

What does a monster with an angel's soul do when a prince comes along to steal his girl? He wants to kill him, of course. When the gods meddle in the lives of mortals, personal disaster is assured, and disaster is coming for golem, girl and prince.

The Gryphon Taint is a three volume set in *The Soulstone Chronicles*. It was written to be a nice big read, with romance, with adventure, with trouble, and lots of all three. There is an angel whose soul was rent from his divine body a hundred years earlier, but who is now trapped in the hulking shell of a creature of sticks and mud. There is a girl, born hideously ugly, who may or may not have elvish blood and in whom the gods have taken a strange interest. And there is a prince whose bloodline boasts a link to a mythical heritage. If so, the girl shares it, for she is his distant cousin through a bastard line.

Volume One is the story of how all three come together, *Volume Two* how family and religion tear them apart, and *Volume Three* how they are re-united—despite death, the gods, and an ancient power that lurks beneath the crust of the world.

In the land of Ulmenir, where kings vaunt the blood of gryphons, some things aren't quite as they seem.

Enjoy!

Books in *The Soulstone Chronicles*, in chronological order:

Bound in Stone: Volumes One, Two, and Three (The entire set is available for purchase.)

The Gryphon Taint: Volumes One, Two, and Three (The entire set is available for purchase.)

The Disposition of Ashes: Volumes One, Two and, Three (The entire set is available for purchase.)

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The Gryphon Taint ***Volume One***

A novel in *The Soulstone Chronicles*

By
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To my husband, JC, for his faith.
And for my son, Alex, for his ears.

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[1. Fantasy – Fiction. 2. Witches – Fiction. 3. Romance – Fiction.]

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Chapter One

It was during one of her brighter moments, when the vinegary wine hadn't quite dulled her mind, that the hag of the western forest concluded she required domestic assistance. That morning, the sun shone pure and clear, and she roused from her slumber remembering she enjoyed the warmth of the summer, if not the brightness, but she lay on her grubby mat and couldn't move her body even the bare yard necessary to reach the light streaming from the window. She only managed to poke one soiled foot out of her blanket.

Yes. A housekeeper. A housekeeper would be very handy. She wanted one, and she was going to make it.

It would be nice to have a tidy hut, to know where her powders had gone, or—before she threw them into the pot—that the bones on the floor were the fresh ones, not the ones from last month. To have order to the moulds she grew on the stained glass stolen from a church window; wouldn't that just take the effort out of a day's brewing? To have someone else gather the necessities—the funguses growing under the coffins buried in the village, the poison bark from the hoary old tree halfway up the mountain, the last breath of a helpless baby, the eyes of a pleading virgin, the wine hidden in the cupboard of a villager—such help, such wonderful help, would fix her life up so nicely, when her legs were getting rather achy and bowed and the potions never quite helped anymore. It was a simply wonderful idea.

It took her a week to remember she had thought of it, the wine all but gone, the bottles scattered across the dirt floor, the moulds lost under dust, and her bones aching with chill. The fire had gone out and she hadn't managed to light it for three days. Her brain banged in her skull like a rotten cabbage, and she could swear, did swear, that pieces of it were hitting her in the back of her bleary old eyes.

The fleas hiding in her under things—unwashed for months and the only set she still had—were noticeably biting where she had the hardest time scratching. Now seemed like the most opportune moment for

creating a housekeeper. She couldn't get any more sober without things hurting, itching, or annoying her worse than they were doing already.

She knew she had a spell for it somewhere. There on her table, half rotten and smelling of mildew and many spills, her book lay open with a blank page torn out. It was the first she noticed of the damage. She cursed herself roundly, taking care to make the motions against the curses actually sticking. The page lay in a puddle of congealed blood. Upon inspecting the tabletop, she decided the effect was pleasing.

She couldn't recall where the blood had come from, not that it mattered. The torn page she slipped between the first and the front cover and then searched in the dank tome for the correct spell. This was an effort in itself. Her fingers weren't as supple as they had once been, and those damned spider marks always got in the way of finding the symbols.

She had no use for spider marks. But there was a picture. She knew there was a picture. The pictures and the ancient symbols were always enough of a guide.

She found the entry eventually, while shivering and mumbling and wondering why it was so damned cold, until she remembered her failure with the fire. It needed a supply of wood. Apparently, she had been trying to set fire to the ashes for the past few days. She suspected this was the reason she had torn a page out of her spell book. She must have thought to relight the fire the old way, the mundane way. But as if ashes would light. Idiot.

She trudged out into the yard, kicking aside piles of rubbish, twigs and leaves, to find her messy stack of fuel nearly depleted. She hauled the wood into the hut and stacked it on the floor. A good few sticks bounced away where they shouldn't, and she had to bend her old back and throbbing knees to fetch them a second time. It was terrible exercise for an old woman with gout and a hangover.

She made a mound in the fireplace, but didn't light it. The fuel had to be conserved for the spell.

Then came the gathering of materials that would become her housekeeper. The debris in the yard being the handiest source, she amassed her collection: twigs, clods of dirt, mud, the odd animal bone, an abandoned wasps nest, some pebbles, a load of withered leaves, more dirt, more mud, more dried plant material, a few more bones, and a couple of acorns that would do for eyes. When all was assembled, she had a heap that took up most of her living space.

Sitting on the floor, careless of the mess gathering on her ragged smock—what did one more stain matter; after all, it had hundreds—she scraped and shoved and packed it all into the shape of a man, or as near a one as the heap could approximate. Satisfied with the result, she began the laborious rise from the dirt floor. It was time to light the fire and work the spell.

But no. Her bones were much too cold and she ached so much. Continuing seemed unthinkable without a small moment to rest and regain her strength. She wouldn't waste the fire meant for the potion, and so a fortifying drop of wine seemed the better option.

She'd had the sense to keep aside a bottle, her best bottle, the largest and containing the strongest of wines. It hid in the crawlspace that was her cold room, where she was normally too lazy to go and fetch anything.

Well, she had worked so hard; she deserved it, didn't she? It wasn't so very difficult to fetch it, was it? Not after all that work? She just had to shove aside her bed, haul up the trap from beneath, and wait for the falling dirt to settle.

And there it was, covered with dust and webs, glowing red where the faint light hit the glass and lit the liquid, deliciously ripe and bloody beneath the blanket of years. She cackled, but then coughed on the floating dust.

She remembered how she had gotten this one, the last of her best bottles. A merchant had come along the trade road one night, a warm night when it had been easier for her to move about. She had cursed him to death. She kept a lock of his hair somewhere about, all white but for a bit of black still remaining on the tip. She hadn't managed to curse that bit out. Tough young fellow, that merchant. Chewy, but sweet.

With bottle to hand, she crawled up from her cellar and onto the floor. Lazily, she left the trap open. The housekeeper would close it after she had finished making it. Yes, it would. And it would get logs for the fire, not just fallen sticks, but logs, and the supplies from the graveyard a week's walk away. Wonderful. Wonderful. The wine was better than she remembered. Best to sit until her bones warmed to it.

She was giggling like a silly girl when she at last stirred herself upward. The wine was in her veins, firing her belly, making her flesh buoyant and her movements effortless. She gathered up what she could of the ingredients for the pot and tossed them in along with a jug of water she had collected from rain.

It was almost too easy to start the fire—a mere glance at the hearth, and the tinder flashed a violent green before settling to a normal array of red and yellow and orange flames. This made her laugh for a good while, until she took control of herself and stirred the messy concoction. She kept hitting the heart that sat on the bottom, and this provoked a spate of laughter, too.

“Old heart,” she crooned at it. “Old stone.”

It was a little joke from a very long time ago. She had found an intriguing stone on the bank of the creek. It had been in the water, but so close to the edge, she had been sorely tempted to reach in. She hadn’t found the courage to dare. Rainwater was all she touched, rainwater and snow melt. Nearby, a spring yielded a small trickle. She’d touch that, but only when the rain wasn’t sufficient.

But this stone... For dread of the water, she had left it to bathe in the flow, but she’d wanted it and had walked near the hated creek every day that summer, until the heat had forced the water to recede from the bank. At last she had taken the stone up and stroked the smooth contours, the grey shape so like a heart as to have been one. She had kept it on the mantle for a year, touching it now and again in wonder. Then, on a night of drunken hilarity, she had tossed it into her pot.

“It’s time you were cooked,” she had said to it, “before you get rotten.” And she had cackled and hooted and danced, she thought so well of her wittiness.

“Haven’t cooked enough yet,” she would mumble toothlessly, brew after brew.

“Too tough still?” This always provoked more laughter.

It had remained in the pot since, always too tough to come out and always bringing a smile to her withered, hairy lips. She wondered about it sometimes, wondered what it had soaked up in the years it had idled there, stirred with the brews and potions and philtres, bathed with the bubbles of numerous stews and soups, ground against bones and slapped against meat. She wondered about it once more as she clacked her stirring stick against it.

Had it caught a flavour? Or anything else? Some of the power from the potions, the life of her victims, the evil of her incantations?

She pondered and she thought and she decided, giggling because it was a better joke than before. But she must fetch it out before the brew became too hot, or the joke would not happen. So thinking, she acted.

She dropped the stone on the dirt floor, spitting obscenities because she had waited too long. It steamed up at her, and she eyed it balefully a moment before cackling again. She dowsed the pain of her burnt hand with a swig of wine down her throat and, much pleased by this, sent a consecrating drop to her inanimate companion.

“Still too tough, still too tough,” she told it. At length, she gathered the grey stone up and held it. “Old heart, old stone.”

Gently, almost reverently, she opened a hole in the left side of her creation of mud and sticks and packed the heart in. She drank more wine after, staring at the spot where she had buried the stone.

“Old heart,” she muttered a last time and cackled gleefully until tears ran down and formed tracks in the dirt on her wrinkled face.

Burning brew roused her from her inebriated humour. She collected herself and set to with her stirring stick, muttering imprecations and coughing on the stench boiling up from the brown liquid. She must have dropped a death’s-head mushroom in it. The smell was fetid. Having a servant bent on smashing jars and tearing her hut apart just wouldn’t do. She had no choice but to counteract this overly potent agent with a rarity, an angel’s feather she kept in a locked box on the floor next to the hearth.

She pulled the heavy pot aside from the fire, cursing her stupidity in wasting a precious death’s-head, once again countering these malefic insults with gestures of warding. She dug in the earthen floor in all four corners until she’d uncovered the small key at last. Formidably rusted with age, it snapped in the lock at once.

“Blast yel!” she screeched at the small case.

The hinges fell off and the box burst open. The lid separated and dropped to the side. A large, white plume with silvered edges lay tossed upon the dirt. It gleamed up at her.

She jumped back and stared suspiciously, but there was no sign that it was about to flutter after her. Cautiously, using a pair of sticks to gather the plume up, she held it before the pot. Afraid and not wanting to search for a knife with which to cut it, she plunged the entire feather into the brew.

It was too much of a counter agent, but she decided it should do no harm in such a simple creation as a housekeeper. A good housekeeper was better than a mediocre one, wasn’t it? For once, she didn’t mind so

much goodness getting into the pot. Satisfied, she pushed the vessel over the fire.

The hut filled with another stench, like a chicken boiling with its feathers still on. She hadn't expected that. It surprised her. She had thought the plume would smell sweet. It was disappointing actually, to discover that such a precious, divine ingredient smelled so utterly mundane.

"Ha! Chicken! Cluck, cluck, cluck, my silver-lined bird! You were pretty till you were torn and bloody. If I'd known, I'd have tried a piece of you. A rooster in a man's shape—you had a set of haunches on you. I remember that. Fine haunches. Good meat! No scrawny bird you. Heaven feeds its fowl well."

At this moment, the pot near bubbled over. Tamping down her humour, she returned to stirring and stirring and waiting.

It is a thing a witch learns with practice, the knowing when the brew is ready. Sight never hinted. Smell always fooled. One never tasted. It is too perilous to touch. A witch, who is any sort of witch worth calling one, just got to *know* when the pot reached the end of its simmer.

Even a drunken witch could do it, if she had learned the trick before becoming a sot. Such was the hag, and she came out of the stupor the moment the brew finished; one minute staring at nothing, moving the stirring stick absently, the next moment eyes brightening like coals as she peered down at her concoction. It looked ghastly, a greyish brown mess with bits of cooked feather resting on the surface and a few nameless lumps hinting here and there.

She had a special stick for getting the pot from the hearth to the golem, a strong short rod, just right to put under the pot bail. With it, she carried the iron container and avoided getting burnt, a hand on either side of the wooden rod. She settled the pot on the dirt floor and went to recheck the spell book before making her incantation.

The arcane symbols showed a primary calling to earth. Solidity: that was easy. The golem was almost half made of earth. She would have no trouble raising power from that quarter.

The mark for fire, the agent to enliven the housekeeper, sat beneath the symbol of the earth element. A few hot embers would handle this.

Water showed a sign of reduction. She need only mention it for the purpose of fluidity. The mud of her housekeeper had plenty.

Air was blackened. She mustn't call on it. She would likely blow the whole thing apart if she did.

There were disadvantages to rejecting a major source of power, but what they would be in this instance, she couldn't fathom. The scribbled spider letters beneath the symbols may have mentioned it, but she couldn't read them, so what did it matter?

She gave her spell book an affectionate pat. Best thing she'd ever stolen.

"Spider marks! Phahh!"

Who needed them? Certainly not her. Never had. She was doing fine, wasn't she? About to make herself a housekeeper, and a grand one, judging from the contemptible, little creature drawn on the page of the book. She was doing just fine indeed.

She'd never needed spider marks. She'd done all right with incantations of her own make, cast on the wind on the spur of the moment, thrown from her gut like pellets of venom, venom that never stayed the same, always changed, always gathered to her will. Oh, yes, she was a fine old witch, she was, fine like a spider spinning a new web, time and time again. She didn't need spider marks to spin a web, but the little drawings and the ancient symbols certainly helped.

"The master's symbols," she muttered, scowling. Obstinate bastard. He'd taught the rudiments of the ancient language to her and the rest of the coven, a coven now broken apart and whose members had dwindled to all but a few. The master had known how to read spider marks too, but that hadn't saved him from destruction so many decades ago. Stupid man.

"You didn't give the mother what she wanted. Your fault." His fault that the great mother wanted none of them any longer. Everything, his fault. The only good he'd done was to teach these symbols.

She checked them a last time and scanned for more hidden in the spidery squiggles on the same page. None. The ingredients of her brew matched the symbols and the drawing, with the exception of the erroneous mushroom and its counteragent, but she suspected these would not interfere with the basic spell. Of course, she might not get the expected results, but she wouldn't necessarily get a bad one either. With her mind made up, she spilled the brew over the golem's chest where she had buried the heart.

Everything was set to begin the incantation, but she stared at the housekeeper of leaves, sticks and dirt and did nothing. Her throat was too parched to begin. She had stood over that hot pot for too long. The embers on the hearth were still hot, and there was yet some wood to spare. She had plenty of time. She gathered her last bottle to her bosom, listened to the slosh of liquid on thick glass, and crooned.

“Old heart.” Her voice grated in her throat. She raised the bottle and drank, and then patted the chest of her golem in a friendly fashion. “Old stone, old mud, old sticks. Old sticks.”

The bottle lifted again.

The incantation she cast in a drunken stupor, and she remembered little of the event afterward. Things happened during that invocation, things not expected. She would have, in the future, a vague recollection of a ball of dim light flying in past the skins that flapped loosely over the window, but she would never tie it together with that particular night.

The shimmering ball floated almost hesitantly over the buried stone heart of her golem, until a minuscule fluff of angel feather wafted up to greet it. Somehow, despite the feather having apparently been cooked into goo, a perfection of white with silver edges had drifted free of the spilled potion.

Perhaps the hag blinked inopportunistically when the fluff touched the glowing orb and the two sparked a pure and vibrant white. Certainly, if she hadn't blinked, the flash prevented her from seeing the suddenly powerful orb dive into the golem where the stone heart was buried. Nothing unusual happened after that in any case. Why should she notice what had taken less than a few seconds to occur? What drunk had the attention for such a short span of time?

When she finished the chant, she tossed as much wood onto the fire as her bleary eyes could see and hobbled off toward her straw bed, intending to sleep off the alcohol until her creation enlivened enough to take orders. She had forgotten about the open trap, which she had left uncovered and which was the normal resting place for her mat. In the state of mind she was in, it seemed perfectly reasonable that the dark hole was her bed. She had a very dirty bed, after all.

She fell into the cellar, more of a crawl space than a true room, but it was four feet down and she landed like a bag of old bones. The broken leg and lump on her head hurt worse than the hangover when she at last awakened. By then, her housekeeper had quickened some time ago.

It was hard for him to say exactly when he knew he was. There was a point of not knowing, then almost knowing, and finally knowing. It was his first memory, that knowing. Sensation arrived much later.

There wasn't much to this knowing, and fairly soon he wondered if there *could* be anything more to it. But then he wondered at his wondering.

His first thought then was, "Why am I?"

He remained in this mental predicament for a good hour, not that he understood very well the passage of time. He knew only now and the state of his own mind.

Eventually a sense of space introduced itself into this early state of awareness. The perception expanded until he understood that something existed in the space with him and that this something moved.

At this exact moment, the birth of his vision occurred. It broke over him like an explosion. There was light. There was flickering. There was darkness. There were numerous, incomprehensible objects that met his sight with overwhelming impact. He lay stupefied.

His vision spanned in a near circle, ending somewhere behind him. It was an odd, shifting vision, and he found it difficult and confusing. The hovel and the objects in it jumped at him sharply, innumerable and unnameable.

This new perception upset him so much, he wished it would go away. He wanted to return to the comforting darkness of before, just for a little while, just until he'd had time to think about it all. But this never happened, and so he stared at the things and the light and watched warily for the *something* that shared the space with him.

As time passed, he began to view everything more analytically. He observed the walls and roof of the hut, and all the objects in those confines, until they became familiar and almost comforting. He wondered about the firelight flickering on every surface, but he had a sense this phenomenon was normal. Not long after, he found the fire, which seemed to jump with the moving light, and he understood, somehow, that they were playing together. But there were other objects

more curious, objects that moved, and their movement provoked a keen interest.

The only problem was, he knew they weren't the thing he'd been searching for, the thing he shared the space with.

The witch had left the door open. She had been in such a haste to create her housekeeper, she had not bothered to close it. Just now, the wind slammed the door back and forth and also flapped the tattered skins over the window. Motes of dust danced around the hovel and flew up over the fire, but these tiny particles did not interest the golem.

He concentrated on the swaying door and flapping skins. It became apparent they did not move with any purpose, but that something impelled their motion while also scattering the motes of dust. This same something also gusted against the *thing* with which he shared the space.

He decided he must see this intimate thing somehow.

His patchy vision came and went quickly, but he'd become accustomed to it. He had created a panorama from the differing views, but for some unknown reason could not yet see the mysterious something. What was it, shifting and moving against itself, that he could not see?

He must do as the door. He must change where he could see. He must be like the wind. He must be something that could make things move!

It was as simple as that. He considered doing it and then he did it.

He sat.

And he saw.

Legs spread before him. He knew they belonged to him. He had no name for them or purpose. They did move, his two legs, but not as any human would expect.

On the whole, the golem's lower limbs lay in the same spot wherein they had been packed together, but the material from which they had been fabricated shifted. Leaves disappeared into the centre and reappeared elsewhere. Sticks poked out here and there, only to return back within. Mud gathered about the lot, seeming to track the motion of all.

The entire process was slow and incessant, and it was this that the golem had detected before the birth of his sight. His own body shared the space with him, his body that moved against itself endlessly.

It occurred to the golem that this bodily motion might account for his shifting vision. Concentrating, he forced his gaze to fixate, but the moment his attention lapsed, his vision wandered back into a panoramic display once again. Eventually, he ascertained that two objects were the source of his sight, but what these two objects were, he could not begin to guess.

So. There he sat, with his moving eyes and shifting legs, with nothing to measure himself against but himself. He was fascinated, but he didn't altogether like what he perceived. Why he should feel that way, he had no idea. Somehow, his legs seemed wrong. His vision, although very adequate, seemed even more wrong.

Bending his head, he noted that his torso and arms were just as busy as his legs—leaves, mud, twigs and the occasional animal bone, all on the go. He watched the bits of himself shifting and, as he sat there contemplating, he began to notice the door thrumming.

He felt it on his bottom where he sat upon the floor. Bang! The door slammed. Thrum! He felt it from the backs of his legs, all the way to his rump.

The thrum didn't happen at the same time as the door. No, it was just a little delayed, but it had to be the door causing it, because the vibration always occurred just after the door slammed shut.

If his body hadn't been so busy scraping against itself, he felt certain he would have noticed the banging of the door earlier. What an accomplishment, to have not only the vision of a thing, but a vibration to go with it!

There was something odd here. Why weren't the skins that flapped over the window vibrating at him? How perplexing. Perhaps, if he concentrated long enough, he would feel the noise. So he sat and waited some more.

Gradually, there did come another noise, one that didn't match with the slamming door, but it didn't seem to belong to the flapping skins over the window either. These vibrations were altogether too regular to be another phenomenon of the wind. They were very faint. He decided they emanated from somewhere to the side and beneath him.

He was very intrigued. He wanted to see what created these regular emissions.

Once again, thinking led easily to doing. He lifted himself from the dirt of the floor and stood on his two legs. He lost sight of his limbs immediately and remained in a state of shocked awe for a good, long time.

The hut the witch called home could never be considered large or man-sized. She was a short old creature, the hag, and she had fashioned her hovel to her own specifications. It was not built for a seven-foot golem whose head crashed through the rotting turf of the roof the moment he stood his full height.

Her intention in creating her housekeeper may have been the pinnacle of practicality, but his actual size was not. Like any old drunkard, she had an altogether too grand sense of proportion for her needs.

It was late afternoon, and he witnessed his first day. And life; he saw life: creatures that moved of their own accord, small and wondrous, winged and not; beings that shifted with the wind, brown and green entities whose limbs grasped each other and the sky, whose feet tangled together and squeezed the earth. Birds, trees; the miniscule, the majestic.

The birds flitted about in the trees, but too far from the hut for a clear view. But spiders crawled on the dried turf of the roof, and he spent minutes observing their progress, minutes more pitying the flies they trapped, once he'd seen a spider wrap up a fly packet for snack time.

Gruesome. He looked away, up at the expanse of blue forever.

He gawked at a single, small cloud until it disappeared behind a wall of blackish evergreens. He revelled in the warmth of the sunshine on his face. He spent the better part of the remaining afternoon in this position, head and chest poking out of the roof and lower half forgotten. The regular vibrations continued to thrum against the soles of his feet, but no longer caught his attention.

Not until the sun had travelled a fiery path halfway from its zenith to the treetops did he notice once more the inspiration of his upward motion. The small thumping noises had become quieter, fainter, less regular. Of a sudden, he perceived the change. He ducked back down beneath the rafters and, hunching over to accommodate the low ceiling, let the vibrations on his knuckles and soles lead him to the hole in the floor.

The witch lay where she had fallen earlier that day, her leg at an odd angle, fortunately with skin intact. He sensed a wrongness to her lying there. He reached down into the cellar and scooped her up. He was very curious about his new discovery and wished he had attended to it earlier. This felt different. This felt like a someone, someone like him.

Her dirty, wrinkled skin, which to him was wonderfully soft, had an ominous chill to it. The coldness gathered inside her, readying for a final push straight to the core, where her heart vibrated ever more haltingly.

Remembering that heat felt good on him when he stood under the sun, he carried her to the closest warmth, the hearth, and crouched with her. She had built a good fire. A few remaining coals still cast heat. The stones of the hearth held more.

Yet this was not enough. The thumping inside her body continued to falter.

The golem didn't like the fire. He enjoyed the heat, much as mosses and lichens might, or perhaps as mushrooms and moulds would, all of which still lived on the sticks and pebbles of his body, but he was wary of the fire itself. Somehow he knew it ate of the same materials from which he was fashioned. He sensed that the heat helped the witch, but that it wasn't nearly hot enough to throw off the terrible cold settling inside her.

Something about this spreading cold seemed different from the chill of the damp floor or the icy air. Something about it spoke of departure, and he didn't like that at all.

Here he had found a someone at last, and he wanted very much to commune with her, somehow. This induced in him enough courage to gather a few branches that had slipped out from their proper place on the hearth and cast them back onto the fireplace.

The wind did the rest of the work for him. It fanned the coals he had inadvertently uncovered, which caught against the mosses hanging off the bark, and this set the fuel ablaze.

However, the remaining pieces of firewood had been few and the fire soon died down for want of fuel. He risked leaving the hag on the floor by the hearth. He rushed out of the hut, a caricature of a man. Sticks and dirt, mud and dried leaves, he crashed about under the evening sun, dashing beneath darkened woods, stealing from their resting places the abandoned twigs of careless trees. He gathered them by the armful, unmindful of how some seemed to work their way inside his body while others worked their way out.

He collected bunches of fuel three times over before he tenderly pulled the witch into his arms, once again to wait out her revitalisation, or her departure. He wished with all his might that it would be the former. He didn't want to be alone again.

Her own coughing roused her. The racking of her lungs shook her injured leg, which was hugely swollen and aching damnably. She screeched with pain and was abruptly dropped from her resting place—which she had thought to be her straw mattress—onto the packed dirt floor. This event set her skull to pounding in various locations, leaving her to believe she had fractured it into a hundred screaming little pieces.

At this point, a fragment of the roof fell onto her chest. The ensuing cloud of dust set her to hacking and choking, which further reduced her to a baggage of screaming, shrieking nerves.

The golem, startled because of the horrid noise that vibrated out of the hag, a noise that snapped at his branches and bit into his mud, panicked during the commotion after he dropped her. He pulled his head out from the second hole he had punctured in the roof and ran bellowing out of the hut.

He halted in mid-stride about a mile away, where he bellowed experimentally in various different tones until he remembered why he had discovered the new skill and this new way of perceiving sound. Then he went rushing all the way back.

He found the hag sitting up, near lost in layers of old rags, her hair coated with a fresh covering of dirt from the roof. She scowled horrifically and cursed abominably, but left a curse unfinished when she spied him at the door. She eyed him balefully a few moments, and then ordered him to go close the trap door.

The golem, if he could have blinked, would have blinked, and most stupidly. It wasn't that he *didn't* understand what she had said. It was that he did. The noise of her words somehow connected in a manner that the banging door did not, straight through the air and to him.

And while *meaning* something. He was incredulous.

He was to learn, within the following week, that he was a made thing, made to be told what to do and, thus, made to have a voice connect,

however inexplicably, to his earless self. For now, it was just another new and amazing occurrence on the day of his birth.

The meaning of thing she had named, the trap door, jumped to his mind with overwhelming clarity, and so he stared at her quite stupidly indeed until she once again screeched at him to shut it. This time he moved to obey, hunched over to accommodate the low ceiling. The trap, so heavy in her hands, moved effortlessly for him. The witch grunted approval.

“Now go get my bed and put it here beside me,” she commanded.

He abandoned the cloud of dust rising from the shut trap and hauled up the mattress. This was so old as to be near rotten, and it ripped in several places, letting the mouldering straw slide out. He dumped it, slightly less stuffed, next to her on the floor. She didn’t bother to acknowledge him, but delicately patted down the soiled cloth in a few places and hauled herself laboriously and most painfully onto it.

Afterward, she lay panting with pain and exhaustion. He watched her curiously, wondering why she hadn’t asked him to put her on the bed. It would have been easier.

Odd that weak glow on her leg. She seemed to be on fire, but the fire was green and it didn’t seem altogether hot. He had a good feeling about it. He wanted to touch, but... But the way she looked at him...

Why did he feel this way suddenly? Dark, a dark feeling, as if...as if a light inside him had dimmed a little. Why did he feel she didn’t...like him?

“Damn the soft arts!” the hag said. She ignored the golem when it shifted back a foot as if nervous. She’d been dragging the green power up to heal herself, but as usual, the power scattered after only a few minutes. She’d never been good at pulling the healing energies up from the earth, always had to spend hours or days brewing a potion to trap the green, and suffer her aches and injuries until then.

“Better at calling the darker forces,” she muttered. So much better, she didn’t need potions for a curse, at least not often. Usually she was very proud of this, but not now. “Damned soft arts.”

Once her pain subsided enough for her to think again, the hag glared at the golem distrustfully, certain that something had, if not gone wrong, gone different with her spell.

She had never tried the spell before. Most witches didn't like company, even company of the animated but mindless sort, a category within which this golem was supposed to reside. She was mystified and worried about the *mindful* way it seemed to be regarding her.

As she watched, one of the acorns she had set somewhere about his face—not that it was much of a face to be called one—appeared from under the mud, crushed leaves and twigs, and then sank inward again, only to reappear just a second later an inch further off. Meanwhile the second eye crawled over to look at her, travelling entirely on the outer boundary of the head.

She was certain they must be the acorns, or the fiery counterparts of them. It seemed the nuts had undergone a fundamental transformation during the casting of the spell. Not only had the element of fire given this fabricated housekeeper life, it seemed to have permanently infused the acorns. The nuts ploughed a continuous fiery path within and without the upper area of his head, as embers glinting orange and red.

“Why hasn't it burned to cinders?” the hag muttered. The mark for water had shown a sign of reduction. The element shouldn't have had enough power to stop this thing from turning into a giant human-shaped torch.

The golem turned its head in an inquiring manner. Both eyes came around and seemed to focus on her, with no sign of smouldering in the material surrounding either. The witch frowned, baffled. Her creation shifted back a foot, like a cowering animal. The eyes crept off in different directions, one going up over the top of the head, the other going to the left side.

It was well animated, she decided, and looked to have holding power. That was all right, for she needn't worry, then, about setting it to a heavy task, such as chopping wood and having it rip itself apart in the attempt.

This motility, however, this unasked for and decisive mobility, this bothered her. This was not to be expected, not from an automaton designed to wait idly whenever it was without a command to set it in motion.

The fact never even vaguely entered her head that she should be grateful for her error in spell casting, that it was this which had saved her life and allowed the golem the intelligence to discover her and keep her warm. She never remotely considered thanking him for his efforts. He

was just a golem that wasn't quite operating in the expected manner, and if this was better, she had yet to ascertain it.

Other more important matters pressed on her mind just then. Her mouth thinned into a mean, old line, and she sent him on a task most pressing to her needs, and this meanness and implacability set the tone of their relationship, a union of master and faulty automaton, that lasted for the remainder of their time together.

"You," she commanded, "will gather enough fuel to keep a fire going for a week. You will put it here beside me. Then you are going to go to the village in that direction," she pointed to the east, "and you are going to fetch me some wine. And you are going to run for it."

On her orders, he had left her a jug of fresh water near to hand and some food that hadn't quite spoiled. After this, she had given him a few more instructions concerning the fetching of the wine. He recalled these now as he stared out from behind a shrub and watched longingly the activities occurring below in the village.

"Don't let anyone see you," the hag had said. "Do it at night. Don't make any loud noises when you break into the house you rob. Be as quiet as a mouse. Don't kill anyone—I haven't the patience for fighting off an angry mob right now."

The truth was more that she hadn't the strength for it, but he didn't know that. There had been further instructions about stealing a sack or crate to carry the wines in, and about packing the bottles so they wouldn't shatter. She had been very careful about explaining this part, but she had not been specific as to the method of breaking into a house, or how to go about doing it quietly.

He had a feeling that stealing was bad, and that the mob and killing were somehow connected to such. This worried him, and he felt odd about the entire situation. He wanted to examine the village more closely, but somehow, he couldn't overcome the compulsion to follow her orders. He must not be seen. He must steal wine at night. He must avoid killing.

He didn't mind the not killing command. Actually, that one injunction was the only comforting detail of his predicament.

At the moment, he covertly observed the village and its inhabitants while he waited for darkness to fall, and he comprehended more completely, with each passing moment, the chasm of difference that separated him from the humans he saw down there. He watched their activities pensively, wishing his orders didn't countermand his desire to commune with them.

They were so interesting, these smooth, brownish, pinkish people with hair only sparsely covering their bodies and mostly growing on their heads. They didn't act at all like the animals he had encountered in the forest as he'd travelled to the village. They did odd things, like singing and shouting at each other, then laughing with the person at whom they had been shouting.

Why did they do that? What did singing mean? And what was this laughing thing that tickled his twigs and dirt when it bubbled its way through the air toward him?

They worked for hours on something. Then, as if by some pre-set pattern, all would stop and begin working on something else, or go eat, or take a nap. He wanted to ask them what these activities were all about. What were their purposes?

Why were some of them so much smaller than the others? And why did these others act so very differently from the larger ones? Why was it that the smallest of them were carried always by a larger?

And why was he different? Even the witch was as they were, albeit she had covered herself so with dirt and grime that perhaps she had been attempting to be more like him.

He knew, even as he thought this, that it couldn't be the case. She was just dirty, and they weren't.

Was he alone, then? Was he without a match? Did no one else have a body born of the forest and the earth as his was? And for all that, how exactly had he come to be?

He'd have to ask the witch about it when he returned with her wine. He hoped by then she wouldn't be so very angry with him for dropping her on the ground, and he hoped as well that he would learn to change his bellow into speech before his return.

All this pondering and spying passed the hours by. Shortly, he witnessed his third sunset, and when the sky darkened to such blackness that he had difficulty seeing, he ventured out from his place of concealment.

A dog barked in the village, but it barked at the same door it had been barking at for hours, wanting to get inside. The golem hoped the noise of the animal, and the occasional other distraction of someone throwing a rock or stick at it, and then yelling at it loudly, would hide any noise he might make when he broke into his target house at the edge of the village.

He'd chosen this particular house because it was larger. It seemed to have more to it than the other houses. It was newer. It had a feel of being filled. Not the same way trees had a feel of being filled with sap and pith, but with a cluttered, dead wood sensation. He hoped that this habitation, which as far as he could tell housed only three humans, was the sort the witch had in mind for robbing.

He, of course, was unaware that the witch would have chosen her target by other criteria. She would have observed the village only from the surface, not with his inborn sense of earthly objects residing within spaces. Had she wanted to see inside the houses, she would have done so well in advance of actually robbing them, and with a lot more ingredients mixed in her pot to do so.

He approached the building slowly, pausing only when the dog stopped yelping. Presently, when he realized the dog would not bark again, he continued onward, but more slowly and cautiously. It appeared, to him that his own footsteps drummed back up like falling logs. He was actually very quiet, but for the incessant scraping of his internally moving anatomy, and even that was not so loud.

Sound. Sound was a very confusing thing. Sometimes it came to him only as a thump or a tremor, shivering up the trunks of his legs. At other times, it hit him straight from out of the air.

Things alive, like humans and dogs, those made sounds with their mouths or their muzzles. Their noises always impinged upon him from out of the air. The fall of a log, the thwack of an axe, a child's thrown rock as it landed: these vibrations all came to him through his feet or whatever part of his body contacted the earth at the time. It was very mystifying to him that sound could be sensed so differently, but he hadn't time to ponder it any longer. He had a task to complete.

He crept up to the house and slipped under an unlit window on his way to the door. Odd repetitive noises issued from within, but they didn't sound like heartbeats. Those he had already accounted for, all three of them.

These other noises were uneven and occasionally very loud, and they reached him through the air. He assumed they must come from a human mouth. Yet, mysteriously, the sounds meant absolutely nothing to him.

What on earth was the human doing? Was it trying to speak with the candles unlit? Perhaps the darkness undid its ability to enunciate meaningfully. He concluded that he must continue onward despite the mystery.

At the corner of the house, he paused and peered warily around. The dog had fallen asleep and made grunting noises while its hind leg scratched spasmodically as if it tried to run. The golem risked moving out into the open area between the door and the corner. He cringed at the noise of his own footsteps. In his attempt to be quieter, he truly made less sound than a rabbit snuffling in some underbrush, but he thought he sounded like a tree thumping over earth.

At the door, he tested the latch. It moved, but the door did not. He edged a glowing eye over to a minuscule crack between door and doorframe. A wooden plank rested athwart the opening. He couldn't think how to move that without breaking down the door.

At a loss, he scanned the face of the house, pausing when he spied an open window above and to the right. This, he decided, would have to be his entry point. He'd seen some smaller humans jumping about after a butterfly earlier that day. It seemed a good idea to attempt such a feat in the hopes of reaching the lower end of the window frame.

He launched himself in the air, hit the wall beneath the opening with a loud, scraping thud, and fell to the earth with an even crunchier thump.

He was mortified. He was terrified. The previously sleeping dog was barking once again, and at him. He lay on his back and shivered on the dirt.

Someone in another cottage opened a window and threw a metal pot at the dog. The dog yelped in protest, yipped once in confusion, and shut up. Inside the target house, the odd vibrations paused, seemed to shift in location very slightly, and then picked up louder than before. The golem waited several minutes before he dared sit up and, when he did, discovered the dog watching him.

The golem froze. He had an inclination to panic and run for the woods, but his orders were like roots with a high regard for the soil of the village. He had, perforce, to finish his task in order to leave. So there he sat and stared at the dog, and the dog stared at him.

The animal, encouraged by the villagers he had been purchased to protect, kept its big yap shut. Eventually, for want of company that cared at all for it, it offered a timid wag of its tail.

There formed in the golem's mind an impression that the dog might be friendly. He felt emboldened to lurch up to his feet. But as he rose, the tail lost its wag, and the dog backed off with the tail curled between its legs. Fear edged into otherwise pleading eyes.

The golem realised his size was overly imposing and crouched down low. The animal's retreat halted and the tail returned to its flagging signal.

Much encouraged, the golem moved closer. Communication of some sort seemed possible with animals, and this animal in particular, albeit timid, wanted to be friendly with him.

It was the first nice act that anyone, or any thing, had offered him. He was overwhelmed with gratitude. Somewhere within the vicinity of his upper chest, the stone heart let out a pulse of warmth that radiated straight through him. It was the most incredible feeling, wonderful, warm and protective. The energy seemed to reach the dog as well, for it sat up with paws begging, and the tail wagged so furiously the animal nearly toppled over. Wondering what had just happened, the golem rubbed the area of his chest over his heart.

This is where I am, he thought. This is to what I am attached.

This was a somewhat confusing realisation, but nevertheless very true. He had thought before that he must reside in his head with his eyes, but this impression had been false. The eyes were merely a strong stimulation of his attention.

The sensation in his chest was very different, very strong and very much himself. It was just one more thing, perhaps the most important thing, to question the witch about; but before he could attend to that, he must complete the task set to him. He abandoned his communion with the dog, loath though he was to do so, and faced the target house. The dog watched silently, and he was thankful for that.

Yes, the window. This time, when he jumped, he took care to keep his arms wide for balance. He undershot once again and re-essayed the leap. The third was true. His twig fingers latched onto the lower edge.

He hung there waiting for his parts to stop scraping on the wall. He sounded like many small bushes scratching to get in, but once he had settled enough, there seemed no evidence of awakening from within. He hauled himself over the sill and onto the floor of a hallway.

This house was much roomier than the witch's hovel. He could stand his full seven feet without scraping the ceiling. Much. The boards were fresh and smelled of resin. There wasn't any mould to speak of, or cobwebs, spiders for that matter, or messy clutter. Three doors lay on the left side. On the right, an open frame with a rail exposed the main living area, where couches, chairs and side tables squatted in the dark, one floor below.

To the left, the humans reposed. He didn't want to search for wine there and edged silently past the first door.

At the second he couldn't help pausing to listen, for it was from here that the weird noises vibrated. His curiosity got the better of his cringing courage, and he opened the door, ever so carefully, to peer inside.

A human slept in a bed with a heavy wooden frame and tall, ornate posts. He was so far sunk into covers and mattress, bolster and pillow that only his face showed. His mouth widened when he sucked in air, creating the most awful choking sound. After, the air blew out with a blubbering of his lips.

It was truly revolting, and so loud the golem decided he hadn't needed to be quite so painfully quiet as he had been. This fellow's volume put the dog's barking to shame, yet the other humans appeared to be sleeping through it. Did that mean barking dogs were particularly annoying to humans, but that other humans gargling in their sleep were not? Just another odd mystery to ask the witch about.

He pulled the door to and moved on. The stairs creaked as he descended, but he set his hands on the wall and the rail for support and the noise eased somewhat.

Beneath a cushioned chair, he found a sticky, empty bottle standing forgotten in an otherwise neat house. He abandoned it to continue on to the kitchen. Here he discovered several full bottles in a rack and—joy to see—there in a lower cupboard, a sack big enough to hold them and many rags with which to pack them. He set to work as fast as he could without breaking the precious glass treasure.

He had just wrapped the second last bottle when he noticed a trap door beneath a table covered with upturned pots and pans. He was sufficiently curious about this that, when he completed his sacking of the wine, he removed the objects on the table and then set it aside to open the trap and discover what lay beneath. It was too dark for his eyes to

function properly, and he relied instead on his sense of space to scan out the objects resting below as he edged down the narrow steps.

There seemed to be a middling large container near the foot of the flight. This he hefted experimentally and was rewarded with the unrepentive sound of liquid sloshing against wood. Having no word for it yet, he didn't know that this object was a cask, but the liquidity of its contents made him hopeful. Was it possible that there could be more than one sort of wine, one for bottles and one for wooden containers?

It seemed a promising opportunity to get on the witch's good side. Besides, he truly did not want to break into another house, and this thing was so much bigger than a few bottles of wine.

He hoisted the cask over his shoulder and headed back up and to the front door, with sack of wine to hand. He set his load aside only momentarily to move the crossbar and shove the door wide. Then he was out with his ill-gotten gains and heading for home.

He paused once to pat the dog, terribly sad about the way its eyes pleaded for him to stay and play, but he had done his bad deed and the witch had ordered him to run.

He was surprised to hear the dog yapping piteously from somewhere behind him a day and a half later and three quarters of the way home. He put down the stolen goods and set a course back, following the wail of the dog, which he could hear much better now that he paused at each footstep.

Eventually he discovered the miscreant, whose tail waved triumphantly while ecstatic barking sounded and woeful eyes filled with evident relief. The peg of the dog's chain had snagged between two terrifically snarled tree roots, and this was the reason for the animal's sudden, far too late notification of its tailing of the golem.

The golem resigned himself, not too reluctantly, to taking the dog with him to the witch's hovel. He fetched up the peg and was about to lead the dog off when he noticed a bleeding foot. This horrified him, but also elicited another burst of warmth from his stone heart.

That this new friend was willing to injure himself just to be with him—it made him feel so very good inside. Carefully, he heaved the dog

up and laid it around his neck. He carried the animal back to the site of the dropped, stolen goods, and carried the lot home; running, but gently.

The chimney, along with the hearth, was the only sturdy architecture still remaining to the old hut. A steady stream of curling smoke drifted out of the former, and also out of the unrepaired holes in the roof. The smoke, of course, meant the witch had survived her isolation despite the broken leg, the concussion, and the exposure to cold, but the golem didn't think of that. To him, the sight of the grey smoke meant he hadn't underestimated the necessary supply of firewood during his absence.

He set the dog down outside the door and hoped hard at it to stay put. Despite repetitive sessions of scratchy yowling and clicking on his way home, he hadn't managed to produce a single meaningful noise. The dog had appeared willing to help him learn, providing a chorus of anxious howling and yipping whenever he had attempted to vocalise, but he still could not form a word to question the woman he suspected had something to do with his existence. Just now, he dared not make a sound, for he did not wish to displease his mistress.

Satisfied that the dog seemed content to sit quietly beside the wall—he had yet to recognise the stiffening effect of near panic when he saw it—he opened the door of the hut and bent himself inside. The witch was in front of the fire where he had left her, but sitting, her leg splinted with sticks and rags, her attention on the pot and something boiling in it. He didn't know what, and had he a nose, he would have wished he had not.

The witch, who knew that it was she who would swallow her own medicine, was wishing it right then. This accounted for the absent frown she sent his way upon his arrival and the brusque command to shut the door, but the golem took it to be a continuation of the bad humour he had set her upon when he dropped her on the floor a week earlier. In a nervous response, he shut the door too hard. Part of the frame crumbled. The door sagged in at an angle conducive to admitting a happy shine of sunlight, accompanied by a companionable, hearty breeze, all of which made the hag sneeze.

“Damned pile of manure!” she reprimanded. “You’re going to have to fix that!”

He shifted back toward the door, but she interrupted quickly.

“Not now! Bring me the wine!” Her eyes bulged. “What in the name of all the fires of the second hell is that?” she shrieked, spying the unexpected cask.

He settled this item next to the stolen sack of wine. The witch became very silent. She stared at the cask a long time, frowning. Her old mouth wrinkled itself so much, it hid underneath her nose. Her glare canted upward, and she looked at him suspiciously.

“I didn’t tell you to look for barrels,” she accused.

He shook his head helplessly, losing hope that his extra burden would bring the clemency he had anticipated, and he became very worried about his other burden, the dog.

Now the witch eyed him most balefully, further incensed over his mute answer to her accusation. Having been sober for the past week, she was distrustful of the her creation’s show of initiative, but the barrel kept catching her eye, and she opted for finding out just what her housekeeper had brought her. Him she could analyse later.

“Turn that barrel over,” she ordered. When she spotted the little plug in the previous bottom, her eyes brightened with a keen, yellow glow.

“Do you see that? Pull that out!” she directed excitedly.

The golem performed as asked. She hauled her head over to sniff at the opening and, if not looking like a pig, sounded very much the old sow rooting for scraps. Her following screech was one of triumph and joy, but not at all pig-like, unless a butcher were killing one.

“Treasure!” she shrieked. “Brandy!”

The golem was relieved. His effort, his hunch, was vindicated. His extra find had not been a waste. Perhaps the dog wouldn’t bother her after all.

She rushed him with orders to find something in which to pour the brandy, and he cast to and fro within the hut for an elusive, pewter mug while she shouted on and on about it. He didn’t mind. He was happy she was happy, although she was getting irritated right now over the missing mug. She directed him to find it in innumerable locations that proved incorrect.

Aside from her water jug, the mug was the only drinking utensil she owned that, unlike crockery, she had not inadvertently broken over her

long life; but, most woeful for her now, it had gone missing from carelessness and disuse. What use for a mug when the bottle was as easy to lift to the lips and took less time? She hadn't counted on a keg of brandy she could not lift on her own. Why the hells hadn't she made a golem to steal her one earlier? She had missed out on this pleasure all those years!

"Damned fool!" she called herself.

The golem stalled searching and appeared to look at her reproachfully.

"Keep looking!" she squawked. Damned, stupid thing! All this excitement was getting her mouth dry. "Have to keep this place clean," she mumbled to herself.

The golem, although he continued delving beneath an ancient pile of litter and bones, listened carefully, believing that it was to him she spoke.

"Have to organize my bottles and moulds. Have to get the door and the roof fixed. Thank the blasted hells for the brandy. Warm the blood. Good as fire. Better than that putrid mess in there."

This last she directed to the boiling brew within her beaten pot. However much she liked to think herself the potent old witch, when it came to the gentler powers, she was a useless package. She'd damned well have brandy instead.

"Should have kept my old heart in there," she grumbled. "Nothing tastes right any more." She looked at the golem accusingly. "Haven't you found it yet, you useless corpse of trees?"

Indeed he had, but had forgotten when wondering why she would want to keep her heart in a pot. A heart, he figured, had to be this thing making a thump in her chest. That's the image he had, sort of, when she spoke the word.

But how had she ever managed to live with it in a pot in the first place? Did she like her own taste? Maybe she had accidentally swallowed her old heart back inside herself. She seemed the type to swallow things.

At her urgings, he forgot his curious musings, lifted the retrieved pewter mug up from the mouldering pile and approached with it. The witch blinked at it, noted the layer of grime covering it inside and out, and still directed him to lift the keg and pour the brandy in. Carefully.

She quite forgot him thereafter. It was a big mug. It held a lot of brandy, having been meant for ale. She didn't ask for a refill. She was

deliriously giddy by the time her tongue met the last drop of liquor falling past her lips. She was pleasantly warm, comfortable, and happy. The hovel had taken on a homey, appealing gloominess. Rather quickly, her eyes glazed over and she fell in a hunch, half off her mattress.

The golem, forgotten but remembering well the words she had spoken, set about rectifying the damage he had done to the hut, and then to getting it well cleaned up.

He was interrupted once when the dog began whining from without. It still cowered next to the door and had found an old bone upon which to gnaw, but seemed unsatisfied with this soothing item. Contemplating the bone, the golem conceived that the dog hungered for nourishment. Following the only example he knew, he borrowed the mug and offered the animal a few dollops of brandy. The dog accepted, perhaps only wanting to please him.

There were, of course, the usual results. The dog was very happy for a time. Then it was oddly put out and wailed most forlornly, no matter how he comforted it. Afterward, its balance gone, it also slept heavily, equalling snore for snore the witch in the hovel.

She discovered the dog, of course. How could she not? She was a witch. Nothing, absolutely nothing, stayed near her hut for long, nothing alive, nothing willing.

The dog, being a dog, whined and yelped. Thus it notified the witch of its presence, doing so most abominably. Her hangover was the second worst she had ever had. She was going to kill that dog. Now. She rose unsteadily into a seated position on her dirty mattress.

“Where did that blasted animal come from?” she said, and winced at the pain her own voice invoked. She didn’t expect an answer.

The golem, who’d been in attendance from the moment he’d perceived her awakening, didn’t understand rhetoric. He pointed at himself and attempted to speak. He failed once again. The scraping, booming caterwaul he created floored her.

He shut up. He had a very real urge to run away, but didn’t give in to it. Where had he to go?

The witch gasped on the floor, half off her mattress. She opened a red eye and glared at her creation. “Never, never do that to me again,” she hissed.

He bowed his head in shame.

“You piece of dung!” she screeched, or began to. Realising the effect this would have on her head, she modulated her voice to a wrathful whisper. “You’re a golem. You don’t speak to me. You don’t speak at all! You can’t think!”

For a moment, he went very blank. Extremely blank. Then he seemed to come to himself, to hear the witch hissing at him, but he couldn’t make out the words.

What was she saying? But he didn’t know! Yet he was moving. Why? He had difficulty comprehending what was happening to him. He didn’t know, didn’t comprehend, didn’t understand. By her command, his maker had effectively rendered him stupid.

He performed mechanically that which she ordered. He fetched the dog he had befriended. He held it while she inspected the whimpering animal. He cared not as it urinated in terror, the heat of its piss steaming up from the dirt floor. At her word, he throttled it, very brutally, completely unemotionally. He held it limp and lifeless in his grasp. Then his wits returned.

He wanted to scream. But she had forbidden it. He wanted to run. But she had issued another order.

What was it? Something about not moving. Yes, that was it. It whispered back to him from his memory.

Golems don’t think! They don’t move without being told! They don’t stare at me! They don’t do things unless they are told to!

So the tirade had gone on. There had been more, mostly the same, all a protest against his proclivity for mimicking life.

Wasn’t he alive?

He could think. Now.

How was it that he could think, despite what she had done to him? *How* had she done it to him? How was it possible that mere words could force him to murder his first friend?

And he wanted to run again and to scream. Instead, he hunched there uselessly with the dog hanging from its neck in his huge, stick hands, a urine puddle glistening up at him, substituting for tears.

It was a very miserable beginning to his first week of life.

Chapter Two

There was a place, just between the plough horse's stall and the west wall, where Hanicke liked to hide when she was so weak that working seemed just about enough to kill her. She always received a beating for her absences, but hiding gave her time to recover and warm up.

The manure pile rested on the outer side of the west wall because Uncle Barnas and her large cousins were too lazy to shovel it further from the barn. Hanicke had discovered that manure piles were often warmer than their surroundings. This one afforded such insulation that she would perhaps have frozen to death without it.

Then there was Pig's Eye, the plough horse. He was always better fed than her, but he didn't begrudge sharing a handful of grain now and then. His large body sent extra heat into the chill of the air and made the hidey-hole rather cosy, if one didn't mind the cramped space and the stink. Hanicke loved Pig's Eye, for his warmth and his grain and his old broken harnesses that had been thrown in the empty stall bordering the west wall.

Uncle Barnas was also too lazy to clear out the barn properly. The broken harnesses covered a small cave made from a pile of trashed crates. The space was just big enough for her to crawl within, for she was not so very large. She could curl into the end part and warm up in a heap of filched hay. It was the only hiding place in which no one ever thought to search for her. The mess just didn't appear to have room to hold anyone, and that made it a very safe place indeed.

So she rested there, sometimes asleep, more often glooming away the hours until someone remembered to feed the pigs. Then she would crawl out to steal the slops, but only when she was certain the cousins weren't lurking around a corner, waiting to catch her.

They had caught her before. After the last time, she had hidden in the hole for two days, waiting for the pain in her chest to subside enough to crawl back out and filch the slops once more. She had lived on those

slops until certain the beating she would get for coming back wouldn't kill her.

She did get that beating, a hard one, for her uncle and aunt had thought she'd died at last and were sorely disappointed to find her returned and apparently unharmed from their boys' *playfulness*. They'd hoped to find her by the stink of her corpse some time in the spring.

No one in the village would blame the boys if ever there were a little *accident*. Children *had* accidents, after all. It was to be expected when three strapping boys played with a delicate, little thing like their cousin. Her relations would dump her body in a hole without any fuss, probably next to the manure pile, and forget all about her.

Except for the land, of course, the property they would inherit if the ugly little heiress were out of the way, the property they said they hadn't the time or the funds to farm.

When she considered it, Hanicke thought the pig slops kept her alive more than anything else. Summer and winter, there were always pig slops. Thank the gods for the breeding sow, which furnished a constant supply of piglets in want of feed.

Hanicke was very friendly with the pigs. On occasion, they hid her from her cousins. The pigs, with their muddy bulk, posed as wonderful camouflage for her dirty, little self. And when the sow wasn't grumpy with piglets, it wasn't too hard to reach into the trough and nab something away from under her snout. It didn't matter what. If the pigs could eat it, then so could she, whether this were corn mash, old tubers growing roots, bruised apples, or mouldy bread.

The boys had orders not to allow her to steal the animal feed, and she had to hide herself away, very carefully, to wait out the siege of the pigpens. But the cousins were never as diligent as their parents wished. They seldom managed to hang about long enough to keep her away from the slops.

"We feed you well enough!" Aunt Perriwin said, but the food her aunt accorded came in a large, cracked bowl and lay in a meagre pile in the bottom. It was seldom fit to eat, and there was never enough even when edible.

Hanicke was eighteen years old. Given the appetite for violence her cousins already displayed, she doubted she would reach the age of majority in the household of her aunt. Soon her cousins' cruelty might outgrow their disregard for her. Once they matured, for none was older

than twelve now, they might also grow that other appetite, avarice, and she knew this probable development would mean her end. She'd die, and the cousins would inherit.

Thus she made no sound as she lay curled inside her hideaway. She listened to what went on without and waited for the pigs to be fed. And she hoped, as the animals squealed and fought for a place at the trough, some slops would still be in the bottom when she felt safe enough to climb out again.

While she waited, she planned. She had gathered a small stash of grains and some long lasting tubers filched from storage. She had also rescued some worn out cast offs of the youngest boy. These last she had repaired as best she could. When the time seemed right, she would make her way to the convent in the neighbouring county.

She would rather exchange her property for a veil than let the cousins have it. There was a distinct possibility she would die in the attempt to travel the many miles to sanctuary, but she hadn't much chance here. She only needed this abnormally frigid, early summer weather to end. In the meantime, she waited on the pigs.

She wasn't to have her hopes met on this particular day. Her cousins were feeling itchy. After they had lugged the slops over to the pens and poured it into the troughs, they called to her, knowing she listened somewhere.

"Maggot!" Jef screamed. Clim mimicked him in a higher voice, and Barnus Junior laughed. Then all three shouted in unison.

"Maggot!"

The nickname thundered across the farmyard. Hanicke had earned it one very cold autumn day when a precious apple had made it to the pens and she'd snatched it up and eaten it, worms and all. They'd caught her at it, had in fact taken bets about whether she'd eat it.

She'd most certainly earned the name, but, more importantly, devouring larvae had kept her teeth in her head another month. Other apples, pre-selected, worm-ridden ones, had regularly found their way into the slops thereafter.

"Come and eat the pig food!" hollered Barnus Junior. He was the eldest of the cousins. "We've got some really juicy pieces for you!"

"Yeah! Something the dog wouldn't eat!" Clim added with his whiny voice.

“With lots of your favourite food!” yelled Jef.

Again, all three together shouted. “Maggots!”

“Maggot come eat the maggots!” they yelled and then hooted and laughed for several minutes at a wittiness only apparent to them.

Maggot shivered in her crate hole and waited. She, who was old enough to take a husband, yet considered not old enough to manage her own affairs, was wise enough to know the games of boys six years and more her junior. There would be no feast for her in the pigpens tonight, not without a price of pain and degradation. The degradation she would have to endure without the gain of a meal as she listened to the three boys holler to her.

“Come on out, Maggot!” Jef wheedled, trying another tactic in hopes of bringing her out. “We’ll let you eat. Honest! Mom said you could.”

“Yeah, ’cause it’s your birthday!”

“Shut up, Clim!” Jef hissed volubly.

“Well, it could be!”

“Shut up, Clim,” Barnus Jr. reinforced. “Come out, Maggot. Mom wants you to eat so you can get the fat boiled down to lard tomorrow!”

Oh, that was a good trick. So, why hadn’t Perriwin put more in her bowl this night?

Hanicke edged a piece of hanging leather aside and peered out, although it was a wasted motion. There was nothing to see but the opposite wall. Still, it helped pass the time, counting the lines on the far board.

I am a prisoner.

“Maggot!” Barnus Jr. screeched. “Get your scrawny ass out here!”

His temper had gotten the better of him once again. He said a few more things he’d learned from his father but had yet to understand and issued a number of threats, all of which she had heard before. Then, because he never could hold to one position and wait when his temper had heated up, he blamed his youngest brother for the continued absence of the despised cousin and chased him out of the barn. The middle brother followed close behind, taking the side of the obvious winner.

Hanicke didn’t stall to think it over. She crawled out from her hole as fast as her malnourished body would permit and scuttled over to the

pens, but her cousins had managed to accomplish their assigned task for once. She couldn't see an edible scrap anywhere near to hand.

Tears pricked her eyes. She was so tired, so hungry. If she ate her stash of grain, she would never survive the trip to the convent.

Jef screamed somewhere in the distance, a hooting cry that hinted of carrion eaters urging the predator onward. Hanicke edged over to the fence corner and peeked out.

Barnas Jr. had caught smaller Clim and held him over the well, threatening to drop him in. Perhaps it was truly an accident, or perhaps Jef's exhortations were too much for Barnas Jr., who liked an appreciative audience, but Clim suddenly disappeared from view. Both older boys stood at the edge in shocked silence. There wasn't a sound to be heard from within the well.

Hanicke waited to see what the boys would do, not at all surprised or shocked at the outcome of Barnas Jr.'s wrath. Then, spying no motion on the part of either boy, she set herself off toward the farmhouse in the same scuttling gait she had used to get to the pigpens. She felt like her bones would crack with each jarring step, but she arrived at the window of the kitchen and yelled for attention from the parents within.

"Not now, Maggot!" Aunt Perriwin shouted back. She had long ago taken to using the name her boys had given the orphan.

Hanicke continued on with the warning, regardless of the careless insult. Perriwin really wouldn't want to lose one of her precious boys. "Barnas Jr. has dropped Clim down the well!" she hollered.

An awful silence ensued from within the house, and then Perriwin came screaming out the back door, fairly flying from the top step on her way to the well. There had as yet been no sound from that vicinity, but when the two older boys saw their mother approaching, they set up a din to match hers, all of it accusatory, with no blame to themselves and absolutely useless to the poor, youngest brother who'd been dropped in.

Uncle Barnas barrelled out the door not long after. He raced after his wife, his boots thumping the ground like the hooves of a rampaging bull. Hanicke, in her own slow fashion, followed him.

It was too late for Clim. The ensuing activity on his behalf served to get his body out from the depths, but not to save his life. This had already lost itself in darkness. Clim had struck the stone on his way down and wasn't conscious to fight his way back to the surface of the water. He'd drowned without knowing it. The parents tried frantically to save

him, desperately believing he was still alive somehow, though blackened water hid him from sight.

Uncle Barnas was too big to get down the well to fetch up Clim's body, and so he ordered Barnas Jr. to go down, tied to a rope that his father would lower. Barnas Jr. refused, too afraid of the hole himself to face going where he'd put his brother. Following his elder brother's example, Jef refused also.

Their father came as close to murdering the two boys as he ever had. They both got knocked about, with their father's wrath also venting over them in the form of the vilest invectives. By the time they took it into their clanging heads to flee for their lives, their mother had already tied herself to the rope and screamed for Barnus Sr. to lower her down. Hanicke was forgotten after her initial alert of disaster.

They retrieved Clim after far too many lost minutes. He was cold. He was blue. He was absent. There wasn't anything inside him. His body was empty, had been for a while. His mother cried to him all the long terrible time she'd been in the water; cried still, clinging to his body while pleading with him to wake up.

Hanicke felt, if not sorrow for Clim, pity for Perriwin, who had lost someone so dear the wound of it spread like a bloody cloud all around her. Uncle Barnus voiced nothing during the aftermath of bringing them up from the well. Sweat covered his body and he panted hoarsely. If he grieved, over-exertion hid it. Yet there was something terrible about the way his eyes seemed to stare at nothing at all.

The elder brothers were nowhere to be seen. They weren't to be seen, in fact, until a day later, when a neighbouring farmer found them bedded down within a haystack on his farm. Barnas Jr. had convinced Jef that the two of them would be hung for murderers, and the pair of cowards had hidden, for once without food or comfort, until the farm dogs alerted the farmer of their presence, whereupon they were returned, sullen, dirty and dejected, to their family.

Their homecoming was the beginning of the immediate events leading to Hanicke's departure from her natal village and county. It had all, of course, started with the death of her father, but what happened after the return of the boys set her path away from Stoneacre forever. At the time, she thought it was just another manifestation of the curse that had shadowed her short life—her ugliness.

Her ugliness, the instigator of rejection, the reason first captured by eyes and then spouted forth from lips.

She's so ugly!

Then followed the fleeing of the eyes, the crossing of fingers, the avoidance, the backs turned, the pretence of her absence. This was the shape her curse of ugliness took. On the day of her cousins' return, it took its most deadly form of all.

She stayed the night in the barn as usual, but the following day, Hanicke worked in the farmhouse and tended to the daily chores necessary for the making of meals and the feeding of animals. It was she who eventually cleaned Clim's body and dressed it for the priest who would arrive that evening.

Clim's mother lay in a state of shock in her bed, staring at the ceiling and speaking not at all. She had spent the previous night in tears over her dead son, shrieking at the absence of her living ones and occasionally flinging herself upon Clim's body, shaking it until she had to be hauled off once again. Uncle Barnas had stayed with Aunt Perriwin through the night, but once morning light had come and she'd showed no further signs of moving from her bed, he had gone to tell the priest of the local chapter that his services were needed.

So Hanicke saw to the meals and the light chores, unwatched until noon. That evening, she ate her last and best meal on her Uncle's farm, one she cooked herself. Then, as she finished the last touches of tidying up the kitchen, she heard the sound of footsteps and turned to the door to discover their neighbour silhouetted against the opening, the two boys collared in either hand.

Uncle Barnas looked up from the kitchen table, at which he had been glaring futilely, to observe his older boys as they attempted to edge behind the neighbour. Both boys had black eyes. Neither made any attempt to whine their way out of their predicament, not just yet. They had grown wise, or crafty, and waited for the right moment.

"So you've come back," Uncle Barnas said. His voice had no sharpness to it, but his eyes still held that tormented glint. Neither of his living sons answered or looked at him.

"The gods bring peace to you, Barnas," said the neighbour. His tone was carefully neutral. Rumours circulated in the village as to how the youngest son had died, but he was certain these two boys were somehow

responsible. However, it wouldn't bear comment at the moment. Barnas was already paying heavily for indulging his bully sons.

"Peace to you, Timon," Barnas replied.

"I found them bedding down in my haystack," Timon said.

Barnas didn't respond. He had returned to glaring ineffectively at the table. Farmer Timon's eyes flicked toward Hanicke and back to Barnas. He cleared his throat.

"I saw the priest on the main road, walking this way," he added.

Barnas nodded apathetically. Timon coughed yet again.

"Well," he ended uncomfortably, "I'll just be on my way. I feel for your grief. Peace to you all." By this time, he didn't expect to be acknowledged, so he merely shoved the boys into the kitchen, shut the door and departed.

Aunt Perriwin appeared at the hallway door, haggard, pale, eyes reddened to bloodiness. This provoked the whining the father hadn't induced. Both boys began sobbing in unison, but it was Jef, the less guilty of the pair, who set Perriwin's grief-stricken mind on the wrong target. He peered frantically about as if to find a place to hide from his horrid mother and spotted his tiny cousin—there before the washbasin, her ugly face like a nightmare, watching with inhuman dispassion—and he did as he always did. He blamed her for his misdeed.

"It was Maggot's fault!" he screeched. "She wouldn't come when Barnas Jr. called and that set him in a temper until he went like our old dog after the rat bit him! She made him kill Clim!"

That changed his cousin's vacant expression, first to one of outrage, and then to fear. He was secretly very pleased. Even as he watched, his mother's expression altered radically.

Desperate to find a justifiable excuse for the death of one of her beloved boys, it was criminally easy to avert Perriwin's mind from the culpability of the elder pair. They were all she loved, all she valued, her beautiful boys. Losing one had been unendurable. Losing her image of the others to the truth of their worthlessness was the death of what little reason she had left, for it came back to her in the end, their worthlessness, and with this she could not live.

And there was Hanicke, standing where she had no right to be, sullyng the kitchen with her presence, living when Perriwin's baby was dead, gone like an arm torn from her body—ugly, shivering Hanicke,

who was the one who should have fallen down the well, who knew it and had sent Clim down instead.

“Witch!” Aunt Perriwin screamed. Her hand pointed like a claw. “Witch!”

Hanicke shook her head, a motion lost, for her body already quaked so violently from premonition she no longer had control of it. She knew she was about to die.

Uncle Barnas stood, slowly as any fat man must, and his face was thunderous. The light of awareness had returned to his eyes, but it was a gleam of wrath that would clean the wound of loss, however wrongfully ministered.

Hanicke’s legs appeared to move without volition. She ran.

Chicken with the head cut off.

She screamed. She fell. The thunder sounded in her head now, transferred somehow, perhaps magically, from her uncle’s face. Her cousins were somewhere near, shouting. There were strange noises, thumping, fleshy noises, and her aunt spoke, but the words were like an animal’s squeal of rage. Then there was nothing at all.

The priest from the local chapter saved Hanicke’s life. When she was first told this, lying newly awakened in a cell beneath the county justice house, she felt reassured that, somewhere in the world, there were others like her departed father who were good by nature.

She was doomed to disappointment.

She had lain insentient in the cell the entire evening past. She recovered consciousness, much astounded to be doing so at all, the following morning. Sitting up, she discovered herself uninjured and was further astonished at a general state of healthfulness she hadn’t enjoyed for two years. Her bones did not ache. Her ribs did not feel as if they were constantly on the verge of jamming together with each breath, and she felt strong, strong enough to walk for miles, let alone totter from the barn to the house and back, her usual distance.

Her cry of awe alerted the neighbouring prisoner of her awakening, and he, who hadn't had a good conversation since he'd been convicted, was only too happy to start one up.

"Hi! Hi, you!" he called from a cell on the left. A wall of stone separated him from Hanicke's view.

"Hello?"

"You a witch, then?"

Hanicke said nothing, in her mind the image of Perriwin screaming the accusation at her. The terror that had followed...strange the memory, at once vivid and surreal. For some odd reason, she seemed to remember the entire event from the ceiling of the kitchen, her cousins kicking her tiny body, Perriwin clawing at the head, Barnas pummelling her guts with his meaty fists...

"Touchy subject, eh?" said the prisoner. "Leave it alone, then. No need to discuss it until you're ready."

"Who are you?"

"Eh? You don't know me? The Gurgler?"

"The what?"

"Murder, rape and pillaging," he said. "That's the charges I'm convicted for. I'm the one what makes that gurgling noise when I comes in the pretty farm girls that didn't run fast enough. Then they make the noise when I chokes them to death."

"What do you expect me to say to that?" Hanicke asked.

"Nothing. I can't be all that terrifying to someone like you. I must seem pretty piddling, eh?"

"What's that supposed—"

"So is it true?" he interrupted. "Did your father pay off the priests more than once so they'd ignore his use of witchcraft?"

"What? Who told you that?" Hanicke demanded.

"Sheriff discussed it with the priest after they dumped you inside. Priest was pretty miffed that your kinfolk called it bribery. Priest said it was a donation for church services fairly rendered."

"It was!" Hanicke asserted.

"Well, now. But your father never aged, did he? Looked like a young man even in his nineties, looked that way even when they finally dragged

his body out from beneath the ice of the river. That's what they say. Said he was childless until he had you some twenty years ago.

"Eighteen," Hanicke said, remembering her father's white face. Dead, so very dead, and yet so very handsome still. The green of his eyes had lost the jewel brilliance. He'd been...empty, like Clim had been empty, and her life had become hell since his absence.

"Eighteen, is it? So he was in his eighties when he remarried and got you on the new wife," the prisoner said.

Her father had been eighty-eight, but she didn't tell the Gurgler this. She never discussed her father's mysterious youthfulness with anyone, not that she understood the reason for it.

"Well, you don't have to talk about that either, if you don't want," the Gurgler said. "I gots me a view from my cell? Do you?"

"A view?"

"A window."

"Oh. No, I don't have a window."

"Then you can't see it."

"See what?"

"The new scaffold. They built it just for me. I'm the Gurgler, you know."

"Yes, so you've said."

"It's quite the fancy contraption, what with the drop-drown trap," he went on despite Hanicke's obvious reticence. He hadn't so many days left to talk and wanted to converse while he had the chance. It didn't matter to him whether he spoke to the jailor, a priest, or a witch. He just wanted to be heard.

"I'd like a closer view of my 'instrument of corporeal liberation' before the actual hanging day, but the bars in this here window are set deep in the granite block."

Hanicke shifted on the bed of straw and scratched a flea bite. She poked her leg free of her skirt to look at the limb.

So healthy. Not bowed. Not emaciated. Well, not as much as yesterday.

Just as dirty as usual.

"It's the scaffold," the prisoner said. "In case you were wondering."

“What? What are you talking about?” She rolled up a sleeve. Her arm looked as healthy as her leg.

“That’s what the priest calls the scaffold—*the instrument of corporeal liberation*, the scurvy twit. Nice way of saying ‘thing what makes you dead’. I don’t suppose you could help me with these bars, being a witch? I’d owe you one.”

“I’m not a witch.”

“Fine, fine. We’ll discuss it later.”

“I’d rather not,” Hanicke said, but she spent that day upon the mouldering straw, listening to her neighbour approach and sidle around the issue of witchery and escape from prison. Just when her senses had dulled into an apathy of forced attentiveness, a jailor finally thought to feed her and arrived with a bowl of food that actually appeared to be food.

While she gobbled stew that had more chunks of meat than she’d seen in months of meals served in her old, cracked bowl, the jailor informed her of the charges for which she had been incarcerated. He carried out this duty with such utter disinterest, she arrived at the distinct impression he thought it mattered not the least whether she knew her charges or not. Still, she was not overly concerned. The self-admitted murderer and rapist had been happy to recount how she’d arrived. He’d blurted what he’d overheard spoken between the priest and the sheriff of Stoneacre.

There had been words of pity, of shock and denial against her charges. Then the priest, a recent arrival assigned to the district, had requested information concerning her, never having seen her in his church.

Such was easily explained. Her father had never taken her, something to do with a ‘sins of the father’ sermon when she’d been a month old. The priest and the sheriff had departed the dungeon, discussing her unlucky situation in life. To Hanicke, this information made it appear she might have allies. Her assumption was brutally ripped from her the following day.

The sheriff visited early the following morning. He planted his feet on the damp flagstones before her cell and spoke without preamble, shunning eye contact. She was used to this sort of avoidance and didn’t heed the warning sign. She lifted to her feet and stood respectfully.

“I want you to know that this is not the usual treatment given someone in your situation,” he said. “It’s usually much worse, but there are outstanding circumstances, in your favour at the moment, that lead me to believe that putting you in the cage is unwarranted.”

Hanicke grew very disquieted at the mention of the cage. This contraption was supposedly an effective method for incarcerating a witch. She had only ever heard hearsay concerning it, but this had it as being very cruel, something to do with suspending a suspected witch above running water, even during the dead of winter.

The sheriff of Stoneacre continued speaking. “Mind you, if further evidence comes to hand implicating you as a witch, I shall resort to that unhappy event.”

He cleared his throat in preparation for the demise of his premeditated statement. “You are to be tried two days after tomorrow. You might think this unfair, not enough time to prepare or find a voice in your favour; however, a man must not sit idle with a possible witch in his dungeon. You had best get yourself set for it, and if there is any evidence proving incontestably that you are not and never have been a witch, I suggest you tell it to me now.”

He paused here and permitted his guarded gaze to fall on her directly, but when she remained mute before him, he cleared his throat and gave her the reason for not putting her in the cage.

“She inherits if you die,” he said. “The cousin, Perriwin of Derrell.”

“My aunt,” Hanicke said. “She makes me call her aunt.”

“Aunt? But she’s not. She’s a cousin thrice removed, isn’t she? Your real aunt’s granddaughter.”

“I know,” Hanicke muttered.

“Why does she demand this?”

“She thought making me call her aunt would instil a feeling of indebtedness and respect.”

“And do you feel indebted? Do you feel respect?”

She considered saying yes, but decided it would be of no use. “No. I’ve been a prisoner on her farm, more of a prisoner there than here. No one beats me here.”

“I see.” The sheriff cleared his throat again. “Yes, the priest... He mentioned the state you were in prior to bringing you here.

Malnourished, bruises all over your body. Old bruises, I mean. Not what they gave you that night. He thinks you may have had broken ribs unhealed from long ago. Is it true?"

"Yes."

"That's why I didn't put you in the cage. No true witch would let that happen to her, would she?"

"I suppose not. I wouldn't know."

"You wouldn't know? Do you know why your father remained youthful until his death?"

"No," she answered.

"Why did he bribe the priests to be silent about it?"

Hanicke's gaze shot up toward him. He winced and set a hand to his sword pommel. She looked down quickly.

"He donated for holy services to prove he was not infected by evil, and every service proved exactly that," she said. "That's not bribery. You can't call it bribery. I won't let anyone say bad things about my father. He was a good man. He was good!"

Her last words resounded off the stone walls. The sheriff backed a step and departed without further comment or farewell.

"He takes his job very seriously," said her neighbour in the next cell. "Do you have money for an advocate? I didn't, you know, but they say it's just a waste of good coin to hire one. It's already decided before you get in the convict's box. They all sit together, the advocate, the judge and whoever, and decide it the night before while eating supper, or maybe at dinnertime over a leg of lamb. Myself, now, I could have talked my way out of it, but I just had a lot against my case, that's all. Witnesses, you know?"

"Of course," she answered dully. She had witnesses, too, didn't she? Perriwin, Barnas, and faithful living sons. She was doomed. She'd likely share the new scaffold with her garrulous friend next door.

"You have a nice voice. The way you talk, that is," he said, surprising her out of her dejectedness. In the next instant, he tossed her back into it. "Are you really as ugly as they were saying, him and the priest?"

Obviously, she hadn't arrived from his direction of the dungeon. She remained silent.

“I don’t mean to offend, but it’ll go against you. That’s why I’m asking.”

That mysterious comment roused her from apathy. “What do you mean, *it’ll go against me?*”

“In the trial,” he answered. “Everyone knows a witch is ugly, ugly as all the sins she’s committed. You’re being ugly might get you convicted. You didn’t know about that?”

“No. No one ever talked to me about it.” Why should they have, when doing so would have been paramount to slapping her in the face?

“So are you?” he asked again.

She saw no point in hedging. He’d only keep at it. What else had he to do? “Yes,” she said simply.

“Are you a witch, then?”

“Would I still be here if I was?” she said caustically.

“Probably not,” he admitted. “But if you were, I’d be willing to help you out, if you help me out. Know what I mean?”

“Yes. I know.”

“So?”

“I’m sorry. I’m not a witch, never have been.”

He was silent a moment. “That’s too bad.”

“Yes, I think so, too.”

“Looks like I’ll be up on the scaffold alone, then,” he added.

Hanicke found that odd and said as much.

“But they won’t be for hanging you, you know,” his voice echoed over, surprise in it.

A premonition chilled her. “What do you mean?”

“You’ll go to the chair, of course,” he answered like she was daft. When she didn’t respond, he continued. “The dunking chair. They’ll drown you. And after, they’ll take your body and burn it to ashes, and bury the ashes under a mound of rock so you’ll never come back from the dead. Didn’t you know?”

She didn’t speak at first. She couldn’t.

“You’ve got nothing to say to that?” he said.

“No, nothing,” she said at last, and he seemed to decide the conversation was at an end, for he didn’t add anything further.

Hanicke settled herself back down on the damp hay, spread her tattered dress around her legs as best she could to keep warm and wondered why the gods had ever bothered to let her be born. The following afternoon, she discovered a likely and very discouraging answer to that question.

Father Ganamede was thin, of average height, and enjoyed an overabundance of religious zeal that compensated for very pinched features. The pinched features would have made him seem less than expansive, which he was, but he hid it with spiritual dedication.

He arrived after what should have been the midday meal for the prisoners, but which wasn’t. The guard had either forgotten or was not inclined to bother feeding anyone at the moment. The priest smiled beneficently down at Hanicke as she lurched up from her position on the cell floor.

His priestly garb, shot with silver embroidery, shone even in the dimness of the dungeon. It was obvious he enjoyed the benefits of wealth and esteem. Hanicke thought the guttering torchlight created a disturbing gleam in Father Ganamede’s eyes, although she was at a loss to pinpoint exactly why. Hadn’t the man saved her life the night before?

Like the sheriff who’d come before him, he initiated speech.

“Daughter of Moselem the Wordcrafter,” he said, for her father had been a legal scribe rather than a soldier turned farmer as his father had been. The priest was patently trying to be polite. He smiled as he spoke, evidencing no sign of distaste over her appearance. “I have come to offer you my services.”

Hanicke moved closer to the bars, smiling as one does when one thinks hope is not lost. The priest winced, but covered his gaffe quickly. His beatific smile, which had lost illumination only briefly, brightened most terrifically. Hanicke was impressed, if disheartened.

“I thank you, Father,” she said with equal politeness, avoiding any further smiles of her own, “for saving my life the evening past. I was lost but for you.”

“It was fortuitous for you, Heaven be thanked,” he agreed, “for you most certainly would have been beaten to death. And also fortunate for you is that other service I rendered, Heaven be praised, which guided you back from the shadows of Death’s Caverns.”

He frowned as if puzzled. “How *are* you feeling?” he inquired rather too carefully.

Hanicke frowned in return. The priest stepped back from the cell a pace, and she smoothed her face to her normal lack of expression. “I feel well,” she said. “More than well, thank you. I feel better than I have done in over two years.”

“I see,” he said, nodding as if he understood something she didn’t, though there was still an air of puzzlement about him.

Hanicke was too anxious for his offered assistance to delve into this odd behaviour further. “Can you tell the village folk that I’m not a witch?” she said. “I’m not, you know? You surely must know!”

He shushed her with hand motions meant to be reassuring, but which to her seemed patronising. “Dear child, of course you are not a witch,” he soothed. “No prayer of healing would have been granted to me in such capacity as was granted the night I prayed for you had you been a witch.”

It took her a moment to think this drawn response through, and then she smiled, helpless to stop herself from inadvertently offending the priest with a gesture of hopefulness.

“Then you have proof to give the sheriff that I am not a witch!” she said in relief, but the priest shook his head, ready, almost happily ready, to dash her hopes.

“I’m afraid not, child. As I indicated just now, one such as myself can heal a witch with prayer, just not in any great capacity. I’m afraid that a successful chant of healing will not stand up in a court of law.”

“Then what can you do?” she said. Her hands sought the bars and fastened like claws.

The priest saw no ugliness in her small fingers as was cursed upon her visage. He placed upon his own uninteresting face the zealous smile he had momentarily forgotten to paste there and informed her of the service he could render in her aide. “There is always the Supplication for Heaven’s Grace,” he said, his voice resounding in the closed space of the

dungeon. "It is incontrovertible proof that, if you survive, you cannot possibly be a witch. Your father had it done three times, you know."

Three times? She wondered why one hadn't been enough.

"What must I do?" she asked anxiously. "Do I need to do anything?"

He shook his head almost affectionately. "No, child. That is all up to me and to Heaven granting an answer. You need only endure the wait."

"That's all? It's so simple?" She was too afraid to hope now. A legality had fragmented the previous simple solution. What could happen to this one?

"Yes, that's all," the priest said confidently.

She hesitated and then lowered her hands in relief. The rusting bars had etched themselves on her palms, and she was sweating in the damp air. She didn't care. She was safe again.

Father Ganamede's voice wormed itself past the blood rushing through her ears. "There is the matter of payment, of course, but we have the means for an equitable adjustment at our disposal."

"What?" she asked stupidly.

"My dear, one cannot conduct supplications of this nature without recompense to the church and the Merciful Light of Heaven," he reprimanded equably. "And then there is the matter of your extraordinary healing the night before. That deserves a donation to the church fund, don't you think?"

The first impressions of panic engraved themselves once more on Hanicke's awareness. "But I don't have any money! My father's savings went toward the church the last time he donated!" she protested. "The funeral took the rest!"

"Yes, of course it did," Father Ganamede agreed tranquilly. "That's not what I had in mind, in any case." He paused to unfold a handkerchief that appeared almost miraculously out of a hidden fold in his garment, and he wiped his nose, which had begun dripping in the chill, damp air of the dungeon.

"What did you have in mind?" Hanicke asked, at the same moment wondering if he'd noticed the shiny stains on her sleeve where she'd been wiping her own nose, or rather the spot on her face that passed for one. She realized he didn't scratch like she did. He mustn't have any fleas or lice like normal folk.

“Quite simply to let you sign your father’s land over to the church,” he said.

He gazed at her expectantly, proud of his brilliant, very lucrative solution. Of course, she would be well served for it, already had. He smiled encouragingly, but the ugly thing merely stared at him in profound, unwilling, tormented silence. He began to frown.

“Child—”

“I’m not,” she interrupted harshly. “I’m old enough to marry, even marry someone as cruel as you, but who would have me without the land?”

Father Ganamede, in the name of the peace that Heaven brings to all its children, decided to overlook the personal insult. He did this for the church, after all. She just needed to comprehend the bigger purpose of it all. “Daughter of Moselem, you will have your life and the knowledge that you will bring prosperity to the church and that this will in turn benefit your village.”

She gave him disdain. “What life? Where would I go? What will I do without the land to bring me income when I reach the age of majority? You rob me of my life while promising to give me my life, you who are supposed to represent truth and honesty!”

Now he grew irritated. She had no business speaking to him like that. He was a properly ordained priest of the most enlightened church in all the kingdoms and empires of the world. It was time she was put in her place.

“You will speak no further blasphemy!” he roared and then said a word that robbed her tongue of all sensation.

“Uuuhngnh!” she protested, but Father Ganamede blasted on unheeding.

“I understand, from the teachings of my betters, that someone in your current position is somewhat prone to lapses of reason. Therefore I shall ignore the foulness that has only recently passed from your lips and remember the politeness that preceded it. Then there is of course this unfortunate curse of yours, which most assuredly catches at your tongue much as it catches at your eyes and nose in such a...well...hmm.”

In the face of her obvious agitation, silent though it was, his voice stumbled to a halt. She had turned her back on him, and her shoulders shook violently. He rushed to the important details

“I shall return tomorrow with the papers necessary to sign over the land. The sheriff assures me they will be ready by then. The supplication will be made public. Thus there will be no possibility of rumour denying thereafter the status that Heaven acknowledges as yours in truth.”

He cleared his throat, sniffed and regarded her bowed figure sternly. She had no need to hunch like that. It was only a facial deformity, after all, the worst he’d ever seen, true, but just an unfortunate circumstance of birth. It didn’t affect her body. Silly, ugly snippet!

“Peace to you and may Heaven’s Light shine on all your days,” he ended abruptly and stalked out the way he’d come, his gown flapping brilliantly around his skinny ankles.

The darkness welcomed his departure. So did Hanicke. Only her doomed neighbour watched him go, one curious eye pressed up against the corner of his cell where he’d been spying all along. After the farther dungeon doors shut, echoing resoundingly in the closeness, he returned to his customary spot on the cell floor, the driest area of the small, dirty expanse, and sighed heavily.

“He’s right, you know,” he spoke to her, all the boasting overtones gone from his voice. “At least you’ll have your life. That’s better than nothing.”

She didn’t consider it wise, or very nice, to disagree with him.

On the following morning, the daughter of Moselem Wordcrafter signed over to the church the land she was to have inherited from her departed father. She wrote her signature upon the paper without comments or tears. She responded to none of the patronising assurances of Father Ganamede, nor to the inquiries of the sheriff, who had come to witness the signing of the document. She was thereafter left in the darkness for a further day while the priest went off to gloat over his acquisition and the county clerks logged the transferral in the municipal records.

The following morning, the jailor unlocked her cell and grunted a nearly unintelligible demand for her to get off her bottom. During this, the condemned prisoner remained hushed, but as she issued from the cell

and came within reach of his spying eyes, his voice leapt across the dark one last time.

“It looks as bad as they said, girl,” he said honestly. “Still, I’ve seen eyes as badly placed or altogether missing, and noses lopped off in war. I’ve seen worse, I mean. You don’t sound like a witch. Will you do something for me when His Holy Majesty is doing the supplication?”

He referred to Father Ganamede, she knew. Liking this cynical descriptive, she acquiesced. “What would you like?”

“Say something for me to the gods,” he begged of her, his right eye gleaming at her owlishly. “That is, if they come down when the supplication is being done. I don’t know if they do, but if they do, put in a good word for me. I’m not all bad.”

Their jailor guffawed. “You’re still going to end up in a hell. What God is going to hearken to a witch?”

Obviously he had been listening to her enemies and had already tried and convicted her in his own mind. Hanicke turned her gaze on him and, such was his belief in her guilt, he actually stepped a pace back, making anxious and completely unnecessary gestures to ward off evil. But he also shut up.

Hanicke was grimly certain there were advantages to being a witch, even if only from a case of mistaken identity. She turned toward the condemned man.

“I’ll say something, whether they come down or not, and they’ll listen, whether I’m a witch or not, because they don’t throw away the message just because the messenger is unsightly.” She thought she saw a flash of teeth somewhere beneath the single, visible eye, and awarded the prisoner a final, silent nod, for she was certain he didn’t like saying good-bye at this unfortunate moment in his life.

By this time, the jailor had recovered enough courage to indicate the direction she should travel. She departed the dungeon knowing full well the only reason she felt remotely good about her future was that someone else was worse off than her, and that also made her feel ashamed.

She followed the dim dungeon corridor, ascended a flight of dirty steps, and issued from an open door where a line of brawny men created a path to either side. She squinted in the sunlight and realized she had arrived in the village square upon which the county government house faced.

Father Ganamede stood on the nearly completed scaffold next to the incomplete, open trap. Hanicke found the sight of him there so ominous, she was convinced they intended to hang her by the neck after all. All the talk had been a ruse to take her land and shut her up in the event she truly was a witch.

The sheriff settled her fears back into manageable apprehension. His hand arrived on her shoulder, seemingly from out of nowhere, what with her focus so fixed upon her apparent doom. He shook her slightly as if knowing what had occurred in her mind and physically led her by the arm to a place in front of the scaffold, where he shoved her down on the beaten earth.

The opening remarks of Father Ganamede were not a part of the supplication, but words drawing attention to himself. Hanicke's gaze drifted to the scaffold again, to the open trap, the rope hanging near the priest's head, the possible feel of it as it went around someone's neck. Her neck.

She shut her eyes and swallowed what tasted like vomit. Her spit had soured in her mouth. The immediacy of Father Ganamede's droning incantation eventually caught her attention and held it. She opened her eyes again to watch. He had said things to her in the beginning, of which she'd responded to none. He had perhaps assumed she'd listened and understood, but she couldn't recall any of it.

For the longest time, the priest remained still but for his moving lips. The words made little sense to her and she doubted they did for anyone else. Some were recognisable, but others... Others caught at her ears but were not quite *there*. They seemed on the verge of being a true word of the common tongue in every sense, but then somehow slipped...sideways.

Yes, that's the best she could describe it. They slipped sideways into something else, perhaps into another word of another tongue. Or they slipped into some *place* else, where she and the common man could not hear words correctly. She wondered if anyone else concluded the same as she did.

Glancing from side to side, she beheld nothing of what she expected on the faces of the gathered villagers. Instead of awe and wonder, she confronted a solid wall of disbelief, suspicion and impatience. This wall of human resentment had not become one of moving anger solely for the reason that guards had been strategically placed so as to prevent the throng from pushing forward. The brawny men hadn't been assigned to

guard against her at all, but to protect her until the supplication had finished.

Where Hanicke could see them clearly, Perriwin stood with Barnas and the two boys, radiating the most vengeful hatred toward her. For the first time, Hanicke became aware of just how much danger she was in, not from the justice system of Stoneacre County, but from the unfounded wrath of its people.

They were itchy, the people of Stoneacre, and it was a familiar itch. So much like her cousins' itch was that particular sneer on a farmer who had never met her. So much like her uncle's was that menacing glare from the candle maker. That look, one of seething, near irrepressible hatred, that was her aunt's face on a young girl who couldn't be more than ten.

Hanicke looked again at the mouth of the priest and nearly screamed at him to make the thing happen, this wonderful thing that would save her life. Why was he taking so damned long? Fear grasped her and she began to rise to her feet, but the sheriff's hand fell heavily on her shoulder from somewhere behind.

"Steady," he said. He pushed her down resolutely. "Steady. The supplication takes time. The guards will make sure you have it. Don't look at the people. If you take fright like a rabbit, they'll be after you like dogs."

She put her eyes on Father Ganamede thereafter and moved her head not at all, not even when an angry muttering began within the crowd, starting at the end where her aunt stood. The noise grew steadily with the encouragement of various well-placed epithets against witches and the crimes they perpetrated against innocent children. A point arrived where Hanicke was certain the wrath of the crowd would at last swell past the point of reason and break over her in the form of a vicious mob, but then Father Ganamede choked.

His voice failed. His eyes bulged. His body stiffened. The villagers, who were only a second from falling out of line upon the supposed witch, froze in a sudden hush. There came a terrible flash, and daylight ended.

She floated in darkness. It was complete, without stars, without moon. Neither torchlight nor candlelight illuminated the blackness. She thought it likely she had just failed the test and died.

But I'm not a witch!

If she had thought the protest would go unnoticed, she was wrong. Something caught her consideration, tossed it up and around like a child's ball, and brought it back to rest before her. The darkness had a light now, and it was her cry of complaint. It was an odd mauve light, and she wondered about that. Why should a protest be mauve? Shouldn't it be redder?

But there's fear in it, something said. Fear is blue.

"Why should it be blue? Fear, I mean? Shouldn't it be...uh...yellow? Maybe?" she asked.

Your fear is blue, the strange voice affirmed.

A blue light separated from the mauve ball and shot toward her. It touched her. She screamed.

You see? the voice said. The blue light popped.

"Yes," Hanicke admitted, although she still didn't understand why it should be so and had the distinct impression some big, awful trick was being played upon her.

It's only to help you concentrate, the voice said. *You aren't ready to see what really lies before you.*

"Am I dead?"

Not yet. Do you want to be?

Hanicke hesitated. "I have nothing to go back to," she said truthfully.

Go back because you must find something to go back to, the voice responded.

She didn't think that made sense, and a faintly orangish light appeared next to her mauve one. "What's that?" she asked.

Doubt, said the other.

"Why is it orange?"

Because you're still angry, but you are also beginning to think.

"I don't know what you meant about going back to find something to go back to," she told it. She felt confused about all these odd lights, not to mention her body was missing. That in itself was troublesome.

The lights are to help you focus, the voice reminded, answering her unspoken bewilderment.

“Oh. Yes. Sorry.” She supposed having a few glowing orbs was better than being in the absolute dark of death.

You have nothing to go back to, but you must go back, the voice said, returning to her spoken question.

“Why?”

Someone needs you.

That surprised Hanicke. No one, not even her father, had ever needed her. She was too ugly.

A bluish black light sidled in next to the mauve and orange ones.

That is sorrow and defeat, she was told before asking.

She would not let lights cow her. “All right. Who needs me?” she inquired.

The voice tossed a white light at her and it exploded in her face. She saw it, bending over a baby in a cradle. It was hesitant. It was remorseful. It reached for the baby. The vision ended.

“What was that?” she cried in shock. It had been ugly, that thing, uglier than her.

Someone who needs you, the voice said. *Someone special. Someone lost. Find him!*

“What will he do to the baby?”

Ask him, the voice suggested.

Hanicke considered this and then relented. After all, she didn’t really want to be dead, not yet.

“I’ll look for him,” she told the voice.

A bright yellow, glowing ball shot through her three small ones and popped the lot. The larger, newer orb stayed.

“Did I do that?” she asked.

Yes. You have become certain. The voice paused as she considered this and then said, *Don’t forget the promise you made.*

“Promise?”

To the condemned criminal, it reminded.

“Uhh...yes. He wants to let you know he’s sorry and that he’s not all bad.”

That’s good, the voice commended. *It’ll be easier for him, what will come.*

Hanicke didn’t want to know about that. She wasn’t all that certain dying could be easy any way at all.

It will be easier, the voice affirmed. *You must go back now.*

Daylight returned. Abruptly. Had she been standing, it would have left her reeling, but she was sprawled across the dirt.

“But I had more questions to ask!” she protested and then gasped at a terrible pain over her heart. She felt frozen. She lifted an arm. Frost layered it, her sleeve, her body hair. The sheriff stood over her, staring in shock.

“I thought you were dead!” he said. “You were hit by a terrible bolt of lightning!”

“Then why am I frozen?” she asked, shivering upward into a crouch.

The sheriff remembered his manners and bent down to help her up. Frost became dew on his fingers and dripped off. “I don’t know,” he said. “No one could explain it. We all decided you were dead.”

Hanicke blinked owlshly at him, her lashes white and frost speckled. “But where’s the priest? He should have told you.”

She blinked again to remove melted water from her eyelashes. Her teeth had begun to chatter. Looking around, she was shocked to find the crowd that had hovered so angrily around her now encircled the new scaffold.

“Over there.” The sheriff pointed at the throng. “When the lightning struck, Father Ganamede stepped backward and fell through the trap. I think he broke his leg.”

As if to corroborate his words, a gap appeared in the crowd, and Hanicke spied the priest momentarily. Father Ganamede certainly looked as though he had broken a leg. He was groaning within a near circle of concerned villagers. One competent old woman was splinting the injured limb with the help of a brawny guard. Hanicke bit back a terrible urge to laugh.

“Why hasn’t he healed himself?” she asked the sheriff.

The sheriff shrugged. "He tried, but his prayer wasn't answered. He says it's because he invoked enough power from Heaven to use up a week of grace."

"Were you the only one who stayed to watch over me, then?" she said through chattering teeth. Her body had caught up with her dentition and now kept time with it, shaking uncontrollably.

The sheriff swung his cape off and placed it across her shoulders. He shook his head. "There didn't seem much point guarding you. I was about to call someone to take your body away. That bolt struck you over ten minutes ago."

"But I was only there a few minutes!"

"Where was that?" He stared at her with piercing curiosity.

"I don't know." She had a terrible thought. "I passed the test, didn't I? I'm not dead, so I'm not guilty?"

"As far as I'm concerned, yes," he assured her. "But I must have Father Ganamede pronounce the supplication successful before I make my public judgement." He took her by the arm. "Come with me." He hauled her in the direction of the fallen priest.

None of the villagers noticed them as they approached, but the sheriff's authoritative bark brought the first of them wheeling about. Concerted gasps of amazement brought more. Eventually, Hanicke arrived at the centre of the throng to a hush that towered over everyone.

The change in atmosphere tore Father Ganamede from his self-pity and pain. He looked up from his leg and the motionless hands of the old healer. His eyes widened when he saw Hanicke, but more from the state of her shivering body than from surprise.

"So there you are!" he said. "Why did you take so long? Heaven above! I haven't been granted a healing!"

He didn't wait for an answer to his question. He began a quick, very rote prayer to Heaven even as Hanicke opened her mouth to speak. The prayer ended quickly, and he looked heavenward for answer. He was disappointed. Heaven was silent.

"Why am I not answered?" He attempted to move his injured leg and let out a bark of pain. "What did you say within the Light of Heaven?" he said accusingly.

Hanicke, near done with shivering, stared without expression down at the priest. When she spoke at last, everyone, including self-absorbed Father Ganamede, listened with fascination.

“I said nothing to anyone about you,” she reported flatly. “I assumed you sing loud enough for yourself and didn’t need my help to get noticed.”

Father Ganamede looked at her without comprehension. When her words at last sank past the layers of self-importance, his colour, previously pale, washed with red.

“Such blasphemy!” he snapped. “It’s a wonder you were allowed to live, if you can speak so to a priest of the church. Were you as stupid with the Lord of Heaven who answered your plight?”

Hanicke shook off the sheriff’s cape and handed it back to him before answering. She was no longer cold, albeit her rag of a dress was yet moist. She ignored the priest’s scathing question and asked one of her own, the one that mattered. “I’ve survived the supplication. Do you agree?”

The priest blinked at her and then nodded once. “Yes, you’ve survived. Let me see your heart.”

Hanicke’s mouth opened in surprise. “What?” she said stupidly.

“Your breast!” Ganamede barked, half from impatience, half from pain. “Let me see the breast over your heart!”

Hanicke raised a single hand over her bodice nervously. Why did he want to see her breast?

She hadn’t time to ask. The sheriff knocked her hand away and pulled the neck of her dress down to expose a perfect breast, and he was so surprised at how perfect it was, he momentarily didn’t see the opal embedded in the skin just where the swell of her breast began. When he did notice the opal, the hues it projected amazed him. Oval and about as large as his thumbprint, it glowed like a rainbow above the delectable creaminess of her bosom.

Hanicke jerked away from him and covered her exposed nipple with her hand. She tore at her dress with the other, attempting to cover herself, but the sheriff stopped her again.

“Look,” he commanded.

She peered down quickly and then stopped struggling. "What is it?" she asked.

"Proof," the priest bit out between pain and resentment. "Proof that you are not and never have been a witch. Proof that you have not in the recent past succumbed in any form to an evil intention of any particular moment. Your father had such tokens as well, one for every supplication he underwent, but not nearly as large."

The priest turned his gaze on the sheriff, ignoring his pain in favour of duty. "She has passed the test," he announced clearly.

"I agree," the sheriff affirmed. He faced the crowd of villagers and raised his voice. "The daughter of Moselem Wordcrafter is free of guilt, as proven by the Supplication for Heaven's Grace. She bears the mark of divine favour. All charges against her are false and therefore dropped."

His mouth opened to pronounce more, but at this point, someone intruded. Perriwin shoved her way to the centre of the gathering, her voice a crescendoing shriek of hatred.

"Nooo! Liar! Murderers! She cursed my baby! She's a witch! The priest lied!"

Perriwin's face had contorted almost beyond recognition. The sheriff, and not a few others, could not help thinking she more resembled a witch now than her accused niece.

Perriwin's husband joined her at the fore, his expression equally enraged over a false injustice he had come to perceive as reality. The sheriff slid his sword from its sheath without any thought beforehand.

"Guards!" he commanded. "Detain these two!"

But his soldiers had mixed with the crowd and were unable to move quickly. The priest's voice rose above the growing uproar, strangely urgent, all pomposity lost for once. The sheriff had difficulty making out the words.

"Stop them...under protection...killed!"

This sounded dire enough to chill the sheriff with apprehension.

"Farmer Barnas," he began, for he had marked the man as the most dangerous. He was wrong.

Perriwin flung herself forward, and such was the sheriff's surprise that he reacted too late. She surged behind him and lunged at Hanicke,

who could not move. The crowd, intent on the appalling spectacle, had trapped her.

“Stop her!” Father Ganamede shouted, his voice pitched so high it screeched. “She violates divine judgement!”

But it was too late. Even as the sheriff twisted toward the woman, who now more than ever resembled a hag, Perriwin fell upon Hanicke. Fingers, hooked like claws, gouged the girl. Hanicke toppled, crying out with pain. Blood flew from her hairline. Perriwin screamed madly, happily.

“Kill you!” she gurgled and sought to kick the girl to death with her wooden clogs.

The sheriff was nearly on her when, with a suddenness too quick to comprehend, something flung him backward into the human wall at the opposite side of the circle. The gathered onlookers cushioned a flight that could well have ended in his death, but he wasn’t to know that until his eyes cleared, for an unexpected light had also blinded him.

Afterward, witnesses related that a second bolt of lightning had shot from the sky and struck the maddened relative of the accused witch. Everyone nearest the blast had been flung backward, all but Hanicke, who had lain untouched beneath the bolt, and Perriwin, who had not survived the strike. Perriwin was a blackened corpse, a hideous reminder of the perils of exacting wrongful vengeance.

Of Hanicke, poor, injured, ugly, homeless girl, there was little further information. She had escaped from the crowd during the ensuing confusion.

Chapter Three

The hiatus of his self-awareness convinced the golem never again to attempt speaking within the witch's presence. Sometimes, at first and far from the hut, he endeavoured to vocalise words alone, but after a month, he no longer bothered. On each occasion, he failed to enunciate anything understandable. Croaks and screeches were his voice, and he didn't much like to listen to himself after a while.

The dog had been cooked and eaten, and its bones crushed into powder for brewing potions. He'd been miserable doing that, crushing its bones. Every twist of the pestle had been an agonising scrape against his stone heart. He'd spent hours over the mortar, grinding and grinding and grinding. If his stone heart could have bled, it would have.

He had a tuft of the dog's fur somewhere, hidden within his shifting stick and mud body where the witch could not see it. In his earlier days, he had taken it out to remind himself of the folly of initiative, a characteristic he no longer overtly displayed. Initiative was something for which the hag never thanked him, not for the clean house, the classified ingredients, the repaired roof, or the keg of brandy. She wasn't grateful for any service he rendered without her prior command. For that matter, she wasn't grateful for any service rendered, commanded or not. He was never acknowledged for anything he did. She just expected him to do it and he did.

There were occasions when he felt he could stop this compulsion to obey, brief, fleeting occasions that hinted at a will of his own, but he seldom heeded these hints. He was alone. He was depressed. He wondered what use was this life of his.

Often he didn't bother wondering at all, but let the witch order him about and behaved just as the mindless, mobile mannequin she expected him to be. Her words of deprecation were orders, and he obeyed them, with the single exception of discontinuing to think. This he did not obey, for he apparently could not stop thinking without stopping to be, and he didn't know how to accomplish that, not that he wanted to do such.

Yet he attempted to comply, though he wasn't aware of it. His depression, his non-inquisitive attitude, his lack of initiative, his deficiency of curiosity: these were all signs of his compliance with her interdiction against thought. This submissiveness, had he but known it, was also the very reason he still existed, for the witch had experienced quite enough of his *aliveness*, whether this brought welcome services or not, and had all but decided to take her golem apart and remake him.

Had she done so, the stone heart would have been removed and the mystical glue that bound his soul to it, the angel feather, would have been thrown out with the rubbish of his creation. He would have died a short week after his birth. But his apparent lifelessness after her correction of his behaviour permitted her lazy nature to let the matter drop.

So the golem persisted, sadly but stubbornly, and performed his ordered tasks. His unnatural, ungolemish abilities remained hidden from the hag, for he did nothing in her presence without her permission. Birds, insects and passing mammals were the only witnesses to his occasional bursts of liveliness. They would never tell. He was safe, so long as he acted the lump of clay in her presence.

A month following his birth, she gave him orders to fetch an ingredient far up the ancient mountain range to the west of the hovel. He received his orders without interest, hardly paying attention to the preparatory instructions she delivered, and shuffled his way out of the hut when she finished, largely unaware of what she'd said. Didn't matter. He'd perform his tasks regardless.

A short while later, coming back from wherever it was he sometimes mentally disappeared when he was within a short distance of the witch, he discovered himself breaking and piling enough logs for the fire to last a number of weeks. Still later, following another hiatus, he realised he was hunting around in the loamy soil of the forest for roots, mushrooms and other edibles the witch preferred to nibble on. He'd already almost collected a sack full of such foodstuffs. He completely missed the episode, perhaps because he wanted to, of running down a terrified doe and slaughtering it in its tracks, yet he found it hanging on a tree near the hut, gutted and bleeding still, as he at last set off for the weathered mountain specified in the witch's orders.

The slaughtered doe enlivened him a bit. An old visitor, remorse, pricked him awake. Undeniably, there were blood traces on his stick fingers. He didn't doubt that he'd just killed for his mistress. He hadn't a

doubt that he'd do it again if he remained under her coercion. This likely event appalled him, and he wondered what he could do about it.

No sooner had he questioned himself than he fell asleep in mid-step. He slumbered through a journey of some four days before he recovered consciousness. It was then, miraculously, that he came brightly, vividly awake. The lines of the world were clear, clean-cut, *real*. *Life* was real, so precious real. He was alive, he could think, he could perceive, and he was as far from the witch as he had ever been. That was the only possible reason for it. He immediately dropped the sack he'd been carrying, altered direction, and strode northward off his ordered path.

He re-awakened a day later with the sack back in his hand, heading west up the mountainside. This time, he didn't alter course.

It was a problem. A very big problem. He was free of the witch in so much as he could now see the world as it truly was, not through a haze of apathy, and could conceive of the idea of ignoring her orders. Yet if he were to act on his rebellious thoughts, he would become a mind-dead slave once more. He would have been immeasurably, desperately frustrated about it all had it not been for a distraction.

At the moment of his current re-awakening, he discovered himself clambering up a most impressive canyon that narrowed toward an inspiring cascade of water. He'd never seen such a thing, such a wonderful, mobile, flowing thing, unsullied by mankind and—perhaps most especially—by witchkind. It was pretty. It was crystalline and fluid, and he didn't want to miss it. He didn't have much use for being frustrated just then, or for fighting against his fate. He knew he'd lose it, that ability to enjoy, if he fought.

Yes, he travelled under coercion, but after all, he wasn't about to kill a dog or a doe or anything much else; just collect a few bits of hoary, old moss on a hoary, old tree. That wasn't so very bad. Was it?

Oh, but how his doubts niggled at him. He did his utmost to ignore these negatives in favour of enjoying what he could in the short time he had away from his hag mistress, for it would all end once he returned. He rode his body as one rides a stubborn mule. He permitted it to carry him where it wanted, and he watched what passed his way like a pilgrim within a caravan. He considered that he enjoyed his tour. He considered it very hard.

He ate his visions like a starving man eating cake. He savoured every passing tree, devoured ravenously the least leaf, swallowed the boles and

the trunks, the limbs and the twigs. The rocks were staples, the soil drink, the occasional animal a delicacy, and the insects spice. He gulped it all down into his hungry mind and made of it a tower of cud to chew upon in a future of famine.

He leaned away from what had been and would be again. He chose to forget that his tower of cud would become useless chaff the moment he came within four day's distance of the witch. What use was memory to an apathetic automaton? He actually managed to dislocate this entire, very depressing fact from reality by the time he arrived at his destination. It was perhaps that his month of mental duress was at fault and that he had shot beyond the endurance of logic. Thus he climbed halfway up the side of the mountain in a state of high enthusiasm and approached his target with eagerness.

What a perfectly awful, old tree it was, truly hoary with moss, just the moss he'd come to collect. Green and knotted, patches hung in clumps like a thousand beards. He moved toward the bole eagerly. The tree was shorter than it was wide, the branches enormous appendages that flung to the sides in a giant welcome. As he strode beneath, the lowest limbs hung ten feet higher than he was tall, and the trunk spanned so far to either side that his spread arms failed to meet a third of its expanse. Yet it was simple enough to climb. Wide, deep ridges lined the bole and made perfect handholds. He launched himself up the tree like a squirrel coming home to safety and perched on a branch so heavily laden with moss that its bark had all but disappeared beneath the tatters.

Even as he enjoyed the view commencing from his perch and thence down the ancient mountainside, command carried him across the limb where his stick hands picked automatically the moss clinging there. He filled the sack, he descended the tree, and he began the long journey back to the hovel without the choice of tarrying awhile, just a little while, to explore perhaps, or rest his shifting anatomy in the sun. His self-delusion, his lie of a pleasant, sightseeing jaunt shattered.

He had an eventful journey back to the witch's hovel, if a state of rebellious, near panic can be given such an innocuous description. The nearer he approached his beginning, the more he grew reluctant to arrive. The plays he had ignored on his trip out, for fear of having nothing to remember of his time away from his mistress, he attempted one after the other. Dropping his sack: this plunged him immediately into darkness. Changing course: if he managed to remain awake, he always found himself travelling where he ought to eventually. Halting in his tracks and

refusing to budge: there was a limit to his body's ability to remain immobile when under the orders of the witch, and he moved whether he wanted to or not.

He endeavoured less obvious insurgencies, such as dumping the contents of his sack on the ground. This was successful. The hag hadn't given him a specific order to fill the sack and he was able to throw out all but a single tuft of the bearded moss. This last he found he just wasn't able to part with and, no matter how hard he threw it, it was always still in his hand when his arm finished the swing.

He tried slowing down. This worked, for she hadn't told him to rush or run. Yet he appeared to have some sort of time limit, for short of stopping, he couldn't quite slow down as much as he wanted. At his slowest, he felt himself to be travelling at a speed approximating the hunched, shuffling gait of his mistress.

There were a number of outright stupidities that he attempted, such as walking backwards, which made no difference whatsoever, but he just had to try, so desperate was he. Swallowing the moss, another stupidity, at first surprised him by working, but the inevitable, involuntary motion of his component parts shortly thereafter defeated him. The tuft always reappeared somewhere else at the outside of his body, in particular his hands. It was truly disheartening.

He arrived at a point of absolute desperation to rid himself of the witch's control. He tumbled into a creek, hoping to defy her with a watery demise. Rather than the anticipated muddy end, the attempt only resulted in a muddy golem sloshing his way homeward for the remainder of the journey. Somehow he just couldn't seem to fall apart. The grass and sticks, the leaves and gnawed bones that made him, these all moved about within the domain of his physical form like a colony of odd-shaped ants. When one twig fell out, another fresher one always found its way up from the forest floor and into his frame. Plunging into the creek had added algae, mud and smooth stones to his make-up, nothing more sinister than that. There would be no falling apart for him.

He could always throw himself into the fire when he arrived!

No, he'd fall asleep the moment he tried. The witch was too close. Near her, he couldn't move without permission.

He noticed the sky was overcast. Perhaps it would develop into a terrible storm and, if there were lightning, perhaps a forest fire would

result. He might just manage to burn to death, if there were a lightning strike. If.

Once all the tactics and tricks, hopes, dreams and nightmares had been eliminated, there was nothing left for him but the journey home and an increasing mental lassitude. His interest in the passing forest dimmed to an occasional flicker. His vivid imagination, albeit one now prone to thinking up his demise, buried itself under his mountain of memories. And these, being absolutely useless to him in that state of mind, were comparable to boulders lying dead centre on a paper figure. As a being, he was becoming slowly crushed. Flat.

He had the presence of mind to return the last bit of moss to the sack prior to his arrival, which occurred twelve days after his departure. With a mentality settled into mud, he handed the sack to the waiting witch. Her crutch waving in the air had been his only greeting, a very peremptory one. He watched in mute apathy the look of astonishment that crossed her face as she peered inside the sack.

“One tuft! One tuft!” She smacked the golem’s knees with her crutch. “I give you a sack,” she went on, her voice a hideous squawk, “and you bring me one tuft?”

She glared at her housekeeper. He should probably have burst into flame, but was at that moment too stupid to notice his unspoken duty. As was his custom, he faced slightly away and down at the floor. Perhaps this excused him from not spontaneously combusting, but the hag didn’t think so.

“I can’t make a potion of rejuvenation with one tuft!” she screeched and launched the sack at him.

This had no effect on his stance or his volatility at all. She hadn’t given him a command, thus he took her abuse for the next hour, verbal and physical, without any outward sign of noticing or of getting hotter. Eventually, with a throat sore from screeching, she ordered him to fetch up a bottle of wine from her cellar. She’d gone without a drop since his departure, knowing well she’d only fall through the trap again if she drank alone. She wasn’t up for breaking a second leg, or her head.

“One tuft!” she said as he set about moving her old bed aside. “Damned golem. Stupid. Useless. Can’t think for itself. Why did I ever bother making you?”

He inevitably, because he had heard this, lost all sense of himself for the next few hours. He returned in a near moronic state that barely

recognised his own existence and he certainly could not think at all for himself. Had there been any residue left at all of his initiative, one that might have taken a careless, rather unspecific command and correctly surmised its intent, this was lost. The witch did a lot of cursing the next few days, all a result of her own words against him, though she'd never have admitted to it even had she known.

"Damned golem," was her favourite, least torrid epithet at the end of three days. She needed to send him back up the mountain, all because he hadn't gotten his orders straight. Never did anything right. She required at least half a sack to do the spell. Not to mention getting the baby. How in all the hells was she to get the baby if he couldn't get his orders straight?

Procuring the baby was the biggest hurdle. After that, the tonic would be simplicity itself. And once she was young again, she could take her malfunctioning housekeeper apart and get her old companion, her stone heart, back. She wouldn't need a housekeeper if she were young again.

"Should have done it ages ago," she grumbled. Ages ago or not, she'd been too drunk or too hung-over to attempt any such spell. Her fall through the trap had given her a scare and forced her to realise a housekeeper wasn't the answer to her problems. She'd gone to pot without noticing it, and the tonic was her solution to setting it right. She'd be young again. She'd be able to fetch her own babies afterward.

There'd been much she'd missed looking down a bottle, not that she was planning to give that up. Oh, no. There was always room for that in her life if she was careful, room for that and her other, more youthful pastimes.

There was the scaring. She loved scaring. She'd been uglier when was younger. Did more evil back then. She hadn't given anyone a good scare for ages. It was certainly overdue. If it weren't for the decrepit state of her body, she would have gone off to the village and fetched the baby herself. That would have been quite a scare, for the villagers and for the baby.

"Hah!" she laughed hideously. "Hah, hah!"

In a better, more witchier frame of mind, she gave her golem very specific orders for his departure back up the mountain, which included the exact quantity of tufted moss to acquire. So up the mountain he went again.

The reinforcement of the witch's injunction against thought put the golem into a state of moronic automaticity for most of the journey. He enlivened slightly when he was once more perched on the moss-laden limb of the hoary old tree. He gathered the required crop of moss and began his journey homeward, writhing inwardly against his own motion. He was helpless. He felt horrible. He wanted to die.

On the homeward journey, he made no effort to free himself from the witch's hold over him. Instead, he concentrated as much as he was able on remembering everything he could in the hopes of finding something he'd missed, something that might free him. He concentrated in particular on everything the hag had said to him or said near him. The exercise availed him little, or so he thought.

Those memories that were clear, those that chains of magic had muddled, those that loss of reason had tarnished black—he looked them over and filed them neatly alongside his awesome pile of cud. These of the latter, the remembrances of his first journey to the hoary old tree, he ignored, for he was busy, very busy with his effort to discover an escape. It was a reawakening, this exercise, had he but realised it. It was a spiral that rose upward and grew wider.

But of course he was entirely mired in his problem. He was stricken to the core of his stone heart by it. At the conclusion of his tally, a sense of utter hopelessness reduced him further, for he'd discovered nothing to aid him and considered the effort of remembering a wasted one. He came to a decision that he must not risk any action without forethought, or he might anger the witch and bring his consciousness to an abrupt end.

His tabulation of data made his position painfully clear. He must endeavour to please the witch with prompt and appropriate service and avoid, if at all possible, further disapprobation. He had nothing to look forward to but more of what he had experienced already. He had no measure of greatness to discover than his own endurance.

So it followed that, once he arrived home after this particular and successful twelve day journey, he was careful to play the part of dutiful, stupid golem, but not so stupid as to get her cursing at him again. He did exactly what she wanted when she wanted it done. He gleaned enough of

her intention behind even the most sloppily given command to provide her with the service she desired and rendered it as expeditiously as possible, and he had some very good days as a result.

There were days when the witch commanded what she had to command, even absently as one does when one is concentrating hard on something else, and he obeyed so well, so unassumingly well, that she barely thought of him except as a forgettable convenience. She hadn't much to say about him as a result, and he gradually recovered more of his self-possession as time passed.

Even more gradually, he began to comprehend that the absence of magical duress levied against his aliveness was weakening her hold over him. He was extremely careful to conceal this with even better service, yet none beyond what she demanded. Oh, he was extremely careful, he was, and he began to grow hopes, high hopes. If his relationship with his witch-mother were to continue in this fashion, he might eventually break free of her control and one day simply walk away from her tiny hut during a lull when he had not been given duties.

Thus it was a terrible shock when she grew irritated after a few weeks of near perfection—if one could call living with a witch anything of the sort—and began cursing at him when he had done nothing wrong at all. He lost ground. Even when she sent him off to fetch something, an ingredient that might take him into the forest for a day or two, he came back to an imprecation, one that sat tiresomely on top of the others.

Nothing satisfied her. The spell she'd been working on, one that she appeared to be making up from scratch—a time consuming venture that involved a lot of mumbling, picking through her mouldy old book and drawing ingredients on an empty page—had not been going exactly right, or so it seemed. Her quills, all old to begin with, weren't drawing correctly, smudging her symbols until they looked like something else entirely. The ink wouldn't dry, even after she sanded the marks down. She cursed, and she cursed long and hard, especially so at him, though he had very little to do with the actual formation of the spell.

Unbeknownst to the golem, the witch had come to regret not understanding the spider marks in her stolen spell book. The symbols for ingredients and the calls to power had all been easy enough to figure out, but without the ability to read the spidery handwriting alongside, she was guessing at best, albeit a guess with a life's worth of experience behind it.

What she had thought was a spell of renewal by the illustration appeared not to have the potency she required for a full rejuvenation.

The ingredients weren't quite adequate. Perhaps it would cure her arthritis, but she'd be as old as she ever was. Though she was a powerful witch—despite that she was also an ignorant peasant—for disparate personal reasons, she'd let herself go to pot, and once a witch has done such, she has to catch up with magic. The hag had spent the better part of both the golem's long absences scratching and re-scratching the power symbols and ingredient marks in an effort to create a more potent spell. She was determined to get it right, determined to remain sober long enough to succeed, but it was frustrating work, and her frustration translated itself into abuse of her slave.

This dreaded, living death—for so the golem had come to think of it, desperately wishing he was as edible as his much-mourned dog friend so that he might have the same demise—all ended one afternoon with a drawn out series of epithets about himself, herself and everything in general, and lastly with a command to get the fire going so that the damned ink would dry out. Immediately following came a series of words that nearly made the golem collapse with relief, and which also alleviated his confusion as to why the witch was being so abominable after all his careful servility.

“And bring me up some liquor from that damned keg of brandy, all the gods piss on it!” she screeched.

Ah yes, the brandy. She'd held herself off from it quite well, for the old sponge that she was. There was certain to be a rather unhealthy rebound from her extremity of sobriety. He might be on his own for a few days, with the witch knocked out on the mattress, passing herself off as the dead trying to rise again, as she sometimes described him. His hope rekindled and nearly blazed out from his eternally burning eyes, but this caused her suspicious gleam to sharpen on him, and he quickly let them sink back down into the moss and twigs. He set to fetching her brandy up instead of seeing first to the fire. He hoped her anxiety for a drink would make her miss the error.

The pewter mug was brimming when he brought it up. His incorrect order of performance went unnoticed, forgotten before he had so much as passed the mug over. There was nothing for her but the brandy, the smell of it, the warmth of its colour. He placed the mug within the cup of her anxious fingers and, with lips pursed in expectation, she carried the brandy up to where her mossy tongue waited for the burning, rich taste. The golem paused momentarily to surreptitiously assess the effect of that first draught, then set about getting the fire up to a nice, hot roar.

If a golem could look satisfied and righteous all at once, he had this pasted all over his stick and moss face. It was just as well he'd been given an injunction against staring. She would have noticed, if he had been facing her, especially during that alcohol induced suspicious period that sometimes follows the one of all-embracing friendliness, not that a hag tends to get much in the way of being friendly, even when drunk.

His satisfaction was about to acquire wounds. And his righteousness? That was about to get a puncture that would blow it out of the hut.

She didn't drink her liquor fast this time. Yes, the first guzzle was a good long draught. But the next? Barely a sip while her stomach reconciled itself to the first. She was going to damn well enjoy her self-given reward, despite everything. And that spell, that gods blasted spell of rejuvenation that she couldn't quite work out? That could wait. The baby could wait. Scaring the villagers could wait. Time to slow down and relax after working so hard, no matter how unproductively.

And so she spent a rather long time getting good and drunk. The golem perforce listened to a great deal of drunken talk, to him and sometimes not, before she eventually made no sense whatsoever. Having experienced only one of her periods of inebriation, he had assumed she would be rendered unconscious quickly. Instead, she was performing a fair rendition of the different states that the dog had passed through during its bout with alcohol. The only exception was that she added an extra state following the one of sadness, which she wallowed into after happy silliness. This one fair massacred his hopes to free himself.

Oh, she became angry. Very angry. She'd reached that mistrustful period, that state of mind some sots fall into, wondering if their alcohol-garlanded friends were really friends at all. Now the brandy painted all things present with an air of danger. All that could possibly be construed as sinister leapt out at the drunken witch, much of it imaginary. Unfortunately for the golem, who was the only other living creature in attendance and unable to flee her presence, this liquor-enhanced suspicion eventually and almost entirely settled on him.

"Thief!"

This was how it started. It was only a name, not a command, yet it hurt, and suddenly he had a fair idea of the value of certain objects in the hut. That spell book now, that was worth something in the right quarter. He was at a loss as to what quarter that might be, however.

“You stole my heart!” she screeched at him and then inexplicably cackled as if she thought something funny. “Should never have done it,” she added. Just as suddenly, she was sobbing, a dry croaking that reminded of dying frogs.

The golem heard rather than saw any of this. His back remained turned as he tended the fire, keeping it hot, remembering that he must dry out the faulty ink with its heat. His apparent inattentiveness mattered not to the witch. Any ear was a good ear, even imperceptible ones that doubled for yard rubbish. The golem listened with mute dread the ensuing, accusatory monologue that followed the passage of the witch’s short-lived woe, and in a brief interval, the witch managed to spout enough invective that—when this was added to the abuses of her recent bad-temper—she undid his small sense of will and reduced him once more to that of a mindless mannequin. He continued to feel the vibrations of her monologue long after he was harangued into unawareness of himself.

Yes, it was an extraordinarily unhealthy rebound. It was a binge of days and measured well the fortitude of the witch against her chosen poison. Upon the first morning after, she had such a head that she knew her only recourse from splitting it asunder was to quaff more of the cause. This she did, and managed to remain in a state of inebriation for some five days further. Eventually, her body became accustomed to the strength of the drink and she sobered enough to cut the quantity down of her own accord.

She awakened at the end of the binge, lying on her mattress of filth and fleas, with days of her own excretions soiling her—all of which had only marginally added to the years of grime—and comprehended that she’d wasted a great deal of time giving herself a bad taste in the mouth and a persistent headache. If her chosen poison hadn’t been the cause of this malaise, she might just have ordered some more fetched up to cure it. It was a pity for her golem that she wasn’t that stupid—she might well have poisoned herself for good—but she was done with her bout of inebriation and was unfortunately wise enough to realise it.

Her housekeeper, being quite stupid by the end of her binge, and therefore innocuous in the extreme, she’d altogether forgotten to bother with. He had become but a means to fetch up more brandy and to keep the fire going. The ink, for which the heat had been ordered, no doubt had long since dried. In fact, the entire hut was the driest she’d ever felt

it, and she wouldn't be at all surprised to find a good number of her moulds gone to spore.

It appeared to her that her housekeeper had done nothing but what she had told it to do the entire duration of her inebriation, and this satisfied her despite her complaining head. Perhaps the odd magics she had thrown together during its creation had at last settled into a working amalgamation. If so, she wouldn't have to bother tearing it apart, and this pleased her again, for she was a lazy old witch and didn't want to do her work twice over.

"You," she croaked at it, "let that fire go out. You're killing my mould collection."

It immediately set down the long stick it had been using to poke the embers into place, and crouched unmoving before the hearth, with the exception of the inward crawling of the leaves, dirt and sticks of its body. She grunted satisfaction. She had a good feeling about her creation this morning. The oddness she'd sensed in it at the beginning wasn't present at all, or so she thought. Contented with this, as much as any old witch can be contented with anything, she sent it off to fetch some water for drinking. It shuffled out of the hut on all fours and she listened for a while as it thumped about outside in search of the bucket that always rolled off somewhere in the wind.

Presently, she lost interest in this and hauled herself up to inspect the ink on the page of her spell book. The old table rocked and creaked under her weight as she leant over. She didn't breathe as she hovered there. She didn't dare, but the ink appeared dry. She carefully touched the edge of an illustration. This did not smudge, much to her satisfaction. Grunting affectionately, she patted the beaten, leather book. As for the spell, there was nothing more she could do with it for the moment. There was but to try and see if it worked, perhaps on a captured pigeon, or rabbit, or some such creature. By her own estimations, the best she could gain from it at this point was a decade, perhaps two. She'd need to test it, refine it, bring up its potency.

"Good," she said. "Time to get the most important ingredient."

And just then, her housekeeper walked back into the hut with a bucket of fresh water. It crouched at the door, dripping from where it had trodden in the creak, and waited with its head lowered. Her eyes narrowed on it speculatively.

“When you were in the village, did you notice any babies?” she asked, her old throat swallowing in a strange state of anxiety, or perhaps eagerness. “Just nod if you did.”

The golem nodded. The witch smiled toothlessly, but like a yawning, voracious, pitiless maw that would swallow the world if it could.

Hanicke was lost, had been for days. Had she been a normal sort of girl, one who had received her allotted share of sympathy and kindness, this circumstance would have been aggravating for her. As it was, she barely noticed being lost. For the first time in her life, she had religious zeal to bolster her. She was on a quest at the behest of the gods themselves, or at least one of them. All she therefore knew was that she'd eventually end up where she was meant to go. It was divine will, after all.

There was that *thing* to find. Upon fleeing her home, she had realised there wasn't much use asking for directions for finding a thing. Who would know such directions? And for that matter, who would want to pause to utter them to such as her? She'd just as likely get stoned for being a witch.

Keeping her distance from humankind had involved wide detours around villages, isolated farms, the occasional travelling stations and inns. She had, as a result, been lost more than once, surrounded by the forest and unable to see more than ten feet in any given direction. Yet not on any particular occasion of being astray did the situation bother her.

It was a perfectly reasonable lack of concern. The gods had asked her to seek a special someone who resembled a walking heap of raked up autumn rubbish. She reasoned that they weren't about to let her wander off in the wrong direction, or what was the sense in having been asked to perform the favour in the first place? She put herself wholly in trust of divinity and accepted tranquilly any serendipitous occurrences that helped her on her way to wherever it was that she was headed.

She hadn't fled her home unequipped. Believing that the departed hadn't much use for the material, she had made off with a number of her aunt's possessions. She had been to and gone from the farm long before any of her living relatives had thought to return. She'd had plenty of time to throw the best foodstuffs into baskets and had taken enough to last her a few weeks. She'd also appropriated the finest knife the kitchen

boasted and the hatchet as well. A pewter cup, a wooden bowl and an iron pot rounded out the items she'd snatched.

But it hadn't been just her aunt's possessions she'd rifled. Her cousin, Clim, had been of a size to match her—she truly was quite small for someone coming from a family of large persons—and she had filched the best of his clothes as well, not to mention his good leather shoes that felt so nice on her feet, even if they were a tad large. She wasn't wearing those at the moment. His boots were also an improvement over wooden clogs and much more sturdy than his leather shoes. These she'd pulled on and worn from the moment she'd tramped away from the farm.

She hadn't tramped away alone either. Perhaps it was only sentiment, but she'd rustled a pair of young pigs to keep her company. A set of harnesses, rigged from the old tack that she'd so long hidden within, served as restraints. With these she had led the pair off, the baskets and provisions tied on the backs of each. The two juveniles weren't so large as to be uncontrollable, nor too fat and lazy to travel. Company they were and warmth on cold nights, though the woollen coat formerly belonging to her unfortunate cousin protected her slim frame well enough, even without shared animal warmth.

Furthermore, it was her decision to steal the pigs that had provided her the most in the way of providence, for it was these two, with their sensitive snouts, that found the roots she ate on cold days when fruit trees were nowhere to be seen and her provisions long ago consumed. When she was not actively leading the swine away from the boundaries of humankind, they were also her guides on this divinely appointed journey. Their bristling, brindle backs were her markers, for she had no others to guide her path, and if on occasion they appeared to alter course to follow a spark of light during their peregrinations, she merely followed on, resolute and unquestioning.

Her one regret wasn't that she'd left her home or lost her inheritance, for she'd cut out from her heart all those old and rotten hopes. No, she regretted something very simple, an item left behind and one that would have been very useful along with that stolen iron pot. She hadn't remembered to snatch up a tinderbox. Free of her kin, she'd have been happy to squander some of her time on a good, cooked meal, even if it were only roots and fungi.

As for her reasons behind fleeing Stoneacre County, her explanation, if she'd been asked, would have been simple. She hadn't the chance of a rabbit in a weasel-infested burrow of surviving the suspicions of the

people of the county, supplication or not. Such was her conclusion concerning the terrible events prior to her escape. The bolt of lightning? That was certainly fortuitous, but she hadn't considered it altogether wise to wait about afterward and expect further intervention on her behalf. The protection of the gods wasn't a gift to be taken lightly. Her father had always said to thank profusely the gods for their gifts, but never to expect a repeat, for they were just as likely to plant the next thunderclap on the head of an overly proud favourite.

Her false aunt's death didn't exactly upset Hanicke. There had been too much of the bad between them for her to grieve. Even so, she didn't like to think about the lightning strike much. She'd had a ghastly close view of that strike. Strangely, the bolt had not blinded her. If she thought about it at all, the event gave her a distinct distaste for the sight and smell of cooked meat, especially pork. Often, her two swine received hugs and fresh promises they would only ever feed her with mushrooms, not their flesh. If they appreciated this pact, they didn't bother showing it.

A seasoned traveller of the realm could have considered the trip a hard one. Hanicke, who'd travelled not at all, considered the journey to be a fair one. She was never as hungry as she'd been on the farm and never as afraid. The cold was about the same, during a rather severe summer, as she would have found it living on the farm with her skimpy rags for shelter—these she'd buried in a ditch not long after her departure. She hadn't been as free of worry since she'd lived with her father and, even if her circumstances weren't the most stable, she'd endured such as to make her current situation seem a very light burden. Besides, it was warming up every day. The autumn promised to be better than the summer.

A month of trudging, lost in forests, crossing virgin fields, was eventually going to result in getting her somewhere. So it did. One day, she arrived. The pigs nosed their way through a cedar bush and poked right out onto a freshly tilled field, one with a quaint little village of stone and log houses and thatched roofs resting just beyond. Hanicke hauled the pigs back through the bush at once. To her, the village was just one like any other, full of normal, narrow-minded peasants with predictable superstitions. Accordingly, she pulled her pigs away from the discovery, determined to get as much forest between herself and any of the village inhabitants as she could before dark.

The pigs chose this moment to balk.

It was nicely done, their balking, so nicely that she didn't at first take it as such. She was merely hauling them along when one of them doubled the cord around a tree. This resulted in an unexpected tumble to the ground that left her breathless and also wrenched the wrist that she'd had the lines wrapped about. When she recovered enough to inspect the state of the problematic pig, she discovered it sitting calmly next to the leather-entwined tree. It was happy to see her up and gave her a welcoming grunt as she set about unwinding it from the beech. This was difficult to do with a sprained wrist, but she managed eventually. Taking up the cords in her good hand, she lined the two swine up and gave them a peremptory shove to get them on their way.

The female, contrarily, decided that this was the moment to settle down for a nap. Hanicke shoved her again and, that failing, gave her a good pinch. The young sow squealed, wheeled and ran the wrong way, back toward the village. Hanicke was hauled a good three feet in that direction when the line of the second pig tightened. He'd also decided to nap and wasn't to be bothered following after the sow. A motionless pig is an effective brake. The sow was jerked to a halt, but Hanicke, who unfortunately held the lines throughout, had her good wrist wrenched as well.

That settled it for her. She'd have a nap, too, after she'd laboriously tied her two nasty pigs to a tree with her two painfully throbbing hands, and if they couldn't reach any roots from where she knotted them, too bad! However, before her nap, she would make a cautious reconnaissance of the nearby village. She was careful to desist cursing as she closed the distance to the habitations. She estimated an hour to dusk and was diligent marking a path back to her pigs.

It didn't take long to rediscover the tiny settlement. She stretched herself under the same bush her pigs had originally blundered through and from there spied the evening goings-on across the field. As she expected, what she observed was all very ordinary and—having long ago lost interest in the ordinary lives of ordinary people—she was about to creep back out of her concealment when an odd crackling noise stopped her.

Hanicke went cold all over. The noise had originated from directly to the side of her, so close as to have occurred within the same bush. She made not a motion, nor did she breathe. The noise continued.

She realised, and would feel stupid about it later after her terrible fear had passed, that the noise had been there all along and that the sound of

her crawling through the bush had hidden it from her. It was a very weird noise, as of leaves and dirt scratching on and on against each other without end. It was terrifying. Could it be a snake coiling next to her head?

She lay there, breathing at last, but as slowly as her fearful want of air would let her. Nothing ensued but more of the weird noise. After a time, she very slowly shifted her head in the direction of the odd sounds. There were two feet beside her, and she suspected she should have noticed them before. Her only excuse was that they weren't very normal as feet go, having not the usual sort of bones and tissue one can expect from such. These were obviously making the eerie sounds, for the component parts of them shifted about in a rather hypnotic manner.

Hanicke blinked and blinked at the pair of feet, baffled that she had been brainless enough to miss the appendages. Eventually, she came to the conclusion, a very late conclusion, that she must find what led to the top of the feet, before the gathering darkness made it impossible for her to run like a screaming mad fool away from whatever owned them.

It had not reached Hanicke's mind yet that the feet belonged to the thing for which she'd been searching. Of course, she'd seen it only once, and that rather quickly in a vision during a very trying time. Thus she did not recognise the goal of her search as she craned her neck in the long, slow, awful stretch upward to catch sight of the face belonging to the feet.

Meanwhile, *it* was bending its neck to spy with burning eyes the intruder who'd picked the same hiding place as itself, and it was trying to do this silently, for it was hoping the intruder hadn't discovered its presence. Alas for the golem. As he peered down, so Hanicke peeked up, and ember eyes met bright green irises. Hanicke, not breathing in the least as she should have done, chose this moment to grow dizzy and blank of mind. When she recovered, the feet were gone.

"God of the Great Mystery!" she whispered. It was a thank-you, that, for not having died of heart seizure during the highly emotional discovery. She also realised, while enduring this quivering episode of relief, that she'd found her thing. But what a thing!

What exactly was it?

Certainly it was alive. If coals could portray life of the inquisitive, sentient sort, then she'd just met two of them. Strange how they'd sunk back into its head just as she'd blacked out.

“Now what do I do?” She was certain it was up to her to discover what the creature was going to do with the baby she’d seen in the vision, and she was certain that it hadn’t nabbed the little one yet. Why else would it be pretending to be part of a cedar bush? It was waiting for its moment.

As she peered again at the peaceful village, observing its normal, settling down activities of the evening, she wondered where the creature had gotten itself. Obviously there was no going back to her pigs for her until well after dark, perhaps not until morning. The thing was going to make its move the moment the village quieted into perfect slumber, and she would have to resolve her course of action before then. Her activities that evening, to stop the thing from stealing the baby or not, depended on her conclusions. And so she absently scratched her arm where the dried needles of the cedar bush were making her itch and sorted the facts out in her mind.

Bringing it all together, she realised something telling. The God had called the creature someone special, someone lost, and referred to it as a ‘him’. Well enough. The thing didn’t have the anatomy to fit the pronoun, but the God had assigned it a gender. Him it was, then. Yet *he* hadn’t looked lost to her. He had been standing in the cedar bush looking very un-lost indeed and with a definite purpose in mind.

Perhaps she wasn’t thinking the right sort of lost. Perhaps it was the sort of lost that arrives with damnation. That likely meant the abduction of the baby was not correct for this special *him* she had been sent to help. Therefore, she must stop the abduction from occurring.

With this determined, Hanicke had her immediate goal to achieve with regard to helping the creature, but she hadn’t a single idea how to go about it. It was far too late for her to search him out and reason with him. The dark had flung a blanket over the sky, and she hadn’t even a star to guide her through the forest. Only the light of a few flickering candles shone dimly through shutters in the habitations across the field. She could barely discern the houses themselves.

Hanicke made a quick decision and scuttled forward from her hiding place. She doubted anyone had posted a watch in this unfortified village and she was determined to be close enough to the houses to spot her divinely appointed charge, before he got himself into serious trouble. She needed to see as much of the village as she could manage, as close as she could manage, before the creature made his move.

She crept closer and closer to the houses, edging all the while in a circular direction, until she discovered a likely position for surveying as many of the buildings as possible. She was careful, putting a year's practice at stealth to good use, and secured her position without alerting any of the farm dogs, chicken, ducks or geese. She settled down on earth the evening chill had dampened, put her arms about her knees, lowered her head, and became an innocuous lump in the gloom.

She waited for an estimated hour, itching yet from the irritation of cedar needles, her wrists even now aching, and wondering when the creature would emerge to attempt the abduction. She was growing cold with enforced stillness and was impatient, thinking perhaps the thing had seen her and wasn't going to perform the kidnapping after all.

She was wrong.

She'd missed his first move despite her precaution of finding an overall view of the crime scene. Perhaps it was purely coincidental that a previously silent cricket decided to chirrup the moment the golem edged from around the corner of a barn. Then again, perhaps not, for Hanicke snapped her head about and witnessed the intrusion of the golem into the darkness—*with the baby in its arms!*

Hanicke acted without thought. She screamed. An immediate frozen silence pervaded the village. The clouds at last broke and uncovered the moon. Pale light revealed the creature's face. Mouth agape and working into various positions of anxiety, the creature seemed petrified with indecision.

The baby began to wail, a high, terrified cry that rendered its abductor near stupid with confusing commands. The witch had told the golem to avoid letting any villagers catch sight of him, and the baby was one. As a result, the golem didn't know what to do. Continue to abduct the baby, or hide from it? He ended up frozen with anxiety, doing nothing at all. The witch had outdone herself rendering her housekeeper stupid, for he hadn't the wits left to realise that abducting the baby was foremost in her mind, not hiding from it.

Sounds of human concern were punctuating the silence and Hanicke, taking advantage of the creature's uncertainty, hurried up to him, snatched the baby from his stick hands and backed away quickly. The golem merely stood there indecisively, watching her. Hanicke did the next thing that came to her mind as a good course of action. She screamed again, but this time with words.

“Baby thief!” she belted out. “Help! Kidnapper!”

Perhaps these words weren’t of the brilliant sort, but brilliance at this point was not required. Naming him for what he was set the golem off. He lumbered away at an incredible speed, abandoning his primary mission in favour of keeping himself hidden. Hanicke set the baby down on the soil and sped off after him, not worrying so much about keeping up as keeping out of sight herself. She didn’t want the villagers mistaking her for the would-be perpetrator.

She must have managed to get under cover of the black forest in time, for the villagers, when she turned at last to see what they were about, had gathered around the baby and its family, and were staring in every direction in absolute bafflement and fright. Hanicke, grinning one of her hideous grins in the darkness, was feeling wild and giddy from her adventure. She most certainly would have been mistaken for the perpetrator if they’d seen her just then, for although she wouldn’t have liked it, she looked indeed the witch.

She was convinced there would be a guard posted the remainder of this night, and perhaps the next and the next, but it remained to be seen whether she had permanently discouraged the golem from his task. It also remained to be seen whether she could find him while also keeping herself and her pigs hidden from the searchers that were sure to be raking for signs in the woods the following morning. That prospect turned her solemn with trepidation. She hoped they didn’t have any trackers. She doubted she’d be able to elude a professional of that sort.

With that fearsome possibility in mind, she risked losing herself in the dark of the forest, knowing that she had to get as far from the village as she could before morning. She stumbled her way back to the cedar bush and bent to the ground to feel for her tracks or her pig’s. After a horrid interlude in which she saw nothing but black and felt nothing in the loam that reminded her of anything pig or human, she managed to find a series of impressions. Hoping these belonged to her pigs, she crept determinedly through the darkness until she had reunited with them once again.

Untying and giving the pair a hopeful push, she tripped her way after the swine, one hand in front to ward off branches and spider webs, until they decided, many hours later, to halt of their own accord once more. Hanicke trusted that they knew what they were doing and settled down between them, then waited for the excitement in her blood to ebb and let her fall asleep.

Of the golem, she neither heard nor saw any sign, but she was certain he was still hovering around somewhere, waiting to steal a baby.

Chapter Four

Physically, the golem sat huddled in a tree. Mentally, he hadn't quite arrived, still lost in a mental fog and trying to stumble his way back to clarity.

The sun was peeking through glinting spider webs and spruce needles. A young bird was squawking at him. He noticed, but it meant nothing. He was a slave waiting for his moment to obey. Of what importance was a twittering bird to that? The bird had nothing to do with his mission, nothing at all. The bird could go elsewhere for all he cared.

Being rather short on energy, the young jay eventually settled itself down for a bird nap and endeavoured to wait the golem out. Meanwhile, the golem pondered and pondered, but the events of the evening last became no clearer in his mind. He'd had the baby. Then the baby had looked at him. There it had all fallen apart.

Well, perhaps it had fallen apart beforehand, when the noseless girl with the crooked face had screeched at him. She'd skulked up to the village just the same as he had, even choosing his own hiding place within which to creep. She was definitely not a villager, if only because his mistress's commands did not seem to apply to her. But who was she?

It didn't matter. Only his duty mattered.

There were two things of which the golem was absolutely certain. The first was that he had failed to kidnap the baby. The second was that he had little likelihood of recapturing the baby as easily as he had snatched it the first night. Only the witch's commands held him within the vicinity of the village. Despite his unsuccessful first attempt, he would keep trying. He had no choice.

The witch had actually taken the time to inform him about feeding the little creature once he nabbed it. He had a bladder, hiding somewhere in his torso, of something that she had mentioned was good for an infant. She'd also shown him the correct manner of carrying the child without causing it injury, and she'd warned him to wrap its bedding

around it for warmth. All he'd had to do was get the baby, but he'd failed.

Since the beginning of this mission, a constricting, burning sensation had plagued him. Somewhere in his chest, this sensation resided, and it hurt atrociously, but never more so than when he'd snatched the baby from its crib and carried it into the dark. It had been a relief to him when the cedar bush girl had screamed. He had been blissfully, mutely grateful after she'd snatched the baby from his arms.

But even now, a demanding pinch from the witch's power drove him, causing the burning in his centre to increase again. He would go back to the village tonight because he must. Vaguely, he wondered if his body would smoulder into flame. When he thought about the strange girl again, it was to wonder if she would be there to save him from what he was afraid he would do.

Hanicke awakened under the sun within a copse of pines and blinked at the rude light. The sun had mounted the firmament high enough to intrude upon her shelter, and she wasn't at all pleased with its arrival. She was extremely tired and, cold notwithstanding, would have preferred the sun to remain on the east side until a more reasonable hour. But the hours are never reasonable for a woman with a mission to accomplish, and the sun blinked at her tiresomely until she ventured to get up from the carpet of needles.

She itched abominably. She wondered how she had managed to sleep through the irritation. Her pigs were wearing welts that looked just as uncomfortable as her skin felt, but she suspected their injuries had resulted from ploughing through brush in the dark. Hers were mostly from scraping fingernails. Even as she realised it, her fingers scraped new welts.

"Why here?" she grumbled. "Why under a pine tree?"

For answer, the young sow belted out a fine good-morning fart. Fearing that raising objections with the pigs wasn't to be a productive pastime, Hanicke settled for silently scratching herself into a more wakeful state of mind. Afterward, allowing old habits to prevail, she filched what the pigs had dug up and ate it herself. Having settled the needs of her body, she tugged the lines into order and set the pigs

trotting back from whence they had fled the night past, or at least in that general direction.

They didn't fail her. Eventually, she found herself back at the site where she'd left them the night previous. Here there were signs of trampling that had little to do with herself or the double-toed markings of swine. A multitude of dog prints of varied size mixed with the imprints of their masters.

"They must have brought even the puppies out," she said, looking at smaller paw marks.

From the tracks, it appeared that the animals had milled about the site for a short duration, then been inexplicably pulled back the way they had come. Hanicke reasoned that this was so, because there weren't any canine prints beyond the pig campground. It was a mysterious circumstance, but one that appeared to bode well for her further surveillance of the village, provided that the villagers hadn't pulled back to create a trap to catch her.

Hanicke was never to know it, but the abandoned chase had been a result of one villager's highly inflamed imagination. This particular fellow, who'd never previously shown signs of superstitious dread his entire sedate life, had discovered a pig track in place of where a booted footprint should have followed. After perceiving this awesome omen, he had concluded that a truly terrible creature had been responsible for last night's attempted abduction. One startled yell, along with his pointing, shivering claw of a finger, resulted in an immediate consensus to retreat back whence the pursuing party had come.

If Hanicke were to have known that she'd just made the leap from accused witch to that of a devil, she would truly have been disheartened, for such had become the case when the hunters had viewed the double-toed tracks where boot prints should have been. In actual fact, Hanicke's wise pigs had merely travelled in a circle that night and come back to confuse the trail and trample some of her footsteps away.

After she had hidden the swine in a secluded location, Hanicke discovered a monumental pile of offerings at the local shrine. She had a fine view of the pile from where she hid, this time beneath a deciduous shrub decorated with copious foliage and with a lovely thatch of last years grass beneath. She naturally attributed the large hill of flowers, fruits, carvings, candles, and various other farm products to the scare last night. She also noted a significant absence of children playing in the farmyards and fields that fine day. She doubted not that their mothers

had them under unusually watchful eyes. Most of the villagers who arrived at the shrine the remainder of that day were strangely reluctant to pray loud enough for Hanicke to overhear and she never discovered that a devil lurked about, waiting to kidnap children in the night.

With the fields empty of exploratory youngsters and with the villagers reluctant to stray beyond the boundaries of tilled land, Hanicke reasoned that, if she were cautious to stay out of sight, she might safely search the perimeter for the stick creature. She was certain it lurked somewhere nearby, and so, seeking the shadows and keeping to the rear of the foliage, she skulked in a circuit along the village boundary. She crept along slowly, taking care not to create any noise that might send her quarry deeper into hiding.

She didn't doubt that, if the creature didn't want to be found, it was possible she might not find him. She hoped he was more concerned with avoiding her by keeping still, as he'd done the evening before when she'd blundered into his cedar bush. He would most certainly be hard to spot if that were the case, but she'd still have a better chance at it than if he fled in advance of her approach. But as luck would have it, or perhaps it wasn't luck at all, Hanicke had less of a difficult time finding the golem than she had anticipated. Some fifteen minutes after setting off on her search of the perimeter, peering ever so carefully at each individual bush, a raucous jay led her eyes straight to him.

Poor golem! After experiencing his first heavy rains, worms gathering above the earth, for want of air in their drowning underworld, had taken advantage of his presence and set up household in his stick and mud frame. A healthy colony of annelids writhed in there now. It was an absurd home for a worm, but as full of compost as one could want and never lacking new material through which to wriggle, due to the shifting nature of their host's body.

The golem hadn't much bothered with the annelid presence before now, perceiving full well that his substance was as much a habitat for them as whence they'd come, but the event of the ravenous jay ended all his previous complacency. His worms had suddenly developed into a liability of magnitude. Their wonderful, walking household had become a banquet hall for a voracious beak, one that had hopped along the branch toward him, hints of wriggling puce urging it onward.

Hunger had outweighed the juvenile's sense of danger. It currently scabbled up and down the golem's frame, pulling worms wherever they were to be seen wiggling. True to its nature, the jay vocalised stridently

whenever it lost a puce tip that had offered itself in a most appealing manner.

Once it dawned on the golem that the bird was a serious threat to his concealment, he attempted to shove the feathered creature back onto the branch, but the jay would have none of that. It latched on with all its tiny might, flapping its wings and squawking mightily. The golem proceeded down from the tree, hoping the jay might decide a lonely exodus back up would be in order, but once again it wouldn't have that. Rather, it had more of what it wanted, worms, and those suddenly more in evidence.

Perhaps this wriggling display was a result of the golem's rapid descent. Then again, perhaps it was for reasons unknown, but there were worms everywhere. The irritating bird wasn't the least concerned with finding itself out of its favourite tree. Here was a feast for the taking, and it proceeded to chase the banquet most diligently, chirruping its content as loudly as it had announced its earlier discontent.

Hanicke, who happened along only moments later, discerned from whence issued the happy noise and spied the golem standing glumly beneath the spruce with juvenile bird firmly attached. The golem, on his part, became aware of the girl at almost the same instant. They stared at each other, both wondering what to do about their mutual discovery. The golem wasn't the first to come to a decision. Hanicke approached him, as quickly as she dared, hoping that he would not flee her advance.

With a single ember he stared at her, his chest suddenly constricting as never before. He thought, most irrationally, that it must be from the little bird adding its weight to the area, where pain and torment seemed to demand something of him, yet to which none of the witch's commands informed him of the course he must take. Unwisely, he attempted to reason out his next move.

This girl... She was a threat to his mission, but she wasn't a villager. She wasn't someone from whom he had to remain hidden. She was someone who screamed at him and about him, someone who told the villagers he was there, waiting in the night. What was he to do about her? He had a terrible thought that he must shut her up and he knew of only one way to shut anything living up. Even as he concluded this, his precious tuft of dog fur fell from his body, tumbling earthward with a worm writhing through the middle.

The golem wanted to scream. His centre pulsed with a terrible pain, a constriction that seemed to sear. He felt as if something in his centre was cracking. He knew, he knew absolutely, that he must raise his arms to

that girl or suffer more of it. He must do this thing he hated so, this thing the witch had taught him.

From his gaping mouth there issued a low reproach, but not for the girl was it meant. For himself, the witch and all the powers of existence, he uttered the tortured noise and approached the next of his victims with such self-abhorrence he hoped his own ill will might kill him.

Hanicke hadn't conceived that she should be concerned for her own safety. She'd been divinely recruited to save this stick man from his own actions. The idea that the creature might form a lethal intention toward her had never entered her computations. Still, as the golem stared one-eyed at her, looking foolish and puzzled for all his inhumanity, the little bird squawking on his chest, an urge to retreat hit her. When the creature's second eye appeared alongside the first to stare at her, when both enormous arms stretched toward her, the urge punctured her stillness like a pin. For all that, her only motion was to take one uncertain step away from him.

The golem took one toward her, one that travelled twice the distance and, all in an instant, she knew he was going to murder her. She knew she must run. She knew he would overtake her. She knew she wasn't going to survive their third encounter. Despite all that, oddly enough, the jay on his chest became the focal point of her final few moments.

It was small. It was pretty. It was pulling at an extraordinarily large worm. The worm she experienced some sympathy for, tugged as it was into a length far outreaching the bounds it was meant to trespass. It had attached itself to something within the golem and was resisting mightily the pull of the feathered marauder. A portion of its puce length was still hidden beneath the chest of moss and twigs. Even as Hanicke watched, even as she felt the golem's stick fingers close around her neck, cutting her breath off, the jay yanked the end along with whatever had anchored the worm to the golem.

It was such a disgusting sight that Hanicke would have retched had she not been strangling at the moment. Dark and purplish, pustulated and domed, it was a tiny mushroom that could have killed a farmyard of pigs by looks alone. Hanicke was sorry she'd lived to see it. She was very sorry, but rather faintly so because of the anoxia in her brain, when the dear little jay gobbled the toadstool down along with the worm attached to it. It made quite a lump in the creature's throat. The lump did not so much as travel half the distance to the bird's crop before the jay lost its purchase on the golem's chest and fell slackly to the earth.

The muffled thump it made as it landed, all limp and loose from death, Hanicke did not hear, for her ears were suffering too much of pressing blood to manage it. Her eyes lost their ability very soon after, but it seemed to her, even as she thought she was thinking her last thought, that the pounding of her blood had eased the moment the toadstool popped from its hiding place, and she wondered if dying could be made easy after all, near the very end.

There are times when one can be thankful for having committed a murder. So the golem discovered. All bent and misaligned from falling loosely to the earth, his last victim held such surprise in its eyes, such terrible surprise that he had to turn his gaze from it. It was too much for him to behold, for the eyes of his almost victim had held the same surprise, that same innocent wonderment, just before he came to himself and loosed her from his murderous clasp. She lay in his lap now, purple marks raised and bloody all around her tiny neck, and he moaned that he had come so very close to murdering a life that could think and perceive as he did. His other victim lay at his feet, feathers askew and tiny beak agape, the lump that had killed it resting midway to the crop. He was so glad it had died.

How could that thing from his chest have caused him such suffering, made of his life a misery? How could it be that he was awake now, in command of himself as he'd never been from his very birth? What had been that thing?

Almost as if in answer, a hoarse little voice vibrated up from his lap. "That was the most disgusting toadstool I've ever seen in my life."

The little body that had created these words shifted ever so slightly in his grasp and he gaped down at the bush girl, wondering how much she was going to hate him for almost murdering her. Perhaps it was time to place her limp body on the earth and run away.

He was certain she must loathe him, for his attempt on her life and for being what he was, a made thing meant for nothing but unending labour. He was unforgivable, in action and by nature. Yet as he prepared to lay her down and scramble into the forest from which he'd been created, she stared up at him with nothing more in her unevenly set eyes

but curiosity, and perhaps a bit of sorrow born of pity. He wished so much he could tell her he was sorry.

“I don’t suppose you could get me a drink of water?” she asked him, her throat swallowing in what seemed a painful manner, for she grimaced and blinked tears.

He nodded his head, set her down gently and trotted off to find her some, abysmally grateful she wasn’t hating him yet. It didn’t occur to him until he was on his way back from the stream, water dripping from a cone formed of leaves, that she had perhaps wanted him gone so she might flee for her life in safety. He lost half the water rushing back to be certain of her, but she was still where he’d left her when he returned with the makeshift cup. With great diffidence, he gently raised her up and helped her drink.

She choked at first. It was almost too much for her to swallow. No doubt the insides of her throat were swelling as much with bruises as the outside. All he could do was wait and offer the cup again when she was ready. Some of the water managed to get down, but she pushed the cone away after a few tiny sips.

“What were you going to do with the baby?” she said abruptly.

What an odd question, the golem thought to himself. Why not, ‘Why did you try to kill me?’ Or perhaps, ‘What are you?’ But no, she had asked what he was going to do with the baby, purple-black bruises all around her neck notwithstanding. All he could do was gape at her, to which she answered with a slight frown. Funny that she didn’t have a nose like other humans. There was only a pair of gaps above her asymmetrical lips. But then, she wasn’t a villager. Perhaps outsiders were made differently.

“Can’t you talk?” she asked.

At last he could answer with a definite shake of his head.

“Oh,” she acknowledged, an expression of disappointment mingled with irritation forming on her face.

The golem was sorry to disappoint her. He supposed he’d already begun that by trying to kill her, but she surprised him again with an odd comment.

“Now I suppose He wants me to stay and find a way to get the answer to my question,” she said breathily. “I should have asked more questions to begin with.”

With that, she pushed away from his supporting hand and lifted herself to her feet, albeit unsteadily. He was terribly concerned for her. She looked as likely to fall back down as stand alone, and he kept a hand ready to grab her, but she stood firm once arrived, peering down at the dead jay with a sort of grim fascination.

“If it weren’t for that bird, you’d have killed me,” she said.

He nodded desolately.

“I wonder what it was about the toadstool that made you want to?”

He shook his head in mystification.

“It looked purely evil,” she added.

To that he nodded his head affirmatively, thinking that she’d hit the mark exactly. It had been pure evil, and all the power of the witch’s cruel commands had been obtained from there. He shuddered to think of it. What if he had more of them?

The girl was staring at him in some perplexity. “What’s that in your chest?” she inquired curiously.

Horrors! Did he indeed have another one hidden within? Even as he thought it, and far too quickly for him to think of stopping her, she sought inside him with a quick little hand and pulling something out. He uttered one scraping screech before he snatched at her wrist, but much too late to stop her. He had visions of her dying before his eyes again, but his screech petered out when he comprehended a feather hanging innocuously from her fingers.

It was a nice, big feather, white with silvery edges. What had it been doing in there? He couldn’t recall killing any birds, other than the jay. Had his hag mistress ordered him to hunt one down, as he’d done the doe?

The bush girl put words to his thoughts. “What were you doing with a feather in your chest?” she asked.

He shrugged dismally. He certainly didn’t want to admit to killing another bird, not even to himself.

“I see you’ve got a big rock in there, too,” she added. “It looks like a heart.”

Sure enough, as he twisted his neck down to get a look, there it was. He unclasped her wrist to scratch at it, but even as he did so, the hole in

his chest began to close up, and he nearly caught his finger in the shrinking gap.

“It looks as though the toadstool was in there with it,” the girl murmured. She examined the feather closely. “There’s something odd about this feather, but I can’t quite tell what.”

She handed it back to him. He took it delicately, reluctantly, and it was as if the girl understood, for she smiled at him reassuringly.

“I don’t see anything wrong with it,” she said. “In fact, I think it might be a good thing, though how I know is beyond me. Put it back if you can.”

He tried to, but for some reason, the feather wouldn’t stay in. No matter how often he shoved it down within his moving anatomy, it crept back out at another location. Eventually, with the girl showing considerable fascination, he opted for hanging it off his chest with a twist of dry vine. It fluttered there nicely, without any sign of shifting back within. He looked at the girl inquiringly.

“I don’t know,” she said. “If you could talk, I’d ask you what you wanted to do.”

This girl was most astonishing. How did she know what he was thinking?

She answered him almost immediately. “You’ve a very expressive face, you know. It’s always moving, like the rest of you, but it always moves into an expression. Right now, you’re looking astonished.”

And he was. Very. And the girl was giggling at him, although she did her best to hide it. Presently, she didn’t bother to hide her mirth at all, a series of choking coughs having replaced the emotion. Her humour had outdone her throat, and she was paying for her lapse. He was very discouraged about this, knowing it was his fault.

“Don’t worry about it,” she breathed hoarsely. “I’ve endured worse.”

This made him angry; to think someone else had done worse. He didn’t want anything worse to happen to her. Ever.

His bush girl, finished with choking and disinclined to remain longer within the vicinity of the village, grabbed hold of one of his hands and pulled. “Let’s go,” she said. “I’ve got some pigs that are waiting for me, and they’ve probably eaten everything to be had within tether length.”

He followed her along most gratefully, blissfully so. She *wasn't* going to abandon him. She was bringing him with her. She spoke to him. She understood him. She wasn't telling him how bad he was.

He was going to follow her forever!

Seven days later he was tugging at her to change direction, but she rebuked him for the hundredth time.

"I told you, I have to go this way! The pigs won't go anywhere else!"

If he had to, he was going to kill those pigs!

"You won't touch them," she snapped. "They're what brought me to you! You should be grateful!"

He was grateful. But the pigs had to go!

"No!"

She halted in mid-step and scowled her worst up at him, but the golem only scowled back, albeit somewhat sheepishly. He hated to earn her disapproval, but earn it he must.

They were much too close. This stream before which they stood bordered the land his mistress considered hers. He had to keep the bush girl away from here, had been attempting to do so since first he comprehended that she would obstinately follow the swine wherever they led.

Damned pigs! They were going to kill his bush girl. They were leading her to be slaughtered.

If he weren't so close to his mistress's hovel, he'd try screaming at the girl again. She hadn't liked it any more than the witch had, and she certainly couldn't make him stop. The last time he'd done it, she'd almost lost her pigs when they'd bolted, but she'd run after them until they'd halted. Then, with their lines back in her hand and her skin smarting from a rope burn, she'd given him a lecture that not even his hag-mother could have beaten for getting him down. But unlike with the lectures of the witch, the effect of his bush girl's disapprobation never lasted long. Concern for her life outweighed any sense of guilt.

There was no further opportunity for screaming, however. She took one step into the water, now so low from the dryness of the warm season as to be almost half its former width, and he was forced to pick her up and hold her at arms length while she kicked at him furiously.

“Put me down, you big stick!” she hollered. “Put me down!”

Never, was his answering grimace, and he prepared to turn about and carry her off to safety when those damned pigs undid his effort. They’d been scuffling in the mud at his feet as he and his new mistress argued. Now, they scrambled around, oinking and snorting, until their loose lines tangled about his legs.

Even a golem can be overbalanced when he’s unprepared. He was most certainly unprepared and overbalance he did. He only had time to release the girl before he tumbled his entire length into the creek.

Hanicke didn’t fare much better. She kept her footing, nominally speaking. To maintain her balance, she performed an acrobatic clown act across the width of the stream, splashing and cursing until she tripped over a large rock on the other side. There she sprawled, spitting dirt out from between her teeth and sneezing mud from her absent nose.

“Blessed damned pigs,” she grumbled. Her shins smarted. She spat again and lifted herself up to her hands and knees, wondering what had happened to that mulish golem in her charge. She never had a chance to look. Something horrible swooped down upon her, shrieking and flapping like a faded and giant crow, its wings cut to tatters. It was upon her, smelling like a pit of faeces, before she comprehended what it truly was.

Of course, it was the old witch, out on one of her forays to the hated creek, seeking another stone to befriend and much regretting the one she’d deposited in that damned golem. She’d expected the creature back three days ago, kidnapped baby borne between his stupid stick hands. She’d been frothing expectantly over the image since his departure, and she’d been foaming like a mad dog after having conceived that her creation was tardy returning from its vile mission.

She had blasted her absent housekeeper with curses most unavailing for those three tense days and, on this third day, had stormed from her hovel to seek peace in the ravaging of her domain. Several trees, which had stupidly stood in her path, had been struck in twain with hastily flung maledictions. Then, when she’d found herself choking on her foaming saliva, she’d withered black a patch of good earth with her spittle. The

patch would never grow vegetation again. She had destroyed ten times the area of that, and one very ancient oak for which she'd once had a liking, when she decided to relieve herself beneath it. The oak was still upright, but its shrivelled leaves were already dropping. The tree was certain to fall by the end of the winter.

Having taken her ire out on that which hadn't caused it, she had almost calmed herself to the point of feeling vaguely vexed when she spied the rival witch dancing impetuously across her creek boundary. Dressed mannishly in brown boy's clothes, this witch was younger and much uglier than her. The unwanted visitor put the finish to the hag's self-restraint. To have her housekeeper go all wrong and then to have a young competitor snatch it, one who had no fear of the water, this drowned all the self-reserve the old hag possessed.

She was going to kill the little upstart and ask questions later. All she needed was to save a few bones and a bit of hair, and the little brat would be dancing from out of hell at her bidding for ages. She hadn't eaten another witch in a long time. The feast was certain to raise her power by immeasurable notches. She flung herself upon the presumptuous little bit without further ado.

Hanicke initially gave one startled grunt when the hag attacked, more a result of the force of the rush, but the terrible gouging of those gnarled claws made her squeal almost exactly like her beloved pigs. The hag's vision was perhaps merciful in her old age, for Hanicke managed to retain her own. Nevertheless, two strips of skin dangled from below both eyes, and she came perilously close to losing the lowest organ, her right one. Through vision blurred from blood and tears, she saw the crone fling her filthy arms back for a second attack, but a terrific roar nearly pierced her eardrums and interrupted the hag's assault.

The crone, startled, froze above the upstart to stare in bewilderment beyond. She gaped at a thing she'd never before had cause to fear. Her golem, her housekeeper, was lurching up from the muddied water with an expression so knowingly venomous that her immediate reaction was to stare with incomprehension. She was incredulous, dumbfounded, but a growing dread gnawed at her immobility. She scuttled backward.

"Stand still, you vile creation!" she shrieked, but the golem approached nevertheless, his intent evident on his shifting features.

Oh, he looked intensely lethal, her housekeeper did, very intelligently so, with his arms extended enormously and his twig fingers stretching to strangle her. There was nothing for it but to blast him asunder. She put

her fingers up in the necessary signs to cast her curse, but even as she began to mouth the dire words, she noticed a thing that gummed up her spit and made her incapable of further speech.

It was an impossibility. She'd seen it cooked, watched it become a greyish and ugly smelling goo, but there it rode on his chest. The feather! That damned feather, as whole and undamaged as the day it had been plucked it from the corpse of the angel. Her half formed curse choked off into a useless croak. Her fingers, set for casting, became a macabre joke of motion, nervous and inutile. She could do nothing with the angel feather hanging in plain view from his chest. Her attacks would reflect back and roast her.

The witch edged away, her fingers gesticulating like snakes in convulsions. Her feet slipped upon the muddy bank, and she flailed her arms to right herself, but tripped over the self-same rock that had pitched the interloper onto the bank. The crone fell not to the earth, but plunged sideways into the creek.

For a brief moment, a very brief moment, she lay quietly in the flow, astounded to have found herself therein. Immediately thereafter, she lurched half upright, screeching and jabbering as if her soul bled out like dye into the cool water. Old muscles being what they were, rising up from off her back wasn't to be done, and she tumbled back in with another frightful shriek. She twisted herself around to lever herself up by her hands and knees, but once again fell into the wet, this time face forward.

The golem watched warily as she thrashed around. He stood in judgement of himself and his mother-maker and, as he observed her slow gathering of strength into appendages that were losing their panic-weakness, he made a fateful decision. She crept toward the bank, his witch-mother, gibbering with terror and already almost half out of the flow, and he wanted that not at all. And so, he stepped forward and pushed her back in. She screamed. She capered on her belly, performed a mad dance with the water and crawled back up again. He pushed her down once more. Then again. And again. And again.

Eventually, she didn't creep back up. Eventually, she tired into a remorseless apathy, a sleepy, traitorous condition that allowed her nose and mouth to slide under, never to rise up again except for one last time and not by her own power. And she bobbed gently in the flow, caught between outthrust stones, the dregs of old dirt clouding the water downstream.

Hanicke, who watched in shock from the water's edge, heaved a deep, shuddering sigh at the sight and fell into a mind blackening faint.

The golem patched Hanicke's skin over her wounds as best he could, this being little more than pushing the tatters into place and binding them with a bit of rag torn from her undershirt. There wasn't much else he could do and, as she considered it, there wasn't much else she could do either. All in all, she'd be lucky if the wounds didn't fester and kill her. Her face was already mightily swollen, and she could barely see from either eye, but she directed the golem nevertheless, sending him scurrying for dry branches as fast as he could fetch them hither.

The witch's body still floated in the shallow water not more than a few yards off. Hanicke thought it best that it remain there. It seemed safer for the moment, but the moment was swiftly passing. The sun was descending the firmament and, as was its wont during that decline, it sped with increasing haste toward its resting place.

Hanicke shifted impatiently. She dared not rise. She'd tried once after re-awakening and found herself on her back again. The attack had taken more out of her than she'd thought, and she didn't doubt the hag's claws had poisoned her with the worst sort of black power. Poor golem. He might find himself entirely alone despite everything he'd done to save her from her own stubbornness.

"Damned pigs," she muttered. Perhaps she shouldn't have followed them this time. Perhaps their part in the journey had ended with the discovery of the golem. More fool her for taking their role for granted. She might die from it.

She touched the rag binding her face. It was tight, passing around her entire head and nearly smothering her at the nose. The cloth formed a canyon between two ridges of inflamed flesh. Fortunately, having such an unobtrusive nose—not a nose at all actually, more a pair of gaps—she was managing all right, even during the moments when she forgot to breathe through her mouth.

The tattered fringe of the witch's smock undulated in the water and caught Hanicke's gaze. She shuddered with dread. Smothering was so very much like drowning, but there were worse ways to die. The sun was

a red eye peeking through tree cover. The night was almost upon them, and the hag's body was as yet untended. Where was that golem?

A giant pyre formed of volatile pine branches and dry wood had already been piled upon the bank. Would it be enough? Could she get the witch up there on her own? She didn't think so, but she was going to try. She was as good as dead if she didn't. She prepared to rise, but the arrival of the stick man from out of the gloom forestalled her.

"Where have you been?" Even as she asked, she observed a monumental stack of firewood piled high upon his arms. "Never mind! Get that wood around the pyre and get the witch up on it. The sun's almost down!"

He placed the logs on and around the formation hastily. Then he stepped into the creek and hauled the corpse up. He carried it toward the pyre by an arm and a leg. Hanicke got a peek at its face through a shroud of bedraggled, grey hair. The eyes were wide and staring, and they didn't look dead at all.

"Oh, gods!" she whispered. "Hurry, Sticks!"

He draped the body over the wood. It lay unmoving, dripping on the tinder. The golem looked back at Hanicke inquiringly. She stared stupidly and then realised her terrible mistake.

"I don't have a tinder box!" she wailed. "Sticks! I've got nothing to start the fire with! What are we going to do?" She looked at the dying sun and nearly screamed. Something moved near the pyre and she did scream.

The golem was gone! To the side of the pyre, a few bushes waved as if something large had just passed through. The golem had left her, and now she was alone with the dead witch.

"Hell! Hell and hell! Hell and hell and hell and hell!"

She tried to stand, but her legs couldn't find their strength. She crawled instead. She had no idea where the golem had gone, hopefully for a means to light the fire, but she didn't have time to wait for him on this side of the bank. She had to reach the other side before the twilight faded, or she'd be joining her murderess to haunt this place forever.

She crept toward the water, hampered by dizziness, making her way more by feel and hearing than by sight. Large stones hindered her progress. She crawled on despite them. She nearly cried when she felt the

water on her hands, running past her dirty fingers like a soothing, unending kiss.

She'd nothing but her feet hanging out when something too dreadfully cold to be water touched her ankle. The scream she loosed was bloodcurdling, perhaps just enough to sour blood that still had some curdling left to do. Whatever had touched her withdrew momentarily. Hanicke didn't wait to find out what it had been or whether it was coming back. She tucked her legs up beneath her until her entire body was in the drink and only then did she crane her neck back to look.

The hag stood at the water's edge, stretched out in a position hideously unnatural, hanging over the flow as far as her fat torso could extend. The dead face hovered terribly close to Hanicke's. She screamed again, but the face hovered on, unalterably there in the dimness, grim and lifeless, with eyes that stared unholy hunger from within a fixed expression.

The witch was having her revenge, and she wasn't getting into the water to do it. Hanicke, despite all her effort, was easy to reach so close to the bank. The hag merely hooked her greyish talons into the back of the girl's coat and lifted her with a strength borrowed from purest evil. She'd wasted no time going to hell and back to get at the upstart. Whatever bargain she'd made with the rulers of that terrible realm, it must certainly have appealed to them to let her go.

There wasn't a breath left in Hanicke with which to scream a third time. She was frightened breathless and, most untimely, her vision was in complete focus. She would have wished to be taken unawares, had she known about this terrible future in advance. Such a horrible demise. Of course nasty fate would revive her for it, just so the hag-corpse could enjoy a last horrific scare. Such was the way of revenge for the departed, especially so with the evil dead. At least she could still shut her eyes, and this she did, even as the hag's gaping mouth approached to suck the life from out of her.

She expected the ghastly kiss so much that the jarring of her body and the fall into the stream shook the very last of the air from her lungs. She blinked away water and gasped without drawing a breath. A terrible stillness had settled in her chest, as though her lungs had gotten stuck together. Before her dim eyes, a mad light danced on the bank, a capering red and yellow flame that waxed brighter by the moment. She could just make out the golem teetering on the brink of the creek, the witch-corpse tearing at his belly with ugly nails. Something silver and white fluttered

aside from the battle and landed at Hanicke's feet. She snatched it up before it floated down the stream.

The white feather lay in her grasp. Suddenly, she could breathe. Energy rushed into her from seemingly out of thin air. She lurched up, soaked and shivering from fright, and stared at the struggle on the bank in hopeful anxiety. This state of mind altered to outright horror. Her golem was on fire, and the fire was spreading up his right arm rapidly, sending tendrils to engulf his head. He'd gone for a fire all right and had set himself alight in the process, and that damned witch was forcing him away from the water with the unnatural strength of her death.

Hanicke sprang from the creek and raced toward the hag, releasing a war cry formed as much from terror as rage. The angel feather advanced before her like a blade of searing silver. The witch retreated, staring death at her.

"Go back to hell, old crow!" Hanicke blared and she forced the crone backward toward the pyre.

The witch darted aside. Then something almost entirely aflame rushed past Hanicke and threw itself onto the hag. It impacted heavily; sending sparks showering into the night. Both the witch and her creation landed on the pyre and set the dry tinder alight.

"Sticks!" Hanicke shrieked. "Sticks! Get off!"

She lost track of the feather in those few moments. She found a leg of the golem sticking out from the pile and hauled on it mightily, but barely managed a slight shifting of his weight. He was pressing down with all his power on the corpse of the struggling crone, prepared to die with her to keep her there. Hanicke tried to move him to no avail, and if she hadn't been wet from the dousing in the creek, she would have caught fire herself. The dead witch was already crackling, her skin scorching and blackening before Hanicke's weakened eyes. Presently, the already dead body ceased struggling. Hanicke began to weep.

"Sticks!" she cried, backing away from the horrific heat. She sobbed and rubbed soot into her swollen face. "Don't leave me! You're the only friend I've ever had!"

Abruptly, the golem lurched upward, all but engulfed from his head down to his ankles. He blundered past Hanicke, a living torch, and plummeted face down into the stream. Hanicke raced after him and splashed water all over him.

“Sticks! You had better live,” she gibbered at him, “or I’ll never find out what you wanted with that baby!”

Sticks most certainly wanted to live, happy to do so for the first time since his first week of life. He rolled onto his back, dousing the last of the fire, and peered up at Hanicke with his glowing eyes. Cinders not being very flexible, half of his smile fractured. His grin fell into the water with the rest of his charred parts, but Hanicke recognised the gesture and smiled back so brightly that he hurt somewhere deep inside his chest. It was such a very wonderful hurt. He was more than willing to bear the pain forever.

She was utterly tired. She’d spent the night searching the darkness for extra bits of wood with which to feed the flames of cremation. She didn’t know where she’d gotten the energy. Perhaps from that odd feather. Where was it now?

Sticks hadn’t been much use helping her. Certainly he stumbled along, keeping guard despite lacking arms up to his elbows. He was able to roll a large piece of wood along by himself, or carry it if she picked it up for him first, but that was about all.

Most of his head was off, fallen somewhere in the stream or near it, but he didn’t seem to mind much. He had lost half his mass and was thinner all the way down to his ankles. His eyes had repositioned somewhat lower. There was an unusually unnerving glow to them, like they were ready to spark into flames at any moment. Hanicke had made him dip his head into the creek at least ten times to be certain they weren’t about to start a conflagration. The rest of him was well and truly doused, and eventually she had satisfied herself that the smouldering of the coal eyes was harmless.

The golem was worried about her as much as she was about him. She looked as pale as a corpse, and he wondered, all that night, whether he should force her to rest. Then he would remember his witch-mother and patiently match her pace, to and fro into the woodland, seeking branches to keep the fire burning. Nothing must remain of the witch’s corpse by morning, nothing but a few bones. These last remnants would be buried deep beneath the soil. Then rocks would be piled atop so high that

nothing would be able to dig the bones up and, more importantly, nothing would dig out from beneath.

In the early morning, long before the sun was ready to rise, Hanicke threw a last faggot onto the flames, walked away a few steps and fell upon some moss, at last beyond her endurance and beyond the aid of whatever unknown magics had propped her. The golem squatted beside her, waiting for the fire to burn down. When he was certain she was deep in slumber, he set about scraping a trench out of the earth.

Yes, his arms were handleless stumps, but his feet were still worthy appendages. With them, he pushed the soil and the rubble out until he had created a circular trough several feet deep. Then he scraped and shoved every remnant of ash, cinder and bone, and a few inches of dirt for good measure, into the pit. He wasn't satisfied until it all rested at the bottom, after which he filled the grave in. He rolled stone after stone from out of the creek with his mutilated arms or his feet, almost making a pond of that section, until he'd created a cairn some two feet high and seven in diameter. Only then did he sit down beside Hanicke and wait for her to awaken.

It had been hard work, but it was done now, despite all the stones that had rolled back down and had to be rolled up again. He thought his bush girl might awaken soon, so long had he been at his task, but he was wrong. He waited from dawn until the noon sun had taken the chill from the air, but then it grew cold and began to rain. He remained undecided about what to do, until he realised she was shivering in her sleep. That settled his mind. He scrabbled alongside her until he'd gotten her rolled up into the remains of his arms and carried her to his birthplace.

The hovel was as he remembered it, a terribly dirty, cluttered old place. He didn't dare let the girl rest on the witch's old mattress. Somehow, he was certain she wouldn't like it. He set her down nearby and shoved the rotting mattress out, careful not to bust it open any further as he did so. Then he waited with her by the cold hearth, hoping that the meagre shelter of the hovel would alleviate the chill. His effort was rewarded not long after with a sneeze and a disgusted snort.

"Oh, gods! What lived in this place? No, don't tell me. I know. Why do I have to smell it? You'd think with a nose like mine, and all swollen up as it is, I'd smell nothing. But oh, no! Not me! I have to suffer a sense of smell."

He had very little idea what she was talking about. He vaguely understood that smelling was for sensing something, but since he

couldn't smell anything, he was unsure exactly what that something was and therefore uncertain how to respond to her complaint. It didn't matter much. She wasn't paying attention, at that very moment attempting to roll off her back and onto her hands and knees. He knew she shouldn't.

"Don't you dare!" she barked before his stumps reached her.

How did she know that? She wasn't looking at him.

"I know you, Sticks! You're trying to make me lie back down again, aren't you?"

She'd at last gotten her hands beneath her. He was relieved when she settled into a seated position rather than continuing onward to a stand. She gave him a belligerent stare.

"You were, weren't you?"

He nodded unashamedly. He couldn't feel otherwise. She looked terrible. Her face, although slightly less swollen than before, was horribly puffed and bruised. The bandage cut a deep groove into her face. He could hear her snorting behind it, like her pigs rooting for grubs in the soil.

Apparently, her breathing also reminded her of the swine, for her next words spoke of them. "Where are my pigs, Sticks?" She sniffed sadly and a few tears leaked out of eyes that peeked through a fortress of swollen flesh. "Are they dead, do you think?"

He shrugged. He couldn't care less about those troublesome, porcine squealers, although he was sorry she was so upset about them.

"They had all my things on their backs. What will I do without them?"

He hadn't considered that. He'd better go look for them once he'd gotten the bush girl settled in here. He wondered again what the bad smell was and how to get rid of it for her. He was certain she wouldn't want to stop up her nose all the time.

Hanicke shifted to get her bottom more comfortable. She looked around the dismal, old hut and shuddered. "I'm in a witch's hovel. If that isn't ironic, I don't know the meaning of the word." She regarded the golem with a serious glint to her green eyes. "Do you think we can fix it up enough to be liveable?"

He nodded assertively. He could fix anything!

But then he remembered his missing hands. His ridiculous, half burnt face filled with dismay. He stared at the stumps with something akin to self-loathing, then down his charred body with utter hopelessness. He was half his former girth. He hadn't any hands. What was he going to do? The parts of him that were burnt weren't regenerating. They remained as they were, scorched and broken, while his unaffected areas picked up new matter and shifted out the old debris just as before. Why weren't his arms doing that?

One of Hanicke's little hands placed itself on a cindered stump. "Things will be fine," she said. "The witch wasn't expecting what happened to her. She's bound to have left everything as it was when she went out of this sty, including the trappings of her profession. Even if it takes all next year, or the rest of my life, I'll see that you get your hands and head back." She shook his stump firmly. "And your shoulders besides. They're not so impressive as they once were. Then there's the matter of a tongue, so I can get the answer to my question."

She looked around with an assessing air. "It can't be so hard, can it? I mean, look at this place. She made you in this. It's practically all rubbish!" Hanicke glanced at him quickly in chagrin. "No offence intended."

Sticks nodded uncertainly. What was she going on about? How was she going to get his hands back? She didn't appear further inclined to discuss the matter, however. Rather, she was muttering a list of objectives to herself. He gathered his wits and paid attention. Hands or not, he was going to do his utmost to help her.

"First the pigs," she was saying, "then the floor. It stinks. We'll have to shovel the top layer out and replace it. The walls will need to be slopped down with water, dried and fumigated to drive the bugs out, and whatever else is in them. Then we stopper up the holes with clay."

She looked up at the patchy roof and added new turf to the list of repairs. Turf made good roofing for a hovel like this. It kept out the winter cold and, if it was done right, didn't let too much water in. She heaved herself off the floor with some effort, Sticks lending a stump to steady her.

"Last, supplies. I know just the place. We'll go before the week is out."

Supplies. What supplies?

She wasn't looking at him. Her attention had been attracted to the rickety table and the large leather-bound book lying on it. She

approached slowly, staring at the tabletop and book with a grim countenance. A grimy quill lay next to the volume and also a bowl that appeared to contain ink made of berry juice. Smashed seeds and fruit were scattered all over, littering the floor beneath. After a long moment of profound silence, Hanicke reached out and delicately touched the edge of the book with the tip of a finger. Nothing happened, and she loosed a breath she hadn't realised she had been holding.

"There are blood stains on this table," she said flatly.

There were strange, scratchy symbols on the open page of the weathered book. Many were crossed out and replaced by others. One repetitive symbol resembled a baby in a cradle. The symbols, the blood stains—they perhaps answered the question she had meant to ask the golem. This was the makings of an unholy recipe, an abomination. The baby had been key to its success.

She lifted the edge of the leather and shut the book with a thud. A tiny sigh of surprise escaped her. Here, on the cover, were words. She brushed her fingers over the indented, gilded letters.

"Journal of Marxig Rhuger," she read in awe.

This was no witch's bible. What was the meaning of this?

As she raised the cover to find her answer, a blast of wind ripped its way into the hovel. It scattered litter and dirt about, and forced her to hide her eyes. She blinked tears and dust, coughing. A large white feather, silver gilt at the edges, fluttered into the hovel and dropped at her feet. She picked it up and glared at it. If it had meant to find her and the golem again, it could have waited a moment.

"Make a better latch for the door," she said in irritation, still blinking grit. "That comes before the floor." Tucking the feather beneath her belt, she turned her back on the book. "Let's go find those pigs. You can carry me on your back and I can call for them." To this she added a stern warning. "And no helping with the calling!"

He nodded agreement, and they passed out of the door and into the light.

Chapter Five

Habitable, but not homey; that was perhaps the nicest conclusion any stranger might say after happening across the hovel. Certainly the turf on the roof must have kept the inhabitants warm over the winter, but the structure beneath was small, only large enough for two adults and perhaps a child squeezed into a corner. There were signs of pigs in the yard, and even tracks leading inward, which wasn't unusual for a lonely, country farm in its beginning stages. That room had been made for pigs suggested occupation by a single person, one who had been in need of the extra warmth a few farm animals could provide. At the moment, the pigs were not in evidence. Nor was the human denizen.

One of the horses in the troop snorted, and another thudded its hoof impatiently. Leather creaked as men shifted in saddles, scanning the forest for hidden quarry. The captain of the regular troop, grey uniformed and bearing only a single bronze insignia of rank on his plain helmet, walked out of the hovel, bending down to pass beneath the low lintel. One of the men who had gone in with him followed on his heels and continued on to survey a carefully cultivated garden.

"There are signs that she was here this morning," the captain reported, "but she isn't now."

"What signs?" His Highness said with a bored voice. He relaxed fingers that had been grasping the reins a little too tightly. He feigned disinterest, but he was feeling disappointed and vexed at what now appeared just another wasted foray.

"The ashes are still warm. There is unwashed crockery on the table. The uneaten food looks fresh enough."

"What exactly?"

"Pardon, Your Highness?" Captain Isidur peered up cautiously. He knew Prince Ugoth better now that a few weeks had passed and understood very well that a misunderstood question, mishandled by the

recipient, could end in a flash of temper. Today, however, the prince seemed to have his habitual irritation reigned in.

“What food was in the dishes?” Ugoth said while his gaze wandered along the circumference of the clearing.

“Looked like oats to me. Maybe some dried fruit.”

“No meat? No pork?”

“No, Your Highness.”

“No parts? Of people? Anywhere?”

The prince’s vivid eyes fixed on the captain’s face with some intensity, perhaps fortified by the odd light that often came into them whenever bloodshed was discussed. Isidur forced himself not to look away as he responded. “No, Your Highness. Nothing untoward.”

The prince’s mouth thinned somewhat. Was it disappointment?

“How many people did the villagers say disappeared?” he said. He flicked a speck of dried mud off his velvet sleeve, once more looking at anything but the captain.

“Some good dozen over the last two years.”

“And how many did you actually find in the village records?”

“None, Your Highness. All deaths were accounted for as accidental or natural, and there was only one case of murder, for which the killer was known and punished by hanging.”

“And yet they insist a witch is living out here,” Ugoth said irritably. “By what reason?”

“It is possible they are basing their stories on older ones,” the captain ventured.

The prince’s regard returned, and now the sapphire of his eyes squinted in warning. “How so?” was the deceptive response.

The captain answered carefully. Prince Ugoth disliked disappointments, and he’d been expecting to encounter a witch for days now. “The village is only a few years old, but travellers have been passing this way since long beforehand, and there have always been inns along the trade road. There are stories circulating about a witch eating unwary merchants, but most of the stories are years old now. I’d say at least a decade.”

The prince was beginning to have that cold, yet thunderous light in his eyes. Isidur rushed on with his explanation.

“The villagers have nothing to go on but the attempted kidnapping two years ago and the missing offerings at the shrine. Not the chapel built around it, nor the stone walls, have kept the thief out.”

“Sounds like witchcraft to me,” the prince said definitely.

“Of course, Your Highness, but it can’t be a very bad witch, if it is one at all,” Isidur dared to volunteer.

“What do you mean?”

“No people parts, Highness. At least not so far.”

The prince blinked, then smiled, a rare thing these days. “Exactly so,” he agreed. The smile disappeared as he reflected on Isidur’s statement. “There is also the matter of the pigs left in the shrine,” he said eventually.

“Could have come from here, I suppose,” the captain said, gazing around at the porcine imprints leading in all directions around the yard. A well-worn ditch of tracks circled the garden. A formidably crafted fence of deadwood barricaded the plot. It looked to have suffered any number of sieges, all unavailing. An old cast iron pot lay half buried in the centre of the cultivation. Something grew from it. It looked like mint, abundant and verdant. The captain returned his attention to the prince and the subject of the pigs.

“It’s odd that there’s no sign of them, no noise, nothing.”

“She could have warned them off,” the prince suggested offhandedly.

The captain took it seriously. “They said that devils tried to steal a baby two years back. There are stories that devils often disguise themselves as pigs. One could be her familiar.”

The prince hadn’t thought of that, but rather than the idea making him uneasy, he considered the foray much more interesting. He shifted restlessly in his saddle. Much to the captain’s surprise, he dismounted and dropped the reins.

The captain paid this last no mind. The warhorse was trained to stand and wait. It was the direction the prince chose to walk that startled the soldier. Past the dumbstruck loyal guards and straight to the hut Ugoth strode. He bent and vanished within before any man had the presence of mind to dismount and rush after him. The captain hurried inward to a chorus of creaking saddles, clinking chain mail and thudding boots.

This was unexpected. The prince seldom dismounted, certainly not to enter a hovel, any hovel, let alone a witch's. If something happened to him, Isidur knew he'd lose his head for it.

He found the prince in the centre of the hut, hunched before the rickety table, strands of his golden hair caught in dried herbs hanging from the ceiling just above. Two of the regular soldiers, who had remained inside to investigate, were acting nervous, eyes darting about and right hands holding sword pommels, ready to pull weapons at the least encouragement. Patently, they were as worried for their heads as their captain was.

"Your Highness?" Isidur inquired. Two of the prince's guards shoved him forward and spread out behind him in the doorway, making the space that much more cramped. None of them could stand their full height in the hovel.

"There are interesting stains on this table," was all the prince said.

Palm on tabletop, he peered around the single room with more attention than he'd given anything the past fortnight. Beneath his feet, the dirt was dry and firm, showing no sign that spring melt or rain disturbed the confines of the hut. He supposed the sloping earth packed around the outer walls accounted for this. Above, dried herbs hung from all the rafters and along the upper walls. Every space that could be used for this purpose had been. The lower spaces were stacked with boxes fashioned from bark. These contained tubers and dried berries. A number of finely crafted pieces of pottery were stored on top of the boxes, all fired with the marks of the shrine on them. One narrow bed with a frame of unfinished wood lay beneath the south window. On the floor just before it was a trap door, presumably leading to the cold room. The door showed signs of recent use.

"Did your men look beneath?" he asked.

"Yes, Highness. We found a partial keg of brandy and bottles filled with more. They were mixed with herbs, from the looks of them, but we can't be certain. Might be potions."

"A keg of brandy? Odd. Anything else?"

"More tubers and a bushel of apples."

"Just a bushel? She can't be managing pigs on this, not if she's not eating them as well."

“The weather’s not so bad in this region, Your Highness,” the captain put in helpfully. “We’re in a valley. Pigs can dig up food on their own if they’re left to roam free, as these appear to be doing. Feral ones will even run down prey and eat carrion.”

“It’s a wonder they haven’t eaten her, then,” the prince said softly. He thought something about a rafter didn’t look right. He angled his body to get a clearer view.

“It’s not likely they would eat a witch,” Isidur said. “Witches are the most unholy creatures of all humankind, smelly, stinking, walking sacks of disease.”

The prince’s growing inattention caused prickle of concern to race through Isidur’s spine. What was the man doing? He looked as if he was sneaking up on something in the upper corner of the hut. Alarmed, the captain darted forward. “Here now, Your Highness! What are you doing?”

There it was! The prince saw it clearly now, leather binding, a book, most definitely a book. He reached up to get it, but the captain knocked his arm back down. The prince withdrew, glaring at the man.

Words were not necessary. The captain knew he was in for it and had better have a good excuse or else. Behind him, the royal guards could be heard loosening weapons in their scabbards. “Beg your pardon, Highness,” he apologized. “Your life was at risk.”

That took the prince aback. The glare receded and became a guarded inquiry, one brow slightly raised.

“It could be spelled. There are traps for the unwary on these unholy things,” Isidur explained.

“Right.”

The prince’s gaze slid away in apparent disinterest. Behind, the captain heard several snicks as half pulled swords settled into scabbards once again.

“What do you suggest, then, Captain?” the prince said.

“I’ll have one of my men push it down with a stick, but we’ll have to clear the hut first.”

“I see. What exactly do you expect to happen when it is disturbed?”

The captain shrugged. “Anything could happen.”

The prince's regard wandered back to him. "Anything?" To the captain's nod, he responded with another question. "Have you actually ever arrested a witch, Captain?"

"Yes, Highness. More than one, as a matter of fact." And he was proud of it, too.

His Highness's next question poked a hole into the captain's swelling satisfaction. "And were they, in actual fact, smelly, stinking, walking sacks of disease?"

"For the most part," said Isidur, his features freezing into careful neutrality again.

"Be careful, Captain," the prince warned, his expression suddenly fierce. "Many of the peasants we have met in the past few weeks have been smelly, stinking, walking sacks of disease. Are you sure none of your arrests included common old women?"

The captain was a simple man, but his work was his honour. He responded forthrightly. "They were common, Highness, but common only as witches go. The trappings of their trade were found with all of them. They were rightfully arrested, drowned and burned."

The prince regarded at him expressionlessly. The captain hated it when he did that. There was never a hint of what the man was feeling, thinking or deciding. He preferred the sapphire glare to the guarded stare. He knew where he stood with the sapphire glare.

"Trappings?" the prince posed.

"Yes, Your Highness," Isidur said firmly.

"In the last two weeks, you've never once mentioned trappings." And now there was a definite edge to his voice.

Isidur coloured ever so slightly. Before now, Prince Ugoth hadn't indicated any interest in what the troop was doing. Yet, because of birth, an apology was in order, rightfully or not. "I apologise, Your Highness," he said at once.

The prince ignored his contrition. Instead, he waved one hand through the air, indicating the single room in which they stood. "Show me the trappings," he commanded.

The captain stepped a pace back and looked about quickly. "There's the herbs," he began, "and..."

“There were herbs in every village we encountered,” the prince interrupted. “They looked exactly like this in every stall I saw.”

“It is true that herbs are not necessarily a witch’s trappings, Highness, but it is more a matter of seeing all the trappings together that makes it undoubted proof of witchery.”

“Then do continue,” the prince granted, though his tone was faintly derisive. He was willing to wait for the full explanation of this matter, if only to watch the dour captain’s discomfort increase exponentially the longer he stared at him.

Behind the ranking soldier, Ugoth noted some of his guards watching with knowing looks on their faces. They had seen him do this before, testing the men around him for weaknesses and pouncing on whatever showed. They, themselves, had not been immune to this discomfiting hobby, but they’d all passed the test. The prince let his attention drift back to the captain, whose eyes had not strayed from his face.

Isidur’s shoulders were as straight as ever. His head remained high and his blunt face set. He was prepared to see through whatever was in store for him, good or ill. The prince could admire the man for his fortitude. The captain was perhaps braver than many highborn officers who had purchased their position and who had performed rather poorly at this little game of his.

“There are the herbs,” the captain began again, “and then there is the book. We will know once we get it down. There is the pot. My men have put the fire out. Once the pot cools, we will spill the contents. If abominable things are found therein, it will be almost certain proof.”

“What things?” Ugoth folded his arms over his chest. This was getting tedious.

“In the cauldron?”

“I would hardly call that piddling pot a cauldron,” he objected.

The captain corrected himself and continued with his list. “No, Highness. Of course. Human parts inside the pot would make an accusation of witchery a certainty, bones of people and such. Also, strange things at the bottom that shouldn’t be there. Rocks, for example. Witches have a thing about rocks. They get favourite ones, keep them handy, sometimes even put their souls in them. Then it becomes a bother because the rock has to be crushed to powder and buried with the ashes.”

“The owning of common rocks has yet to be passed as a crime in our kingdom,” the prince pointed out. “If there aren’t any human remains in the pot and if that book has nothing of witchcraft within it, then you have no cause to arrest this woman, or man, except because of rumours and hearsay. And perhaps thievery. Thievery is the only charge that might be factual.”

“It’s true enough,” the captain said honestly. “I won’t arrest her for nothing. It isn’t my way.”

The prince’s eyes narrowed. Isidur seemed an honest enough man, but position was position, and he needed reminding. “It isn’t your decision,” Ugoth said coolly.

The captain’s expression tightened. Then he seemed to shrug mentally, for his features lost their rigidity and he spoke quickly enough. “As you will, Your Highness.”

If the prince had finally decided to take an active part in this mission, he had the right. His father had sent him out for this; at least, that was the official reason. Isidur had been disturbed from the beginning that, of all the officers available, he had been the one ordered to keep King Ufrid’s second born out from underfoot for a few months. Isidur had nothing to do with the nobility if he could help it. They were an arrogant, often useless lot, especially those with Omeran breeding in them. Looking at the prince expectantly, he wondered what the king’s youngest offspring thought of this small exile and also wondered how long the young man intended to pretend he was managing the reins of this troop.

The prince appeared to have lost interest and passed Isidur on the way to the door. The guards pressed back against themselves to let him by. Words drifted back to the captain.

“Have one of your men get that book down, Captain.” The prince exited without a backward glance.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Isidur called out. He looked over at his men, ignoring the noise of the guards passing out the door. “Well, then, whose turn is it?”

One jerked a thumb at the other, while the gangly fellow shrugged and smiled wryly.

“Good luck, Ripper.”

“I may need it, Sir,” came the response.

“Me, too,” the captain said under his breath as he bent out of the hut. The other man trailed his senior and left Ripper alone in the hut with the book.

From a bush dense with summer foliage, Hanicke watched the soldiers surrounding her abode. Beside her, the hog had parked his large frame and observed the proceedings with unnatural calm. The rest of the herd had followed the sow deeper into the forest and were probably digging up roots even now, albeit quietly. Hanicke pushed one small leaf out of her way to get a better view. Men were entering her home. After a wait of several minutes, one came back out and began a discussion with another man still astride.

Even at this distance, Hanicke clearly discerned a difference between the soldiers and the mounted man in the centre of the troop. He had chain mail, polished and black. His surcoat was of a matching sombre shade, mitigated by a golden crest. She couldn’t determine the device. His legs were covered in what appeared to be leather, black again, but the cape over his shoulders was a deep, rich blue, the sleeves of his tunic the same hue. There was a bright glint at his throat where a cloak pin reflected the sun. That much shine meant gold or silver.

Surrounding this man were a number of mounted soldiers with a different colour uniform than the common grey of regular military. These others bore black with red trim, and their surcoats also carried the golden device. As a result of his better dress and personal guard, Hanicke concluded the man in the centre had to be the leader of the troop and of high birth as well.

Suddenly, he dismounted and entered her home. His guards alighted and hurried to follow him. Some remained outside with their swords bared and their eyes glaring in all directions. The remainder of the regular soldiers stayed astride and began talking amongst themselves, as if mildly interested in what appeared to be an unexpected change in procedure. Other than the rare bit of raised voice, words were indistinct, and Hanicke could not understand what they were saying.

Several minutes later, the nobleman exited the hut, followed by his guards. He didn’t appear inclined to remount and made his way toward the forest edge in Hanicke’s direction. Several of the guards, gleaning his

intention, jogged ahead of him and spread out in a fan, their swords extended. Frightened, Hanicke made to creep backward, but it was already too late. The soldiers approached her hiding place and commenced beating the bushes with the flats of their blades, apparently attempting to flush out anything that might be hiding in them. She crouched down lower and hoped they wouldn't spot her beneath the shrubbery.

But it was too much for the hog. Even as unnatural a pig as he had his limits. With an angry squeal of protest, he charged past her and into the open. Fearful hollers and startled curses followed his abrupt emergence. From beneath the bush, Hanicke saw him hurtle past the unprepared guards, bowling one of them over. The pig tore across the field, narrowly missing the nobleman. He had been working at his leather leggings beneath his surcoat, chain mail and tunic, obviously preparing to urinate on her bush. That necessity forgotten, he pulled out his sword.

“Great pustulant sluts! Get that brute!” he barked.

The grey soldiers on horseback reined their beasts in to pursue. Pikes, swords, bows, whatever weapons they had came out and were readied to let fly. They were well-trained men, and they blocked off the hog's path to the other side of the forest in moments.

Hanicke watched these few seconds pass in growing horror. One of her precious pigs was in dire need. Two years without human company had perhaps addled her brain. Whatever the reason, she erupted from the foliage, a small fury of a woman, leaves flying about her in all directions, and a surprisingly forceful cry of rage came bellowing out of her mouth.

“Away from him!” she shouted.

It reverberated from all sides of the clearing and came back from the forest edge, seeming somehow stronger and also very, very terrible. Suddenly, what had been a well-organized troop of soldiers on seasoned mounts became a great, blundering, hollering lot of men who sailed over bucking and twisting, fear-maddened horses. Those men who could stay astride found themselves racing toward the forest in every direction. Those who were unlucky enough to make it there, and who hadn't the presence of mind to duck, received the slaps of low hanging branches. Not a few were knocked off.

Hanicke perceived all this in some awe. She had done this! She had! It was simply unfathomable.

Off to the side, her pig rushed under the bushes to safety. As she turned her head back to the fiasco going on in her yard, she felt something cold and sharp touch her jugular. She apprehended instantly that a sword was at her throat, and her gaze met that of the nobleman's, warm green against cold blue. Her eyes widened, but not in fear.

He was beautiful. He was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

Behind him, men cursed and picked themselves off the ground. His guards approached with their swords ready. One stepped on a twig. It snapped sharply. Hanicke recalled her situation abruptly.

"That wasn't wise," she muttered to herself.

Her eyes still on his, she watched his lids narrow. The sword arm bent somewhat as he took one step toward her. His head tilted slightly to the side, and he peered at her questioningly, as if wondering what to make of what he was seeing.

"No, it wasn't," he agreed.

It was a well-modulated voice, spoken from beautiful lips, the lower somewhat fuller than the upper. He had a day old growth of beard on his face, which was oval, with fine cheeks and a wonderful line of jaw. His nose was straight and well defined. His hair, the colour of honey, matched the colour of his brows, lashes and half grown beard.

For a moment, her gaze fixed at his collar, where a small, golden gryphon regarded her with a sapphire eye. It nestled angrily, clasping his cloak together with its terrible claws. Another gryphon, rampant with a serpent in its bloody beak, sported upon on her captor's black surcoat, but she was too busy scrutinizing his physique to pay this monster much attention. Judging by the outline beneath the chain mail, everything about him was just as delectable as his face.

Her gaze, which had drifted tellingly, lifted back up to his. His glinted somewhat of amusement, yet still retained that cold, dangerous light. "Have you seen enough?" he said sardonically.

Once again, perhaps her two years as a hermit excused her, addling her brain as it must have done, for she responded unwisely and without thought. "I don't think so," she said.

He did nothing except raise a mocking brow. Perhaps his eyes shone with a hint of more amusement.

Though he appeared not inclined to take offence, one of the guards was ready to do so on his behalf. This man took a step forward and lifted his hand to club her, but the nobleman spoke to him sharply.

“Leave her!”

The guard stepped back at once, glaring at her, but she paid him no mind. A noise at her back had caught her attention, one familiar and expected, a scratchy noise, as of leaves and dirt moving over itself endlessly. It had taken the golem long enough to arrive. He must have been far afield, looking for the herbs and roots she had wanted. He didn’t appear to be in any hurry to make himself visible just yet, and she thought his choice of inaction wise. It occurred to her that, if she didn’t handle this just right, the men surrounding her, and likely all the ones beyond, were in as much danger as herself.

Behind the nobleman, a common soldier approached. That had been the one speaking to her captor outside the hut earlier. Her expression tightened with anger. He was carrying the leather-bound journal. Damn!

None of the closer soldiers appeared to have caught on to the low noise behind the bushes, perhaps thinking it to be branches rubbing against each other in the wind. Their attention was riveted on her, the nobleman, and the man approaching with her book.

“She’s a witch,” said the newly arrived soldier.

“I am not!” she retorted hotly. The nobleman didn’t take his eyes off her, but his head inclined slightly in the direction of the officer.

“There are spells in the book,” the captain said. “And there’s that face of hers. Has to be an illusion. There’s no doubt that she cursed our horses just now.”

“My face is not an illusion. It’s an accident of birth. And that thing with the horses was an accident, too. And the spells in the book aren’t mine. They belonged to the old witch.” Suddenly the sword at her throat, which had relaxed a short while, pressed against her neck more sharply again.

“Have you no fear?” the nobleman said.

“I am in no more danger than you are,” she snapped.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked, and now a definite sense of menace exuded from him.

If he pressed that sword any closer, there would be blood. Careful, Maggot! “A forest spirit watches over this place. He isn’t likely to take kindly to your presence here.”

The nobleman’s gaze darted to the forest behind, as did the gazes of many of the others. His came back quickly. “I see nothing,” he retorted.

“Well, you wouldn’t, would you? It’s a forest spirit,” she said simply, her derisive regard daring him to make something of that.

“She’s bluffing,” said the captain.

“I’m not,” she said back. The captain’s blunt face was implacable. She wasn’t going to have any mercy from that one.

“She must be bound and gagged before she wreaks more havoc upon us,” the officer insisted. “She must be drowned at once.”

“I am not a witch, you oaf! You have as much sense of justice as a stump of rotten wood!”

“You have very little evidence in your favour,” the nobleman put in before the captain could retort.

She surprised him with an unexpected answer. “I have proof. I underwent the Supplication for Heaven’s Grace.”

The captain glowered. The nobleman merely blinked. Hanicke guessed he didn’t know what she was talking about, but that the captain did.

“Exactly what is that?” the nobleman said, his head tilting slightly toward the captain, indicating from whom he wanted the answer.

“It’s a rite of the church. If she underwent it, she can’t be a witch. Witches die of it.”

“How is that supposed to help us now?” the nobleman snapped in irritation. “Verifying such a thing could take weeks.”

“I have the mark,” said Hanicke.

The man’s sword lowered ever so slightly. She found it simply marvellous that he had kept it up so long with nary a waver. What he must have endured to train for that, she could only imagine, which put her to wondering exactly what those arms and shoulders of his really looked like under that fine blue velvet. Realising her eyes were wandering again, she forced them back up. He was regarding her with something akin to wry impatience.

“What mark?” he prodded.

She could almost see one of his dimples creasing. Well, if he was laughing at her, that was better than disgust.

The captain answered him. “There’s always a mark of some sort. It’ll be somewhere on her body. It will be bonded to her, a part of her, but not something a man could put there.”

“What exactly?”

“I don’t know, Your Highness. It would depend on which god answered the supplication.”

So. He was a prince or a duke. But which? She recalled there were two princes of the ruling family. She’d even seen them once when she’d been younger, as they’d passed through her natal village. This man fit the part of a prince, arrogant and beautiful. It was probably the most awful combination, really.

Ah, hells. Distracted again. She belatedly realized he was looking at her expectantly. “I will have to move my hands,” she warned him and then added sarcastically, “Just make certain these poor terrified little men don’t shoot me with arrows or gut me in terror.”

Those little men were giants compared to her. The prince, himself, towered above her.

His dimple actually made the transition from crease to half smile. The expression was brief. He raised his voice in command to the men around them. “If anyone harms this woman before I give permission to do so, I will have his blood on my sword and his head on the ground!”

He added to her more quietly, “Will that do?”

“That should be fine,” she agreed. “Your sword is in my way.”

He lowered it without hesitation, but left it unsheathed. She nodded a polite thank-you, to which he only raised a brow. He thought this woman could out-do a lady of the court in hauteur. He wondered if she knew it.

She lifted her small hands to her neck and untied the laces that closed the brown boy’s tunic she wore. Ugoth kept all expression from his face, but this was becoming more interesting and not just for him. The men surrounding them had grown distinctly quieter.

When she had reached midway down her chest, she shifted the fabric aside and pulled it down, revealing the upper half of the swell of her left

breast. Just where the swell began, something luminous shone from her smooth skin.

Hanicke knew they were all staring. The men further off were shifting for a better position to see what she had exposed. She had expected as much, but the prince completely surprised her. His sword passed from right hand to left, and he appeared to hold it as easily in that one as the other. He took an abrupt step toward her. She had no idea what he was about, but his sword wasn't raised. She remained frozen, watching. Then his right hand lifted and brushed away the concealment of her shirt in a circular motion until the entirety of her breast rested lightly on his palm.

Her breathing stopped. She stared at him, her mouth open in shock, completely unable to comprehend his boldness.

"What is it?" said one of his men.

At this point, his eyes lifted, once again to impale hers with that incredible blue stare.

"It's a simply perfect breast," he said, ignoring the true answer to the question, which was the opal peeking out from her flesh like a half buried pearl.

Hanicke gasped and slapped his hand down, then made haste to cover her breast. His hand lifted once again, and she prepared to fight to keep the shirt on, but he surprised her again. This time the backs of his fingers ran lightly down the line of her cheek. His hand dropped slowly. She froze a second time, completely off balance. No one had ever dared touch her face.

"Is it real?" he asked.

She looked away from him, disconcerted and ashamed all at once. She lifted her gaze again in defiance. "Yes, it's real. I can't help the way I was born."

He merely looked at her as if puzzled.

"It has be an illusion," the captain said. "It's impossible that she should have that face."

"What are you going on about, man?" the prince snapped. "She has the mark."

"That could be an illusion, too. Remember what she did to the horses. There are spells in the book!"

"You have a point," he conceded.

“You should step away from her, Highness, before she puts an evil charm on you. She must have started already, picking that face to wear.”

That man was beginning to irritate Hanicke. Now she only had to be ugly to accomplish an evil charm. “What? You’re going to ignore the mark, then? Be careful, you great fool! The gods might not think kindly of such a deliberate insult. It has already happened.”

“Are you threatening me, witch?” the captain growled.

He stepped forward with his sword raised. The prince slapped the weapon down with an idle tap of his own. He was about to put the man in his place verbally, when an odd noise behind the woman caught his attention, a strange, insistent, scratchy sound. He squinted at the bushes warily. His eyes widened. Something was there. What...!

“Highness, I apologise, but we really should bind her and gag her until we have had time to investigate this more fully. Remember what she did to our mounts. She could do it again with a single word. She is a danger to you. That face...”

“Shut up, Captain,” the prince commanded urgently. His eyes were riveted on the bushes behind the girl.

Taken aback, the captain goggled at the prince. Then he perceived the intensity of the stare the young man fixed upon the forest edge. “What is it? What do you see?” Isidur, and now more of the men, looked in that direction. “I see nothing.”

“Look harder,” Ugoth insisted. It was there, a thing, an uncanny thing. It was a giant looking down at them, fiery eyes in a face made of the forest itself.

“I think the captain is beginning to irritate him. I know he’s irritating me,” grumbled Hanicke.

The prince tore his gaze away from it to look down at her. “What is it?” he demanded.

“The forest spirit. I did tell you,” she reminded waspishly.

“Yes, you did,” he conceded rather humbly. Ugoth considered how much danger he had unwittingly put himself in when he had touched the girl and barely repressed a shudder of horror. As he watched, the eyes faded. Presently, he was unable to discern where the giant stood. It was hiding again, but the warning had been clear.

Behind him, his men could be heard retreating. Even his guards had edged away, their duty forgotten in that moment of dismay. Shortly, only he and the girl remained near the forest edge. The girl did not overlook their lack of courage.

“Now, that’s loyalty,” she said. “Aren’t they supposed to be the royal guard or something?”

“Will it come back?”

“Will they?”

Ugoth shoved his sword back into his scabbard with a definite air of mounting frustration. What could he do to her with *that* watching?

Behind, men muttered worriedly. No one appeared inclined to approach where he and the woman stood. Rather, judging from the noise, his men were still retreating. Fine lot, they were! He might just have their heads for cowardice. He crossed his arms over his chest and attempted to work out his next course of action.

“You’re much braver than they are. Is that something to do with being royal, or is it a mental lapse?”

He looked down at her, frowning with obvious aggravation, something he normally wouldn’t permit himself to do. It was beneath him to show concern over the menial character of the lower classes, but this woman was hardly menial. There she was, watching him complacently, yet with a challenging gleam to the green of her eyes, and it irritated him that her regard reminded him of the way he enjoyed testing the mental fortitude of his men. That this woman had the gall to do so to him made him want to shake her. But that wouldn’t be at all wise.

“Do you know what they do to people who are stupid enough to bait royalty?” he said. Giant be damned. If he couldn’t run her through, he could at least let her know her place.

“What? Make them jesters?”

He smiled before he could catch himself. Blasted woman! Blasted creature behind her! He was completely out of his head! What the hells was he doing, standing here alone with her? He found himself staring at her, just as he had done since he’d first laid eyes on her: a tiny wild woman, all of a rage, bounding out of the foliage with wrath spitting from her amazingly green eyes. She was so absolutely beautiful.

It had to be a spell. No one could look that good.

Under his steady, silent stare, the complacency retreated from her face. "I told you, I can't help the way I look," she said, her gaze shifting away.

Well, at least he had that. He could discomfit her with a simple stare. Fine. If that was the only weapon he had, far be it for him to cast it away unused. "You insist that face is real?" he said.

She glared up at him from beneath a cap of honey hair that should have been longer. It appeared that she had the habit of cutting it off haphazardly with a knife. It waved all around her head like a mad halo. Bits of twigs resided in the mess, begging to be combed out. His fingers fairly itched to do it.

She passed her hands over the lower half of her face nervously. She hadn't meant to, for she pulled both hands down decisively, as if to say he could look if he wanted, but that she wasn't going to let herself care. "I have little use for hiding it. I never have visitors...until today, of course."

It struck him that she was actually ashamed of the way she looked. The woman was certainly odd. "If you aren't a witch, why are you here alone and with that thing?" He indicated the direction of the forest spirit with a mild inclination of his head.

"I was sent to look after him," she said.

He stared at her again, but in stupefaction. "Take care of him?"

"You think no one ever needs any help?"

"Of course people need help. He isn't people."

"Doesn't matter if he isn't people. He's my friend."

He considered the implications of that remark. Presently, he spoke again, following the best line of logic he could see of the matter. "Fine. Who sent you to look after him?"

"The same one who put this on me," she said, pointing at the area of the opal.

"Will you let me see that again?"

She huffed in irritation. "Are you going to keep your hands to yourself this time?"

"Do you want me to?" This time he caught her smiling, but she wiped it off quickly. Of a sudden, she looked more irritated than before.

“That’s not funny at all! How could you tease someone like me? Quit toying with me, Prince Who-Ever-You-Are. You have at least three dozen frightened men whispering behind you, and all you can think to do is bait one ugly woman you wouldn’t squander your time on if you weren’t out here running about looking for a dead witch!”

“Ugly?” he repeated.

“Yes, ugly. What? We haven’t agreed on that yet?”

“Not entirely.” The woman was mad! “What was that about a dead witch?” he asked, comprehending belatedly what else she had just said.

“I already told you about her!” she snapped.

“You did not,” he insisted mildly.

“I did, too! She’s the one who owned the journal!”

“Oh. *That* dead witch. How *ever* could I have forgotten?”

He was so sarcastic, glaring at her with his piercing blue eyes, that Hanicke looked down in chagrin. What was she doing arguing with a prince? “Alright. Maybe I didn’t mention the dead part.”

“Prince Ugoth?” someone called.

The nobleman turned his head impatiently. Ugoth, that was the second son, Hanicke recalled. This seemed more sense than the first born, really. The heir apparent wouldn’t hare off on some menial witch-hunt. Come to think of it, it didn’t make sense that the second son had hared off on a menial witch-hunt. There were menial people for doing that, like that blunt-faced oaf who argued she was a witch. Something wasn’t right here. Was the prince being punished, perhaps?

“What do you want, Liudger?” Ugoth snapped. The knight appeared to have regained his courage and was approaching cautiously. Ugoth had thought the man loyal to him, but his faithlessness just now made him wonder, not for the first time, if the man was in his brother’s pay.

“I would beg of you to move away from the forest edge, Highness,” Liudger requested.

The prince repressed a desire to run the idiot through. If the creature had meant to have him, it would have done so by now. “If you aren’t going to stand over here, Sir, and guard me as is your duty, then at least get the horses rounded up so that we can be on our way!” he said harshly.

The man's face flamed. He marched forward at once, hand on his pommel, ready to free the weapon.

"Keep your sword sheathed for the moment," Ugoth directed.

The knight captain removed his hand from the haft, his gaze fixed upon the bushes. "Captain Isidur is taking care of the matter of the horses, Highness," he reported.

"How unfortunate for you." Ugoth turned his attention away from the shamed man and back on the girl. She had been lacing her shirt while he'd been distracted. "I will need to see the mark again," he informed her.

"Why? You saw it well enough. And you're leaving, aren't you?"

"Not for a while and not without you."

Her eyes widened in alarm at this pronouncement. "Are you arresting me after all?"

This was a fine mess! Why couldn't she act more sensible and cower like a peasant should? Perhaps the prince would have decided not to take an interest in her if she had. She would have appeared to be just another boring serf, if unusually ugly.

The nobleman answered negatively. "No, I am not arresting you. The evidence is all circumstantial at this time."

"Then I want to stay here!"

"I'm not finished investigating your claims," he responded.

"How do you expect to do that?" she said in frustration.

"I expect to send a letter to the church, finding out if a supplication was in actual fact performed on you, and I expect to get a reply with a description of your person."

"That'll take weeks! You said so yourself! I'm not going."

"Refusal to obey the command of a prince of the blood is punishable by death," he stated with infinite composure. "You are either a loyal citizen of the realm or you are not. I may not be able to take you by force, for obvious reasons," he pointed with his chin at the bushes, "but I can mark your head for bounty. I doubt your forest spirit is capable of protecting you all the time. Eventually, someone would collect that bounty."

"I haven't done anything wrong!" she insisted.

“Haven’t you?” He smiled coolly. “There is the matter of thievery.”

“What? I haven’t stolen anything.”

He pounced on the bare lie like a cat with a mouse in the open. “Do you think we don’t know about the offerings at the shrine? There is pottery within your hut that remarkably resembles those recently reported missing by the local potter, all bearing the symbol of holy offerings. Since you admit to never having visitors, and the villagers have never mentioned your existence, that only leaves one conclusion. You are a thief.”

“I am not! I paid for those!”

“Confound you, woman! The logic is undeniable!” This creature! This female was getting his temper up!

“I did pay for them. I left four fine pigs this spring alone. They were more than enough to pay for all the things taken this year.”

Well, that at last explained the pigs the villagers had mentioned. “So you admit to taking the offerings?” he said in triumph.

“No! I admit to paying for them. Sticks took the offerings. Are you going to arrest him?”

“Who is Sticks?” he barked. She jerked a thumb back toward the forest. “Oh,” he said, much deflated.

She gave him a sample of her own logic. “You can’t arrest a forest spirit for plundering the offerings. If the gods had objected, they would have blasted him before now.”

He almost growled in frustration. “You are a very irritating woman,” he mentioned.

“I’m so sorry to disappoint you,” she said scornfully.

Off to the side, Knight Captain Liudger gawked at them, his head bobbing back from one to the other. Neither paid him the least attention, too caught up in their less than amicable negotiations. Liudger glanced at the shrubbery again and gulped. The giant was there, a pair of red eyes peering down from what seemed ten feet up. It seemed to notice his attention and retreated. Liudger swallowed another nervous load of saliva and listened to Ugoth argue his next point. Just now, His Highness was annoyed, but he hadn’t come close to conceding the battle. Massive guardian notwithstanding, he appeared intent on winning.

He wasn't an easy man to get along with, the younger prince, but nor were the rest of his family. Liudger supposed it took someone just as difficult to get such a rise out of the normally self-possessed man. Beforehand, Liudger had only seen other family members manage the feat, especially so if it happened to be Ugoth's elder brother, but this witch seemed to have the same knack. Amazing that face of hers. It had to be an illusion. He was surprised Prince Ugoth hadn't taken off her head at once. The gall of her—to wear a female mockery of his features. She was only lucky that awful creature guarded her.

But she had the opal. If that wasn't an illusion, then the face was real. Perhaps an accident of birth, as she'd said.

Liudger's gaze jerked toward the arguing pair and back toward the shrubbery. No sign of the monster. Good. Good. He hoped His Highness ended this standoff quickly.

"Did you tell the forest spirit to steal from the temple?" Ugoth demanded.

Hanicke didn't answer right away. Hah! He had caught her. His eyes practically glowed with triumph

She noticed and objected hurriedly. "That's of no consequence!"

"I say it is. The intent was to steal, even if you didn't lift your hands yourself. *And* you have made use of the goods."

"But I paid for them!"

"Oh, yes! Leaving pigs for the villagers makes it right to steal from the shrine," he retorted caustically.

"I left the pigs for the shrine," she denounced hotly. "If the villagers stole the pigs, you'll have to take it up with them."

He all but spluttered with rage. "Take it up with them! Are you accusing the villagers of thieving now?"

"Well, if they ate the pigs instead of letting them get on with having babies that didn't belong to the shrine, that's not my problem," she parried.

"Ahh!" He threw up his arms in apparent defeat. "You are a mad woman."

"Then you will leave me here?" she said hopefully.

"No! You are coming with me and that's final!" he roared. He turned his back and stalked away. He stopped dead in his tracks only five steps

away. Everyone who hadn't been sent to search for the horses was watching him. It no doubt crossed all their minds that if he ordered them to place hands on the girl, they would be the ones to pay the fearsome price.

"Cruddy hells!" he said under his breath. He wasn't used to being denied, at least not by anyone that wasn't of his immediate family or a member of the monastery in which he had been raised. He made to stalk back to the woman and almost bumped into Knight Captain Liudger, who had been zealous in his duty to guard the royal backside. Liudger jumped out of the way hurriedly. Ugoth came to stand before the woman and composed himself forcefully.

"What is your name?" he asked her.

The question seemed to take her aback. "My what?"

"Your name?" he repeated. "You do have one, don't you?"

"Yes," she said with a small frown.

"Well?" he insisted, once again glaring because of her lack of co-operation, and this time over a simple thing like a name.

It was unbelievable! He couldn't seem to control himself near her. What the hells was happening to him? If he didn't shake her to death, he was going to kiss her soon, and that wouldn't do at all with that *thing* watching from the foliage. She *must* be a witch. No mere female had ever angered him this much, except perhaps his mother, and this woman was most definitely not his mother.

She had done something to his mind, of course. Look what had happened to the horses. And that face of hers just could not be true. He'd never seen anyone that beautiful.

"My name is Maggot," she blurted.

Ugoth blinked in silent surprise. She flushed a vivid red and looked as if she would fly off in all directions at once. What a mortifying name.

"No father would give a child that name," Ugoth said, endeavouring to act extremely unimpressed, which was hard to do since he couldn't take his eyes off her.

"It's really a family nickname," she admitted meekly.

He didn't think he wanted to know the story behind that, but he suspected he would ask anyway. Someday. "What is your real name?"

"Hanicke, Moselem's daughter," she said softly.

“Hanicke, Moselem’s daughter, I am asking you to come with me. I am requesting it of you.”

She stared up at him with mounting astonishment. “What?” she said in confusion.

“We appear to be at an impasse. If you refuse to obey me, then my men must attempt to take you. Some may die. Your creature over there, forest spirit though he might be, may take a number of them down before we find a weakness, but with thirty-nine men to watch for it, a weakness will be found.” Her eyes narrowed in response to this logical deduction. Ugoth continued before she could speak. “If you don’t want to be named a criminal, if you don’t want imminent bloodshed, and if you don’t want harm done to your friend, you will relent,” he suggested.

“This is such a bother,” she said to herself, thinking quickly.

She considered fleeing straight into the woods. She doubted the prince and his soldiers would be able to catch her, but then, she would lose her home and all the things she needed to survive. Branded a criminal, she wouldn’t be able to go anywhere without someone discovering and reporting her eventually. It wasn’t much of a life, and she had done nothing wrong.

“If you hadn’t tried to pee on my hiding place, none of this would be happening now. You would have left and gone on somewhere else to look,” she accused. “I hope it’s starting to hurt.”

“Are you cursing me?” he said menacingly. He crossed his arms over his chest in an unconcerned manner, but it *was* beginning to hurt actually.

She peeked up at him in remorse. “No, really, I’m not. I’m sorry.” She wasn’t making much of a case for herself. She had to keep her mouth shut. Two years alone and she had lost all sense of discretion.

“You’re wrong. Even if we had left, we would only have done so to search for signs of you, and having failed to find you, we would have come back,” he pointed out.

“I can’t just leave! This could take weeks! Months! The pigs and the field mice will get into my things, and I’ll starve the coming winter!”

“As you insist that you are innocent, which the inquiry should prove, I shall take it upon myself to see that you are recompensed for the loss. You will be granted sufficient funds to pay for your winter supplies.”

“Why would you do that?” she asked in surprise.

He huffed out an impatient breath. “If I don’t promise, you won’t stop arguing.”

“Good point,” she said. She pulled at a lock of wild hair that had gotten into her mouth as a result of the wind, only to begin chewing on the end of it nervously.

He sighed in resignation. This woman could most likely go on interminably. “Be so good as to come to a decision, woman. I am not inclined to wait much longer.” She looked pointedly at his crotch, and he scowled at her. That wasn’t what he had meant to convey, but she had lost interest and was muttering to herself.

“I don’t think the gods meant for me to be convicted as a witch or a thief, or they wouldn’t have sent me here in the first place. The pig led me out of the bushes after all. They always led the way before.”

This was all very interesting, if somewhat odd logic, but he wished she would hurry up and come to a conclusion.

“This has to be a part of it, then,” she pronounced. “Fine. I will take your offer of recompense and go with you.”

He shut his eyes momentarily in relief, then turned his back and proceeded toward the men. He expected her to follow him without further argument, but stopped when he didn’t hear her footsteps behind him. “Are you not coming?” he said, half turned.

“I just need to explain to him what I am doing,” she excused herself. She was also half turned, but toward the forest.

“Oh,” he said in comprehension. He wasn’t going to stand around watching that, nor did he feel he had any further time to waste. He presented his back again, and without any outward sign of concern for her honesty, or his need for haste, made for the other side of the clearing. He refrained from rushing to unlace his leathers until he had gained the other side.

Sticks edged closer to the perimeter as the girl approached. He had been terrified. Arriving to find men surrounding his bush girl, with a multitude of bows aimed at her heart and a sword pointed with deadly stillness at her throat, he hadn’t been sure what to do. The man holding

the sword hadn't appeared in a hurry to harm her, and so he had opted for caution.

It wasn't until the other man had arrived with the journal in his hands that the girl's situation had become more uncertain. This man had been intent on having her harmed. Rushing out might have gotten her killed. Sticks had chosen to make his warning at that point.

Now he wondered if he should have rushed out and bashed them all... But he simply hated killing. But they were taking his bush girl away! What was he going to do?

She was looking up at him, smiling encouragement as she always did. She never failed to know when he was worried or afraid, but this time he suspected her reassurances would be hollow.

She'd called herself Hanicke. Why hadn't she ever told him that name? She'd always been Maggot to him. Maggots were beautiful. They turned into extraordinary winged creatures. He thought *she* was extraordinary. Why hadn't she told him that name?

"I have to do this," she said. "If I don't, we will never be left alone."

He hissed at her in protest. Two years had passed like the wind, and they had both changed, but during that time, she had never managed to make him talk properly. She had tried a strip of leather in his mouth, but it hadn't performed with the same perfection as a real tongue and had shifted from his head and dropped out of his body within a month. They had, therefore, worked out a series of clicking, snapping and hissing noises as a form of communication on his part.

He was taller than before. Once seven feet, he had grown in size to ten. There remained nothing of the charred stumps of his arms or the other injured parts. All had been repaired using the dirt and detritus of the forest as before, but with some important additions.

How she had managed it, he wasn't certain. She had never used the cast iron pot of the old witch. She had put that outside in the garden and planted mint in it. She'd said mint could grow in anything. Somehow, gleaning what she could from a dead man's journal and the spells found therein, she had muddled together a method that defied the natural, perhaps even defied witchcraft, for she hadn't concocted potions in a pot to call the forces of the elements to her aid. She had merely persisted until somehow the forces had begun to listen.

Early on, he had listened to her mumble to herself as she pored over the book. “Another way,” he would hear her mutter. “A better way. Not this way.”

Eventually, the mumbling had translated into action. Her first attempt at magic had been over the remaining stumps of his arms. Using living vines as wrapping and green wood for form, she had shaped new arms and packed them with mud and fresh verdant leaves. She had made him sit in the shade for a day while she’d relentlessly tucked back in any vines or greenwood that dropped out, glaring at those that dared to do so, and packing in more mud whenever necessary. In the end, the bond had been obtained. He had hands again, better and more manoeuvrable than before. She had worked the same healing over the rest of his shrunken structure.

The vines formed something of a skin for his body, beneath which all the rest of him functioned. In the winter, they lost their leaves and grew colder, but not brittle. He shrank somewhat, but took up snow and ice particles and sometimes seemed a giant of frost. In the spring, when the wet season was relentless, he walked as a colossus of mud. In the summer, he was green and humid, a mass of tendrils and leaves. In the fall, he changed colour and grew drier. He began to absorb sand, which somehow packed around a core of wet near his centre. This core continued feeding the living vines until they went dormant once again with the coming cold.

Hanicke had once mentioned to him that the living material had been necessary. “It resists fire,” she had said, and he had been grateful for that.

Because of her ministrations, he had grown, not only in size, but also in strength. And more than that, his mind had obtained clarity under her gentle tutelage. Sometimes, just sometimes, he thought he could feel something, something far beyond the world that surrounded them. It made his ivy shiver with pleasant tickling, this indefinable, elusive something. He felt it was calling to him and, now and then, he thought his bush girl heard the call, too, because then she would look at him keenly and frown in concentration.

But despite her success with magic, their first winter together had been rough. His bush girl had been close to starvation on several occasions, and he had taken the offerings at the shrine to help her, whenever he had dared and whenever need had forced him. Even the pigs had assisted, although they had grown terribly thin. The girl had often found edible roots near the doorstep, despite not having seen the

swine for days. The animals had roamed far and wide searching for their meals and more than once come back with bleeding hooves from breaking icy crusts. Hanicke had always taken them into the hut to heal them. She had tried to feed them, too, but they had always turned their snouts away after only a polite nibble.

Late the following spring, the sow had littered ten piglets on the hovel floor. Hanicke had been overjoyed. So, too, had he, for the piglets had been funny.

Hanicke had changed as well, but not quickly. The scratches the witch had given her hadn't wanted to heal. Her flesh had eventually knit back onto itself, but it had remained sensitive and inflamed. Later that winter, they had thought she might lose her right eye. This one had always been significantly lower than the other. It became reddened and teary, and she'd begun to go blind in it. She had placed poultices on it daily, and the inflammation had cleared up for a while.

But then, sometime toward the first spring, she lost her vision in the afflicted organ and a raging fever forced her to bed. Her face had swollen again and, to his touch, her bones had felt oddly soft and puffy in her head. He had groaned in agony and fear at her side during the entire episode, never leaving her for a moment. When the fever had at last broken, she had been a woman wasted to painful thinness, almost white unto deathliness. And also very different.

A lump of pointed flesh had formed where her absent nose had been, and her right eye functioned again. It had also shifted position. When she had first gotten up from her sickbed, she had stumbled because of the changed balance of her vision.

He'd told her that her eyes were set even and that the lump of pointed flesh looked like a nose, but she had laughed this off. He'd asked her to check her image in the bucket she kept for water, but she'd refused to look.

She made a habit of not looking at herself. To this effect, she would stir drinking water with a finger before approaching close enough to see an image, and if she did see an image, she never focused on it. She had no idea what she now looked like. She didn't want to know. Since neither she, nor he, were very concerned about their appearances, merely their functionality, the matter never came up for discussion again. If the soldiers hadn't arrived on this witch-finding foray, they would have blithely continued to forget.

But the soldiers had come. Sticks, barely hiding in the foliage, continued to hiss his rejection of her decision to leave with that prince. He and those two hostile men had kept talking about her face. Why had they made such a fuss about it? She had a nose and even-set eyes now. That didn't mean they should fuss. And why hadn't she said her real name was Hanicke?

He asked her as much, and she blinked and her skin went pink like a carnation.

"Um...I sort of got rid of it," she said.

How can you get rid of a name? And why would you? he asked.

"Because I didn't want to be Hanicke anymore. I wanted to be Maggot who survived despite everyone. They gave me that name to hurt me, but I took it away from them. Now it's my strength."

Oh. She referred to her life before now, when she'd been a farm slave. Sticks appreciated her tribute to strength born of suffering, having suffered himself. *I can keep calling you Maggot.*

She smiled. "You can call me what you want, because I know you love me."

He smiled back. *We should run away now. There's no one close enough to stop us.*

"No! Sticks, I can't. I already thought of that, but I don't want to run my entire life. This must be done."

He scowled at her for being so stubborn about it. She was stubborn about everything, though. Generally, he just let her have what she wanted, because he liked watching her smile, but he didn't think he should be so congenial this time.

"You can follow me as long as you are able," she said, attempting to ameliorate the situation for him, "but it needs doing. Once I am cleared of all suspicion, I can be certain to have a written document proving my innocence to anyone who ever comes by to bother us again."

It sounded well enough, but it was still unbearable. There was no telling what would really happen to her. Those soldiers were always staring at her, some not so fearfully, and it made him nervous. He clicked a question at her.

"Well, I am ugly," she said forthrightly. "Everyone always stares at that. It's perfectly natural, if not welcome."

He didn't think that was why they stared at her. Something about their expressions didn't smack of morbid fascination. Even that prince, who was back from the other side of the clearing and standing in the centre of the troop, even he watched her with those vivid eyes of his. He was the worst of them. There was something extremely predatory about that man.

The prince's gaze left Hanicke's shape to look upward at him. Clearly the man saw him, for he glared with no lack of heat.

They were not going to like each other, definitely not. The golem was very certain of that. The prince was unmistakably warning him that he did not intend to relent on this course of his. Sticks, therefore, indicated to Hanicke that he intended to follow her into the prince's very stronghold if he must. She snapped at him in annoyance, just about hopping off her two little feet in frustration.

"You can't do that! You'll be wonderful, big target, won't you? And if they don't scream at the sight of me, they most certainly will at you." Her arms waved madly in the air as if to make her point.

Behind, a boot crunched twigs. Hanicke whirled toward the sound.

"Problem?" asked Ugoth with his coolest voice. Her upset had been a perfect a reason to interrupt, and he had approached, the captain of his guard not far behind. Ugoth tore his gaze from her and looked up at the giant again.

The monster stood his ground, just at the edge of the clearing and scowling over the intrusion. Truly, he was an impressive sight, eyes blazing from ten feet up. By rights the eyes should have set fire to him, but his verdant face showed no evidence of scorching. Ugoth was inclined to back away from the creature, but he was perhaps as mad as the witch-girl and cursed with far too much pride to flee where a bit of a thing like her would not.

"He wants to come with me!" the woman yowled in upset.

"Come with you? You said he was a forest spirit."

"That doesn't mean he can't move. He's not a tree."

"But isn't he bound to this place?"

"Hardly."

The golem hissed at him. The noise sounded oddly insulting. Ugoth's eyes narrowed. "Let him come if he wants," he offered. His tone was more threatening than polite.

Hanicke glared up at him briefly, as if to say stop interfering; then her attention reverted to the golem. "I won't have you in danger," she denied him.

I won't have you in danger, he said in turn. Her lips pressed together angrily. He knew her well. Momentarily, she would let fly with all sorts of calculated invectives and ingenious reproaches, all designed to shame him into capitulation.

"You...!" she began.

He put a giant, ivy finger on her open lips, cutting her off abruptly. The prince almost drew his sword, but stopped, an expression of dismay and chagrin on his face. Sticks only glanced at him contemptuously.

You said you were sent here for me, he reminded her. *Is it true?* Her eyes widened in protest. His finger left her mouth.

"It's true," she admitted reluctantly.

You and I, we belong together, he concluded. She appeared ready to argue the fact. *I am only strong with you, not without.*

She shut her eyes as if to shut out the truth of it. Eventually, she reopened them, relenting. "You have to promise to stay hidden whenever it is possible," she said.

I promise to do so, if circumstances do not dictate otherwise.

She frowned at his qualified oath, but had no choice but to accept it. "This is not going right," she grumbled to herself.

The day had been one surprise after the other. Nothing would be the same again. She was certain of it. She turned away from the golem and headed for her hut without another word to him. She knew he would remain nearby, watching her from a distance from this moment onward.

She was so upset, she did not at first notice the prince striding along beside her. She had gained the door of her hut when she came back to her surroundings mentally. "I'm just going to toss a few things into a basket," she informed him.

The captain of the regular troop appeared from inside her doorway, determined and implacable. "She should be allowed nothing," he told the prince.

To this, Ugoth raised a brow in question.

“She mustn’t be allowed the trappings of her profession,” Isidur explained himself.

“Oh, we’ve come to that again, have we?” Hanicke snapped at the brute of a man. His character was as blunt as his face, she decided. “I *am* allowed a change of clothing, am I not?” She addressed this demand to the prince.

“That would be in order,” he consented, and Hanicke barged past the disgruntled officer.

“I will watch,” said Isidur.

The prince merely nodded. Just after the captain had passed back within, a shriek of outrage pierced the atmosphere. The horses, still nervous from beforehand, began to prance about and snort fearfully.

“Gods blast her!” Ugoth hissed. He dove into the hovel, expecting the captain to be a slug or worse. Instead, he found the man with his arms crossed, glaring in self-righteous wrath. The girl stood in front of her hearth, in the centre of a large puddle of what looked to have been soup. The pot lay on its side on the dirt floor. She was coughing somewhat violently.

“I think I lost my voice,” she croaked between hacking.

The prince glowered at the captain. “Out!” he commanded.

Isidur turned to go, still glowing self-satisfaction, but his path was suddenly blocked. Bending his entire bulk, the creature of vines forced his way into the hovel. The captain wheeled backwards. The girl hopped aside. Isidur slipped on muddy soup and flipped over, landing helmet-side down with a clang and a woof of lost breath as his body settled in a heap. Outside, horses and men neighed and shouted in the distance. The prince shut his eyes in absolute frustration, his head raised as if to cry to the gods for mercy.

Instead he remarked rather mildly, “There go the horses again.”

He opened his eyes. The giant had halted half in, half out of the doorway. If he pushed in any further, there wouldn’t be room for all of them.

“You promised to hide,” the girl coughed accusingly.

If coal eyes could roll, his appeared to do so. He began to back out again. Briefly, ember eyes and cold blue irises met. There was a moment

of complete accord, perhaps the only accord golem and man would ever have. *This woman was difficult*, they seemed to say to each other. The moment ended, and the golem quickly retreated out of sight.

Ugoth rounded on the girl. "You can hardly blame him. You screamed as if a wraith was about to suck the life out of you, or as if you were the wraith itself. I thought I was going to see the captain turned into something disgusting."

He was babbling. The giant's rush to her defence had disconcerted him more than he wanted to admit. He bent to look at the fallen soldier. Isidur was breathing, but unconscious.

"He knocked himself silly," Ugoth said. The girl giggled, then coughed. He repressed a smile of his own. "Hurry up with your packing," he commanded sternly. "If this keeps on, we're *all* going to need a change of clothes."

He didn't doubt some of the men would return to the village rather worse for wear, but he wouldn't have them smelling like a cesspit. A stop at a stream for a general washing up seemed in order. He would be damned before he rode back with a stinking, demoralized troop.

"Perhaps I should see to his injury," the woman whispered hoarsely and hacked into her palm as if her throat pained her.

Served her right for screaming over a pot of spilled soup. "He wouldn't thank you for it," Ugoth said.

The patient in question groaned suddenly and proceeded to roll to his fours. He lifted himself, rubbing his neck gingerly. He stumbled out of the hut without a word, apparently not quite himself. They watched him as he blinked in the sunlight stupidly. One of his soldiers appeared next to him and led him off, out of their line of vision.

Captain Liudger darkened the entrance. The man hadn't run off, then. Ugoth noted this with approval. "Be careful of the spilled soup," he warned.

Liudger peered down at the mess and nodded. "It came out so fast, we hadn't even drawn our swords half way before it was already here. All the horses took off this time, and most of the men. We'll have to make camp here. It'll take too long to sort out the mess."

"I thought this was a seasoned troop," Ugoth said.

Liudger shrugged. "From what I gather, none of them have done much in the way of bashing monsters to a pulp. You have more experience in that regard."

Ugoth sighed in resignation. "But my usual prey are not as problematic as forest spirits with divinely appointed guardians, apparently."

The girl grimaced at him and turned away. She hauled a broom out from a nook between boxes and began sweeping the soup ingredients into a pile. Ugoth ran a hand through his golden hair and considered the situation, his head lowered. "Half of them may not show up at all," he said, meaning the men. "They could be making their way back to the village on foot."

"I don't think so," the knight captain disagreed. "I sent the few men left to shouting that the creature has gone into the woods. They're yelling to come back where it's safe. Some of the soldiers are already showing up."

Ugoth smiled without mirth. "How many of yours ran?" he inquired dryly.

"None, Highness. Not this time," the knight said proudly.

The prince nodded. "Very well. I must leave you in charge of them all. Captain Isidur may be unable to function for a time."

"As you will, Your Highness," the knight captain acknowledged. Rather than departing, his gaze shifted to the side and fixed upon the cause of all their recent troubles, this woman with a face that mocked his liege lord's.

"Was there something else, Liudger?" His Highness asked.

"Don't you think it's too much of a coincidence that she looks like that?"

The prince blinked. "Whatever is the case with her face—real or not—the inquest will determine it."

Liudger frowned and opened his mouth as if to continue objecting, but then turned about and quit the hut.

Frowning as well, Ugoth faced the woman. She had stopped sweeping and was sitting on the small cot.

"Well, if we are to stay for the night, I might as well ready the hut for a long absence," she said.

He nodded permission absently. He couldn't comprehend why both Liudger and Isidur were fussing about her face. What was there to fuss about?

Unless they thought her beauty was meant to trap him... But then, beautiful women went about doing that to men all the time, without any more magic than nature had given them. He couldn't very well bind and gag her just because she was appealing to look upon.

"What did he mean that you had more experience bashing monsters to a pulp?" she asked.

"Ogre and trolls," he said. "I hunt them."

Her eyes transformed into a pair of green-centred moons. "You hunt ogres? Is this a princely pastime?"

"For the men of my family, yes. Tell me about this supplication?"

"It went on for minutes and minutes," she told him. "I don't know what the priest said. His words didn't make sense. They sort of slipped away. But then the light disappeared, and I didn't have a body anymore. The god spoke to me and asked me to look for Sticks, and I woke up with frost all over me, but the sheriff said that I'd been struck by lightning, only I didn't die. And the opal was over my heart."

In response to this short account, Ugoth said, "The words slipped away? Tell me more about that."

Hanicke blinked in surprise. "Um...it's sort of hard to describe. It was as if his words..."

"Were foreign?"

"No. No, it was as if they went elsewhere before I could hear them properly. Does that make sense?"

"More than you think."

This phenomenon was exactly what happened when the gods listened to the prayers of the holy brothers in the Turamen Monastery. Of all that she'd related, this fact alone eased Ugoth's disquiet. Most likely, that opal on her breast was real.

Dismissing Liudger's unease about her face, Ugoth turned away. He saw no purpose in remaining to observe her every movement and so marched out of the hut to see what he could do to get his men back in order. The woman could take care of herself. She'd proven that most definitely.

Chapter Six

Thirty-seven of the thirty-nine soldiers gathered in the clearing by dusk. The pair missing had either gone too far to hear the calls of their comrades or were beyond hearing for other reasons. Only some of the horses were recovered. These included the ones used for carrying supplies, but the prince's stallion was amongst those still lost. There was a definite prospect that riders might have to double up the following morning.

As the foray had been meant to be a quick jaunt into the woods with a minimum of gear and staples to carry, the supply wagons had been left back at the village. Only one tent had been brought, and it was for the prince. That evening, the soldiers formed an encampment around the hovel, with the prince's tent facing the witch's door. The tent was a small affair that could hold three men lying flat. His Highness shared it with Knight Captain Liudger.

The soldiers sat about in groups surrounding several different campfires. None approached the hut or bothered the girl. On her part, she went about her business almost as if they weren't there. They ate hardtack and chewy, dried meat for their supper. She ate something hot that smelled wonderful, the odour floating out the windows to surround and tease them all. She didn't offer any, not even to the prince. She knew Captain Isidur would just think she was trying to put a spell on everyone.

The prince, on his part, didn't demand to be served. He knew that Isidur or Liudger would accuse her of attempting to bewitch him. He had yet to understand the significance of their continued disquiet. They both still fussed about her face, and Liudger had made a comment about her hair, something about the colour matching the royal hue. Ugoth hadn't thought this noteworthy. What did it matter that a near midget of a woman had the same hair colour as him? Blonde women were plentiful in Ulmenir. Some were bound to have the same shade of gold.

He'd shut the captains up, without demanding the reasons for their continued suspicion, because he hadn't liked the way Isidur had begun to

look at him, as if he his judgement were unsound. Liudger knew better than to question his decisions; but still, that hint about hair colour had been odd. Ugoth had decided not to take the knight captain up on the reference. He refused to look uncertain before a common soldier, and Isidur, despite his aching head, was always watching.

All the same, the captains had begun to make him edgy about the girl again. As a result, he didn't speak to her all evening, merely stared in the direction of the hut, even when he couldn't see her through the window. And he wondered if she *had* put a spell on him, because he couldn't stop thinking of her, of the scent of herbs that shadowed her every move, or of those incredible emerald eyes. When he at last turned in, he left the flap of his tent open and fell asleep still facing in the direction of the hovel.

Early the next morning, he awoke to the feel of something wet and cool snuffling over his face. He opened his eyes to see a huge pig over him. From his supine view it was upside down. If yesterday's events hadn't already tempered his wits, he might have leapt up bellowing in surprise. As it was, he felt he'd had all the surprise pounded out of him and merely blinked at the slobbery snout. Vaguely, he recognised an abundance of large upside-down teats.

"Must be the sow to go with the hog," he muttered.

She grunted at him pleasantly by way of response.

"Greetings, O Queen," he intoned.

He almost thought she was smiling as she turned and shuffled off toward the hovel door. It opened before she arrived, and he raised himself on a forearm to watch the sleep-dishevelled woman usher the pig in. Several piglets suddenly appeared and ran in quickly, oddly silent.

He hadn't imagined it. She was still as beautiful as the day before and as diminutive. The slight puffiness around her eyes only made her adorable. If he hadn't seen her breast, he wouldn't have believed her an adult. In fact, he'd only kept off from decapitating her yesterday because of her child-like size.

After the last of the piglets had entered, she looked over at him unerringly. Their eyes locked. She was the first to turn away, her head lowering, once again appearing ashamed. She shut the door softly.

Ugoth glanced at Liudger. The knight captain slept on. Patently, the sow hadn't thought to make a morning call on him.

Ugoth crept out of his blankets and pulled on his boots. Buckling his sword belt, he wandered off to the forest edge, without benefit of chain mail or royal guard. The camp was completely silent except for his movement. A mist on the forest floor reached a few feet into the clearing, but it was retreating rapidly from the rising sun. Not far off from his destination, two regular soldiers watched him uncertainly. He assumed they were on the morning watch and ignored them. He picked a bush and untied his leathers. He was just starting his business when a nervous voice interrupted his peace.

“Your Highness?”

This day was starting off just right, he thought, but he responded calmly enough, not bothering to look at the man. “What is it?” he said.

The soldier didn’t respond immediately. Impatiently, Ugoth looked over at him. The soldier was twisting his helmet around and around his two hands in a frenzy of anxiety. The second man stood to his rear, looking as apprehensive as the first. The prince peered at their faces more closely. He looked away again, hiding his surprise. He finished his business and began to tie his laces, seeking the words he wanted in his mind. He couldn’t remember names.

“Aren’t you the two who were missing last night?” he asked, turning fully at last.

“Yes, Your Highness,” the second confirmed.

“When did you arrive?”

“Just now, with the pigs,” the first said.

The prince regarded them narrowly, until the second pointed just beyond them to the forest edge. Ugoth shifted his gaze in that direction. There were pigs, most certainly, rummaging around at the edge of the mist. In their centre, the hog stared out at him, as if waiting for him to notice. The instant Ugoth recognised the animal, the hog wheeled about with a snort and led the herd into the murk beneath the trees.

“They brought us,” offered the second soldier.

Ugoth turned back to the pair in growing wonder.

“They found us in the dark,” the first said to his silent stare, “and they herded us in this direction.”

“They herded you?”

“Yes,” confirmed the second.

“They brought some of the mounts, too,” added the first.

If anything, he was twisting his helmet faster than before. The prince wondered if it would start smoking in his hands, but he suspected his own ears might fall off before that. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“We put them inside the picket with the rest,” the second reported quickly. “I even rubbed yours down. He didn’t seem to mind much.”

Ugoth took this all in much as one ‘takes in’ a sudden deluge from a tidal flood, without the opportunity to so much as gasp. He merely stared in astonishment.

The first soldier suddenly stopped twirling the helmet. His eyes rolled up in his head and he fell backwards with a thud. The second continued looking at the prince as if everything was perfectly normal, but his eyes had mildly crazed gleam.

Ugoth closed his gaping mouth and shook himself mentally. “Pick up your comrade and go lie down,” he commanded the man.

“Yes, Highness. I am very grateful,” he said, bending down to pluck his companion’s two arms up.

“Certainly,” the prince acknowledged, rather than ask him what he meant. He watched the soldier drag his fallen comrade off closer to the encampment. There, the fellow promptly dropped the swooning man and lay down next to him. He folded his hands over his chest and went completely still.

The prince gawked from the distance. Where had all the guards on duty been during all this? Had no one seen the pigs, the men, the horses? He pivoted and began searching the perimeter. He found them eventually, seven of them, sound asleep on the ground, exactly where they had been since the fall of the sun last night, the same men who had begun the watch.

“Bloody hells,” he said.

Even now, none of the other soldiers in the encampment appeared to be in any hurry to awaken. He couldn’t see the forest goliath anywhere, but he didn’t doubt that it was out there somewhere, watching, possibly laughing at him.

He turned back toward the hovel and stalked over in a wrath. He almost shoved the door in without forewarning, until he remembered the huge sow inside. He wasn’t about to get run down by that massive

animal. One near miss the day before had been good enough for him. He thudded the door with his fist. He heard a protesting, animal grunt. Shortly after, the door opened up. The woman stood in the entrance, scratching at her backside sleepily.

“What?” she said.

The sow lay before the hearth with her piglets suckling greedily at her teats. She looked up at him lazily, then put her head back down to watch the flames licking fresh logs. The woman stared up at him expectantly.

“What the hells did you do to my men?” he demanded.

She blinked at him, taken aback. The sleepiness fled from her eyes. “Has something happened to them?” she asked.

“Don’t play stupid with me! You’ve put a spell on them!” he shouted.

“I have not!” She pushed past him into the sunlight and peered about uncertainly. “Are they dead?” she said worriedly.

“No, they’re sleeping!”

She looked up at him in dawning irritation. “You woke me up because they’re sleeping?” she bit out. The man was unbelievable!

He nearly growled at her. “Do you see any of them waking up? I am shouting at the top of my lungs and none of them are waking up!”

“That one is,” she pointed out.

He whirled. Sure enough, Captain Isidur was creeping out from beneath his blankets and shaking his head as if trying to snap himself out of an unusually lifelike dream. As he rose up, other men commenced to shift about beneath their blankets, coughing and mumbling in the early stages of awakening.

“If you’re not careful, your bellowing will wake the dead,” the woman spoke, perhaps unwisely.

He whipped back toward her. “You did something!” he hissed at her. “None of the guards changed shifts last night. They all fell asleep where they stood.”

Her eyes widened. “Standing up?”

“No!” he snapped. He was near ready to shake her.

“Now that would have been something to see,” she said, ignoring his obvious anger.

She crossed her arms over her chest in a pose of complete unconcern and inadvertently pressed her breasts up against her unlaced shirt. He found the lovely swell they made most distracting and forgot what he was about to say. His eyes fixed on the opal, which was exposed to his view. Belatedly, she noticed where his regard lay and hastened to cover herself, but he grabbed both hands and held them fast.

“Let go!”

He ignored her and continued to examine the divine token. It was very odd. Oval and about the size of a thumbprint, it shone with little rainbows that shifted with the angle of light. When he peered at the stone more closely, he saw that the edges weren’t really edges at all. Somehow, the stone and her skin seemed to merge at some indefinable point.

“A part of her and not something a man could put there,” he repeated to himself.

He straightened, releasing her arms. She stared up at him uncertainly, her hands dropping to lie athwart her chest like the wings of a dove. Behind them, soldiers slowly picked themselves off the ground and brushed the cobwebs of sleep from their minds. The prince and the woman paid this no mind. Their eyes had locked in a strange dance, all involuntary.

“What did you do to my men?” he asked again, this time more calmly.

“Nothing,” she re-affirmed.

He just couldn’t believe that. Their sleep had been about as natural as pigs herding humans and horses. “But something did happen,” he insisted. He attempted to placate her. “It didn’t turn out bad, that is certain.”

“Then why are you pestering me about it?”

“You are such an irritating woman. I could just throttle you.”

She blinked up uncertainly at him. He had said it so calmly. Had he meant it? She didn’t like being throttled. She knew precisely what it felt like. She looked down at his hands apprehensively. They were large enough to do the trick. “I suppose you’re strong enough to just snap my neck, so why bother with the long method?”

She never said what he expected. He shut his eyes in absolute aggravation. There had to be some other way to win the truth from her.

With his unnerving eyes shut, she took the opportunity to examine his face once again: the straight nose with its evenly flared nostrils, the firm jaw and high cheeks, those lips that were almost too beautiful for a man to own, but that fit him just right somehow. There wasn't a thing about him she didn't like, except his personality, of course.

He raised his lids of a sudden and caught her gawking again. An odd light entered his expressive eyes. "Tell me the truth," he said. "What did you do last night?"

Her brows lowered in exasperation. "I went to bed!" she huffed.

A hand shot out and braced against the doorframe behind her, blocking her retreat. He leaned in exceedingly close. "What did you do before that?" he whispered into her ear.

His breath entered her ear canal and she shivered. She angled her face away. Not far beyond, soldiers stared at them, gathered around in curiosity. "I said a prayer," she said hesitantly.

His face turned toward hers. Now his lips approached her cheek, and his breath became a kiss mocking a real one. Her knees were beginning to feel oddly unsteady. Distractedly, she wondered how he could be so cruel, to approach an ugly woman and callously mock her with fake seduction. But damn. Even knowing what he did, she seemed to have no immunity.

"What was the prayer?" he said.

His scent, sweat wafted strongly from his undershirt. Peculiar, but she found it distressingly attractive. She fixed on the exposed skin between his unlaced collar, the point where his collarbones met. Her gaze immediately afterward dipped down to where she could just see golden chest hairs. That didn't help her concentration, but worsened it.

She tore her gaze off his body. More soldiers had gathered to watch this quiet byplay, including the captains Isidur and Liudger. The former glowered like a thundercloud. His disapproval just added to her confusion.

"Um," she mumbled, trying to remember what she had prayed the night before last. "Uh...I...um...thanked the gods for their kindness."

"Yes?"

His breath fanned her cheek warmly. It sent a shiver up her spine. She attempted to step back, only to feel his arm blocking her path. She

froze, the warmth of his limb like a brand iron, one from which she didn't want to retreat.

"I prayed for guidance?"

The answer was more a plea. She was losing control of herself. She simply must get a grip. He was playing with her and he was damned good at it. She darted her eyes toward his, barely turning her head, and met his blue ones. They weren't cool at all. They all but scalded her. She gasped and looked away.

"I asked for a good night's sleep and hoped that no one would bother me in the night!" she blurted.

Her mouth widened into a round O. He straightened away from her with a triumphant expression. She looked fully at him in shock.

"I didn't mean to," she whispered.

That he believed. He nodded and stalked away before anyone, especially the girl, could tell just how disturbed he had become from baiting her.

She didn't want to leave the hut, but not because of her reluctance to abandon her home. The appalling way in which the prince had manipulated her made her hesitate. She was so ashamed of herself and so mortified. She sat alone at her table, drinking a last hot herbal tea, wondering at her own stupidity and his duplicity.

The sow had left. None of the soldiers had approached the swine as she made her sedate way from the hut to the forest, piglets jogging silently in tow. The sow hadn't appeared the least afraid of the multitude of men. In truth, they had been more apprehensive of her. Not a few of them had cast hasty signs to ward off evil.

Beyond the door, drifting though the windows, Hanicke heard the soldiers making last preparations for their imminent departure. She set the bowl down, disgusted.

How could he have done that to her? How could he have looked at her like that, looking like he meant it?

She sighed and stood. She poured the last of her tea over the doused fire and was fastening the shutters firmly when the door opened without warning. She thought it would be the prince, but it wasn't.

"We await you, witch," spoke Captain Isidur.

He was obviously never going to forgive her for the tumble onto his head yesterday, even if it had been his own fault. She finished fastening the last window and picked up her covered basket, passing him without comment. He glanced around the hut as if wanting to torch the entire thing, then withdrew to follow, but she was waiting just outside. He drew up beside her, hostility a cloud around him. She ignored him and merely pulled the door shut, fastening it as tight as she could.

She turned to the yard when she had finished and looked around uncertainly. Nearby, a soldier held the reins of a horse. She saw that a few men were doubled up today. Not all the horses had returned, then. She wondered if she was meant to get up behind the soldier.

Prince Ugoth was already astride. Today he sported a wide-brimmed, felted hat that matched his blue cloak in colour. There was a golden braid at the base of the crown. He pulled his warhorse aside and directed it toward her. He halted a few feet away.

"You can ride?" he questioned.

She hesitated. Isidur snorted.

"She won't be able to. Horses can't abide a witch."

She refrained from glaring at the belligerent oaf. She didn't want to start something. The horses might be set off again. The possibility was making her hands sweat. "I can ride," she disagreed mulishly, "but I haven't done it much, not since I was very small."

The prince stared down at her, a half smile suddenly playing over his lips. "How could you have possibly been any smaller?" he said.

Isidur she would not glare at, but she would the prince. She would not forgive him for using his beauty on her. He was a cruel man, to make an ugly woman feel so wretched.

Becoming aware of her displeasure, his eyes narrowed. "Try that one," he said curtly, indicating the gelding the soldier held.

She dared half the distance to the beast and then stopped. She looked back at the prince. "What do I do with my basket?" she asked.

"The soldier will strap it on the back for you," came the answer.

So, she wouldn't be riding double. They were all afraid of her, then. She handed the basket to the soldier, who did appear uneasy. She was encouraged to find that the horse merely regarded her with horse-like disinterest. She walked over to its side. There, she was stumped. The stirrup was a far stretch up from the ground. She thought she could get her foot up to it, but she might not be able to haul body up afterward.

She felt all their eyes on her and didn't doubt she was about to look a complete fool. Thanking the gods that she wore loose breeches that wouldn't rip asunder from the great stretch, she put her foot in the stirrup and reached as high as she could for the pommel. She proceeded to haul herself up. The gelding looked back at her and bared its teeth in a mockery of a laugh. Then it moved. She lost her balance and fell on her back with a thud. All the air left her lungs at once. She said ouch, but it didn't sound like much.

Suddenly, the prince was standing over her. Before she could comprehend it, she was in the air and upon the horse. He tossed one of her legs over the saddle and held onto her while she adjusted to the changed altitude. When she did, she pressed herself down for all she was worth and hunched over the pommel. She still couldn't breath, and he had only made this worse.

He eyed her askance. "Are you all right?" he inquired.

Fine time for him to ask! Up on a mountain of horseflesh with uncertain skill to stay aloft! Riding on Sticks was easier.

There was an idea!

No! Bad idea! Deal with the horse!

The prince shook her. "Are you well, woman?" he insisted.

No, don't do that! "Fine," she croaked.

He didn't believe her, for his lips tightened in that exasperated look with which she was coming to be very familiar. She pressed down all the tighter to the animal beneath her. It snorted in what sounded like disgust.

"You've never ridden in your life, have you?" he accused.

"My father was always up with me," she admitted meekly. As a child living with her father, she had seldom even gone outside.

The prince sighed in resignation. "You are such an irritating woman," he said again.

“I know, and you could just throttle me,” she replied. “At least the horse isn’t afraid of me. Look. He’s laughing at me again.”

It certainly seemed that way. Making an irritated grimace, Ugoth scanned the faces all about them. Which of the soldiers would ride with her? From the changes in their expressions, he could see the same conclusion crossing many of their minds. Some frowned, but other didn’t. Those that didn’t edged forward in a suspiciously eager manner. And now he didn’t think he liked the idea at all. He had to get this woman to sit astride on her own. At once!

“You will learn to ride now,” he decreed.

“As your Royal Highness commands,” she acknowledged sarcastically, making no attempt to unglue herself from the horse’s broad back.

He turned his back on her, and she almost yelped her fear as he stalked away, leaving her alone in the heavens, or at least that was how it felt up there on the horse. He didn’t leave her for long. He returned astride his own steed. In short order, he hauled her up into a seated position, where she clutched the pommel in straight-backed terror. He forcefully pushed her bottom forward with his hand, getting her in the correct position.

“Give me the reins and get those stirrups adjusted,” he commanded the nearby soldier. The man put the basket down and handed the reins to the prince, then set about strapping the stirrups up, adjusting them for Hanicke’s small size. “Get your feet in,” the prince ordered her.

She did as she was told. The soldier stepped aside to fetch the basket. He took a bit of rope that someone handed over and lashed the basket securely down behind her. That done, he went off to find his own mount. The remainder of the soldiers quickly got themselves astride. If any were disappointed, they didn’t show it.

“Right,” the prince said in satisfaction. The woman’s gelding tossed its head and pranced, and she went as white a boiled and blued sheet. “You’ll get used to it,” he promised her. She obviously didn’t think so, but was too busy hanging on for dear life to argue the point. “If you don’t relax your back, you *will* fall off. You must learn to move in complement to the gait of the horse.”

He appeared to do nothing, but his stallion snorted and began to walk. With the reins of her gelding in his hands, she was forced to follow. The soldiers put their mounts into motion and formed up so that the

prince rode in the middle with his prisoner. Captain Isidur took the lead, but Knight Captain Liudger and his men remained in close proximity to His Highness.

“We’re going the wrong way,” she reported. Terrified or not, something had to be said.

“We’re heading for the road,” he informed her.

She blinked in surprise. “What road?”

The prince stared at her like she’d turned into a rabid squirrel. “You don’t know about the road?”

She flushed slightly. “I never go far in this direction.”

“Why not?”

“Well, the village is the other way, for one thing,” she reminded, “and in this direction, the land turns into a lot of rocky terrain. There’s not much in the way of herbs to be had from the cliffs. Everything I need can be found in this valley, and we’re leaving it, going this way.” As she said this, she considered she might manage to stay aloft after all. She endeavoured to relax as the prince had urged her.

“You don’t like exploring, do you?” he said.

She didn’t like getting caught in the open, more like, and this direction had very little cover.

Ugoth waited for a response, but her lips had thinned shut. Ah, well. He’d get the answer out of her eventually. Stubborn female.

“The trail yonder goes through the cliffs straight to the road,” he said, “and the road swings around the rock formation and heads back toward the village. It’s faster by horseback. If we make a straight route in the other direction, the trees come together too thickly to ride.”

He had a point. She let the matter drop and concentrated on feeling the pace of the horse. He let her, watching diligently.

The prince was gentle with her, at least by his standards, because he kept the pace at a walk until he saw her spine relax some fifteen minutes later. At that point, he ordered Captain Isidur to pick up speed. An unholy gleam of anticipation seemed to play in Isidur’s eyes as he acknowledged.

“And not a blasted trot!” Ugoth quickly roared ahead. She wasn’t ready for that, slower pace though it might be. As if to confirm his suspicion, the captain scowled back at him briefly.

“Why not a trot?” Hanicke asked.

“You’ll just fall off,” he said, which explained little.

She had no time to quiz him, because the horses all jumped forward, altering their paces quickly into a roaring canter. She threw her arms around the gelding’s neck, until she was all but flat against it, and hung on with all her might, but the prince hauled her back up again with relentless determination. The extra effort of doing so, while manoeuvring a cantering stallion, appeared not to bother him the least.

“Keep your back up, but keep it loose,” he snapped at her. She grappled with the pommel and hung on desperately. “Squeeze with your legs, woman! Don’t just flap around like a goose!”

She squeezed her legs with every ounce of her strength and also squeezed her lids tight. Something smacked the back of her head.

“Eyes open,” he shouted.

She opened them. His hat was off. It had a dent in the crown. She hadn’t the energy to complain about the abuse. She hung on and concentrated on learning the pace, but kept her eyes off the ground thundering past below. Shortly, she began to get the feel of the canter.

When it looked to him that she wasn’t going to cower again, Ugoth shoved the dent back out with a fist and put the hat back on. If she’d been a boy, he would have used the flat of his hand unhesitatingly. But she wasn’t, and there was that giant to consider. Last thing he wanted was to battle the monster for striking its miniscule girl companion.

They travelled for a while at a canter, riding between the gaps of trees until the terrain began to rise. Then they were forced to slow, and Hanicke was introduced to the trot. She had thought her bottom had gone numb beforehand. She jarringly discovered how incorrect her assumption had been. She thudded against the saddle, over and over again. A foot came out of a stirrup, and she started to slip off, on the side away from the prince.

The captain of his guard saved her. Liudger pulled her up by the collar of her coat and thumped her back down onto the saddle. The prince edged in from the other side and lent a hand to steady her.

“Thank you, Liudger,” he acknowledged flatly.

“She wasn’t doing too badly until then,” remarked the knight captain.

“We have to go back!” Hanicke blurted.

They looked at her in consternation. “Why?” said the prince.

“My bottom dropped off somewhere back there, and I think I may lose all my teeth next!” she vibrated

“Use your cussed legs, woman!” he snapped at her.

“I am holding tight!” she snapped back.

“Not like that! Use them to ride with the motion. Take the shock in the knees!”

“Oh.” Eventually, she managed it, with both men trotting alongside, prepared to push her to centre again.

They continued onward, coming to a path that was more gravel than dirt and that passed along a rocky outcropping. Presently, the outcropping turned them sharply, and they were forced up between that and another. Here, Ugoth slowed the pace to a walk to conserve the strength of the horses. Hanicke was grateful for the respite.

Now that Liudger assisted to the other side of the woman, the prince began to look around. Trees grew sparser here. Low-lying shrubs and grasses replaced the taller greenery. With the terrain so sparsely forested, he expected to see the creature somewhere, but found no hint of it to either side or to the fore. Twisting about, he scanned the rear.

“Your escort doesn’t appear to be in attendance,” he said to Hanicke, wondering what she would make of the announcement.

“Look up higher,” she said without taking her attention off the task of riding.

He craned his neck, taking off his hat for a better view. High on the rocky ledge, the monster crouched, staring down at the troop. Even at this distance, it was awesomely huge. Ugoth had a clear view of its entire shape. Manlike, it squatted, but there the resemblance ended. Mostly green with hints of brown, it most obviously was not a thing of flesh and blood.

It rose and leapt onward. The distance it covered with each stride was enormous. Shortly, it had passed them and gone yards ahead, leaping crags to do it, some of these half a dozen feet wide or more.

Ugoth’s horse jerked its neck suddenly, and he looked away reflexively. When he peered up again, he couldn’t see the creature.

“How did you know it was there? You haven’t been watching,” he said to the witch. Not witch, he revised. That opal dictated otherwise.

She was something out of the ordinary. Of that, he was certain. He had yet to determine exactly what.

“I don’t know. I just did,” she said distractedly.

Well, that actually told him more than she thought. She *just did*, somewhat like she *just did* the prayer last night. What had she said when she’d leapt from the bush yesterday?

“Away from him.”

“What?” she said in confusion.

“That’s what you *did* to my men and horses yesterday,” he informed her and then tagged a warning. “I think you had better be careful what you *just do* around me in the future.”

“I didn’t do any of that on purpose,” she protested.

“I know,” he said. “Be careful all the same.”

“I’ll be careful,” she agreed. They travelled onward without further speech.

Midway through the morning, they arrived at the road. Their speed picked up, and it was back to a trot for a quarter hour, but after, Ugoth called forward to slow the pace and let the girl relax. If he thought Hanicke’s progress as an equestrian satisfactory, he gave no sign. On her part, she was too sore to be concerned with anything but her aching thighs and bottom. She was just glad they were back to a walk.

By noon, they had already traversed the great curve that led in the direction of the local village. They stopped at the other side of a large creek to rest the horses and eat the noon meal. The men dropped off their mounts. Some walked the animals, in pairs and threes, to cool them before leading them to drink, while others unpacked the supplies, and fetched out hardtack and dried meat. Meanwhile, Hanicke sat on her gelding unmoving.

“Get off your mount,” the prince ordered from below. She turned her head to gaze down at him. She looked tired. Smeared dust and tear tracks circled her eyes, and her hair had taken some of the grey dust of the road. Despite this, he still thought her adorable. Damn it.

"I can't move my legs," she said.

He reached up and pulled her off without warning. She hung from him like a rag doll.

"Put your legs under you and stand," he said.

She tried, but her legs seemed to have lost their capacity to come together right. When he released her, she stood there trembling. Her first step was an agony. "I can still feel the horse," she complained.

"I told you, you were too stiff," he said unsympathetically.

"That's very nice of you," she grumbled. "You've been doing this since you were a child."

"How would you know?"

She surprised him. "I saw you once, when you were a boy. Besides, there is no way a prince would be untrained in horsemanship."

"You saw me?"

"Yes." She dared another few steps, this time away from him. "I am walking like a duck!"

The prince snorted with impatience and hauled her up in his arms. He walked over to the creek and deposited her on a large boulder, where he leaned over her warningly. "Where did you see me? And when?" he demanded.

"Ow!" she cried. "This is a rock! I have no butt left! Do you want my bones to wear away, too?"

"You irritating woman!" he roared. He picked her up again and this time placed her on the grassy bank. Despite his apparent temper, he was careful how he set her down. "Is that better?"

"Yes, thank you."

He crossed his arms and towered over her, glaring. "You do know that I have a title, don't you?"

"You mean Prince?" she said, blinking up at him. The sun was behind him, and she had to put up a hand to shade her eyes.

"Yes," he said meaningfully.

"Would you mind sitting down, *Your Highness*. I may be going blind," she said dryly. She thought he might have smiled just then, but as she had mentioned, she was going blind.

He sat before her, draped an arm across one raised knee and regarded her with amusement. So she'd been right. He had smiled.

"I make you laugh," she said cynically.

"I had the choice of that or throttling you."

"You've threatened me with that before," she observed.

"It may still happen," he warned. It would give another opportunity to get his hands on her at least, something he had been careful to avoid unless it seemed necessary.

He should have let a soldier see her off the horse just then. He should perhaps also have left her to her own devices this morning, had someone else train her to ride. Bothering with her at all had only proven to everyone that he'd taken a personal interest in her. Judging from Isidur's black looks today, at least that man, if not others, didn't approve.

Isidur would approve of a good throttling, however. That was certain.

Returning to the present, he saw that she was looking at his black boots and leather covered legs. His gaze sharpened in a somewhat predatory manner. Ugoth knew exactly what she was wearing. It was burned into his memory—a boy's linen shirt, yellowed with age, brown breeches that were rather loose and dangled past her knees, sturdy leather boots, very worn, again fashioned for a boy, a grey woollen coat that had been patched innumerable times, woollen socks and an outer belt with a large white feather tucked into it. He wondered what the feather meant. He would save that question for later.

A soldier approached and handed him hardtack, dried meat and a helping of dried fruit, then offered the same to Hanicke. His service was wordless and his retreat was as well.

"He didn't say 'Your Highness'," she remarked.

Ugoth raised a brow as he tore into a chunk of meat. "Princes don't pay attention to servants," he said around the chunk.

"Is that wise? There are more of them than you." The soldier returned with two mugs with ale in them. Hanicke took hers in surprise. "Ale. You actually have ale, but no fresh fruit or good bread?"

"The men like the ale better."

She smirked at this perfectly masculine answer and took a sip of hers. It wasn't bad, though warm and lacking fizz. She watched Ugoth dip his

hardtack to soften it up before taking a bite. "So that's how you make it edible."

He nodded. She followed suit. It wasn't terribly awful eaten that way. She ate the dried fruit quickly, demolished the hardtack methodically, and swallowed the rest of her ale in short order. She handed the dried meat to the prince.

"You don't want it?" he asked in surprise.

"I can't eat meat."

"Why not? It's good."

"I know, but when they help you so much, it takes the pleasure out of eating them," she said seriously.

"You're referring to those odd pigs of yours. If you object to them being eaten, why did you send four of them to the temple where they were in danger of being consumed?"

She grimaced. "I had to do something to repay the gods for the things Sticks took to help me survive. I had nothing but my pigs and their babies. It's not something I am proud to have done, but tribute was necessary."

"I see," he said, "but this is beef."

"I know, but I still can't."

In response, he tore into the strip she'd given him. She refused to be baited and looked away. "You're not much of a witch," he said after swallowing the chunk.

"I am not a witch," she said flatly.

"Tell me where and when you saw me as a boy."

Hanicke eyed him thoughtfully. He didn't stay sidetracked for long, this one. She sighed and began her account, settling herself in a new position with arms folded about her knees. Beyond, the soldiers were spreading out beneath shady trees to rest.

"It was in the village of my birth," she began.

"Which was where?"

"Stoneacre County, in the village bearing the same name."

"Go on." He mentally filed the name away for later.

“Word had come that the king’s hunting party was going to pass through the village some time during the day. Everyone came out to see. They stood around for hours. My father wanted to see the procession, too. He rode in with me and left me under a cart while he went off to get a better view.”

“Why did he leave you under a cart?” the prince interrupted.

“So no one would see me,” she said, as if it were obvious.

His brows lowered thoughtfully as she went on with the narrative.

“I was seven years old. I remember it was drizzling and that it was very muddy under the cart. I was wearing my best dress. It was ruined very quickly. I remember being very hungry, because the king’s party took ages to appear. Then I heard cheering and a lot of yelling. I couldn’t see a thing. I was excited, too, and I wanted to see. I disobeyed my father and crawled between the legs of the crowd until I came out on the road. You were just passing.”

She hesitated a moment before continuing. “You were wearing a blue cloak, just like now, but your clothes were green. Your brother was riding on the opposite side. He was wearing a black cloak and black tunic. He was much larger than you. He looked like a grown man to me. At first, I thought he was your father, but I discovered otherwise shortly after.

“You were looking around at everyone, but he was staring straight ahead. Then you looked down and saw me. You stared, and your horse slowed until it stopped. The king turned around at that moment and shouted at you to keep up, and your brother backed his horse and smacked you on the back of the head with his crop. You yelled at him. He just laughed and called you a snivelling brat of a brother and kicked his horse into a run. You set yours racing after him to catch up.”

She winced slightly as she finished the anecdote. “Some little child ran into the street just then, and your horse reared up and you fell off. Your brother just laughed at you again. So did your father.” She paused again, looking down at her knees. “I crept back under the legs of everyone and hid again,” she ended. “I felt ashamed, because it was my fault you stopped.”

“I remember that,” he said in surprise. That had been her? That just wasn’t possible! Was it? He stared at her in consternation. “That was you?”

“You could hardly forget such a face,” she said, “although you might want to.”

She pressed her face down into her knees and strained not to cry. She hadn't felt like weeping about her ugliness in years. She'd been able to forget. Her two years alone, with her pigs and her beloved giant, had been bliss. She realized that now. She wanted ever so much to go back. She was so hideous!

"You don't look the same as back then," he said, his voice oddly constrained.

Hanicke continued to press her face into her knees without answering. Ugoth sucked in a breath and released it slowly. He recalled the incident clearly. It had been one of the worst expeditions in his life, together with both his father and his brother for company, the two men he hated most in the entire world. He'd had little peace during that hunt. Just pulled out from the monastery, he hadn't been accustomed to days of riding, to hunting, or to the behaviour of the courtiers surrounding his father.

His brother and his father were of the same character, conducting their personal affairs like men at war, testing and seeking every weakness in everyone around them, whether strangers, friends or family. If he shared a distinguishing quality with them, it was the need to test. They had taught him the use of it and taught him well, but his brother had rarely ever left it at testing. With him, once tested, then came torment.

Hanicke's voice brought him back from the past with a small jerk. "I've grown up since then," she said, lifting her face from off her knees. She indicated the nose on her face. "I was badly injured after the attack. While it was healing, I grew this lump."

Attack? Lump?

He was staring at her oddly. She decided she must pay this rudeness no mind. He was always doing that, staring.

But suddenly, she noticed he appeared to have trouble getting the words from his mouth. It was open and his lips were moving, but there wasn't a sound coming out. She watched in fascination. He seemed to collect himself, for presently he spoke.

"One eye was lower down than the other," he recalled. He jerked his chin at her. "Yours aren't."

"I had a fever the winter before last. It was probably a remnant of the poisoning. I had problems with the right eye. Eventually, I lost my vision completely. By late winter, early spring, my entire face swelled up again, except worse. This time, I was laid up in bed for weeks with Sticks

looking after me. It felt like all the bones in my face had turned to jelly. When I woke up from the fever, my right eye was up here in line with my left.”

She lowered her legs and crossed them delicately, trying not to grimace as she shifted her tender bottom to another position. The prince shifted as well, coming closer to sit at her side. She looked at him uneasily. He lifted a hand and pinched her nose. Hard.

“Ow! Why did you do that?” Eying him apprehensively, she held the tender lump, refusing to put her hand back down in case he did something as surprising and nasty again.

“To see if it was real,” he said without a hint of malice.

“Of course, it’s real! It’s there, isn’t it?” She lowered her hand cautiously.

“You didn’t have it before,” he pointed out, his blue eyes gazing at her intently.

“Well, I just explained that to you,” she protested.

“The colour of your eyes is the same.”

She blinked. He remembered that much? His next words confirmed the silent question.

“I remember what I was thinking, as I slowed my horse to stare at you. I was thinking that the colour of your eyes was remarkable.”

“That was all?”

“No. I also thought you were an incredibly ugly little creature and dirty to boot.”

She should have expected no less.

“And I thought that if a soul could speak its misery, then yours was doing it from your eyes. I was very sorry for you. Until my brother hit me.”

She gaped at him. “I didn’t think the nobility bothered to feel sorry for the common and lowly,” she managed to say.

“I’d just come out of the monastery,” he said, which was a surprise for her, to say the least. “I’d been taught to feel sorry for the lowly, even to pray for them.”

He had prayed for her, in fact, for months before finally forgetting. Back then, he had nearly forgotten everything of kindness the holy

brothers had taught him. That sorry hunt had been the beginning of his elder brother's life lessons.

Ugoth stood suddenly, dismissing his family troubles with a rush of movement. "Wait here," he said.

Not a problem. She didn't think her legs would work yet anyway. She watched him march over to his stallion and work his hands through one of the saddlebags. She took the quiet moment to admire his fine backside. That was certainly a nice spread of shoulders. Although he'd taken his cloak off because of the warm day, he still wore the heavy padding, chain mail and surcoat. She supposed he needed strong shoulders just to keep that armour up.

He turned away from the horse and approached with a leather case. He knelt next to her. The case was rectangular, about six inches long, four wide and three deep, kept shut with leather straps. The sides had been worked with designs that were gilded with gold. He was undoing the straps.

"What's it for?" she asked curiously.

"It's a shaving kit," he explained.

"What do you want with that?" She looked at him askance. "You don't want me to shave you?" He was mad. She'd never shaved anyone in her life.

"Have you never looked at yourself?" he said, almost angrily.

"No! Never!" She didn't like the direction that question led.

"Not in a mirror, a pond, the reflection from your cup?"

"No," she said definitely. And she wasn't about to, she decided silently.

He flipped the case open, and there, indeed, lay a mirror encased in its own frame, also gilded around the edges.

"I won't look in that," she informed him.

He glowered at her. "How is it possible not to see yourself in the reflection of even your own drinking water?"

"I stir it," she said.

She turned her face away. His hand tugged her chin back. She shut her eyes firmly. She felt something hot on her lips. Her eyes flung open in amazement. The prince was kissing her!

Suddenly, the mirror arrived in front of her face. She screamed.

Half the men in the encampment jumped up and ran toward the horses. The other half leapt to their feet, pulling swords. Fortunately, this time most of the horses hadn't bothered to look up. Perhaps they were getting used to her excesses.

The men faltered, seeing there wasn't a need to prevent the animals from bolting, nor to protect themselves from anything, in particular anything giant, green and monstrous. They stared at the prince and his witch in consternation, but he merely appeared to be holding a mirror to her face. Was he testing her in some arcane manner?

Abruptly, the witch burst into tears. Ugoth lowered the mirror. "Why are you crying?" he asked gently.

She put her hands on her face and felt her nose, knowing it for a nose for the first time. "This isn't real," she sobbed between her fingers.

"Yes, it is," he said. "It's there, isn't it?"

"This is a trick!" she wailed.

"How could it be? Who would do such a trick?" She peeked up in tears at him, and he all but howled in frustration. "Me? Why me? Why would I do that?"

"You want me to admit that I'm a witch! This is a trick to make me do it." She sniffed abysmally. Her new nose had begun to run. She rubbed her sleeve over it.

She looked absolutely adorable.

He almost grabbed and shook her, frustrated with her, but more with himself. Instead, he yelled at her. "How could this make you admit to being a witch? That's the stupidest thing I have ever heard!"

She only cried harder. Women! He shifted his legs out from under himself and sat properly. Then he pulled her over and held her while she wept.

"One would think you'd be happy over this," he said down at her head.

"It'll all disappear in the morning!" she wailed.

"From what you told me, it's been that way for at least a year."

"Doesn't matter!"

"Why the hells not?"

“Because now I know about it!” And she yowled even louder.

Oh, bother! What was he going to do with her?

The men behind him began to yell. “Your Highness! Your Highness! Watch out!”

Liudger and his men were abruptly around him, their faces pointing in the direction of the bridge they had just crossed. Beneath the arch, in the centre of the creek, the forest spirit glared at them.

“Your friend is worrying about you,” the prince announced coolly.

Hanicke lifted her head. Yes, there he was, standing in the flow and looking mightily perturbed. She got to her feet laboriously. “I’ll go talk to him,” she said.

The prince stood with her. “Yes, do that.” He turned his back on her and stalked away.

Why was he so angry all of a sudden? None of the men were hurt. Sticks hadn’t attacked anyone. The horses were all fine. She frowned at his stiff back as he marched away.

Perhaps, had she more experience with the emotions of men, especially of this man, she would have recognised this behaviour as jealousy, but even had she thought it, she would have dismissed the notion as impossible. In her mind, no one could possibly be jealous of her, especially not over the attention of a golem. Resentful, perhaps, since the monster was a truer friend than most people and also a wonderful protector and helpmate. But jealous? No.

But Hanicke didn’t understand men or Ugoth, who weighed her interest in him by her quick desire to withdraw to the monster. Shrugging away her anxiety over his inscrutable manners, she tottered over to Sticks.

It had been a horrible morning. Sticks suspected everything would only get worse. He hadn’t realised how attached he’d become to his forest abode until he’d actually started leaving it, and the enforced separation from his bush girl was making him edgy and angry at once.

Hanicke.

Her name, her real name. It still bothered him that she hadn't told him. She had always been just Maggot to him. He remembered how she'd laughed and shown him the little worms in fallen apples when they'd found a wild orchard from a settlement that had grown and disappeared ages past. Maggots, larvae, the babies of insects. He'd no notion anything was wrong with the appellation until he'd seen the prince reject it as unsuitable. A short conversation with that man, and she had blurted her actual name at once.

That man! He didn't like that man.

As he smouldered watching her, Hanicke approached the edge of the brook and bent down. She gathered water up in her palm and washed her face, then splashed her neck. Under the bridge, the air was cool. Had she been alone with Sticks, she would have stripped down and gotten in the water. Gotten her butt in, for certain. It hurt so much.

"My butt hurts," she informed him.

Serves you right for riding those things, he said.

She looked up at him inquiringly. "So, you're angry with me, too."

Is he angry with you? Is that why you cried?

"He? You mean the prince? He may be, but that wasn't why I cried." She pulled her boots and socks off, shoved her feet in the water and sighed in ecstasy. Sticks took a few giant strides toward her, splashing her legs. "Careful, you! If these breeches get wet, my legs will chafe in the saddle even more than they're already doing."

Sorry. He sat down. *You should let me carry you.*

"I thought of that," she admitted, "but your safety is more important."

What about your safety? Isn't that important, too?

"I am in no danger for the moment."

He mashed his face into you!

"That was a kiss, and it wasn't dangerous."

Then why did you cry?

"I saw my face in the mirror," she said. She couldn't believe it yet.

That's no reason to cry!

"Not any more."

Sticks didn't understand. He decided to ignore the strange answer and express what was more important to him. *I want to go back.*

"Me too," she confessed.

Then let's go!

She shook her head and leant on him. A great, vine-covered arm came out and hugged her nearer gently. She shut her eyes, listened to the ceaseless scratching of his body and smiled as the troubles nagging her mind eased.

"This must be done," she said and hoped her words were true.

"What do you make of that?" Ugoth asked.

Captains Liudger and Isidur both hesitated before responding. Within the shade of a tree some distance away, they watched the witch and the golem sitting together beneath the bridge. Isidur knew exactly what he wanted to say about it, but because he was of common birth, the right to answer fell first to Liudger, who was a highborn knight.

"It seems very devoted to her," offered Liudger.

"They are both abominations," Isidur said promptly afterward.

The prince continued studying the odd couple, as he'd been doing since the two captains had joined him. "It's doubtful," he said eventually. "The gods favour her, Isidur. If this were not so, I wouldn't hesitate to agree with you."

"She's nothing but illusions and lies," Isidur insisted.

"Most women are," Liudger pointed out mildly. Isidur glared at him for not helping his cause, to which the knight lifted a wry and unsympathetic brow.

The prince smiled without turning. "Funny, but she didn't know that she was beautiful. She still doesn't, really."

Isidur scoffed with a rude noise. Liudger frowned in disbelief.

"How is that possible?" he asked. Was that what the mirror had been about?

"She wasn't born that way," Ugoth explained.

That caught Isidur's ever wary suspicious bent. "How was she born, then?"

"She was born ugly," Ugoth said flatly.

"Then I was right!" Isidur said in triumph. "It's a spell!"

"It isn't," Ugoth denied. "It's divine will."

"It's witchcraft," Isidur disagreed.

"What do you want, man?" the prince snapped at him, turning at last. His blue eyes were cold and dangerous. "For the gods to come down here and tell you to your face? She's done everything you said she couldn't. She's ridden a horse, crossed water without turning into a snivelling wreck, survived a supplication. What more do you want?"

The man was silent. Ugoth mistook this for surrender. He averted his gaze, settling it back on the girl and the monster. His tone brooked no argument as he subsequently spoke.

"We will do as I have already decided. We will write to the church to verify her claims. If there is anything more to be done, we will know when we reach Durgven."

"We're taking her to the capitol?" Isidur said in disbelief. They weren't supposed to return for weeks. The captain made to continue protesting, but Ugoth cut him off.

"Get your men ready, Isidur. We are leaving."

"Yes, Your Highness," the man gritted out and then stalked away.

"You must be careful," Liudger ventured to say.

"Of what? Of Isidur? Or of going home?" The prince's eyes remained on the scene beneath the bridge.

Liudger shook his head disapprovingly. "No, of her. She *is* putting a spell on you."

Ugoth made light of it. "If she is, it is the usual, female kind."

Of course, they had noticed. It must be obvious to all of them, especially now that he had kissed her. It was time he put some distance between himself and the girl.

"She is something to look at," Liudger admitted cautiously. He hesitated then, uncertain if he should bluntly mention the uncanny similarity between his liege lord and the prisoner. But of course, the

prince must be aware of it. It was obvious, wasn't it? He'd shoved a mirror in her face, hadn't he?

Before Liudger dared to broach the subject, the prince began walking toward his mount. "Have one of Isidur's men go and fetch her," he called back to the knight captain.

"Yes, Your Highness," Liudger acknowledged. One of Isidur's men wasn't going to like that.

He sauntered off to relay the command and also suppressed his misgivings over the girl. Ugoth wasn't a stupid man. He had to have seen the resemblance. It was just so obvious.

But Liudger, and Isidur, had not taken into account that no man could be expected to recognise his features altered to female form, and in a woman whose height barely reached midway up to the chest of an average Ulmeniran male. The differences were sufficient to throw off the similarities, at least for Ugoth, who could not stand outside himself and look at his face and the girl's side by side. Aside from the fact that Hanicke's unusually vibrant eyes caught his attention foremost whenever he looked at her, he just wasn't vain enough that he could spot female imitations on any given stranger.

But the captains did not conceive of this logic, and while Liudger decided to assume that Ugoth was aware of the resemblance, Captain Isidur grew more convinced that His Highness had succumbed to the girl's witchcraft. Because of this, Isidur commenced to remember every bad rumour he'd ever heard about the younger prince and to harbour them as proof that the man possessed a weak nature, for no one else in the troop had surrendered to the witch's spell but him.

"Excuse me, uh...Lady Witch?"

Hanicke looked over to see a soldier standing nervously a short distance away. The golem looked over, too, and the man nearly bolted. He was brave, or perhaps afraid of the consequences for not getting on with his orders, for he stayed put.

"W- w- w- we- we're ready t- t- to get under way," he said.

"Sorry," she apologized. "I'll be right there."

He nodded, but remained where he was. "I w— wa— was told to escort you," he explained.

"All right. I'll just get my boots back on." Out of pity for him, she went about it as fast as she could.

They aren't like you, Sticks said to her.

"What do you mean?" she whispered back.

They are afraid and suspicious of everything that isn't like them, he explained.

"That's normal."

If that is so, why aren't you?

"Because I'm not like them," she answered in a roundabout.

I just said that.

She giggled. "I'll explain later."

She rose up, Sticks helping her. She touched his hand in farewell and walked toward the soldier. The man gulped volubly looking at the giant and stood frozen as Hanicke passed him.

"Aren't you coming?" she inquired.

He remembered himself and rushed after her, stumbling over rocks in his haste to get away from the monstrosity beneath the bridge. Sticks shook his head wearily and disappeared into the shadows beneath. He would follow them the moment they moved on. His lodestone was in the centre of the troop.

Chapter Seven

The prince abandoned her to her fate—which happened to be a saddle on a large gelding—for the remainder of the day's journey. He rode up ahead, surrounded by his guard, while she struggled along between men of Isidur's troop. She supposed he was bound to have lost interest in her. Once he'd gotten her functioning in the saddle, he really wasn't required to pay her any consideration. She was just a lowly prisoner, after all. But his disregard bothered her nevertheless. She had enjoyed his attention, even when they had rubbed each other wrong.

She'd have had a terrible time of it that afternoon if it weren't been for the kindness of the same soldier who had come to fetch her at the creek. Perhaps he appreciated the fact that she'd hurried to put her boots on for him, or perhaps it was because she'd been polite. Regardless, he rode beside her and offered his help the moment he thought she needed it. The first time he did so was when she started squirming in the saddle shortly after their noon break.

"What's wrong?" he asked her.

"I didn't go to the bushes before we left," she said reluctantly. The horses were trotting and the need was getting worse.

"Oh. Just a minute, then."

He handed her reins over to someone else and kicked his horse into a canter, forging up ahead to his captain. Isidur looked back at her with obvious irritation. The prince spoke to the captain, who apparently reported the urgent situation. A regal nod approved a stop, for the captain raised a hand and bellowed a halt.

The detachment rumbled to a stop. Hanicke, with much effort, threw her leg over the horse's side and slipped down with a thud. She landed on her bottom and hissed in pain. The soldier came to her aid and helped her up. She thought she could hear her bones creaking.

"You should have waited for me," he reproached her.

"That's all right. I need to learn to make do."

She wobbled over to the bushes. Once she'd gotten a short way in, the golem loomed over her. He picked her up and carried her to a more private location where she did her business. She had waited so long, it was an agony to release.

You're peeing on your boot, Sticks warned her.

"Blast!" She shifted carefully. Sticks handed her a large, clean leaf. "Thank you."

You're welcome.

It seemed to take forever before she finished.

I will carry you back, the golem said, and he did, lowering her only when they'd come close enough to glimpse soldiers through gaps in the foliage. She returned, wobbling as before. She looked over at the prince, but he faced in the other direction. The kind soldier helped her up onto her horse, and they were off again.

"My name is Ripper," he said not long after.

"Is that your real name?" she asked.

"Uh...no," he admitted. "But I'm so used to it, it feels like it."

"How did you get it?"

He hesitated.

"Is this something to do with catching witches?" she guessed.

"Yes," he confessed uncertainly.

He actually seemed ashamed to have earned his nickname. She decided that, whatever he had done, he was basically a nice man. "I'm not offended. Tell me how you got it. It'll take my mind off of my tortured bottom."

He smiled in commiseration and began his story. While he spoke, she took the opportunity to look at him more closely. He was a good-looking young man, with sandy hair, even features, a longish face and a too large hooked nose. The nose gave him a rascalion air, which didn't match his shy bearing.

"We were poking at a scroll in one of the places we'd gone to," he said. "Nothing happened at first, and we all turned our backs to check out other things. Behind us, this black, cloud thing came out of the scroll and attacked one of us. It started strangling him. His eyes were bugging out inches from his sockets, I swear!" She was fascinated and he was

beginning to puff with pride again. “We were cutting at it with our swords and slashing with all our might to no avail. Then I threw my sword at it. That did nothing, of course.”

One of the men next to them laughed. He was an older, bland looking fellow who seemed to have an easygoing nature, for he smiled openly and without a hint of suspicion or dislike in his bearing. “And that’s when he charged past the phantom, screeching like a madman, picked up the scroll and ripped it all to shreds,” this man said.

Everyone around them laughed. Hanicke laughed as well.

“It disappeared,” Ripper ended gruffly, his skin slightly flushed. “I’ve been called Ripper since.”

“Where was the witch during all this?” she said.

“Oh, we’d already drowned her,” Ripper reported carelessly; then he blushed red as a cherry.

She took pity on him. “My name is Maggot,” she said.

“That can’t be your real name either,” he said in disbelief.

“Would you like to hear how I got it?” she offered.

“Yes,” said the older fellow.

She accommodated them. “I was starving. I was in the farmyard of my aunt. They had just tossed spoiled apples into the pigpen. Some were riddled with larvae.” They looked at her in confusion. “Maggots,” she explained and went on. “I stole some of the apples and ate them anyway. My cousins caught me doing it and they all started calling me Maggot ever after.”

None of them laughed.

“Why were you starving on your aunt’s farm?” Ripper asked.

“They didn’t want me. I was an orphan. My father had left the family holdings to me, and my aunt and uncle wanted to have them.”

“So they starved you,” Ripper concluded. “I don’t think I want to call you that name.”

There were several murmurs of agreement.

“That name kept me alive,” she informed them, and they muttered in surprise.

“How so?” asked the elder soldier who had ended Ripper’s story.

“At first because it made me angry, then because it reminded me that I was strong enough to continue despite everything.”

They considered that silently. “Maggot it is, then,” said Ripper finally, “but not when we get to the village.”

The soldiers surrounding her appeared to agree with that, for they nodded one after the other.

“What do we call you when we get to the village?” Ripper inquired.

“Hanicke,” she told them shyly.

“It’s a good name,” the second man said and he smiled widely. “Can’t be a real witch, you lot. She said her name to us.”

Ripper and a few others nodded or chuckled.

Hanicke frowned at this, uncertain what the older soldier meant by it, but before she could question his assertion, and before oblique passages in the journal of Marxig Rhuger solidified in her mind, a distraction occurred. Just in front, the prince’s stallion, which had somehow dropped back down the column unnoticed, snorted loudly, tossed its head and began to prance.

The soldiers instantly became quiet. Hanicke looked over to see the prince staring at them, his eyes glinting coldly. He said not a word, but his bearing reeked menace. Then his lids seemed to shutter the anger. His head turned. They watched as the stallion cantered with its rider further ahead once more. After this, none of the soldiers appeared inclined to speak with her further.

She glared furiously at Ugoth’s straight back. He’d done that on purpose. She was sure of it. He’d come back just to shut them up. What did he have against her talking to the soldiers? She had just managed to acquire the company of a friendly escort, and His Bloody-royal-pain-in-the-ass-Highness just had to frighten them all silent. Now, she was forced to ride with all her attention on her abused bottom. He was so cruel.

After this, the troop rode on, for the most part hushed, till late that evening. Just before the sun went down, they stopped at a clearing that bore evidence of having been used as a camp often. The men quickly set up fires and saw to the horses. A few pots were brought out to the different campfires and dried meat placed in each to stew. Soldiers removed the prince’s tent from off a horse’s rump and dragged it to the location where they’d set it up, while Ugoth paced before a fire nearby, seeming to be in deep thought. Meanwhile, Ripper helped Hanicke off

her horse and led her to a log standing on end that she could use for a seat. She felt as though her thighs and buttocks were in flames and didn't want to sit.

"I'll just stand here," she mumbled in exhaustion.

Ripper looked at her closely, shook his head and went away. He came back again shortly with a small wooden container held together with leather thongs. "Liniment," he said and handed it to her. "We're putting some blankets together over there for you to hide behind."

She looked and saw that the men who had surrounded her that afternoon were indeed setting up a sort of shelter with blankets.

"Thank you," she said. Tears stung her eyes. No one had ever worried after her, not since her father had died. Well, except her beloved golem.

"Everyone is like this the first time riding," Ripper said encouragingly, "especially after a long haul. It would help if you had breeches that fit more snug." He flushed with embarrassment to have mentioned a woman's legs, even indirectly.

"Well, I don't," she said. She noticed his discomfort, but she ached too much to worry over being indecently clothed as a boy. "Maybe I can get some in the village?"

"I'll see what I can come up with before then," he promised. He led her to the shelter and left her there.

They had thought to leave a blanket on the dirt to sit upon. She sank down and began to work her breeches off her legs. She groaned in frustration. She was so stiff it hurt.

She noticed traces of blood on her breeches. Was she having her courses? At last? She'd not had them before. She'd believed herself barren, because most girls had them regularly by her age. A few months back, she'd thought she'd had one, but it had only been a spot, really. She'd said nothing to Sticks, not wanting to frighten him that she might be ill, but the blood had gone away and not returned since. But it seemed that now...

No, the pattern was wrong. She peered more closely at her inner thigh. The skin was raw. She sighed dismally. No courses. She wasn't ever to be a normal woman, it seemed, even if her face had changed for the better.

She touched a blister. Aiee! That hurt! What she would have given for her herbs back home. If not for that brute Isidur, she'd have some with her now. She hoped Ripper's liniment was as good.

"Are you well?" a voice inquired just without.

It was the prince. Blast him. This was his fault. If he hadn't insisted she come along with him, she wouldn't be lying here groaning now.

"No!" she reported angrily.

It was the wrong answer. Abruptly, the curtain was shoved aside, and the prince entered, dropping the cover behind him. He had her basket in his hand. She rushed to get her breeches up, but only hurt herself trying. She hissed in pain. He knelt and pushed her fumbling fingers aside. Only her boy's tunic covered her essential areas, and she tugged it down urgently. He had doffed his armour and wore just his tunic, leggings and boots.

"You're completely blistered down both thighs," he said, setting the basket aside. "What did Ripper give you?"

"Liniment," she said. And she'd thought he hadn't been watching. "Now go!"

He eyed her levelly. "Not till you get the help you need, which will either come from me or one of the men. I choose me."

"I can help myself," she protested.

"You can barely move. Do you have a skirt in this basket?"

"No. Why?" she said suspiciously.

"So that your legs don't rub against fabric for a time," he explained. "You'll have to wear a blanket."

"I will not."

He frowned at her in irritation. "Did no one ever inform you that one mustn't deny a prince?" he questioned dryly.

"Not that I can remember. I do remember overhearing something about denying men in general."

"It doesn't apply to me," he informed her, his expression unyielding.

Frustrated, she began to speak, but was too vexed to continue. "You are so...so...!"

"So what?" he inquired dangerously.

“Arrogant!” she cried, not heeding his warning tone. Suddenly, his mouth was over hers, and she was too stunned to do much of anything. Her lips opened of their own accord. His tongue slipped lightly in between her teeth and licked hers. She groaned in agony, or was it ecstasy? She wasn’t sure. Air rushed into her lungs as he released her.

“You irritating woman! Shut up or I will do it again.”

That wasn’t much of a threat. She almost spoke again, but he wasn’t looking at her face anymore. He yanked off her boots. The breeches came off shortly after. She gritted her teeth at the pain the brusque movements caused her. He handed her the open jar and turned his face away. She didn’t move.

“Are you going to put it on?” he prodded.

She hastened to smooth the thick, oily substance over her inner thighs. She peeked up at him, but could barely see in the growing dark. Did he look a little flushed? Was that sweat on his brow? “I’m done,” she reported.

“You’ll have to roll over and let me see to your backside,” he said.

“Uh...maybe you could just help me stand, and I’ll do it myself,” she suggested quickly.

“Fine.” He hauled her up too hastily. She let loose the jar, hissing in pain again.

“I dropped the jar,” she said after she had regained her breath.

Ugoth was much taller than the woman. The makeshift cover didn’t protect him from the regard of the men while he stood. More than a few faces looked at him with great interest. Ugoth shut his eyes momentarily in aggravation, then bent to retrieve the jar. He found it quickly, but experienced a strange dizziness prior to rising. His heart pounded with a deafening noise, seeming to be up in his ears.

The scent of her. Horse and blood and woman. He almost pulled her down with him. His cheek touched her outer thigh, and he felt her cool skin against his terribly hot flesh.

“Are you all right?” she asked as if from very far away.

“Yes,” he mumbled. If she’d been anyone else, another doxy in a village, even a whorish nobleman’s wife, he would have taken her at once, but he had to be careful with this one. He forced himself upward, schooling his face with every ounce of will he had left. He handed her the

jar. She quickly took care of her bottom and informed him when she was finished, handing him the jar. The lid was somewhere below. He wasn't certain if he could resist the temptation of a second descent.

"Ripper! Bring me another blanket," he shouted.

The soldier rushed forward and handed one over the barricade. Ugoth passed him the open jar, then wrapped the blankets snugly around the girl.

"Lift this curtain," he commanded. Ripper did so, and Ugoth came out carrying Hanicke. "Get everything and bring it to my tent," he said as he walked away.

"Your tent?" Hanicke asked anxiously.

"You will have it tonight," he informed her, and he would be just in front of it where he could watch her, but he didn't think to tell her that. His mind lingered on what he'd manage to see of her within the crude shelter. What he'd seen looked very nice indeed.

"You're very strong, aren't you," she said, her voice almost seeming distraught.

"What?" he said stupidly.

"You don't have any trouble picking me up and heaving me about, do you?"

She was babbling. He was certain of it. "No," he said. This conversation wasn't helping at all. Time to change the subject. "Why do you speak like that?" he asked.

"I was just curious," she said hastily.

"No, that's not what I meant." He bent to lower her into the tent. "Why do you speak like landed gentry?"

"I am landed gentry, or at least I used to be," she said, blinking up at him uncertainly.

"Your father was a titled man?" he asked in surprise.

"It was a very minor title. He never insisted on using it. I've forgotten what it was." She squirmed about in the blanket to get comfortable, inadvertently revealing a length of leg. He tossed one his own blankets over her. "Thank you," she said, embarrassed again.

He nodded vaguely, looking elsewhere. A cool evening breeze had developed and was doing wonders for his forehead. He settled down just

outside and gazed around the camp, apparently losing interest in her. It was almost too dark to see clearly. He wondered where the giant was.

Ripper arrived with the basket and the liniment. He'd capped the jar and tied it shut with leather straps. Ugoth nodded politely. Ripper left. Shortly after, he returned with a plate of stew and hardtack for each of them. Another soldier brought the ale. Hanicke squirmed upward into a seated position and thanked them. Ripper smiled. The prince glared at him. Both men hurried away.

"Why did you do that?" she said.

"Do what?" he replied calmly.

"Glare at them?" she said huffily.

"I did not. The shadows are playing tricks on you."

She didn't think so. She passed the plate of stew out to him but kept the hardtack. He handed over his crust. They ate in silence. When she'd thought he had no further intention to converse with her, he spoke abruptly into the dark.

"Your hair is the same colour as mine."

Odd time for him to bring that up. "It's not surprising."

"Why is that?"

"My grandmother was the mistress of your great uncle."

"King Ugoth!" he said in surprise. Was it really his namesake she referred to?

"She had a child by him, a son. My father got Ugoth's hair, straight like yours. When King Ugoth was tired of her, he married my grandmother off to one of his favourite captains and gave him land in Stoneacre County. When the captain retired after the great war, he became a farmer, and he and my grandmother raised their children there. My father inherited the land after my grandmother died."

"And that's how you became landed gentry," he said.

"Yes."

"So we're cousins. Of a sort."

She smirked in the dark at the qualified conclusion. Royalty never liked to acknowledge bastard lines. "Yes. Of a sort", she agreed.

"And the green eyes?" he inquired.

“From my grandmother. My father had them, too. But the curls skipped him and passed to me.”

So, King Ugoth had had the pleasure of her grandmother’s intimate attention. It must have been those remarkable eyes that had attracted him.

The current Ugoth thought about the revelation, but what kept returning to the fore of his mind was the sound of his name upon her lips. He had enjoyed his name coming from out of her mouth, even though she had been referring to someone else.

He had a sudden thought which dashed this rather useless rumination. “How can you be King Ugoth’s granddaughter?” he said. “A great granddaughter possibly. I could see that.”

“My father aged slowly,” he heard her say. “He never had children by his first marriage, but he loved his wife and kept her anyway. He remarried at the age of eighty-eight and fathered me.”

“I see,” Ugoth said impassively. “What happened to your father? Did he die of old age?”

“No, he drowned in the river after falling through the ice one winter,” she said softly.

Out of respect for her loss, he was silent, but continued questioning when she shifted restlessly in the gloom. “Does it bother you that your grandmother was the king’s mistress?” he asked.

“That my grandmother was a doxy? No. She was—” She stopped cold. She couldn’t tell him that. She didn’t dare.

“She was what?”

Still alive but pretending to be servant of no relation up until Hanicke was twelve. Her father’s longevity seemed to have been acquired from her grandmother. “She was something of a heroine to me,” Hanicke answered. “Yes, she was a whore, but she was a brave, adventurous and warm-hearted woman. I hope that I take after her.”

He hadn’t expected her to name her grandmother’s position with such indelicate terminology, but there was no getting around the fact, really. She was just being wise. “Your father must have had many interesting stories to tell about her.”

“Uh...yes,” she mumbled.

She was squirming around again. He could just barely see her doing so in the firelight. "What is it?" he said.

"I need to visit the bushes again."

"Oh."

He set his empty plate on the ground and bent inward to get her. Pulling the extra blanket aside, he wrapped the other more firmly and lifted her out. The men had placed a log over a pit on the far side of the encampment. He decided not to take her there. More than likely, she'd just fall in. He headed in the other direction.

Several of his personal guard got up as he walked out of their circle of firelight. Some followed. Others forged on ahead.

"Are you all going to stand around and watch?" Hanicke said dryly.

"Don't encourage them," he reproved.

"That wasn't what I meant," she gritted out. Frustrating, highhanded oaf!

It was dark around the camp, but enough light remained to make out the men seated or lying near each fire. Ugoth avoided them. As he approached the further side of their encampment, he detected members of the first watch standing just at the edge of the firelight. He had taken a few steps further out when a large shadow diverged from the perimeter and towered over them. The prince and his guard stopped, alarm growing in the guts of each like a pressure that would burst them asunder.

"He'll take me the rest of the way," the woman informed Ugoth.

As usual, he contained his turmoil to the point where it could barely be discerned. "Very well," he said mildly.

He passed the frozen men to the fore and proffered the girl to the giant, who took her in turn and slid into the dark beyond. Ugoth waited. Several minutes passed, during which his men looked at each other uncertainly, silently questioning the wisdom of waiting there. Ugoth merely stood still and contemplated the memory of the scratchy noises the giant constantly emitted. Presently, the creature returned with Hanicke, lowered her into his waiting arms and disappeared again. Ugoth turned about and made his way back to the tent. As he laid her within, she asked him a question.

"Why are you the only one with a tent?"

“This was meant to be a quick foray out to your location. We left the larger equipment and the majority of supplies back at the village.” He tucked the second blanket about her and prepared to withdraw.

“Why didn’t you leave your tent as well, then?”

He paused at the mouth of the shelter, a shadow hovering over her. “I suppose because of my station,” he said. “I didn’t ask them to bring one.”

“So if it had been left to you, you wouldn’t have bothered bringing it?”

“No,” he admitted.

“I thought princes would be inclined to enjoy all the comforts of their station,” she said.

He snorted. “They do. And there are a lot of perfectly perfumed asses that grow fat, lazy and useless, too.”

She giggled. “There’s an image.”

He smiled, but she couldn’t see it, what with his back to the fire. But he could see her in the flickering light and wanted badly to pull that twig out of her hair. She was too damned adorable for continued good sense on his part. “Go to sleep,” he commanded roughly.

“Yes, Your Highness,” she acquiesced.

Was she mocking him? He decided to ignore the possibility and withdrew. He tended to his own needs at the privy and returned. He found extra blankets lying next to the tent. Ripper had undone the temporary shelter and passed the covers on to him while he had been gone. Looking in on the girl, Ugoth found her undisturbed and apparently asleep. He took his boots off and set them just a few feet from the fire to keep them dry, then rolled himself up in the blankets and tried to sleep as well.

It took him a while. He stared at the stars and wondered at his reaction to the girl. He couldn’t believe what an idiot he was being, near fainting from the smell of her, some muscles weak, some shaking with the need to move, to lunge, to crush. To own.

Ah, gods. He forced his mind onto a place of safety and calm, onto the monastery where holy brothers had raised him, onto tranquil, amiable Abbot Gaved who was like a father to him, and onto Herfod.

Herfod. Ugoth smiled sleepily. Herfod would kick him upside the head with his old clogs for being such an idiot, or for dithering about what he wanted.

“Trust your guts, boy,” he always said. “You have better guts than you think.”

Well, his guts were tied in a knot at the moment, but he thought he could sleep now despite them. With a soft sigh, he loosed consciousness and collapsed into dormancy, his morale bolstered by the pithy advice of a beloved, elderly monk.

It was very late the next morning before the troop got under way. Isidur liked to think it was the witch’s fault, naturally, but it was really Ugoth’s. The Prince awakened early, before the first light of the sun hinted on the horizon. He roused Isidur abruptly, demanding the man bring him the leather journal. Isidur blinked up in the dark, coming out of a nice dream sharply and disappointingly. The prince didn’t wait for an acknowledgement, merely stalked away with his usual supreme confidence that his will would be done.

Isidur found him shortly thereafter, shaving by the pale light of the morning. He handed the book over with due warning as to the dangers of it, but received little hint that the prince cared the least. The nobleman waved him off and continued with his overdue shave. Breakfast was passed around, the same meal as the night before except it was a bigger serving and dried fruit and pepper had been added to the stew, making it taste sweet and spicy.

The prince passed the second plate back to Ripper, ordering dried fruit and hardtack only. When the soldier returned, Ugoth left Hanicke’s share next to the faintly smoking campfire to keep the flies off it, but made no effort to awaken her. Instead, he pored over the journal with exceeding interest, ignoring everything going on around him.

Men cleaned themselves up in a nearby stream. Blankets were shaken and rolled up. Horses were saddled. In due course, all that remained to be done was put down the prince’s tent. Isidur attempted to get things under way and approached the prince a second time.

“Prince Ugoth?” he said.

“Hmmm?” Ugoth murmured without looking up.

“We are ready to get under way,” the captain reported. “We should awaken the woman and get the tent down.”

“Later,” the prince said firmly.

Disconcerted, Isidur stared down at the seated man. Eventually, as the prince continued to ignore him, he went away.

The men stood about wondering, but after a bit, one of the more seasoned fellows decided to take the opportunity to shine up his saddle. Soon after, all of them were seated about the encampment, with their saddles, their boots, their armour or their weapons, seeing to repairs, shine, or sharpness. They spoke amongst themselves quietly. Ugoth read on, unheeding.

Hanicke at last awakened. She felt stiff, but not unduly sore. She found the tent flap had been lowered, the encampment cut off from view. It was very bright outside. Obviously, the sun had risen long ago. She wondered why no one had awakened her. She heard the speech of men nearby, but it was all low and indistinct.

Her breeches had been set down beside her. They were folded with her boots next to them. The belt was on top of the boots and the white feather lay beneath the belt. On top of the breeches was the jar of liniment.

She had been given her orders clearly, and so set about spreading the medicated grease over her injuries again. She pulled her breeches on, repressing any groans the motion elicited. Presently, she was able to crawl out from beneath the tent flap to see what was happening in the camp.

The men were busy with various pieces of their gear, and just without the tent, the prince sat before the dead campfire, reading. She recognised the journal at once. She said nothing. Instead, she stood carefully, making an effort to keep her groans of protest contained. The prince didn't look up, to all appearances completely absorbed in his quiet activity. She hesitated to call attention to herself. She decided it best to get on with her business. The troop was obviously waiting for her. It was somewhat embarrassing.

She tottered over to the bushes. No one tried to stop her, but a few hands rose in acknowledgement of her presence. These gestures came from the men who had been friendly the day before. She nodded politely and continued on. Sticks met her not far inside the sheltering leaves.

You slept a long time, he greeted her.

“I was very tired. I don’t understand why they didn’t wake me.”

He wouldn’t let them, the golem said. He meant the prince. Sticks almost always clicked the pronoun referring to Ugoth with an angry emphasis.

She ignored his veiled disapprobation. “I feel a little better,” she said.

You won’t again, not if you get back on that beast.

She sighed. “I’ll get used to it. Eventually.”

Perhaps.

She finished what she came there for and prepared to return, refusing to be carried. She wanted to walk some of the stiffness out of her legs. Sticks paced alongside slowly. They didn’t speak. She pressed her hand on his just before she re-entered the encampment, looking up at him reassuringly. He touched her head with his other hand and then turned away. He had looked so distressfully sad.

“I have been missing you!” she called to his retreating back. He half turned to her.

And I you, he said.

He passed from view. Tears smarted her eyes. She blinked them back.

“I love you,” she said to the air. She faced around and went back to the prince.

Ugoth knew exactly when she awakened. The tent wasn’t far from his log seat. He heard her shifting about as she dressed. He ignored her when she emerged from the shelter. He wondered what she would say about his reading the journal, but she stood silently for a short while, then left. He turned to see where she was off to, but did no more than that. He was reading the book again when she returned.

Hanicke stood behind him uncertainly for a moment, then spotted the uneaten plate of fruit and hardtack and knew it was for her. She sat down gingerly on the ground and began eating. After she’d given up on the prince noticing her, he spoke.

“There is a page in this journal describing the creation of a monster called a golem,” he said. “It can be created from virtually anything; stones, mud, leaves, sticks.”

“I read that a number of times myself,” she admitted.

“You told me that *thing* was a forest spirit,” he accused.

“He *is* a forest spirit, so to speak.” She put her plate down. The fruit was sticking in her throat suddenly, because he was intimating that she’d lied. She sipped some ale, thinking carefully, wondering what to say to him. She didn’t look at him.

“It states here that golems are made things,” he said sharply.

“It’s true he was made,” she replied, “but the book clearly states that a true golem is a soulless hulk, requiring a lot of continuous maintenance to keep it functioning and needing constant and clear commands to keep it working at any task. Sticks thinks by himself. He has a soul.”

“A soul?”

She nodded, still gazing at the dirt.

“Look at me!” he commanded.

She did. He’d shaved. He was almost pretty now, but that very masculine way he had of glaring at her with his vivid blue eyes tore that brief impression asunder.

“How can a made thing have a soul?” he said.

“I’m not sure, but this one does. It could have come from the forest, for all I know. He’s made of it, after all.”

That was true enough. He puzzled the possibility out. What sort of soul would take the body of such a creature? He wasn’t sure he liked the probable answers to that. One of the first that came to mind was a demon’s.

Hanicke watched him guardedly as he thought. He looked much younger with his beard shaved off. She wondered how old he actually was. She couldn’t recall the birthdays of the royal princes. She remembered that the eldest was ten years older than the youngest.

Ugoth put his attention back on her. She regarded him from beneath a messy cloud of honey hair. She’d forgotten to comb it. He thought about reminding her, then decided not to bother. Her hair would just get messy again while she rode.

“This man, Rhuger, was a complete idiot,” he said, changing the subject. He shut the book and traced with a finger the indented name of the journal’s first owner.

“I have thought the same,” she agreed.

“What sort of fool wanders about alone, interviewing witches to write down their deeds for posterity?”

“I think he hoped to shed light on the way magic is conducted,” she offered.

“He was an idiot,” he repeated. “What do you think happened to him?”

“I have an idea, but if you give the book to me, I will show you the page and let you make your own conclusions.”

He canted his head slightly, considering her offer. Then he handed over the journal without a word.

Nearby in the camp, Isidur stood in alarm and rushed forward with his sword drawn. Ugoth saw him coming and rose, barking an order at him.

“Stay where you are, Captain!”

“But Highness! She—!”

“She is showing me a page,” the prince snapped. “Put your sword away before you bring the wrath of her protector down on us.”

Isidur looked beyond to the trees. The golem was ten feet within the clearing, ready to rush what was, for him, only a very short distance to the girl. Isidur blanched, backed up and sheathed his sword. The golem, glaring menacingly, retreated from sight. The prince sat back down. Hanicke handed him the journal. Isidur returned to his place, disconcerted.

“Was he there?” Ugoth asked, referring to the golem. He hadn’t let himself look. Dignity was always paramount. Perhaps it was pride, really. Or was it just cussed stubborn refusal to show that the great hulk frightened him? All told, he’d rather take on a troll. They were slow compared to the golem.

“Yes,” Hanicke answered.

“So I thought,” he said. He looked down at the book. She’d opened it to a page he hadn’t come to yet. It appeared to be Marxig Rhuger’s last

entry, because after that, odd, meaningless scribbles filled the page. The entry was dated over seventy years ago. He read it carefully.

I am very excited. I have found a new one. She is perhaps the most hideous of all that I have encountered. She was surprised to see me and even more so when I told her what I wanted. I at first thought she might attack me, but my mission to record the doings of these creatures caught her interest. She told me she would let me live. I set up camp by the forest edge. It is the closest I dare come to her hovel, which stinks like the worst cesspit I have ever visited.

I really must repeat how vile she is. She is a scabrous, odoriferous, repulsive monstrosity of a woman. She has a nose that could be described as a diseased beak, a chin that sports enough hair to shame a young man, and greasy locks that mat her skull where the hair isn't missing altogether. There is possibly every unnameable sort of dirt in every crevice of her skin that I can see. She appears to be very old. When asked her age, she insisted that she'd been born five times as many years as I looked to be of age, and I am a mature forty-seven!

She asked to see my journal earlier. I let her, of course, seeing no reason to risk her wrath. She seemed very interested in it, but I don't think she is literate. She complained that I hadn't drawn enough pictures. I explained that the drawings were only a quick way for me to find the spells I had witnessed performed. She merely grumbled and trudged off.

I am hoping that tomorrow she will open up and show me some of her skill. She promises to be the most interesting of all the subjects I have discovered so far.

The entry ended. Ugoth followed the meaningless scribbles down to the end of the page. At the bottom, the scribbles turned into a scratchy drawing of what appeared to be a human skull and bones. Next to them, there was a pot with a fire below it and more bones inside. Next to that was a stick figure of a woman seated at a table. Above the skirt protruded an exaggerated round belly. The head was drawn with wild hair all over it. The figure had a big smile in the middle of the face.

Ugoth stared at the stick figure a few minutes. Then he turned the page. He found nothing but drawings, some which basically matched earlier ones in the book, some that were different. Writing of any kind was missing. He turned the next page and found a similar symbolic ingredient list. He checked page after page thereafter, only to see more drawings. The only real change was that they were all drawn better on each consecutive page. He shut the journal with a thud.

“Why do you suppose she scribbled on the remainder of the page after his last entry?” he asked Hanicke. This made her smile. He blinked, wondering what she found amusing about his question. “Why are you smiling?”

“You’re very observant,” she said. “Most everyone else would have been commenting on the awful little drawings at the bottom.”

“Does that mean I caught onto something important?”

“I think so.”

“Oh,” he said, then raised his brow as a reminder that he’d asked for an opinion from her. “And?”

“I think she scribbled because she was trying to learn to write by just doing it,” she said. “But she gave up and made her happy drawing instead.”

He frowned. “If she had persisted, could she have done it?”

“It’s possible,” Hanicke replied, but then hesitated.

He knew instantly she had left something unsaid. “And why is that important to you?” he pressed.

“It isn’t,” she denied, then shook her head. “It is, but not...”

She was at a loss for words suddenly. She looked at the dead campfire, frowning. He remained quiet and waited. Presently, she began again.

“I’ve read that journal over and over,” she said. “Rhuger stated that witches forced their will onto the objects they worked with. I don’t think he really appreciated fully what he witnessed.”

“And what do you think he witnessed?” He watched her as she concentrated on the cold cinders. There was something about her eyes, a strange light that seemed to flicker on the edge of actually existing. His own narrowed in fascination.

“With her will,” she continued, “and using ingredients containing some innate power, or at least holding sufficient meaning, a witch could call up the elements themselves. A witch could almost learn to do anything, given time, create any spell she wanted to. She never had to be taught.”

“That’s it? A cauldron full of special ingredients, a strong will and persistence?”

“That’s about it,” she agreed softly.

But it was more. It was the nonsensical scribbling that had led to the eventual healing of Sticks. Hanicke had read and reread about the forcing of nature to witch-kind’s will, but this fundamental had not really struck her profoundly until she’d stared at the scribbling and realized what the old witch had intended. It had been will alone at work on that page. Hanicke had traced the scratching and felt it, faint and terrible. There hadn’t been any ingredients involved, no cauldron boiling with a foul potion. There had just been the witch, the book, a quill, and her will.

It had been fortunate for the kingdom, and perhaps the world, that the hag had given up the attempt to understand the writings of Marxig Rhuger. The histories of the many witches committed to those pages told a story of awesome potential. Hanicke doubted Rhuger had noticed the truth of it, so enamoured was he of his bold mission. Detailed in that journal was the fact the each spell caster tended to concentrate her energy along a certain avenue, often remaining blind to the potential of other processes that could make of her a more formidable witch. If the old witch had come to understand that these different methods could be combined, rather than concentrated on explicitly, and that the control of magic fundamentally involved only one’s personal will, there would have arisen a creature of horrendous power.

Hanicke suspected the old witch had already discovered some of the truth on her own. Walking through the hag’s territory, she had seen damage done to many of the once-living trees within the domain. Touching them, she had felt the shadow of that old power. Shut the eyes and concentrate, there came images—here spit, there urine, this place cursed by foul words. Again, there had been no potions, just willpower.

“It’s just as well she gave up,” she ended. She turned away from the campfire. “There are spells described in that book that are horrific, and hints of more that a literate witch could have made use of. Rhuger *was* an idiot.”

Ugoth appeared to accept that, for he stood and stretched. “It’s time we left,” he said.

He put the book down and picked up his sword belt, which had been on the ground near him, and buckled this on while Hanicke looked at the book unhappily. The prince fetched the book up and walked away toward his horse. She watched him pack it into one of his bags.

I am an idiot, she thought. I should have burned that book long ago.

She worried over it, but then shrugged mentally. She couldn't second-guess herself. The past was over, and if the old witch had managed to learn some of the truth to magic, so too must others have done. The journal couldn't possibly be the only book on magic to exist, and certainly there must have been innumerable witches in all the history of their world, and not all of them illiterate.

Behind her, men approached the tent to take it down. Hanicke came back to her present circumstances and looked about. The soldiers had risen and begun making ready for the imminent departure. She stood, her gaze panning back to the cold campfire. A glint caught her eye. A tiny ember burned in ashes that had been cold earlier. It glowed an exceedingly unnatural blue.

Casually, hoping not to attract any attention, she scuffed some dirt over the ember. A wisp of pale smoke hissed out from the spot and dissipated. She shut her eyes in relief. Silly idiot! She had to be more careful.

Lifting her lids, she spied Ripper arriving with their horses, the reins of both in one hand. In the other, he appeared to be carrying large leather scraps.

"Good morning," she called.

He smiled shyly. "I made something for you," he said.

"What is it?" she asked in surprise.

He showed her the scraps. Along with them, he had several thin cords of leather that appeared to have been cut from the same larger piece. "This will keep you from getting worse today."

She was intrigued and hopeful that this next, dreaded day of riding would not be so awful after all. "How will they do that?" she asked.

He dropped the reins, letting them drag on the ground. The horses were trained to wait when this was done. He took one of the two rectangular pieces and wrapped one around his inner thigh. There were holes punctured evenly along both outer edges.

"See?" he said. "We'll tie these on snug, and then you won't get rubbed raw."

"That's brilliant!" She was delighted. Her legs were saved!

Ripper flushed red. "No, really. It just made sense, sort of." He handed her the first of them and knelt down to help her with the lacing.

She held the rectangle in place as he started to fasten the ends together. A cool voice interrupted their progress.

“What do you think you are doing, Ripper?”

Ripper jumped to attention, his face going pale. Ugoth, astride his stallion, glared down at them both, his blue eyes deathly cold.

“Highness! I was endeavouring to protect the young miss from further injury!” Ripper blurted, face forward and not daring to look up at the prince.

Ugoth leant forward slightly to inspect the large straps. “Whose breeches did you sacrifice for that?”

“My spare ones, Highness! They were new!”

The prince’s gaze narrowed dangerously. “I’ll see that you are reimbursed,” he said icily. “Now, take your horse and leave.” He inclined his head toward Hanicke. “And you. Get those strapped on by yourself.”

Ripper picked up his reins and rushed ahead with his mount. Hanicke watched him go, her lips pressed together angrily. Without looking at the prince, she bent and finished tying the first rectangle on. She started on the second one. The prince spoke again, this time quietly.

“Hanicke.”

At the sound of her given name, she looked up at him. She could see from the coldness of his expression that he was furious. She almost shivered. As it was, the skin all the way up her back prickled.

He held his temper in like it was a beast trained to the leash, starving it of its only craving, release. She knew of a sudden, very clearly understood that he would drop that leash when and where he wanted it dropped. Then the beast would fly and it would kill.

“You will not allow any of the men to touch you in such a personal manner again,” he said softly.

“He only meant to help,” she dared to protest. His expression nearly froze in thin-lipped wrath. She thought his eyes might just burst into flame like the eerie ember in the campfire.

“He may have meant it so, but it breeds familiarity. Men forget help and think of other things after a time. You will not permit such familiarity again,” he insisted.

“And does this command apply to you as well?” she snapped.

Anger flared all the brighter in his eyes. "No!" he said.

He jerked his horse around and set it prancing over to the front of the waiting troop. A clod of dirt hit her in the leg. This was the first time she'd seen him use the reins on that stallion of his. It said something of how angry she had made him. She wondered how he directed that great bay beast the rest of the time.

The answer came to her mind quickly. With his legs, of course. Suddenly, she felt a little hot in her middle. Such legs.

My legs! Wrap my legs!

She commenced with the second rectangle, concentrating furiously, but her anger wouldn't rest. Who did he think he was, the autocratic, arrogant bull!

Idiot, she told herself. He thinks he is a prince of the realm, of course, and he is. And he really did have very fine legs.

She gave herself a mental slap to get her mind back into order, finished her task and straightened up. The rectangles felt snug enough. She'd pulled her breeches as far over to her outer thighs as she could, to ensure that not a single crease on the inner thighs hurt her over the day. She looked at the horse Ripper had left for her. Her basket had already been tied down behind the saddle. Uneasily, she perused the stirrup. Now that it had been strapped up to suit her stature, it was higher from the ground than before. How was she going to get astride?

She peered about uncertainly. Other than for the captains Liudger and Isidur, the men of the troop looked anywhere but at her. Her lips thinned in irritation. Ugoth had frightened them all silly with his royal wrath. She glanced at him, to find him eyeing her with a challenging air. He said nothing, and his horse remained motionless.

So. She was to find her own way through this, was she? Fine.

She looked around more carefully. A number of stumps and logs lay about the encampment. Some appeared tall and steady enough to give her the necessary height to mount on her own. She took up the reins and pulled the gelding over to the nearest likely stump. She climbed onto the crude mounting block, put her foot in the stirrup, grabbed the pommel, and prepared to heave over.

The horse moved.

She hung on for dear life, then gave up. She did not make the mistake of catching her heel in the stirrup, but clung onto the pommel and jerked

her foot out. She landed safely on the ground. The gelding insulted her with another of its smiles, opening its mouth to bare big yellow teeth at her.

“So, you like to play tricks,” she said to it. “Fine. I can play tricks, too.”

She led it back to the same stump and stepped back on. The horse snorted and flicked its tail, as if to tell her it couldn’t wait for her to make her pitiful attempt again. Very good. Here she went. She put her foot in the stirrup and made a motion as if she was about to mount. The moment the horse started to move, she jerked its reins back roughly. Surprised, the gelding found itself looking one-eyed into a stern green glare.

“Be good!” she snapped at it, loading a mass of intention into her words. Its visible eye widened in apprehension, after which Hanicke permitted the warned horse to turn its head back to the front. Once again, she put her foot in the stirrup. She heaved herself up. This time she mounted, because the horse did not move. Successful, she gave it a pat. It looked back at her uncertainly.

“Go over there,” she bade it, waving vaguely toward the troop. The gelding began walking. Every face in the troop was now turned toward her, but the moment she looked up, every set of eyes, except those of the prince and the two captains, shifted away again. The gelding halted on its own in front of Ripper. Ripper refused to look directly at her.

Ugoth, his temper not entirely soothed, kicked his steed down the column, snatched the reins out of her hands and jerked the gelding into a trot behind him. Hanicke repressed a smirk. Perhaps that terrible beast he kept locked inside was getting a bit of exercise today. Perhaps airing it out would do him some good. Now that she had nothing to do but hang on, she let herself look at those fine legs of his without slapping her mind back to order.

Ugoth’s personal guard gathered in formation around them as the troop got underway. To one side of His Highness, Captain Liudger rode, while Isidur chose to take up a position to the side and front of Hanicke. He glared at her as he passed. She glared back. Some of the regular soldiers set their horses galloping and thundered onward to a position at the fore. Once all these precautionary measures for the prince’s safety were taken, they settled into a trot and continued in the direction of the village.

They hadn't proceeded very far when Isidur turned to the prince and spoke. "May I ask her questions, Your Highness?" he inquired.

The set of his face suggested he was eager for permission. Ugoth considered the request, then nodded. He didn't look at Hanicke.

"What did you mean when you said you were sent to help the forest spirit?" Isidur all but barked at her.

So, it was to be an inquisition. "I already answered that. The same God that gave me the token sent me," she said.

"Why? Why did this great *thing* need help?"

"He was in trouble. The old witch had poisoned him with evil and sent him to do harm. It was breaking him inside."

Ugoth slowed his horse until he matched her position and could watch her expression better. Despite his fury over her easy conduct with the men, he wanted to know the answer to this particular riddle. He'd meant to ask her himself, in any case.

"You say he was sent to do harm. What harm?" interrogated Isidur.

"She sent him to the village to kidnap a baby," Hanicke said reluctantly, "but I stopped him. The baby wasn't harmed!"

"I remember that," Liudger exclaimed. "The villagers said devils tried to steal a baby."

"It still may have been," Isidur said in irritation. "She consorts with pigs of unholy intelligence. She may be the head devil herself."

"My pigs are not unholy!" Hanicke burst out. "They are very nice pigs."

Isidur made to argue the point, but Ugoth decided the inquiry needed redirection. "What did the old witch want with a baby?" he said with extra sharpness, intending to cut off Isidur.

"Oh!" Hanicke jumped in her saddle, startled. She'd set herself to verbally fending off Isidur, not the prince. His sudden interjection knocked some of the stuffing out of her outrage. "I think she was after ingredients for a potion of youth," she said honestly.

Isidur, and the others nearby who were eavesdropping, looked horrified. Ugoth merely nodded. "And how did she poison the golem?"

"Golem! Golem! Is that thing a golem?" Isidur blurted.

"No," said Hanicke.

“Yes,” said Ugoth. He looked at Hanicke’s stricken face and relented somewhat. “But it appears to be functioning with its own soul.”

“Soul! No witch’s filthy creation has a soul!” shouted Isidur.

“Are you remonstrating with me, Captain?” Ugoth said, most icily calm.

Isidur collected himself with a start. “No, Highness! I apologise for my inappropriate tone.”

“Very well, Captain, but do not forget yourself again.” He turned back to Hanicke. “In what way was the golem poisoned?” he repeated.

“I don’t think she put him together right,” she said. “I think she found the instructions in the journal, but she didn’t understand or didn’t care to follow them properly. She put a death’s-head toadstool in him.”

“I’ve never seen one of those,” Ugoth said.

“If you ever do, you’ll wish you never had.”

“They are very poisonous?”

“They are very evil. You could touch one and die of it.”

“Yet you removed the one that was in the golem?” he said.

“Not really, no.”

“Then how did you save him from it?”

She hesitated, and that always meant she had something she didn’t want to tell.

“A bird plucked it out of him,” she said presently. She refused to look at him. This also meant she was hiding something.

“Why would a bird do that?” he asked.

“It was trying to get a worm. The worm was wrapped around the toadstool, and the toadstool was in Sticks.”

A protracted silence ensued as he took in those unlikely events. “Wasn’t that a fortunate set of coincidences?” he remarked after a bit. Like the gods didn’t shit thunder! “What happened to the bird?”

“It died.”

He pondered this and the fact that she had hidden something. He remembered their conversation at noon yesterday and decided to pull a thread on it. “You told me yesterday that you had been injured from the attack. You mentioned poison. Did the golem attack you? Did he put

some of this toadstool toxin on you?”

“No,” she said, apparently relieved, because the stiffness suddenly went out of her.

His lips twitched in irritation. He was completely off target, then.

Her next words stunned him. Hanicke had only been reluctant to say that Sticks had almost strangled her. She preferred not to mention that awful incident. Ugoth had given her an out when he had mentioned yesterday’s conversation, and she took it.

“I meant blood poisoning. The old witch attacked me,” she said.

The prince’s stallion suddenly lifted its forelegs into the air and neighed. Hanicke blinked in surprise, wondering what had set the beast off, but it had been Ugoth’s surprise, for he’d given it an inadvertent signal. The entire troop pulled to a stop as he jerked both his mount and hers to a standstill. Their horses rubbed flanks and his leg touched hers.

“You were attacked by the old witch? She wasn’t dead before you found the hovel?”

Hanicke gaped at him. He seemed oddly upset with her. “Well, what was the use of a youth potion for a dead witch? Of course she was still alive,” she said.

“If you had saved the golem from the witch’s poison and stopped him from stealing a baby in the village, was it really necessary to go visit the witch herself and get attacked?”

“I didn’t save him from the poison. That was the bird,” she reminded stubbornly.

“Answer the question!” he roared.

The horses pranced in anxiety. If they bolted this time, it would be his fault, Hanicke decided, but she didn’t have the temerity to tell him so. She answered meekly. “I was following the pigs. They led the way. They led the way from the beginning. After Sticks was freed, they led the way to the witch’s hovel.”

“And you don’t call them demon spawn!” he said harshly. “What the hells was your protector thinking, letting you run off like a goat for sacrifice? I would have gutted those swine.”

“Well, then he’s a lot nicer than you,” she said unwisely.

He hissed in outrage. There, in front of the entire troop, he grabbed her, and with one hand at the back of her neck, dragged her face up to

his. He kissed her brutally, then released her abruptly, perhaps belatedly remembering the need for self-control.

“It was that or snap your neck,” he growled at her, his skin pink.

She gazed back at him, fingers on her bruised lips. She thought she might fall off the gelding. Yet another time, she permitted her mouth to speak before her mind could censor the words. “Kissing was immensely more preferable.”

But the prince wasn’t paying attention to her. His gaze was on the roadside. The golem stood there, glaring at him. The soldiers toward that side edged their prancing horses away. Hanicke twisted about to look. She saw Sticks’ forbidding expression and shook her head at him. He refused the silent plea and clicked a curt command at her. Swallowing anxiety, she looked toward the prince.

“He wants me to go with him.” She knew, by the tenseness of his expression, that Ugoth would refuse. “He will not relent,” she added. “I must go to him. We can keep up with the horses from within the forest.”

He didn’t doubt that they could. He had been a fool. The golem was exercising his right as her protector, and judging by the angry intent on his inhuman face, he would, indeed, not relent. “Go, but return to us at noon,” Ugoth said.

Hanicke slid off the gelding and slipped between the horses to her guardian. The golem immediately picked her up in one giant arm and carried her off into the woods. Swiftly, they both disappeared. His face set, Ugoth jerked his stallion about and kicked it into a trot. The men around him followed suit. They were wiser than Hanicke and kept their mouths shut, riding in complete, tense silence.

I don’t want you to travel with him anymore, Sticks clicked at her. He strode between the trees, ducking the higher branches, but swiping at the lowers ones that weren’t prepared to move aside. The branches broke.

“You’re hurting the trees,” she reproved.

He kissed you again! Another branch broke. He kissed you in anger!

“It was my fault. He’s not accustomed to being spoken back to.”

Have you no right to speak! Who is he to treat you so?

She sighed heavily. "He's a prince, Sticks. No one speaks to a prince like I do, not unless they are equal or higher than him in rank, and even then, his equals may be wiser than me and not speak so at all."

Then why do you provoke him?

Sticks approached a branch. This time he merely bent it gently away. She found this encouraging.

"I don't know why, really." She shifted in his clasp until she rested more comfortably, keeping her arm around his large neck. Sticks could carry her like this for hours if he wanted, days even. "He irritates me," she offered eventually.

He irritates you in an odd way, then, the giant clicked, suddenly angry again. Another branch snapped off a tree. You enjoy it when he kisses you. I think you provoke him so that he will.

Her mouth opened to protest, but shut again just as quickly. He may have a very valid point there.

I am right! the golem insisted, knowing her silence for what it was, an argument conceded. *I don't like that man!*

"You don't like him because you think he will take me away from you forever," she flung back.

It was his turn for silence. She knew it for what it meant as well.

"Stop a moment, Sticks," she requested.

He halted, looking at her unhappily.

"This journey is meant only to ensure that we can be together safely," she explained once again. "Your needs will always take precedence with me."

His face, which had looked hopeful, dropped into disappointment. *Only because the gods told you to look after me. I am just a duty.*

She shook her head in exasperation. "No! I love you."

His expression altered into one of astonishment, then reluctant happiness.

"I love you," she repeated firmly. "Whatever reason brought me to you, you have been my one and only true friend. I trust you. I am certain of you. I wouldn't trade that trust or affection for anything."

Not even the prince's kisses?

She sighed again, this time unhappily. "Not if it came down to a

choice between you,” she said. She looked at him questioningly. “You aren’t going to make me choose, are you? It’s not as if what he does with me really means anything, after all.”

What do you mean?

“He’s a prince,” she repeated again. “He probably has some proper little princess tucked away in some perfect little castle having his proper little children. Whatever his attraction for me, it can’t be permanent. I am nothing but a troublesome commoner who happens to have caught his interest for the moment.”

If he has his own woman already, he shouldn’t be kissing you! the golem said.

She smirked at him. “Men do this sort of thing all the time. That’s why they run around terrorizing women. They just want to keep us intimidated so they can play more than one fiddle without letting us women think we can do it, too. I don’t think its working out exactly as men planned.”

Sticks stared at her in incomprehension. Play more than one fiddle?

Humans are very odd, he clicked. He began walking again. He was more careful with the branches in their path. *I don’t think he should be allowed to kiss you in any case, whatever he or other men think. He’s an angry man. I want you to tell him he isn’t to touch you again.*

“It won’t be as easy as that,” she said.

Because you want him to keep kissing you?

“No, because he’s a prince!”

That again! What exactly did that mean? He repeated the question out loud.

“It means that he takes what he wants and no one dares to disagree.”

What gives him such a right?

“Because he was born a king’s son, and the king rules the realm,” she explained patiently.

Then someone should tell the king to make him stop.

“Who’s to say the king wouldn’t do exactly the same thing?”

The golem pondered that. *No one has the right to refuse them anything?*

“Well, it’s a bit more complicated than that, but when it comes to this particular sort of thing, especially with women of no real rank, then it is ignored and allowed to happen.”

What might happen if such a woman said no?

She shrugged uncertainly. "I'm not sure. It would depend on who she refused, but it would probably be unpleasant for all concerned, including her family."

I am your family, he clicked firmly. *If you decide to say no, they will have to deal with me. I dare to disagree.*

Hanicke smiled and hugged him. "See! I told you that we were meant to be together."

No, you didn't! He clicked a laugh at her. *I said that.*

"Still, I want you to be careful about disagreeing," she said. "Let me handle it for now."

Very well, he relented, *but you will warn him that I will tolerate no further acts taken out on you in anger. And you must try not to provoke him anymore.*

She had to be satisfied with that. She knew him well. She could bend his will like the vines from which he was made, but she couldn't break it. She would never try to break it. She nodded and rested her head on his leafy shoulder. He continued to carry her in silence. Presently, she drifted off to sleep.

Sticks didn't mind. She was here with him. That was all that mattered. She was his.

Although they hadn't travelled far that day, when noon came, the prince ordered a halt. The agreed upon time had arrived. The creature must bring her back. Ugoth was tense in his saddle. His back ached with it. He'd travelled in a black silence the remainder of the morning. It had been a silence no one had dared to broach.

The troop dismounted. Soldiers passed out the noon meal. Others saw to the horses. Ugoth ignored all this normal activity. He sat his horse, motionless, while his personal guards looked about at each other, questioning mutely. Sir Liudger, their senior, remained astride without comment. The others perforce remained mounted as well.

The regular soldiers ate in a hush, watching surreptitiously, but Captain Isidur, sitting amongst his sergeants, observed with obvious disapproval, though he didn't dare say a thing, not even to his own men.

As much as His Highness was infuriated, so was Isidur. The prince had lost control of the situation. His objectivity was in doubt.

Isidur almost sneered. Objectivity? Had the man ever had it concerning this woman? No. She'd caught him from the very first.

Isidur had seen the prince take an interest in a fair number of women during the few weeks they had travelled together. He'd bedded a few, but he hadn't fussed over any, shown not a single sign of remorse upon leaving in the morning, nor any guilt for having used what had been offered. But this woman! This woman had him by the balls. That was certain.

'That illusion of beauty had caught him. But why that face? The prince didn't seem to see the significance of it. Or did he?

The prince must be denying it to himself. Just the tense set of his features told the story. Likely he hoped none of them really knew how deeply the witch had set her claws in him. Isidur concluded that Ugoth must be more dissolute than rumours hinted. How else could the witch have managed to attract him with that face?

His face. His face on a woman's body. Gods. It was so disgusting. It had been like watching brother and sister kiss.

If the proud young bastard had been one of his men, just another lowly commoner, Isidur would have knocked the arrogance off his pretty face. A few cuts, scars, even a broken nose might be an improvement. Too bad the king kept the two brothers apart these days; otherwise Prince Ufrid might have seen to the necessary adjustment.

Now, there was a man worth respecting. Isidur had spoken to him once. That man, he was a warrior. There wasn't a doubt of it. He'd been in battles, won wars, enforced peace for his ailing father. What had Ugoth done but grow up pretty in a monastery? So what if they had taken him out at the age of ten and taught him to act a prince. Those effeminate monks had probably done their worst to him by then.

Ugoth didn't come up to the size of his sibling even now. He was inches shorter than his elder brother, who was the king's namesake. His eyes had the jewel tone of family heredity, and the golden hair marked him as one of the Tyrunath brood, but there the similarities ended. He was too pretty. Both the other two were rough figures of men.

Isidur had never seen the queen. She had immured herself in the Convent years ago. Perhaps Ugoth took after her.

There were good rumours as well as bad about him, one of them that he was excellent with the sword, perhaps even a master of it. But this story didn't sit with that face of his. He'd never gone out to war like his older brother. True, he was ten years younger, a mere twenty-three to Prince Ufrid's thirty-three. This foray into the wilds had perhaps been meant to get some seasoning into him. With Ufrid's firm hand over the armies, there wasn't much use for the younger prince.

Just a useless younger son, that's what he was.

Isidur snorted. A few of his men looked over at him in surprise, but he ignored them. If Isidur could predict anything, it was that this lying witch would have Ugoth's royal balls for her breakfast one day, one way or another, and he laughed harshly at his distasteful joke.

His men looked around at each other. They must have thought it wise to refrain from comment, for no one asked him why he laughed. Everyone had been acting strange since finding the prince's witch. Only Isidur had been brave, or unwise enough, to challenge His Highness over his decision to let her live. The rest of them watched and waited to see the result of these strange and disturbing events.

If Ugoth heard Isidur's laugh, he made no sign of it. He remained in the centre of the road, looking ahead stonily. Shortly after, the giant emerged from the forest and halted fifty yards ahead of the troop. The woman he cradled in one arm. She sat there comfortably, but appeared a small child; the giant was just so huge compared to her.

Ugoth stared without moving a few moments, then kicked his stallion forward. His guard followed. "Drop your men back," he ordered Liudger.

Liudger didn't like it. If something happened to the prince, the king would have his head. He said as much in protest.

"Nothing will happen to me," the prince insisted. "Stay close if you wish, but not too close."

He wanted privacy, then. Liudger could understand that. The witch might have the temerity to exact an apology from His Highness for his forward behaviour. It would be something of an embarrassment for Ugoth, if that were the case. He certainly wouldn't want men of lesser rank to witness a comeuppance from a complete nobody whom he would have tossed down on the ground and had his way with by now, if not for the guardian of such ominous nature.

Ugoth approached the pair alone, his men watching some fifteen feet away. He halted the stallion five feet from the girl and her golem. The stallion pranced and worried the bit, but the giant didn't move and the horse settled. Ugoth waited, eyeing them both with a flat stare. Hanicke eyed him back. Deciding that he wasn't prepared to make the first opening remark, she spoke.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have provoked you. I'll endeavour not to in the future."

He was surprised. He had expected recriminations of some kind. "You're sorry?"

"Yes," she confirmed, and indeed she looked it, peering at him with large, worried eyes. He hadn't expected this. Once again, she had astonished him.

The giant clicked and hissed something. It was the longest series of clicks he'd heard the creature deliver. Hanicke listened, frowning. As the clicks continued, dismay clouded her expression.

"What is he saying?" Ugoth said, but Hanicke refused to answer. Ugoth's gaze narrowed. Already she was breaking her promise.

The golem clicked more imperiously at her. "You'd better tell me," Ugoth said. "I know he wants me to hear whatever it is."

She frowned unhappily at the two of them and capitulated. Between them, she was outmatched. "He says that you must promise on your part never to..." Here, she hesitated. "Lay hands on me again in anger," she ended carefully.

She had changed the words, obviously. Ugoth looked at the golem. They were near level because of the added height of the stallion. This was the reason he had not dismounted.

The giant regarded him relentlessly. He intended the promise made, or he was prepared to keep the girl. That was evident to the prince, whose lips thinned stubbornly. He hated giving in. He looked at Hanicke. She watched him with more anxiety than before.

"How long will you keep your promise not to provoke me," he said suddenly. He saw the desire to reply to his challenge rise in her instantly and knew she wouldn't be able to resist it.

"About as long as you keep yours," she snapped, then covered her mouth in chagrin. "I'm sorry," she blurted.

He repressed a smile, but it glittered in his blue eyes. He looked back at the golem, who was frowning at him in displeasure. "I promise not to lay my *hands* on her in anger," he told it.

That hadn't been exactly what the golem had wanted. Ugoth could tell, for it considered the promise and then clicked in irritation at the girl. She shook her head emphatically and refused to speak. The prince raised a brow at it. Eventually, it clicked a few short angry noises, glowering ever deeper, but with a hint of submission to the leafy features.

"He accepts your promise," Hanicke said promptly.

"Then approach," the prince uttered.

The golem did so. The stallion wanted to fly, but Ugoth forced it still, soothing it with words and firm direction. They transferred Hanicke from one set of arms to the other. The prince refused to look away from the burning eyes of the witch-creation. He listened to the scratching noises of its internal parts and repressed a shudder. Hanicke now clasped in his arms, he kept his edgy mount in place with consummate skill, using leg signals alone. The horse trusted him, or it wouldn't have borne the presence of the immense, angry creature.

The golem touched Hanicke's face with one gentle finger, turned his back and departed. Ugoth, at that moment in time, thought of many ways to kill it; with slashing swords, burning arrows, brands of fire, anything. He felt suddenly desperate never to let her out of his arms again. The golem had the power to keep her from him. He knew it and he hated the monster for it.

And he wondered, beneath this smouldering, almost animal rage, had she put a spell on him? Had she?

Chapter Eight

A normal human, travelling by foot, would have taken a week to walk to the village. On horseback on the road, this was just a matter of a few days. The golem could have managed it faster, had in fact, but he contented himself with pacing unseen alongside the troop. During the next day and a half, he watched carefully and remained hidden, only revealing himself during those brief moments when Hanicke approached him during stops and nightly camps.

Hanicke improved her skill as a rider, and her legs began to heal, what with Ripper's leather rectangles preventing further chafing. The liniment took care of the initial injury, but the aches in her bones persisted. She never failed to feel as though she walked with a horse between her legs after getting off the gelding, but the sensation was faster to dissipate each ensuing stop.

The prince ignored her. He refused to speak with her, and she tried not to attract attention to herself. She was very quiet, did not converse with the other men in the troop, and did not smile at or thank any of them if she knew he was watching. She used his tent again the second night, and he slept just outside it. They said not a word to each other.

He was the most obdurate man she'd ever met, not that she'd met many. The resolution between the golem and the prince appeared to have accomplished nothing more than to make him disdain her. He hadn't even taken up the thread of the investigation concerning the death of the old witch. When Isidur had attempted to bring it up, His Highness had glared at the man so wrathfully that the captain had apologized twice. Whatever the reason, Ugoth was not speaking to her, and no one else was either until he was ready.

Hanicke only wanted to keep her promise not to provoke him. Given her recent history with this man, it wasn't likely she would if she opened her mouth. So she put a button on it, so to speak. She couldn't begin to guess the reasons for his silence.

After the golem had placed her back in his arms, Ugoth had wheeled the stallion around and brought her to the centre of the waiting troop. He had set her down near Ripper and ridden away to the opposite side of the road. They had eaten apart. He had not looked at her again, either disinterested or refusing to appear otherwise. Thereafter, Ripper had led her horse. He did so in silence.

Most often, the entire troop rode in silence. If the men spoke at all, they did so hushed. They were loath to attract Ugoth's attention or Isidur's, who, after being refused the request to continue interrogating the prisoner, scowled at everyone except the prince. At him, he would not look.

He was a proud man, Isidur, proud of the accomplishments he had attained. He was perhaps the most experienced soldier who dealt in the pursuit, capture and arrest of criminals accused of using arcane powers. He knew the exact manner in which to deal with each offender, including the punishment of the perpetrator and the disposal of the body. Every passing hour that Ugoth left that woman unbound and without a gag, Isidur's innards seethed and boiled with ever more umbrage. If Ugoth did nothing when they arrived at the village, Isidur intended to take action. He wasn't sure what yet, but he would.

On the latter half of the third day, they arrived at the village. Hanicke, between a number of regular soldiers, tensed so fearfully that Brownie—so she liked to call the gelding—began to prance anxiously.

"Easy," Ripper said to the horse, clucking at it encouragingly. He looked at its rider and found the girl's eyes fear wide and her mouth a rigid line of the suppressed emotion. He was surprised, to say the least. He looked at the village, expecting to see something horrible hovering over it, a dragon perhaps, a giant laughing fog with teeth, anything bad at all. But there was only the modest village and its simple villagers, these standing about gawking at the troop's arrival. "What is it?" he whispered cautiously.

"People!" she hissed back anxiously.

He frowned in confusion. "What of it?"

"There's so many of them!"

True, the village had grown in size over the last two years, but the people here were nothing compared to a city. "You've seen them before," he pointed out.

"Yes, but they couldn't see me."

“You can’t have been born in the wilds. What are you so afraid of?”

“People always stare at me.”

Oh, Ripper thought. She was that shy, was she? Perhaps she’d made a hermit of herself because of it. “You shouldn’t worry about it. They’re only doing it because you’re pretty.”

She was more than pretty, but he didn’t dare say that. Hanicke blinked at him. Suddenly, she seemed confused, almost embarrassed.

“Oh, right,” she said, so low he barely heard the words.

Apparently, he had succeeded in reassuring her, because she seemed to relax again. He turned his attention to the fore and found the prince turned in his saddle, staring back at them. Ripper reddened, then whitened, then started praying.

“Ripper!” the royal voice shouted.

“Yes, Highness?” he responded dutifully.

“Bring her up here!”

He hastened to obey, kicking his horse forward. The men ahead made way. He thought he would have to pass the reins over forthwith, but the prince merely nodded and turned in his seat again. Ripper blinked. His entire life had just passed before his eyes, and he had only been nodded at! He almost felt cheated.

Cheated! What was he thinking?

The troop had just passed the outer houses and entered the village proper. Ahead, prominent buildings, a few with signs posted over their doors, formed the courtyard that was the village square. A man rushed out of the largest house, which was grand enough to be called a manor. He was fat, bald, and beamed with obsequiousness. Hanicke recognised him as the mayor. He’d been the mayor since the founding of the village, from what she’d overheard whilst spying. She had one of his barrels of brandy in her cold room. Sticks said he snored like a herd of pigs smothering in a bog.

“Your Highness!” he boomed. “Your Highness! How happy I am to witness your august return!”

Hanicke winced. This man was going to be as irritating a toady as when he acted the officious boor. She just knew it.

A line of servants filed out from the house and formed up behind the rotund fellow. These bowed and curtsied to the prince before they had even made a proper queue.

“We had grown anxious for you, here in our little town! I am so happy to see that you are safe and unharmed by the dreadful witch yonder!” the mayor continued.

Was he going to boom every sentence, Hanicke wondered? She speculated what His Highness thought of the ingratiating spectacle. But then, perhaps Ugoth was accustomed to such spectacles. If so, was it any wonder he found her so provoking? She was *so* disinclined to being obsequious.

“Will you not dismount, Highness? Your chamber is prepared for you just as before! I have brought my best wine from the cellar! I will be most happy to serve you personally!”

What was he doing now? Was he ogling her? Was he actually ogling her while still booming at the prince?

“I see you have made a find, Most Gracious Highness! Is she the witch in question? Is she the frightful creature at last brought to justice?”

His words and his ogling didn’t match. Hanicke’s lips pressed thinly in growing vexation. It would serve him right if she rode over there and poked him in one of those big bulging eyes of his.

“She is not,” His Highness interrupted firmly.

There was no sign of irritation in his voice. She watched his back for signs of tenseness, but none were perceptible.

“Hanicke.” The prince waved her forward.

She almost gaped in surprise, but just barely managed to keep her mouth shut. She refused to gape in front of that horrible mayor.

Ripper passed her reins over and urged her forward with a small wave. She kicked Brownie experimentally. The gelding interpreted the clumsy command correctly and clopped forward. It stopped on its own next to the prince’s bay stallion.

“Hanicke, this is Master Jorigun, the Honourable Mayor of this...village, whatever it’s called.”

The mayor flushed behind his beatific smile. Ugoth had not only insulted him by forgetting the village name, but had introduced him to Hanicke first. This was perhaps more discourteous than the first affront,

to be treated as lesser in status to some strange woman in worn-out, boy's garb who rode astride like a hoyden. Ugoth wasn't finished surprising everyone, however.

"Mayor, this is my cousin, Hanicke, Moselem's daughter. Be so good as to prepare another room for her and have some things fetched for her to wear. She's had a rough journey and her female trappings are missing."

Master Jorigun obtained a somewhat dazed air for a moment. His smile managed to stay on, but it lost some shine. He squinted from one to the other uncertainly. His eyes suddenly widened in mild astonishment. Something seemed to click in his mind, for the smile waxed strong again. Hanicke wondered what had just convinced him, for he seemed to believe the prince of a sudden. Must be the hair colour, she thought.

"Highness! Young Miss! How unfortunate for you! Please! Let one of my servants help you off that horse and hurry you into the house so that you may suffer no further embarrassment!" he boomed.

With a single wave, servants rushed toward her, a young man and several young women. Bemused, Hanicke slid off the gelding into the waiting hands of the young man. The female servants surrounded her, thereby hiding her inappropriate attire. They promptly rushed her into the large house.

As she disappeared from Ugoth's sight, he sighed in relief. The mayor had begun booming at him again. He barely registered what the man was saying. He dismounted, handed his reins over to a waiting servant and walked past the mayor toward the house. If the mayor held any rancour over the calm appropriation of his domain, he said nothing. Perhaps he only boomed louder.

Behind, Ugoth heard Captain Liudger order the town official, in no uncertain terms, to shut the hells up and get the damned wine. The mayor's voice ceased to boom. Crunching boot steps followed Ugoth into the manor.

"Well, that was interesting," Liudger said as they passed out of the hallway and into a large living space to the side.

Ugoth undid his sword belt as he walked. Once it was off, he sank onto a large wooden chair that had been cushioned and decorated with fine skins. He was weary unto death. He'd barely slept for three days. He thought he might have forgotten how to sleep. "What was?" he asked the knight tiredly.

Liudger mimicked his actions and sank onto another chair, spreading his dirty boots over a very clean rug. "That little prevarication about the girl," he said.

"Prevarication?"

"About her being your cousin. It was a wonder how he kept his smile on." Liudger laughed.

Just then the mayor rushed in, bowed to the two noblemen and excused himself rather quietly, muttering that he would return with the wine shortly.

"It wasn't a prevarication," Ugoth said. He had his eyes shut, and his head rested on the back of the chair. He, too, had stretched his muddy boots out upon the clean rug.

"What?" Liudger was stunned. His mouth opened in surprise. "She's your cousin? Really?"

Ugoth opened one eye at him, then shut it again. "Really," he affirmed.

"She's your cousin?"

"Haven't we just discussed this already?"

"But how?"

"She's the granddaughter of my great uncle, King Ugoth, by a woman he later married off to one of his soldiers."

"That explains it, then!"

Ugoth lifted his heavy lids and looked at Liudger rather superiorly. "Of course, it explains it." He shut his eyes once more. He thought he might be getting a headache.

"No, I mean it explains the other thing."

He opened his eyes again, fixing Liudger with a steady blue glare. "What other thing?"

Liudger didn't hesitate to answer. "Why the similarities, of course."

Ugoth shut his eyes yet again. "Oh, you mean the hair colour," he said, bored.

"No," Liudger answered.

This time, Ugoth's eyes snapped wide. Suddenly, he didn't feel sleepy anymore. He sat up. His head was definitely pounding. "What?" he said.

Liudger looked at him askance, realizing the prince didn't know the half of it. "Perhaps you should ask Master Jorigun if he has a very large mirror," he advised. "Perhaps you and the girl should stand in front of it. Together."

"Why...?"

The arrival of the mayor cut the prince's question off. In his hands were an open bottle and two glasses. Several servants followed behind him. They carried platters with food on it: bread, cheeses and fresh fruit. It was too early for supper. This offering was meant to tide them over.

The mayor poured a glass of wine, first for the prince, then for Liudger. When he had turned back to the prince, he discovered the prince's glass was completely empty. Ugoth had downed the entire contents in a single gulp. Jorigun made haste to pour again.

"I want a bath," the prince said.

"I have taken the liberty to have one prepared for Your Highness!" Jorigun boomed. The prince winced. Liudger stood menacingly and grabbed for the sword and sheath he'd propped against the chair. The mayor bowed and backed out hastily. The servants retreated along with him.

"That man is an ass," Liudger said, little caring if the mayor heard him.

Ugoth merely stood, drained his glass once again and grimaced. "This is his best wine?"

"I've had better in a dirty tavern," Liudger agreed. "You don't think he's such an idiot as to retain his best bottles?"

"I don't really care at the moment." Ugoth dropped his glass on a side table and walked out of the room, pausing as he tried to remember where his sleeping chamber had been located last time. His head pounded like an ogre banged about in it.

"Down this hall and up the stairs. Second door on the right," Liudger directed him. "Do you want me to lead you? You're having one of your headaches again, aren't you?"

"I can take myself there."

He refused to admit to the headache. They came on from time to time and never seemed to have a reason. He always endeavoured to act like they didn't exist, up until the pounding became so unliveable as to

fell him in his tracks. But it wasn't that bad yet. He had a few minutes left; time enough to keep his princely dignity intact.

He walked down the hall. It was an effort to keep from trudging hunched over in pain. He made it to the stairs and up them. He succeeded in locating and entering his room. A woman waited inside, but she wasn't the one he wanted. A servant, a rather pretty one, she stood beside the tub, smiling invitingly at him.

Had she been the same one as last time? He thought so, but wasn't sure. She hadn't been memorable in any way. But it didn't matter how unforgettable she'd been in bed; he did remember adequate service during his bath and that was all that concerned to him now. He shut the door behind him.

She seemed to know what he wanted, for she wordlessly helped him remove the heavy armour, pulled off his sweat-stained padding, then the soiled tunic and undershirt. She tugged loose his leather boots and assisted with the removal of his leggings, all without chatter. He sank into the large bath, mutely grateful for the hot water. He shut his eyes and let the servant minister to him.

The room was very large. The outer wall had a fireplace built into it. His chamber shared the chimney with the room below. He could hear voices coming out of the flue, arriving from somewhere beneath. Servants were speaking about his arrival, the surprising introduction of the cousin, Master Joripun's lack of good etiquette. Innocuous stuff.

Ugoth relaxed further into the tub and let his mind drift. The woman bathed him first, then had him hunch forward to knead his shoulders and neck. His back lost its tension. His shoulders sagged tiredly. The headache slowly receded. He sighed in contentment.

"What's your name," he asked, his eyes still shut. The woman seemed surprised, for her kneading slowed. "Don't stop that," he ordered. The fingers on his muscles at once pressed firmly again.

"My name is Mavianna." She had a countrified accent, but her voice was low and sultry.

"Were you the one who served me last time?"

If his forgetfulness insulted her, she didn't let on. "Yes, Your Highness," she said meekly.

“I thought so.” He had just redeemed himself, for she pressed a little kiss on the nape of his neck. He ignored the gesture. “Did Master Jorigun pick you personally for this duty?”

Her fingers hesitated again, then forged onward. She was truly very talented.

“Perhaps you would like to get out of the tub, Your Highness? I could work the rest of your back on the bed,” she suggested.

He was sure she could. “Answer my question,” he insisted.

“The mayor did send me,” she admitted.

“Do you do this sort of thing for him as well?”

This time her fingers froze on his back. “Yes, Your Highness.”

Her voice was very small. He was confusing the poor thing. Perhaps he should stop quizzing her before she forgot how to rub his back altogether.

At that moment, Ugoth recalled that the mayor had a wife, purportedly visiting relatives in a village closer to the centre of the realm. He tossed his momentary kind thought and grilled the servant again. “Does his wife know that you perform these discrete duties for the mayor?”

“Of course not, Your Highness! At least, I think not!”

Suddenly, Ugoth heard what he thought was muffled laughter coming from the wall to the other side of the room. There had been more than one voice involved and one of them he recognized. He opened his eyes and sat up.

“Who’s over there,” he demanded.

“That’s the room with your lovely cousin,” Mavianna said without any apparent envy.

“Who’s with her?” he said angrily.

“The other girls. Mayor sent up the small bath for her. The other women are serving her.”

Oh, that was all right, then. Abruptly, he had another thought. “Do you think they can hear us?”

“I should think so, Your Highness,” the serving girl reported uncaringly. “The walls are thin between all the rooms up here.”

Ugoth scowled. *Blast and bloody bells and may all the devils suffer to have knots in their most sensitive places!*

He rose abruptly from the tub, showering water from all sides in his rush to get out. The woman made haste to wrap towelling around him. He felt his headache coming back.

She could hear everything he did. Everything! He could hardly have any peace knowing Hanicke was one thin wall away, bathing in a small tub. The image all but made him groan. He sat on the bed, hurting in more ways than one.

“Shall I rub your back now, Highness?” the servant inquired.

“Not just now. Tell the men to leave the tub until later. I wish to rest a few hours.”

“As you wish, Your Highness.” If she was disappointed, she hid it. She curtsied and left the room, shutting the door quietly behind her.

It was suspiciously quiet along the wall of the other room. Ugoth frowned at it. He thought he heard muted speech, but that was all. Slowly, he lay down on the four-poster, still wrapped in the towelling. He stared at the wall for some time, waiting to catch any hint of what was going on over there, but despite his vigilance, his eyes shut and he fell asleep.

Hanicke was rushed down a short hallway and up some stairs. The serving women, three of them, ushered her into a room down the upper hall. They installed her behind a large screen set close to the fire and commenced to strip her worn clothes from her. She opened her mouth to protest, but realized this would appear abnormal coming from someone who had family connections to royalty. Only when the belt was pulled from her did she make a single motion of objection. She snatched the large white feather tucked into it and hung on, refusing to let the women remove it from her tight fist. She merely shook her head adamantly until they left off.

The tunic was tugged upward, and the women paused in shock at the sight of the opal over her breast. Afterward, they were more hesitant as they pulled her garments off. She was an oddity to say the least, a woman in boy's garb, her hair awry and cut too short. They wondered what

horrible thing had happened to her to make her this way. How had that fascinating jewel gotten into her flesh?

The silent tug of war over the feather confirmed their silent conjectures that, whatever had happened to her, it had probably driven the prince's beautiful cousin a little mad. No doubt the opal had something to do with her madness as well. As a result of her behaviour, her attire, the feather and the opal, none of the women made any effort to speak to Hanicke, and she was permitted to stare blankly past them.

Hanicke hadn't had time to really look at the room, so rapidly had she been rushed in. At the moment, she had nothing to see but the painted, floral screen. While they stripped her of her old clothes, a lot of noise ensued from the other side of it. Once unclothed, she was wrapped in a blanket. All the women but one left her and went into the room proper. The last remained as if to guard her, whether from herself or from what sounded like men coming in and out of the chamber, she wasn't sure. She heard water splashing.

Presently, the voices of the men ceased. There came a sound as of door being firmly shut and locked. The women returned and tugged Hanicke out from behind the screen. At last, she had a clear view of everything. A woman's chamber, the room was large and well appointed, the choice of colours primarily pale blue and lilac. A fireplace nestled within the outer wall, but it was unlit because of the summer heat. Before the hearth, a half bath of warm water waited.

The women stripped the blanket from Hanicke and directed her into the tub. She stepped in, and they pressed her down onto the little bench that sat above the water. Only her legs actually rested in the bath. One of the women used a cup as a scoop and drenched her with bath water. Another went over to a dressing table and came back with a bottle. She began cleansing Hanicke's hair with the contents. The last woman grabbed a sponge with which to wash her body, while the first dropped the cup, picked up a small bristle brush and used it to scrub her fingers and toes.

Hanicke sat through these ministrations, pretending all this intimate care was all perfectly normal. She really wanted to leap up and run, but she suspected she wouldn't get far completely naked. It was just less embarrassing to sit and pretend she wasn't noticing anything they were doing.

Eventually, they stood her up again. One raised a steaming kettle that had been left on the hearth and poured hot water into a half filled bucket

of cold. Checking for warmth, the others poured this over Hanicke as a rinse and repeated.

While the two performed this last rinse, the third returned to the wall with the dressing table to fetch up towelling from a nearby washstand. Hanicke was more comfortable watching this woman than the ones handling her so familiarly. The woman hesitated with her face to the wall, then pressed her ear to it in an obvious effort to listen.

“What is she doing?” Hanicke asked.

The woman at the wall jumped away in discomfort, and the rest stopped in surprise, for Hanicke hadn’t said a word up until then. They had begun to think she never would.

“Who’s in the room next to this one?” Hanicke said.

“Your cousin, the prince,” the woman admitted reluctantly. She brought the towelling over and the others wrapped Hanicke up. One of her companions was bolder.

“She was listening to the prince get his bath,” this one informed her eagerly.

Hanicke raised a brow in interest. She stepped out of the tub and walked over to the wall, also to press her ear against it. She smiled into the air, for she heard Ugoth on the other side, asking a woman questions of an embarrassing and less than romantic nature. The servants with Hanicke looked at her, then at each other, and then rushed over to different sections of the wall to listen.

“Does he always talk to the servants?” Hanicke whispered.

“He didn’t last time,” the daring one replied. “He just had his way with her and sent her out.”

“Oh.”

That’s why he wanted a woman with his bath. Convenient. Make a mess and clean up after.

The prince asked a bolder, more embarrassing question, while the women on the other side of the wall eavesdropped with wicked smiles on their faces. This time, he wished to know if the servant assisted the mayor in the same fashion as him. After the woman responded, their voices discontinued for a time, and the servants on Hanicke’s side imagined any number of fanciful reasons for the silence, but Hanicke knew Ugoth was thinking about the woman’s answer.

Suddenly, he asked if the mayor's wife knew she performed these discrete duties for the mayor. On Hanicke's side, their jaws opened at the scandalous question. Hanicke giggled, and some of the others did as well, but then she slapped her hands over her mouth, because if they could hear him, he could hear them.

His next question, although muffled, confirmed her suspicion, and they all listened anxiously as he grilled the woman for answers concerning them. When it appeared he had lost interest, they crept over to the other side of the room, Hanicke in their centre. She put her fingers to her lips and smirked naughtily. They all giggled again, but muffled the noise with aprons and fingers.

After that, they brushed her hair, clothed her in a voluminous undergarment, and put her in the large bed that rested off centre of the chamber. The shy one asked her if she wanted to have one of them stay with her while she rested before supper, but Hanicke shook her head. She smiled her thanks, and the servant shut the lilac curtain around the bed.

The door opened. Heavier footsteps entered the room, more than one set. She heard water sloshing. Ah. The men had come for the tub. She listened as they and the women filed out and door shut. Hanicke sighed. She was alone at last. Smiling, her lids lowered against her cheeks.

So soft. She hadn't been in a bed like this since her father had died. The smile escaped and solemnity returned. Her father. He had done well by her, despite her horrid face. She was sorry he hadn't lived to see her like this, accepted as one of the normal for the first time in her life. She sighed again, this time only in semi-contentment.

But even this modicum of happiness wasn't to last. Isidur had had enough.

Early that evening, the returning servants awakened Hanicke. She heard them moving around quietly, whispering to each other. Hanicke lifted herself and pressed the bed curtains aside. The women at once stopped what they were doing. Hanicke knew at once their attitude toward her had changed, for they all looked as if they wanted to bolt from the room. She let the curtain drop and sighed unhappily. It had all been too good to last. She should have known better.

“Miss?” a voice called. That was the bolder one.

“Yes?”

“We have a dress for you.” From the sounds of it, she hadn’t come any closer to the bed than she’d been before.

Hanicke twisted the white feather in her hands nervously. She didn’t feel like seeing them anymore, nor did she wish for them to stand around ogling her in fear. “Leave it on a chair. I will dress myself,” she said from behind the curtain.

She heard them move about the room. Presently, the noise indicated that all were walking out the door.

“Miss?” came the same voice again.

“Yes?”

“What about your hair? The toiletries?”

“I don’t use perfume and I’m clean enough. I’ll comb my hair myself.”

“Yes, Miss.”

The door shut with a soft click. Hanicke sighed dismally again, then lifted the curtain and looked out. There was no one present.

She slipped from the bed. The voluminous undergarment proceeded to fall off her shoulders. She tugged it up again. A green dress had been laid over a chair. It was pretty, if plainly cut. Its beauty lay in the velvet fabric. She approached and picked it up. It had been taken in. On the interior, she could see where the old seams had been. She looked at the hem. Yes, even that had been taken up.

The servants had been busy while she’d slept, with the dress and gossip. Hanicke wondered who had told them about her. They all thought she was a witch now.

She discovered an undergarment, perhaps borrowed from a girl. She slipped the large one off and stepped into the new one. It fit well. She put the dress on, the first she’d worn in two years. Despite the new seams, it was loose and too long in the sleeves. The hem just brushed the floor.

A girdle lay on the seat of the chair, braided of the same velvet but with threads of gold in it. Hanicke began to think perhaps she had been given the use of one of the mayor’s wife’s garments. She tied the belt above her hips, inserting the feather into the knot after. Under the chair,

she found slippers. They were very nice slippers, fashioned from the same velvet cloth, twists of gold thread decorating them, here and there. Beautiful, but much too big for her little feet. She left them untouched. She would only trip herself using them.

At the dressing table, she picked up a comb and began pulling the knots from her hair. A mirror hung over the table, but she refused to look at it. Habit and fear. If she looked, her old face might shine from the glass. All of this, even Sticks, might be a dream: wonderful, incredible, happy...until the horrid ending arrived. She would not look in the mirror. She turned her back on it and concentrated on the knots.

“How can I have so many knots with hair this short?” she asked herself. The locks hung to just above her shoulders, but they were wild with curls. She thought she might hack her hair off to her crown again. She grimaced and yanked the comb in frustration. The comb stuck.

“Ouch!” She tugged carefully, then harder. She couldn’t get it out. Definitely time to hack it all off.

Someone knocked on her door.

“Yes?” she called.

The door opened. The prince stood in the doorway with his hand on the latch. He seemed surprised, for he stared at her, his eyes widening slowly. Hanicke, perhaps because of the feminine attire, was reminded of the manners she’d been instructed in as a child. She performed a deep curtsy, complete with comb stuck in hair. She heard him enter.

“Get up,” he said impatiently.

She did as he bade. He wore a different tunic, this one a deep burgundy. He had his sword belt strapped around his waist as usual, but the armour was missing. He looked better, rested, clean. Calmer. As she mused upon this change, he lifted a hand and tugged at the comb.

“Ouch!” She’d forgotten the comb. She put up her hands to stop him. He merely brushed her fingers away and proceeded to untangle it from her hair.

“Where are the women sent to take care of you?” he asked. He didn’t care really. He was pleased to have this opportunity to touch her, with no one watching and especially no monster to interfere. She was so petite. He thought she must look how an elf should, beautiful, wild, delectable. Such untouchable, mysterious creatures, but he seemed to have one here before him.

“I sent them away,” she said, her eyes downcast.

“Why?” he asked gently.

“Someone told them about me. Now they’re all afraid.” She refused to look up at him, for she didn’t want to see the pity she was certain would be there. She didn’t want his pity. She understood his irritation better. Irritation never made her weep. But kindness would.

His hands paused at their task. “It was bound to happen,” he spoke at last, then continued to work the comb from out of the knot. “Men like to gossip as much as women, especially if there’s a woman listening.”

She nodded faintly. He gave a last delicate tug on her curls and pulled the comb free, but he didn’t give it back to her. Instead, he commenced untangling the remainder of her wild hair, working at it quietly.

He stood very close. He smelled very clean. Hanicke was becoming very hot in the velvet dress. It felt heavy, cumbersome, a burden that constrained her to principles and ideals that had never before meant anything to her, who had been ugly and unvalued before now. Yet here was unexpected temptation, and she was wearing a garment that reminded of society and its morality, but also of femininity and things she’d never hoped to have. She wanted him to kiss her again, but she didn’t dare move or speak.

Ugoth finished at last and put the comb down on the dressing table. His body touched hers as he leant forward. She jumped as if he’d burned her, and he released a small noise, like the tiniest gasp for air. He wanted so much to clutch her into his arms that it hurt. The need of it trembled inside, close to the point of breaking free, but his eyes met his own as he looked up from replacing the comb.

A fine mirror hung above the table, very large, with only a bit of greying at the edges. He remembered what Liudger had advised him earlier.

“Turn around,” he said to her. She shook her head mutely. He sighed in vexation and turned her forcibly. His hands dropped slowly from her shoulders.

Hanicke refused to look upward. The prince, with his usual stubbornness, seemed to be waiting silently for her to give up. But something about his silence disturbed this notion. He wasn’t breathing right.

He wasn’t breathing at all.

She glanced up at the mirror, seeking his face in it. His eyes were wide with disbelief. She looked at herself, expecting the worst, but once again saw the woman with the nose. She frowned at the image, then looked back at the prince's. And now her eyes widened as well.

It was undeniable. The same lips, the lower slightly larger than the upper, the same fine nose with the same perfect flare of the nostrils, the same high cheek bones, the same arch of the brows, the same shape of the eyes—this all stared back at them from the misty mirror, his features, so perfectly feminine on her.

Ugoth breathed. His inhalation rushed in, burning. The gods had played a terrible, terrible joke on him. She could have been his sibling. She looked more a sister to him than his true sisters did. What he felt for her suddenly smacked of the worst sorts of human impulse. He stalked from the room without another word.

Hanicke stumbled over to the chair and sat with a thud. She heard his booted feet rush down the stairway. The mayor's voice boomed, but there came no response to the hearty greeting. The front door crashed shut. The noise was so loud it reverberated throughout the house.

To the back of the room was a window. Hanicke realized it looked down at the front of the manor. She rushed over and peered down, seeking him.

He was just outside, but not alone. Captain Isidur was with him. He must have called the prince back, because Ugoth faced in the direction of the house. His expression was that of anger and disbelief. She couldn't see Isidur's countenance.

The prince's features altered to that of scathing contempt. Without speaking, he turned his back on the captain and strode away. The captain rotated and looked up directly at her window. She saw clearly the look of black triumph playing over it. Isidur had done something. It couldn't have been anything good for her, perhaps not for the prince as well.

The captain appeared to laugh up at her. Then he pivoted and made off in the direction the prince had taken. Her eyes widened as he stumble on the flat ground. He corrected himself, advanced a few steps, then seemed to lose his sense of direction, for he wove sharply to the right. He wove back just as precipitously.

Captain Isidur had been drinking and, from the looks of it, had been doing so since their arrival several hours ago.

"Excuse me?"

She turned from the window. The knight captain stood within her doorway. He, too, had washed and shaved. He wore a clean tunic, still as black as the other, but the armour and the surcoat bearing the gryphon rampant were both absent.

Hanicke suddenly realized she had never really looked at Liudger. She was surprised to see he was not an unhandsome man. Ruefully, she suspected that her attention had been too caught up with surreptitiously watching the prince to have noticed the knight's pleasing features before now.

Liudger was taller than Ugoth and broader in the shoulders. His hair was wavy and brown, falling to his nape, where Ugoth kept his shorter, cut to the line of his jaw. Liudger's eyes were brown as well, warmer than the prince's blue.

Hanicke grimaced. Even now, she couldn't stop thinking about the man whose face she wore. She even compared other men to him.

Liudger must have thought the grimace was for him, because he backed a pace. Hanicke was instantly contrite and made a curtsy at him.

"May I help you, Knight Captain Liudger?" she inquired. She rose, schooling her face to impassivity.

Liudger eyed her askance, then stepped forward again. "Have you seen the prince?" he asked.

"He went outside," she informed him. "He wasn't in the most pleasant temper."

Liudger lifted a brow at the admission. Ugoth hadn't been in the most pleasant temper since discovering this girl. "What happened?" he demanded.

"We looked in the mirror together," she said simply.

Liudger's mouth rounded into a comprehending O.

"You should know," she added, "I saw Isidur stop him outside. He said something to the prince. Whatever it was, it wasn't to Ugoth's taste. I think Isidur is drunk."

Liudger scowled and swore. He swirled out of the chamber door, black cape flying, and rushed down the stairs. Once again, the mayor's voice boomed. Once again, his salutation went unanswered. The door slammed shut a second time. Hanicke looked down. Liudger was in the

courtyard. She watched him stop a commoner and speak with him. The man pointed a direction. Liudger stalked off in a hurry.

Sighing, Hanicke went back to the chair and sat down again. She wished she were in the forest with Sticks. She wondered what he was doing right now.

She knew immediately. He was watching and wishing the same thing as her.

A length of time passed wherein she merely sat in the chair, waiting. She knew not for what exactly. Darkness beat the already dim daylight away. She heard the mayor's voice downstairs, no longer booming, but alternating between querulous and irritated. She suspected the fine supper his servants had prepared for the prince lay uneaten and spoiling. She was hungry, but no one came to lead her down for supper. Possibly, they were waiting for the prince to return, fearing his wrath if the meal was served without him.

The door to her chamber remained open. No one passed. She felt herself sinking into a kind of torpor, one in which she thought nothing at all, but merely lingered. Time passed. People came and went below. The voices lifted in what appeared to be fear briefly. Then the house settled into a hush of ominous proportions.

At last, she shifted in the chair. Something was not right. Something was very wrong.

She stood. She walked to the door. There was shuffling down below, quiet feet treading with utmost caution. She walked down the hall to the head of the stairs. She heard voices whisper. She trod upon the topmost step. It creaked. The whispering ceased instantly.

She stepped down, one bare foot after the other, until she reached the bottom floor. The mayor stood in the sitting room, staring at her in terror. Many of his servants were there as well. All gaped in horror at her. She couldn't have created more fear if she'd appeared with her birth face. Something had happened, something bad.

Hanicke turned away and walked to the door. She opened it and passed outside. She didn't bother to shut it after her. They would only rush to open it, to see what she was about. She peered around at the dark courtyard. Further down the road that led away from the square, she located a number of lanterns bobbing about. Many people were gathered in that direction. She walked toward them.

The night air was chill. Her bare feet grew cold, but she ignored the discomfort. She tried to watch where she stepped in the darkness, but it was difficult. She stumbled over a rock and winced, then continued onward, relentless.

She heard cautious whispering before she discerned individual shadows within the mass of people she approached. The words were indistinct, but the tones of the voices were excited and horrified. She drew nearer and presently stood behind a gathering of men. All stared inward through the windows and single large doorway of a building. It had a sign over the door, a pair of wine bottles resting amongst grapes. A tavern.

“He must have seen the prince sitting there. We all knew he was in the back,” someone was insisting.

“If he had seen him, do you think he would have said the things he did?” another asked.

“Either way, he’s paid for it, he has. The fool.”

“I saw it! I saw it! He didn’t even give a warning! It was pure fury and purely cold!”

“Look at him,” someone else said. “Look at him. He hasn’t taken his eyes off of it.”

“How long do you think he will sit there? It’s been hours!” another voice asked.

There was more whispering, all of similar meaning. Decisively, Hanicke moved forward. Somehow, the men directly before her felt her presence. They turned, startled. They spread apart hurriedly, almost panicked to do so, even some who were soldiers and knew her. Silence reigned, profound and petrifying. No one said a word. She passed through them, ignoring their terror.

Facing the interior, leaning with his hand on the frame, stood Captain Liudger. He stared inward silently, his face blank, unreadable. Hanicke stopped beside him and peered inside. The large, low-beamed room was empty save for one seated occupant. Ugoth sat on a bench before one of a number of trestle tables. A pewter goblet was lifted to his lips. He sipped it, lowered the goblet, regarded the object before him and raised the pewter again. Shards of pottery and tipped goblets littered every table therein, as if recent occupants had dropped them in great haste. The floor was similarly strewn. Wine and beer had been spilled and left

forgotten. Ugoth saw none of it. He stared only at one thing, one awful thing, his face emotionless.

Half on the bench next to him, a body draped backward onto the floor. The legs remained where they should have been, under the table, but where the head should have been was a pool of dark, congealing blood. On the trestle table, its hair bloodied and standing upright as if it had been used for a handle, sat the head of Isidur, its eyes half shut, the dead mouth open in a sneer of disdain. Next to it lay the prince's bloody sword.

Hanicke watched Ugoth take another sip from the goblet. His stillness, his silent contemplation was ominous. She moved a step forward.

"Don't," hissed Liudger, placing a hand on her arm. "He's unapproachable just now. He won't even have me there."

"He has made a promise," she reminded.

"He's too drunk to remember it. He's dangerous. I came here to arrest Isidur, but Ugoth ordered me out, along with all my men. He *let* Isidur insult his way to that end. He's gone over the edge. Keep away!"

Liudger's earnest warning attracted Ugoth's attention. He turned toward them and then lurched up, his face suddenly animated, all wrath and deathly intent. His hand reached for the sword. Perhaps instinct told Hanicke his anger wasn't directed at her. Perhaps she was just being a fool, but she shrugged out of Liudger's grasp. Liudger was wise and let her go.

She went in, heedless of the shards that could cut into her small feet. At her approach, the prince's wrath seemed to fade like smoke. He released his sword and sank down onto the bench, watching her flatly. She continued forward. Eventually, she met one of the awaiting shards and winced, biting her lip to keep from crying out.

"Haven't you even the sense to wear shoes?" Ugoth mocked her. He made no effort to get up and save her from her predicament.

She ignored him, making her way to the bench at the opposite side of the trestle table, dripping small spots of blood. The spots didn't compare to the lake of it on the prince's side. She lifted her skirt and stepped over the bench, then seated herself across from him. Isidur's head sat on the planks between them, a pool of red surrounding it like a platter.

Ugoth raised his goblet again, staring at her with impenetrable disdain. She found a vessel lying on its side next to the grisly head. She righted it and poured wine from the prince's bottle into it. She took a sip. It was a relief to her dry mouth, but she almost choked as it went down. She felt she couldn't swallow right. Her throat burned.

"It's Anasinian wine," he said. "It's somewhat stronger than what you might be accustomed to."

His tone still mocked. His words did not slur. His voice was as cold and well modulated as she was accustomed to hearing, but she knew he was far gone into the cup. His skin was flushed. His eyes appeared to have trouble focusing, for he squinted at her. She took another sip of the wine without comment, a smaller sip. This time, she let the taste sit on her tongue before swallowing.

"It's not bad once you've been warned."

He lifted a brow in sardonic amusement. "Isidur seemed to enjoy it."

He attempted to pour himself more and found the bottle empty. He threw the offending container across the room. It shattered on the far wall. Hanicke did not turn her head, nor betray any of sense of disquiet.

"What did he do?" she asked.

Ugoth glared at her, forgetting what he'd been about. He seemed to realize her question and squinted suspiciously.

"What did he do?" he repeated. He thought on it, just as he'd thought on it for the last two hours. Eventually, he answered her. "He reached the limit of my patience," he said.

He looked around for the bottle and frowned to find it missing. Hanicke passed him her goblet, making a small detour around the platter of blood. He accepted it without comment and took a sip while watching her. She said nothing. Ugoth seemed unable to resist the silence while the alcohol boiled inside his body, because he spoke again.

"Do you know; he wrote a message the moment he returned to our base in the fields here. He wrote it and he sent it home with one of my pigeons. He sent it to my father, wrote that I had fallen under the spell of a witch. He requested that I be recalled immediately, to get any needed *attention*." He almost spat these last words.

So, that had been the meaning of the incident below the window. Ugoth passed the goblet back to her. She took it up and risked another small sip. The liquid burned its way down her throat, as strongly as the

first time. She repressed a cough. Her bland expression did not fool Ugoth. He smiled mockingly at her. She passed the goblet back. He took it and drained it.

“That wasn’t the limit of your patience,” she said with certainty.

“No,” he admitted, the mocking smile gone. He hadn’t looked at the head since she’d sat down. He no longer appeared inclined to do so.

“What was it, then?”

“What have you done to me?” he asked in turn.

She stared at him. Abruptly, she lifted the hair off the back of her neck and placed her head on the table. Her cheek came to rest on Isidur’s blood.

“What are you doing?” he snapped.

“If you think I am a witch and that I have ensorcelled you, you might as well end your problem now and cut off my head, too,” she said.

He didn’t answer. She listened as he rose from the bench. She waited in the tense silence, waited for the sound of his sword to be lifted from the table, for the noise it would make falling upon her neck. Neither came. Instead, Ugoth roared.

“Get your head off the fucking table!”

She sat up. Isidur’s blood dripped down her cheek and fell upon the green dress. She swiped her cheek with her sleeve. A smear remained. Ugoth’s stare burned down on her. He put his two hands on the table and leaned forward until he hovered over the decapitated head.

“Do you really want to know what made me do it?” he said.

She nodded.

“He said a number of things about me. He knew I was here, listening. He looked at me when he entered. I’d only just taken a seat when he staggered in. He compared me to my father and my brother. He said I didn’t live up to their fine examples. He said I’d been a fool and let myself be ensorcelled. Then he said that I’d put my two balls into your hands like a eunuch begging for them to be preserved. *He said I was such an effeminate waste that I needed a hag to make a man of me.*”

Hanicke flushed in the dim light. He was close enough to see the change of hue. He bent even closer. His abdomen touched the tip of Isidur’s blood soaked hair.

“What is this joke the gods play on us, girl?” he hissed.

She knew he meant their shared features. Despite her own fear, she faced him without flinching.

“I can’t help what face they put on me.” She searched her mind desperately for a plausible reason that would appease him. “Perhaps they wanted you to recognise me somehow,” she proffered.

“As what? A sister!”

She shook her head. “No. I don’t think so.”

He roared wordlessly and slapped the head with the back of his hand. It sailed away and thudded somewhere near the rear of the tavern. He grabbed her by the front of her dress and lifted her bodily from the bench. She slid over the blood and lay across the table near the other side as he shook her desperately.

“Then tell me why!” he demanded again.

Her teeth rattled. Abruptly, the abuse ceased, and then his mouth was on hers. He groaned against her lips.

“Tell me why!” he hissed upon her face and captured her lips again.

She could barely think, let alone answer him. Distantly, or so it seemed, she heard many men yelling.

“Highness!” someone shouted.

Ugoth’s lips lifted from hers and he looked toward the door. Liudger was within the tavern, backing away from the entrance with his sword out. The golem bent within the doorway, his burning eyes directed upon them. The bystanders who had been without had scattered for their lives.

“Bloody bother,” Ugoth muttered with no apparent fear. He was perhaps too drunk to feel it. He sat on the bench, suddenly dizzy. Hanicke tumbled down onto his lap. He caught her and buried his head in her neck. He didn’t care what happened anymore. He didn’t care.

Hanicke put her hand on top of Ugoth’s head in an attempt to lift her own. She managed to get herself up long enough to see Sticks crouching inside the low room. Liudger was still backing up, uncertain what he could accomplish against the monster.

“He’s drunk,” she said to the golem.

What does that mean? the golem demanded. *Does it mean he can shake you?*

Sticks slouched over to the bench and hovered above them. Ugoth's arms were locked tight around her, and his head remained pressed into her neck. She felt his lips nuzzle her cold skin.

"No," she said. "It means he's drunk. He just killed someone. I don't think he's ever killed a man before."

The fact that Ugoth had killed Isidur had been plain to the golem the moment he'd looked in the window, but her words made him take a mental step backward. He remembered the awful, sinking sensation that murder had created inside him. Could this prince be suffering the same torment? He wasn't sure. The prince was so...predatory.

But then, Isidur might have deserved murder. Sticks had thought of killing him himself, because the man had been aiming for Hanicke's death. If there was one thing of which Sticks was certain, it was that he could murder willingly for his bush girl. He'd done it before, and Isidur, by being detestable, had been making the idea of doing it again easy. All told, Ugoth had done him a favour.

Sticks eyed the oblivious man, for once not feeling too irritated with him. The man seemed totally absorbed with Hanicke's neck. Funny creature. He was like a boar rooting for tubers.

Just to their rear, Liudger confirmed Hanicke's suspicion. "He hasn't," the knight said. "He's never even ordered an execution. He's spent most of his life going between the court and the monastery."

"The monastery?" Hanicke inquired. "He told me he'd left it when he was ten?"

Ugoth had lowered his head and commenced to nuzzle the indentation at the centre of her clavicle. He seemed oblivious to everything but what he was doing. Isidur's decapitated body moved as she kicked it in her struggle to look up at the knight captain.

Liudger's gaze danced between her and the golem. He knew he hadn't a hope of surviving an attack on this creature alone. He was forced to trust the girl to get them all through this latest crisis. The golem's face, oddly expressive, seemed to look down at the prince sadly. Liudger opted for answering the girl's question. Sympathy seemed the prince's best chance to survive.

"He was taken out at ten, true enough, but after two years, he fought with his father to go back. Ufrid had gotten married and a baby was to be born soon. Ugoth reasoned there wasn't need for him if another heir were to come from out of Ufrid's wife." Liudger took a breath and

continued. “The king gave him a compromise. Ugoth would be permitted to study with the holy brothers, but he would do so without vows. He would spend half the year with them during the winter. The other half of it he would spend performing his princely duties.”

Hanicke had a hard time with this information. This man, kissing the upper curve of her left breast, whose hand was working her bodice down in an effort to get at the flesh beneath, didn’t strike her as monk material. She thumped the unlikely fellow on the top of his head with her fist.

“Ow!” Ugoth lifted his head and looked at her with bleary eyes. He fixed on her bloody cheek as if noticing it for the very first time. His expression changed.

Hanicke’s eyes widened in alarm. “Get me off, Sticks!” she yelled.

The golem plucked her out of the prince’s arms with alacrity. The prince made no move to prevent the transfer. The moment she departed from his vision, he bent to the side and vomited. He choked and vomited violently again. When he was finished, he wiped the side of his mouth with a velvet sleeve and straightened up. Slowly, he lifted his legs over the bench and stood. He looked around uncertainly. Isidur’s blood and his own filth surrounded his feet. If he moved, he would likely slip and fall on the disgusting chaos he’d created.

Sticks decided he needed help. With one giant hand, he hauled the man up by the top of the cloak and set him down next to Liudger. Liudger had to drop his sword to catch the dizzy prince. The weapon clanged as it hit the floor. The Knight stumbled backward until he got his feet braced under him with the help of another table to the rear.

By this time, Hanicke stood next to the crouching golem. She shook her head sadly. Ugoth was a complete mess. So was she. Isidur’s body lay as testimony to Ugoth’s distress and anger, the captain’s head nowhere to be seen. She refused to look at the body. She was close to vomiting as well.

Ugoth seemed not so inclined to ignore his sins. His face white, he looked steadily at the evidence of his handiwork draped over the bench. Presently, he straightened away from Liudger, and without a single word or any indication that he noticed the golem at all, walked past Hanicke and Sticks and out the door. Liudger picked up his sword, sheathed it, then grabbed the prince’s weapon and followed him out into the empty street.

Let’s go sleep in the shrine, Sticks suggested.

Hanicke nodded. Let Liudger take care of the prince. Let the tavern keeper take care of this mess, these grisly remains. She wanted only to get away, get back to something simple. Such was her friendship with Sticks.

“Let’s go visit that little spring first,” she said to him. “I need to wash.”

He nodded. After bending out behind her, he picked her up and sped with her into the darkness. If anyone saw them, they kept out of sight.

By mid-morning, Ugoth was desperate to know the whereabouts of the girl. He paced from one side of the mayor’s sitting room to the other and waited for the reports to come in as to whether she’d been sighted. He felt like such a fool. He’d broken a promise to the monster, and it appeared the creature would exact its price for the offence, by spiriting the woman away forever.

As for the matter of Isidur’s murder, he gave it little further thought. The man had been a greater fool than any involved last night. A prince of the blood had the power to try and punish as he saw fit. Whether the accused had the right to hear his trial depended solely on royal preference. Isidur had been a commoner. He had insulted a member of the ruling family. He had been made to pay. It was that simple.

That wonder of male virtue, that hero of Isidur’s, the other prince of the blood, Ufrid would have taken the man’s head off long ago. Gods! He would have taken the man’s head off just for insulting a member of his family, whether he had any affection for that family member or not.

Isidur had been a fool.

Ugoth turned and paced back whence he’d come. The knuckles of his left hand hurt. Apparently he’d knocked Isidur’s head across the tavern. If so, he didn’t remember doing it. But he remembered the smell of blood and the scent of woman, the silky feel of delicate skin.

Gods! Where was she?

Liudger entered the front door and halted. Ugoth glanced at him, saw his weary, almost exasperated expression as his gaze pinned on the breakfast left uneaten in the drawing room, and continued pacing.

“Have you eaten nothing yet?” Liudger said.

“No. My stomach still feels off.”

Liudger drew in a tired breath. “How could you not have noticed she looked like you?” he demanded.

Ugoth spun about to face him. “How was I to notice? Was I standing next to her with my eyes popped out to get a view of us both together? Was I?”

“But she’s like your sister!”

“None of my sisters are like my sister!” Ugoth shouted. “They look like my mother! All of them! What? Do you think I spend all my evenings in the monastery staring into a mirror, wondering what my face would look like on a woman? Do you? Would you have recognised your own face in female form?”

Liudger conceded the point. “No. It was stupid of us not to tell you sooner. It was so obvious to the rest of us.”

Ugoth grimaced and stomped away, to then turn back and stomp the other way.

“We found her,” Liudger announced.

Ugoth stopped and stared at him. “Where?”

“They were in the temple, sleeping.”

“Sleeping?”

“Yes.”

“Both of them?”

Liudger nodded. Ugoth blinked.

The giant slept. It was a weakness. How often did he need to? For how long?

Ugoth shook his mind free of these questions. “How did they enter?”

Liudger shrugged. The answer seemed obvious now that they knew about the monster. “I suspect the golem climbed over the gate with her. He’s tall enough and strong enough, even while carrying someone or something. As for the locked door, I don’t know for certain. You would have to ask the girl. There was no sign of damage.”

Ugoth was fully dressed, with all his armour on. He grabbed his cloak, which he’d tossed over a chair, threw it over his shoulders and made to walk out past the knight, but Liudger didn’t move from his path.

“You could just leave her go, Ugoth,” he said. “What’s the point of getting her back? Isidur’s dead. Let her and the golem go back to where they were happy.”

“I don’t want to let her go back!” Ugoth snarled. “Get out of my way!”

But Liudger would not budge. Insults the prince would not tolerate, but he would listen to reason if a man stood up to him without cowering. “It’s not too late, Highness. I can take her wherever you want, somewhere safe, somewhere out of Ulmenir. You’d be better off without her, and she’d be better off out of this kingdom. You know it.”

“Damn it, Liudger! I’m not an idiot! I’d already decided to take her up to Stohar last night, before that son of a bitch walked into the tavern and started mouthing off about my less than exemplary manliness!”

“Let’s not talk about that idiot and his lies, shall we? It still turns my stomach, remembering you sitting with his head.” In the face of Ugoth’s growing impatience, Liudger hurried on with his appeal. “So we are agreed? We take the girl to Stohar?”

“After I take her to the capitol.”

“What! How is that to help her?”

“It’s not for her! I want that golem in the monastery. If the gods truly have an interest in that monster, then let the holy brothers look it over. I know of no men closer to the gods than the monks of Turamen. None of the other orders compare. And the damned priests of the church would just take one look at the creature and howl for fire.”

Liudger conceded the battle. “You’ve a point. If the gods did send that girl to the monster, they must have had a reason. Do you think Abbot Gaved might discover the truth?”

“If not him, then Herfod.”

“Oh. Right. Canny little fellow, isn’t he? For a senile old pest.”

Surprised, Ugoth smiled and then shoved Liudger out of the way. “You’re still pissed he accidentally knocked a jar of paint on your head from the second floor window and ruined your best suit.”

Liudger followed him out, grimacing. “I still have a bump on my crown. And the day after, he mashed me with a pot full of chicken livers. Uncooked! Half went down my breeches. Tell me how he managed that

by accident? I was wearing a belt, and it was unbuckled when we got up off the floor. I tell you, he did it on purpose and he's still laughing."

"Then apologise for referring to him as a doddering miscreant hiding behind a habit."

Well, that was unfair. He'd only said that after the dropped jar of paint.

But Liudger shut his mouth on further complaints, knowing they were useless. Ugoth adored old Herfod. Always had. Liudger suspected he'd just have to raise the flag of surrender and hope Herfod decided to be merciful. But he *was* a miscreant hiding behind a habit.

But perhaps the use of doddering had been a mistake.

"You shouldn't have referred to him as doddering," Ugoth called back just then.

Liudger shook his head in exasperation. Just as he'd suspected. Ugoth had only confirmed it. Miscreant Herfod was, but not a doddering one, and no one, absolutely no one, was going to save him from the wrath of a living saint. Best get on with the surrender before more than raw chicken livers made it down his breeches.

The shrine sat just outside the town where the road led off to the centre of the realm. The prince, taking long strides, arrived there quickly. Villagers had gathered at the gate and were muttering and speaking in excitement. Just inside the yard, the object of morbid interest—the shrouded corpse of Isidur—lay on the ground, waiting for its moment inside the shrine. As Isidur's executioner walked up, the people hushed and lowered their gazes.

Likely a story would spread across the kingdom, about the younger prince's murderous, evil temper. Ugoth knew this, but he walked resolutely on through the shrine yard. If he had ever truly felt the need to follow his father and mother's examples, to arrogantly ignore the lowly masses, it was now. The noise of speculative voices rose the instant he was out of sight, but he put the whispering from his mind and scanned the interior of the shrine, which the forest shade made gloomy.

The structure was more a small temple. An edifice had been built around the statue a year ago, supposedly to keep the mysterious thief out. That measure had failed, and the fence and gate had then been constructed. This, too, had been a futile effort, but all these combined additions had the makings of a fine little church. Ugoth didn't doubt a priest would be assigned here permanently and soon.

He stepped further inward, but because of the dimness, halted and waited for his eyes to adjust. Presently, he was able to make out the woman standing on the marble floor, her small feet bare. She wore a sleeveless white undergarment and held the inexplicable feather in her hand. The green dress was draped over the outstretched arms of the faceless statue at the rear. Weak light from high windows filtered down, creating a nimbus around the statue and the cloth it bore. The dress was clearly ruined. Blood, although faded from a washing, stained the bodice, the skirt and a sleeve.

Next to Hanicke, the golem stood as tall as the un-named god. The creature made no move, merely watched silently. Ugoth stepped forward. Exhibiting trust that vaguely surprised Ugoth, Liudger remained at the entrance. The prince advanced to within a few yards of the girl and halted. He gazed narrowly at her. She looked back without comment.

He had dressed in blue again. His maroon tunic was as ruined as the green dress she'd borrowed. The happenings of the night past, the atrocity, the desperation, it lay between them just as Isidur's head had lain upon the trestle table, yet all he could think of was how she'd smelled when he'd buried his face in her neck: of soap, of another man's blood, of her fine woman's smell.

He must be mad. He *was* mad. He had no idea what to say to her.

The golem broke the silence and clicked a series of words. Ugoth glanced up at it uncertainly. There was no anger on the giant's face, or recrimination. The expression it bore struck him as...compassionate?

Yes, that was it. How odd.

"What did he say?" he demanded, but softly.

He? Why'd he refer to it as a he? More odd, but somehow, the pronoun felt right. It also evoked the need to bristle into some sort of beast large enough to tear the thing to shreds. Him! Even the girl referred to the monster as him. Why? What did this say about her feelings for her inhuman companion?

Hanicke, who had turned to look up at the golem, looked at Ugoth again. "He said men should not drink alcohol. It makes them behave erratically." On an aside, she added, "We had a long conversation about wine last night."

Ugoth's skin turned a mild shade of red. So. He could be embarrassed. Hanicke made a heroic effort not to smirk.

The giant clicked again, and Ugoth lifted a brow at her, a weak effort to appear undisturbed. She mocked his expression with mimicry, but answered nevertheless.

"He said that you were very improper with me last night."

The golem was still clicking, obviously having something he wished to speak at length upon.

"He says that you are very bad at keeping promises while under the influence of wine," she continued and watched Ugoth redden further, "and that, if you should make a nuisance of yourself again, he may have to jog your memory a little."

The prince eyed the golem askance. Jog his memory?

The golem snapped more words, ready to answer the unspoken question. Hanicke repressed a smile. "He says that if you insist upon fondling me in the future, he might have to knock you on the head somewhat."

The prince considered that, then took a few steps forward until he was merely a few feet from her. He looked up at the monster without any sign of fear, then down at her. That scandalous undergarment was doing very little to conceal the objects of last night's fondling.

"Tell him that someday you may ask me to fondle you, and then you won't like it if he knocks me on the head."

Her eyes widened, and then her beautiful lips formed a smile. She giggled. "I told you he wouldn't listen," she spoke up at the golem. The golem clicked something back at her, but she shook her head.

"What did he say?" Ugoth said.

"That comment was personal."

His expression darkened. She merely lifted both brows, as if to ask him what he could do about it. He, therefore, changed the subject. "I thought you had left."

She shook her head at him. "You made a bargain with me."

“So. Is this about the recompense for your time lost at that hovel? You’ve barely been gone from it.”

She shook her head again. “No, that’s not it. You promised to investigate my claim to innocence of the charge of witchcraft. Once you do, you’ll find everything I said was true. Then you can give me a written declaration, so that if ever anyone comes to bother us again, we can use it to make them leave us in peace.”

He gazed at her silently upon this assertion. He felt as if a pit had formed in his stomach, a chasm straight to a hell. Self-pity, wretchedness, rage; these all roiled beneath the rim of this black pit, ready to erupt.

Us. Leave *us* in peace.

She was concerned with nothing more than getting this irksome business over with and getting the hells away from him.

She was staring at him, frowning. “You’re doing it again,” she said.

“Doing what again?” he inquired icily.

“Getting angry with me for something that I don’t understand. What have I done this time?”

Ugoth didn’t answer. His emotions were too volatile for a sane response. This woman! What had she done to him? He’d gone insane the moment he’d laid eyes on her. He couldn’t comprehend it. No woman compared to this one. None had caused this turmoil, this madness that shook him to the core. In four days, she had driven him mad.

The golem spoke again. Furious that the creature had influence over her that he apparently could never have, Ugoth wanted to tear his sword from its scabbard and hack the monster to pieces, but with a will, he refrained. Hanicke frowned up at the creature. She shook her head, but the golem insisted.

“What is it?” Ugoth said harshly.

She looked back at him uncertainly. She tried to shake her head again at the golem, but it snapped at her. She stamped her foot in frustration.

“Tell me what he said,” Ugoth insisted.

“You won’t like it,” she said, her gaze mutinous. “I told him, but he doesn’t want to listen. He doesn’t understand how things work.”

“Tell me anyway.” His curiosity had surmounted his anger at this point.

The golem clicked his own endorsement of this demand. Hanicke huffed and began the translation.

“He wants to know if you have a proper little princess in a perfect little castle bearing your proper little children,” she said reluctantly. Her gaze averted from him.

Taken aback, Ugoth momentarily forgot his anger. “What?” he repeated stupidly. His eyes narrowed upon her. “Did you say that to him?”

She wouldn’t look at him. He glanced up at the golem. The golem nodded faintly. Ugoth repressed the urge to grab her and shake her. What was she doing, discussing these matters with a thing that had no real means of understanding them?

“I don’t have a wife,” he said tersely.

The golem clicked. Ugoth’s brow rose imperiously. Hanicke, peeking at him only a second, reluctantly continued with the translation. “He said you should get one so that you can stop pestering me.”

Ugoth glared ice at the monster. “It wouldn’t make a difference if I had a perfect little princess,” he said to it.

Hanicke shook her head in disgust. Sticks wasn’t making this any easier for them.

Ugoth’s glare turned down to the woman. She was embarrassed and still wouldn’t look at him. It appeared that she’d argued the case with the golem previously, to no avail. “What exactly did you tell him about how things work?” he said.

Hanicke scowled. He just would have to make her explain the entire conversation she’d had in private with Sticks. He was so stubborn! And irritating! She could just reach up and bite him. Somewhere. Anywhere! On that fine chin of his to start.

“I told him that you weren’t going to have any lasting interest in me. That as soon as you’d finished playing the fiddle, you’d be off looking for another woman,” she said defiantly.

“Playing the fiddle?”

“You know what I mean!”

He pretended otherwise with a withering lift of golden brows, and she could no longer contain her anger. Immensely irritated, she hopped up and down, stomping into the flagstones her utter vexation.

“Men! You always pretend we don’t know! Do you think women are all stupid? We know you mess about with everyone you get the opportunity to toy with. And you! You’re a prince!”

“Which means what exactly?” he asked mildly, crossing his arms. This was getting interesting. Was she actually jealous? He hoped so.

She did another small dance of female outrage. “That means that mayors, in every village you visit, throw their doxies at you so that they can scrub your pretty royal ass and give you back rubs!” she shouted with all her might, stamping again in irritation. Her injured foot came down a little too hard. “My foot!” she bawled.

He caught her before she tumbled to the floor and lowered her gently until she sat upon the flagstones. Blood welled from a gash in the ball of her left foot. He touched her flesh.

It was so cold! He was such an idiot. Here he was, fully dressed, and she had nothing dry but her underthings. He stood, unclasped his cloak and placed it on the floor. He lifted her up and sat her on it, caring not if her blood stained it. While he wrapped the cloak around her shoulders, the golem crouched down and clicked softly at her, concern evident in a gentle touch to her now hidden leg. Ugoth shoved his finger off.

“Get that dress over there,” he commanded it.

The golem looked at him angrily, then reached up without standing and brought the velvet dress down from the statue. Ugoth snatched it and ripped the garment up the seam. He took a knife from out of his boot and cut a strip with which to wrap her cold and bleeding foot.

“You did this last night,” he said.

“Yes,” she answered with a small voice.

“And yesterday afternoon, you were eavesdropping during my bath.”

She’d been hoping he’d forgotten that revelation. She looked at him guiltily. He mocked her with a smirk. She jerked her leg from out of his hands, one of which had travelled up to her calf.

“They eavesdropped last time, too,” she said smugly.

“What?”

“The serving women. They listened last time, too. They said you didn’t speak, had your way with her, and sent her out. You are *so* charming,” she scoffed.

Ugoth went stiff with umbrage. “You can be sure I would keep you long enough for seconds before I send you packing,” he snarled at her.

“You are assuming that seconds would be of interest to me.”

Ugoth’s mouth opened to retort. Sticks snapped so loudly, they both looked up at him, startled.

The golem was yelling at them. Both of them. Hanicke blanched, then reddened.

“What did he say now?” the prince all but shouted. Her green eyes glinted at him from beneath her lashes, all devilment and humour suddenly. Ugoth was not amused.

“He said if we don’t stop arguing, he’s going to knock both our heads.”

The prince gaped at the giant. The great monster glowered meaningfully down them both.

“Fine,” Ugoth acknowledged brusquely. He sheathed his knife, picked the girl up, cloak and all, and stood.

“What are you doing?” she asked him.

“I am taking you back to the Mayor’s house, where your injury can be looked after properly,” he informed her coolly. She opened her mouth to protest, but the prince was having none of it. “Be quiet!” he snapped.

She shut her mouth, scowling. Since he was already striding toward the entrance, she decided to be wise and shut up. For now.

They passed Liudger, who eyed them both wryly. The prince ignored him, but Hanicke lifted a sardonic brow back at the knight captain. Behind Ugoth’s back, Liudger smirked and followed the unlikely pair of future lovers out.

Chapter Nine

They were not to make it back to the mayor's house. One of Liudger's men stood at the bottom step of the shrine, waiting for them to emerge. A sergeant of Isidur's stood just behind.

"Your Highness?" the prince's guard spoke.

"What is it?" Ugoth said. He stalled in front of the man.

"The sheriff of County Morelith is in the encampment. He's in something of a state. He says that half the population of one of his larger villages has disappeared overnight. He was looking for Captain Isidur. Apparently, they were in communication with each other about the troubles there."

Ugoth momentarily shut his eyes in aggravation. Of all the times for him to chop off a man's head!

"Lead the way," he ordered the guard. He proceeded after the man, a very quiet Hanicke in his arms. He was stopped again just at the gate.

"Your Highness!" This time, a quavering elderly villager had spoken.

"Yes?" the prince said, curtailing his impatience with a will.

"What do we do about *it*?" the old man said, his wrinkled finger pointing at the open shrine doors.

Ugoth had no idea what he was on about. His restraint forgotten, he responded with an annoyed snap. "What do you mean?"

The old man gulped and took a step away. "The monster in the shrine?" he explained fearfully.

"Oh, that. Just leave him alone. He'll depart when he's ready." He prepared to step onward when he had a cautionary thought. He turned slightly. "Mind you don't bother him. He won't harm anyone if he isn't disturbed." He pinned a glare on the man. "I would be most displeased if my orders were disobeyed."

“Y—yes, Y—your Highness,” the old fellow stammered. He looked sideways at the body on the ground at his feet.

Ugoth, frowning, glanced down briefly at the shrouded corpse. There was a large lump in the centre of the pall. Isidur’s head rested on his stomach. Coolly, Ugoth averted his face and stepped onward. Isidur could wait for his funerary service. He wasn’t in a rush any longer.

“Thank you,” Hanicke whispered up at him, “for telling them to leave Sticks alone.”

“I didn’t do it for you or even him,” he whispered back.

“Then why?”

“I just didn’t want any idiot villagers to get killed,” he said gruffly.

“Thank you anyway,” she said.

He walked on without answering. The encampment was in a fallow field just outside the village. Ugoth knew the way, but preferred to let the guard lead, who was an efficient fellow in possession of an effective menacing scowl. Any villagers inclined to gawk at the prince moved from his path quickly, and soon their way to the encampment was clear.

Perhaps as many as twenty, the tents spread up unto the edge of the field, leaving a wide berth between the first small row and the village. They were all constructed of the same dull beige canvas, but three were larger than the others. Before one of these, a standard drooped. This particular pavilion stood near the centre of the camp, with some space between it and the others. Ugoth’s man made his way to this central shelter, the prince following along steadfastly.

The identifying standard hung laxly in the windless air. Hanicke discerned the gryphon picked out in gold thread on the black cloth and realized this must be the prince’s personal pavilion. Obviously, he’d been using a smaller shelter during the foray to her hut. Beforehand, she’d thought that tent large. Now that she could see within some others, she discovered that three men were expected to share the interior of these smaller structures.

Neither of the remaining two pavilions was decorated outside by a standard. A small group of men talked in front of one. They stopped and watched as the prince approached his own. He ignored them. His guard lifted the flap for him, and he bent to pass beneath.

Hanicke found herself in a space of considerable comfort. There was furniture: a cot, a small desk and a chair. Furs were thrown about as rugs,

and finer ones were on the foot of the bed for extra covers. A tall stand bearing a roundish object beneath a black velvet cloth waited near the entrance. Hanicke blinked at it in mystification, until she realized what the object must be.

A glow ball. She was in the presence of a glow ball. This circumstance seemed more impressive to her than that a prince carried her in his arms. Such things were a rare sight for the eyes of a commoner of little wealth. Not even her father had possessed a glow ball, but he had owned a few sticks, which he'd taken out on rare occasions as a treat for her. They'd been old, and the biotic jelly beneath the glass had been near dead, the glow from the liquid faint.

Hanicke's gaze shot around the confines of the pavilion, seeking more such wonders. A brazier sat in the centre of the expanse. She searched elsewhere. There, standing at attention on a desk, which was covered with an orderly pile of papers, inkpots and quills, were thin sticks, each in a brass holder and protected with black velvet hoods. Glow sticks. Ugoth had glow sticks. They had to be new. The jelly must be bright, to need black velvet.

She lost her view of them as Ugoth continued inward. The tent was sufficiently large to add more furnishings. As it was, it seemed somewhat barren once the desk was out of sight, because there was nothing more than the cot, which Ugoth set her down upon. Still, even the small bed was richly appointed, with a quilt fashioned from silk scraps, the embroidery around each section worked in gold coloured thread.

"So," she said. "This is how one succeeds in keeping oneself in peak condition without turning into a perfectly perfumed ass."

Ugoth grabbed her face roughly, tilted her head and kissed her firmly. He gave her chin a quick tug for punishment as he released her. "This is enjoying the benefits of my rank," he said. "Be thankful. You will be making use of all this in the very near future. Now, shut up and be good!"

"You are so arrogant!" she huffed.

For answer, he performed a courtly bow at the entrance and strode outward. Immediately outside, two of Isidur's former sergeants and a stranger met him. This would be the sheriff of Morelith. He was a middle-aged man, short, but well built. His clothes were of sturdy brown linen and wool. He had a beard and moustache of curly red hair, which matched the thatch on his head. For some reason, Ugoth found his

colouration oddly interesting and could only stare as the sheriff bowed. He barely remembered to acknowledge the man's presence with a short nod. Why should red hair give him such a turn?

"Your Highness," the stranger began, but Ugoth lifted a finger for silence and directed his attention to one of the sergeants.

"Have one of your men go into the village. Have him fetch female servants from the mayor's house. They are to bring more clothing, shoes of a proper fit, and bandages."

"Boys clothes!" a feminine voice hollered from inside the tent, for which the sheriff's eyes widened in shock.

"Ignore that," Ugoth commanded the soldier complacently.

Something thudded against the tent flap. A glow stick rolled down near his feet, uncovered and glowing bright on the trampled earth. Fortunately, it hadn't broken. But then, Brother Herfod had done something to make the glass tougher. Likely prayed over the set.

The glow sticks and the ball were a gift from a few years back, given on his sixteenth birthday. Old Herfod had apparently crafted them himself, but he'd not said so to the receiver of the gift. Abbott Gaved had told Ugoth later. Herfod was apparently a genius at alchemy, but one would never know it, the way he acted so forgetful and oblivious at times.

Ugoth flipped the glow stick back under the flap with a casual toss of his boot, then directed his attention to the second sergeant present. "I want all of the correspondence belonging to Isidur brought to my tent. Bring any maps as well."

Both sergeants saluted and turned about to accomplish their tasks. But for the presence of Liudger, who'd been waiting to the side, the sheriff stood alone in front of the prince. Ugoth eyed him more closely. His clothing was stained with sweat and dirt, his hair grimy from the dust of the road, and his eyes reddened with exhaustion.

"Tell me briefly what has brought you here," Ugoth ordered the man. He did not invite him into the tent. That would have to wait. Let the girl explore it a bit longer; then he'd have at her for getting off the cot when she should have been resting her injured foot.

"I am Juren Kraf, sheriff of Morelith. I've been expecting Captain Isidur's troop to appear for weeks now," said the sheriff. "I'd written to tell him that the situation was worsening. The last message from him

arrived to say he would be in Morelith County within the fortnight, but the terrible thing happened in Holds, and now I hear Isidur is dead. What am I to do?"

"You are to tell me what happened, sheriff," Ugoth repeated firmly. So. Isidur's men hadn't told the sheriff exactly what had become of Isidur yet. Ugoth was surprised. Then again, they were perhaps keeping their mouths shut, thereby making certain that none of their heads rolled as well. Ugoth pulled his mind from this conjecture as the sheriff continued speaking.

"Half the population of Holds village disappeared in the night. In one night! The first I heard of it, fugitives were rushing into Morelin village, saying that their families and friends had disappeared from their beds. Those lying next to them woke up to find them gone without a trace."

"There were no signs of violence?"

The sheriff shook his head. "None." He swallowed nervously. "I went, of course. I went and found nothing. The morning after I arrived, half were gone again, including some I had brought with me. I came here as soon as I learned where Isidur's troop was, but no one will tell me where he is. Did the witch reported to be in these parts murder him? If so, it is a terrible loss. He was the finest soldier, a warrior of no little prowess. Morelith may have lost all hope of fighting the hag of Petrich off."

"Don't be so certain of that," Ugoth said irritably. The man was as abrupt as that head of red hair, and he proved Ugoth's unkind consideration again by ranting further unwelcome accolades to the late Captain Isidur.

"But he knew everything! He was the best witch hunter the kingdom ever boasted!"

"Well, now he's not!" Ugoth snapped. Damn Isidur! He was managing to aggravate him from beyond the silence of death. And Kraf didn't deserve that red hair. He just didn't. Ugoth had no idea why he felt that way, and this irritated him further. Somehow, Kraf sullied the colour.

Ugoth's outburst took the sheriff aback. He stared at him dismay. This young man, this prince, Kraf understood he was an untried soldier. He was aware that His Highness spent half of every year in a monastery and that he had done so since he was ten, for it was a national pastime to gossip about the Ulmeniran royal house. Virtually everything the noble family did was common knowledge.

If it had been Prince Ufrid standing before him, Kraf would have been certain his great need would be met with assistance. But this unproven almost-monk? He was not sure of him at all. Had he not heard that the ancient Turamen Order was a failing, fumbling sect? How could anyone, taking an education from that lot, be good at anything?

“Was there nothing untoward the nights of the disappearances? Nothing at all?” Prince Ugoth asked him.

Kraf pulled his despairing thoughts together and answered. “There was a great mist both nights. On the second night, the villagers remained locked within their homes. None would venture out in it.”

“Did anyone stay awake throughout the night? To watch over the sleeping.”

Kraf nodded his head solemnly. “They were the ones to vanish the second night. Now the village stands deserted. All have fled. But I do not think it is over.”

“What do you mean?” Ugoth said.

“The mist that came on both nights expands. My men sent pigeons ahead to me, in every village where I searched for Isidur. All the messages report that, with each passing night, the evil fog creeps further away from Petrich and into my district.” He swiped grit from his sweaty brow, his eyes glinting somewhat of the desperation he felt. “Can you do aught for me, Prince?”

“We will soon see,” Ugoth said. He nodded at Liudger. “Can you put him up in your tent?”

The knight captain dipped his head in affirmation, but the sheriff shook his own desperately. “We must go! It approaches the next village even as we stand here!”

“You will go and rest,” Ugoth denied him. “Do not think to make yourself useless with exhaustion. I will speak with you again later this afternoon.”

He turned, lifted the flap and stalked back into his tent. He immediately bumped into Hanicke, who had been eavesdropping near the entrance. He clutched her before she toppled over.

“Can you not do as you are told even once?” he said, repressing the need to shake her or do something else.

“You told me to shut up, not be still,” she protested, blinking up at him innocently. In nothing but the skimpy, not-so-innocent under dress, the need to do something else to her was becoming a terrible distraction.

“Aaah! You irritating woman!” He picked her up and dumped her back onto his cot. “Be still!” he barked, turning his back on her before his resistance faded.

“Oww!” she said.

There were no springs beneath the mattress. The cot was nothing more than a board with a mat over it. She pulled the cloak around herself and glowered at Ugoth, who ignored her and went to sit at his desk, which faced the door. He spread a parchment before him, opened an inkpot and took up a quill. He began to write. She watched him quietly, but broke the silence after a bare minute.

“What are you writing?”

“I told you to be quiet!” he said irritably, refusing to look at her.

Fine. Hanicke wiggled herself into a more comfortable position, which included a clear view of him. Finally, she could gaze at him unhampered by the presence of any others.

This perfect moment wasn’t to last. Thudding boot steps approached. The shadow of a soldier appeared upon the entrance flap.

“Enter!” the prince called before the man had a chance to announce his presence.

Just as the flap lifted, he hastily peeked over to ensure that the cloak properly covered Hanicke. Ripper thrust inward, carrying a sack of correspondence and several leather tubes that held maps. The prince barely glanced at him, then turned his face back to the letter.

“I have brought the communications you requested, Highness,” Ripper reported.

“Put them next to me,” Ugoth said.

Ripper did as bidden and turned to go. He glanced at Hanicke, who sat on the bed, but made no other motion to betray he was aware of her presence. In fact, he seemed in a hurry to leave. His hand was on the flap again when Ugoth forestalled his escape.

“Ripper!” the prince barked.

Ripper started. He spun about and drew to attention at once, his grey cloak swirling about him. He blinked worriedly at the prince's down-turned head.

"Which of the sergeants has seniority?" Ugoth asked.

"That would be Omerle, Highness," Ripper said without hesitation.

"Go and tell him he is now captain," Ugoth commanded. He had not looked up at the soldier, merely continued his writing, as if uninterested in Ripper's presence other than to see his will done. Ripper acknowledged the instructions and left quickly.

"Aren't there supposed to be lieutenants or something?" Hanicke asked from the cot.

"Not for a bannerless troop," Ugoth said tersely.

"Oh." She had no idea what he meant. Ugoth seemed to know, for he lifted his quill and looked at her.

"The nobility have banners," he explained, "a standard like the one outside my tent. If a knight, such as Sir Liudger, were to have a troop, he would have a banner. If, in that troop, there was a junior of noble birth, the junior would likely become the lieutenant under Liudger. Bannerless troops have soldiers and sergeants, with captains of common birth commanding them."

Seeing that he'd finished his explanation, she thanked him politely. He nodded and went back to scratching at the paper. Another shadow fell over the door. A woman's figure stood outside, the motions of her silhouette uncertain, for she raised her hand as if to knock, then lowered it, then backed a step, then drew forward again. This time Hanicke called instead of the prince.

"Come in."

The woman entered hesitantly. Ugoth looked up briefly to see whom Hanicke had permitted into his private tent. Seeing the serving woman, he turned his head and continued writing. Hanicke recognised the bolder servant she'd met last night, although today she didn't seem all that plucky any longer.

"I hurt my foot," she told the woman.

The servant came forward. She carried a basket filled to overflowing with clothing. She set it on the floor and knelt down next to the cot. "I will need to see it, Lady," she said cautiously.

“I’m not a lady,” Hanicke informed her. The prince made a noise that sounded suspiciously like an amused snort. Hanicke glared at his turned head briefly. “I mean I don’t have a title. My father was a landowner, but the title was unimportant and not hereditary for the women of his line,” she explained to the woman. “What is your name?”

“Kara,” she said. Hanicke poked her foot out from beneath the prince’s cloak. Kara took it up and proceeded to unwind the green fabric.

“The dress is ruined,” Hanicke said.

Kara nodded, but didn’t speak. She unwound the last of the velvet and looked carefully at the cut. It was deep and still seeping blood at the centre. It appeared to be clean. “You must not walk on this,” she told Hanicke. “The cut is jagged and the edges are apart. I think I must sew it.”

Hanicke hastily withdrew her foot beneath the cloak. Kara’s face lifted, to discern the refusal in the other’s expression. She frowned seriously. “It must be done,” she insisted. “There’s no priest here to cure you of your wound. If you don’t let me sew it, it will get dirt in the centre and fester. Men have lost their feet for less.”

Hanicke’s eyes widened in alarm.

“She’s right,” Ugoth said. He was dusting fine sand over the letter he had written. “Did you bring the necessary material?” he asked the woman.

Kara nodded and dug in her basket.

“Very good. I will hold her foot still while you perform the task.”

“You will not!” Hanicke protested. Ugoth’s ruthless countenance informed her otherwise. “Don’t I get to ease the pain in the foot first?”

Kara glanced at her. “How would you do that? You don’t want to get drunk first like the men, do you? They’re such babies.”

“Men are babies?” Ugoth repeated.

“A poultice. Herbs,” Hanicke said. She grabbed Kara’s shoulders. The woman had been looking back at Ugoth with a sheepish half grin. “Don’t you have an herbalist here? An herb garden?”

“We have an herb garden behind the mayor’s house,” Kara said.

“What’s in it?”

Kara listed the many herbs growing there. Most were culinary, and none were what Hanicke wanted.

"I need to go into the woods," she told Ugoth.

"Why?" he said suspiciously.

"To get a root. They don't have what I need here."

"You can't walk on that." He pointed at her foot.

"Sticks can get it for me."

Her eyes implored him to relent. Ugoth hesitated. He wasn't about to carry her out to speak to the golem again.

"Please!" she begged.

He shook his head in exasperation and turned to withdraw from the tent. "What is the name of the root?" he said at the entrance.

"Black cow's udder," she responded.

Ugoth lifted a brow, mildly amused. "I never heard of that in the monastery."

"I know it isn't the right name. It's what it looks like. Sticks will know what to look for," she assured him.

"He does understand what is being said to him, does he not? By others than yourself?" Ugoth asked, his eyes narrowed.

"Yes," she said. Ugoth nodded and left.

"Now's as good a time as any to dress you," Kara said to the smaller woman.

"Do you think you can find any boy's clothing for me?" Hanicke asked eagerly.

"You can't wear boy's clothing. You're a woman." Kara eyed her with evident shock. Was this witch-cousin of the prince crazy after all?

"I know that. I don't want to ride a horse in skirts," Hanicke explained.

"But I have a riding dress for you. We spent all night taking in the mayor's wife's clothing. It'll do even for a man's saddle."

Hanicke didn't understand what she meant by a man's saddle. She shook her head desperately. "But my thighs will rub raw again!"

"Your thigh's rubbed raw? Have you never ridden before?"

“Not till the prince brought me out of the forest.”

“Well, you can’t have been riding correctly, then,” Kara said unhelpfully. “You’ll get used to it.”

“That’s a big help. Thank you.”

Kara knew sarcasm for what it was. This small woman hardly looked the evil witch everyone said she was. In the light of the day, she seemed a fragile, little creature, one that pouted like an importunate child. “Are you really the prince’s cousin?” Kara dared to ask. Hanicke nodded. Kara was encouraged to be more daring. “Are you a witch?”

“No,” Hanicke said.

Kara frowned. “Then why does the monster serve you?”

“He doesn’t. We’re friends. The gods sent me to be with him.”

Kara’s eyes widened with awe and she bent forward, fascinated. The other women would be begging her to tell what she’d heard today. She grew bolder still, clutching at her thin apron in her eagerness to learn more. “Is the prince your lover? Is that why he didn’t want Mavianna last night?”

That was going a bit too far. “I’m not going to answer that,” Hanicke snapped.

Kara’s expression dropped in disappointment. Just then, Ugoth re-entered the tent. Kara flushed and began to dig in her basket again, pretending to reorder the contents.

“I sent Ripper after him. The golem’s already gone from the shrine,” Ugoth said.

He approached the two women and looked down cagily. Hanicke wondered if he’d overheard what Kara had asked her. At that moment, Hanicke’s belly squealed. It was a grumble of enormous emptiness. She crouched smaller in the cloak, embarrassed.

“Are you hungry?” Ugoth inquired.

“I’m starving,” she said. “I haven’t eaten since noon yesterday.”

Ugoth frowned. “Didn’t you eat supper?”

“I think your absence at the supper table last night confused the host,” she said wryly.

Ugoth sighed in disgust. “I’ll have someone bring something in at once,” he said resignedly and left again.

This time, Kara got on with the business of helping Hanicke dress. She was just pulling a blue dress over a clean undergarment when Ugoth returned once more. Despite Hanicke's state of dishabille, he made no move to leave again. On her part, Hanicke was too busy keeping herself upright on one foot to bother worrying over this. He'd seen her in less this morning, after all.

His presence disturbed Kara, however. Blushing, the woman steadfastly continued her task until every button on the back of the blue dress was fastened and the belt tied, but after, she twisted her fingers uncertainly, not knowing what to do.

Ugoth, however, did. "Wait at the manor," he said. "I will have you sent for."

She curtsied and departed, leaving the basket behind. Hanicke sat back down. She was tired. The strain of the past few days had taken its toll. She wanted nothing more than to shut her eyes and sleep, but her stomach rebelled once more. She pressed a hand to the offended organ and looked up at the prince with big woeful eyes.

"Food will arrive shortly," he said.

His voice was deceptively mild. Subsequently, something seemed to snap inside him. Though he'd been regarding her with apparent impassivity, he was abruptly there at the edge of the cot, pressing her down onto the forgotten cloak, kissing her desperately, his hands cradling either side of her head. She shuddered, groaned against his mouth, then clutched him to her, her arms wrapping around his waist. He needed little encouragement and pressed closer still.

"Umphhh!" Hanicke yelped beneath him.

He tore his lips away, eyes dark with emotion, too disturbed to question her in any way but with silent confusion.

"Your chain mail is hurting me," she cried.

He shifted back hurriedly, concern in his expression. "I'm sorry."

Hanicke stared in surprise. His entire character had changed in an instant. Not cold, not haughty, he looked like a sweet puppy that had just been scolded. She touched his face in wonder. Was this the same man who'd decapitated someone last night and sat with the head as a drinking companion?

"Take off your chain mail," she suggested. She thought she could just swallow him with her eyes, and he seemed to burn with an answering

need. His head dipped toward hers again, but a voice announced itself outside the entrance, and Ugoth leapt up in a rush.

“Bloody, cussed hells!” he hissed. With a more careful tone, he called for whomever it was to enter. Meanwhile, Hanicke pressed herself upward into a sitting position, smiling in amusement. “If we’d gotten a little further, you’d be the one swearing,” he breathed at her.

“But not as much as you,” she said sweetly.

He laughed, then turned away as men entered the tent with her meal, and Hanicke was left with the memory of that brief sound of mirth and how wonderful it had been to hear it.

Soldiers carried in a small table and two chairs. Villagers bearing covered baskets followed them in. They laid the table and left quietly. Hanicke stood, intending to hop over on one foot, but Ugoth grabbed her before she bounded more than once. He helped her over and saw her seated without further injury to herself.

“You are a precipitous creature,” he grumbled at her. “You’ll open that cut further if you aren’t careful.” He tugged her skirt up somewhat, noted that the injury had been temporarily re-bandaged, then went back to the desk.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” she asked him. The table was set for two. There was far too much food for her on it.

He shook his head. “In a moment. You may start without me.”

He picked up the letter he had written and carefully knocked the sand off of it. Satisfied, he left the parchment and went to the entrance. He called a nearby soldier. “Ask your new captain to find a man who can read. He is to act as an envoy,” he said.

The soldier saluted, fist to heart, and departed. Ugoth returned to the desk, picked up the sack of correspondence, then went to the table and sat across from Hanicke.

“Do you recall several pages in Rhuger’s journal concerning a hag located near Lake Petrich?” he asked her.

She nodded. She’d already made her own conclusions while eavesdropping on sheriff Kraf.

Ugoth rummaged in the sack. He brought out a small bunch of papers tied together with a string. The topmost bore the seal of Morelith. “Do you think this could be the same hag?” he said.

“It’s very likely.” She bit into a hunk of cheese.

Ugoth glanced at her briefly. “They can really live that long?”

Hanicke nodded again. Having swallowed her mouthful, she said, “Somehow, the magic they force gets into them. It doesn’t seem to stop some of them from aging, but they do just seem to go on and on. I’m not sure how it works. Why age? Why not age?” She shrugged. “They seem to individually decide where they want to end up in terms of maturity.”

Ugoth considered this and then went on with his questioning. “Isidur was adamant that witches are horrified of water,” he mentioned.

Hanicke knew this was generally true, but the witch of Morelith was another matter. “Water is still one of the fundamental elements,” she said. “If a witch were to learn the way of it, she could overcome the repellent effect it has upon her.”

“Rhuger said that this particular hag would step in water each evening,” Ugoth recalled. “He wrote that she was attempting to overcome water’s power over her. He described her as writhing in pain near the end of only a few minutes.”

“It would appear that she has managed to conquer that problem,” Hanicke said.

Ugoth looked up from a letter he’d been examining. “What makes you so sure of that?”

“The mist,” she said. “She’s using water. If she can force it outward from the centre of her spell casting nexus to such an extent, she most definitely has learned to control the element.”

“That is not good for us,” he said, to which she gravely nodded with her mouth again full of cheese. He lifted a paper he’d been holding and handed it to her. “Look at this. It’s dated ten years ago. A different captain signed it. It would appear that this is not the first time our troops have sought the hag of Petrich.”

Hanicke took the letter. The report described a failure to apprehend the hag, who had managed to flee over the lake onto an island. All attempts to cross the lake had resulted in mishaps and drownings.

“There are others here dating even further back.” Ugoth rummaged through the pile until he located the oldest, a tattered account of chasing the hag across a marsh. Over half the men of that troop had been lost in the mist, never to be seen again. “Ten men out of a troop of sixteen were killed in this one,” he said, passing the document over.

Hanicke saw that it was dated over fifty-five years ago. Ugoth poured them both a glass of wine and took a sip of his own absently. "Isn't that a small troop?" she asked.

"It's the normal number of men."

"But your troop is so large!" They couldn't have wanted to send double the number of men after her. It must have been for the old witch.

Ugoth corrected her of this misapprehension. "Isidur was assigned extra men because of my presence," he said.

"Oh," she uttered. "To protect you. Of course."

He nodded. "It's an unwieldy size as these troops go. They weren't meant to be so large."

"Why not?"

"They take up too much of the resources of the villages they visit. They are meant for policing the kingdom, not making war."

She nodded in comprehension. "The size of this troop won't make a difference with this hag," she warned him.

He'd already thought of that. He put the glass of wine down and took the two reports back from her. "We have our own edge against her."

"What would that be?" she asked.

"You," he said firmly.

Hanicke's mouth dropped open. "Me! Why me?"

"You are the only expert we have in witchcraft."

"But I'm not a witch!" she blurted.

"I didn't say you were, but you are something."

She made to protest again, but he dropped the packet on the table and came around to her side. With one hand on the back of her chair, he knelt on a knee—not in supplication, but to look her in the eyes more directly. "If you don't help, a lot more villagers will die," he said earnestly.

She knew it was true, but she was upset that he asked this of her and fiddled nervously with the white feather tucked into her belt. Ugoth plucked it from her fingers, drawing it from out of the belt.

"Why do you carry this with you everywhere?" he asked.

"It's very powerful," she said.

This feather? He looked at it more closely. There was something about it, he thought. Perhaps it was just very white and that was all. The silver edging, though, that was somewhat unusual. He suspected someone had rubbed silver gilt on it at some time. It was a fashion with the nobility to do so with their writing quills, but usually only with those that had been fitted with metal nibs.

But this shaft showed no signs of tampering. She had perhaps come across a spare feather, which some careless servant of a travelling nobleman had lost, and thought it special because of the gilding.

“How is it powerful?” he asked, thinking she must have long ago blamed her own strange gifts on this simple, inanimate object.

“Well, for one thing, it saved me from the old witch,” she informed him. He gaze narrowed on her. “She was terrified of it,” Hanicke continued.

“You still have to tell me about that, don’t you?” he recalled. She nodded reluctantly. “I wonder what it is really?” he said, looking down at the feather. Perhaps there was more to it than he’d surmised.

“I don’t know. I found it inside Sticks.”

Ugoth gaze shot back up at her, and the sapphire of his eyes, warm just seconds ago, had gone cold. He handed back the feather, as if wanting nothing more to do with it, and stood again.

“If it frightened your old witch, it may prove useful against the hag of Petrich,” he said coolly. He looked around at the entrance. Someone was approaching. “Enter!” he called.

A soldier lifted the flap and strode in. “I’m Gory Taf, Highness. Captain sent me because I can read.”

He was another tall fellow. It seemed Isidur had liked to surround himself with sturdy, big men.

“What took you so long?” Ugoth wondered.

“Captain Omerle tested a bunch of us to see which was better,” he reported.

Ugoth nodded, satisfied. “Go and read the letter on my desk. If there’s anything at all you don’t understand, you need to tell me now, because you will be responsible for the answers to it.”

Taf went to the desk and picked up the letter. Ugoth sat down and began to eat, while Hanicke watched the soldier quietly. The man’s eyes

widened in surprise. He glanced sharply over at her and away again. Ah, she thought, it's about me. Taf read it through twice before presenting himself before Ugoth.

"You understand it?" the prince inquired, setting his glass down.

"Yes, Highness."

"Good." He stood and took the parchment. At the desk, he folded it carefully, but then left it lying there as he stalked over to the cot. He pulled his abandoned cloak up and withdrew the gryphon pin from it. Hanicke watched him seal the letter with wax and stamp it with his cloak pin.

"Why do you use that?" she asked. "The gryphon pin, I mean. Isn't that an heirloom belonging to the crown prince?"

"You know that much of our family heritage?" he said, casting upon her a narrow look.

"I was only a hermit for two years. I was raised by a learned man," she reminded. "My father."

"My brother threw it at my head two years back. I kept it," he said.

"Why'd he throw it at you?"

"I said that if there was any truth to the ancient legacy, he didn't have enough of the taint to warrant the token."

Hanicke blinked at him, uncertain to what he referred. She apparently didn't know as much of his heritage as she thought.

"He mocked the legend and tossed me the heirloom," Ugoth ended.

"Um, what taint?"

"The gryphon taint. It's an old family legend about a progenitor bearing the blood. It's not widely proclaimed any longer. The church frowns upon such things."

He presented the parchment to the soldier. "Go to the sheriff of Stoneacre County and see that all the questions are answered," he instructed. "Check in at the local church for any confirmation. Get it in writing. Then go to Durgven. You are not to give the responses to this letter over to anyone but me. Wait at the Monastery of Saint Turamen. I trust the holy brothers there. Tell them I sent you. They will see to your needs until I arrive."

Directly upon speaking these instructions, Ugoth dug into a drawer of his desk and from it withdrew a small sack that clinked as it moved. He took from it several silver and gold pieces and handed them to Taf. "This should take care of your expenses while you travel."

Taf nodded. "Thank you, Highness," he acknowledged, a slight glow of pleasure in his eyes, for the prince had been generous. Ugoth waved him off and the soldier turned to leave.

"Taf?"

The man wheeled back to attention. Prince Ugoth was staring at him narrowly. "Do not discuss the contents of this letter with anyone, now or on the way," he ordered the man.

"Yes, Highness." Taf saluted, fist to heart, and departed.

Ugoth went back to the business of eating. Hanicke picked up an apple and crunched into it thoughtfully. She wondered if the sheriff of Stoneacre remembered her. Probably. She'd left under very unusual circumstances, after all.

"You aren't going to ask me what I wrote?" Ugoth said.

She looked up to find him watching her attentively. She shook her head. "I can guess."

He nodded and poured her a second glass of wine. "Drink. If your black cow's udder doesn't arrive shortly, I'll be ordering that woman to sew up your foot without it. It may hurt less if you have some wine in your blood. Oh, and men are not babies when it comes to dulling pain in this way. They're practical."

She grimaced a promise of mutiny at him, to which he merely sipped his wine with a pledge of reprisal in his eyes. The man was so stubborn, but she knew he meant what he said, and just in case Ripper failed to locate Sticks, she took up her glass and drank. Practical suited her fine.

Sir Liudger settled sheriff Kraf in his tent with some inconvenience, for the man was overwrought and difficult to appease. Throughout their conversation, querulous on Kraf's part, growing more impatient on Liudger's, Kraf insisted upon knowing what had happened to Captain

Isidur. Eventually, Liudger decided to tell him. The revelation initially made matters worse.

“He cut off his head!” Kraf burst out. “He cut off his head! The only man who could have helped us has been decapitated!” He threw up his hands and almost stormed back out of the tent, but Liudger stopped him.

“Sit you down, sheriff!” he snapped. “You assume too much! Isidur was good at his duty, that I can agree, but he wasn’t the wisest man I have ever met, and I suggest you learn from his error.”

Kraf gulped and sat. What had he been thinking? He had been about to charge into the prince’s tent and accuse of him of bringing disaster down on Morelith County. Certainly that would not have been wise, especially in the light of what had been done to Isidur last night. “But is he capable? Rumour has it that he is untried!” Kraf complained.

“He’s not a stupid boy, Kraf,” Liudger said. “He has more education than his father and brother put together. Few know it, because Prince Ufrid would have it that way, but it was tactics Ugoth sketched out that won the skirmish with the Cho Korth last year.”

“Then why wasn’t he at the head of the army?” the sheriff said.

“You don’t know that family. If King Ufrid weren’t of failing health, he, not the Crown prince, would have marshalled the army. The two of them are as alike as peas. When King Ufrid was a younger man, he took all the glory for himself. Now he watches Prince Ufrid and gleans bitter pleasure from that. Prince Ufrid would no more lose an ounce of his glory to Ugoth than his father wanted to lose to him.”

“And Prince Ugoth, why doesn’t he complain of it?”

Liudger shook his head. “He’s a quiet man, our Ugoth, but he is a man. Never doubt it. Just because he doesn’t take pleasure in fame does not mean he is not a capable leader. If I know anything about him, it’s that he was planning how to proceed over the Petrich matter even as you spoke to him. You’ve given him a challenge, and he won’t turn his back on it. Up until a few days ago, this was one of the most boring missions he’s ever had the misery to be sent upon.”

“Have there been many?”

“A few, all done quietly for his father, things the older prince wasn’t any good at.” Kraf wanted to hear more, but Liudger knew when to shut up. State secrets would not be bandied about because of him. “Go rest

yourself, man,” he ordered. “The prince meant it when he said not to come back to him useless with exhaustion.”

Kraf sat back down on the second cot. Grudgingly, he lay down. Could it be that this prince could help after all? His eyes drifted shut, then snapped open in sudden fright. He leapt up in alarm. “I am mad!” he blurted.

Liudger, who’d been sitting on his bed, rose in alarm. “What are you about now?” he barked.

“I can’t ask the prince to help us! He could be killed! What would his father do then?”

Liudger laughed. “Do you think you can stop him? He’s more stubborn than anyone in the entire family. Go back to sleep.”

Kraf gaped at him uncertainly, but, seeing the look of warning on the knight’s face, did as he was told. Liudger sat on his cot again. When the noise of the sheriff’s breathing changed to the regular deep inhalations of slumber, he lay down and shut his eyes.

Ugoth. Yes, he was stubborn, and he had all of the family temper and then some, but of the two brothers, Liudger was glad to be serving this one. Ufrid did not appeal to him, especially not after one of his underlings had approached and attempted to suborn him into spying for the older prince. He still felt soiled by that solicitation.

Ufrid be damned. If Ugoth suspected the loyalty of his knight captain, he never hinted at it, and he’d never once asked him to do something that would leave a bad taste in the mouth. He was a better man to serve, temper and all.

Liudger grinned, almost on the edge of sleep. The man’s temper had been getting worse lately. Ugoth had better make his peace with the girl and get her in bed before a few more heads went flying.

As Liudger’s mind dropped toward slumber, his lips opened and three words slipped out.

“Play the fiddle,” he uttered and said no more, but he smiled as he at last tumbled into dormancy.

Ripper, standing nervously in the middle of a small clearing near the village, wondered whether to give up. He'd called for the past half hour, but the giant was not answering. He had even hollered to the silent trees what the girl wanted from him, but without any reaction.

Had he tried long enough? Where was the monster? Wasn't it supposed to be always watching Hanicke?

Ripper was still wondering what to do when an odd scratchy noise to the rear of him caught his attention. He froze, very frightened. Up above his head, something clicked. Almost involuntarily, he turned and found his eyes level with the giant's trunk, which was but a few feet away. He lifted his gaze slowly and met that of the golem's. Ripper was ready to bolt. The giant clicked again, and a large green hand opened. Resting on the palm was a dirty black root that looked like a shrunken udder. Ripper picked it up, noting with terror how much smaller his two hands were compared to the one the giant proffered.

"Thank you," he said to it.

The giant nodded and walked away. Ripper's legs collapsed under him.

"Why did I ever become a soldier?" he muttered. He picked himself up and retreated from the forest as quickly as his shaky legs would carry him.

Sticks halted beside a large bush and looked back. The man was getting up off the ground. That had been the thump, then, the one that had vibrated up from the forest floor. Sticks shook his head in sadness. Everyone was afraid of him except for Hanicke and perhaps that irritating prince.

He had left the chapel that morning to an outcry of frightened voices. The villagers had scattered back to their homes, and only the soldiers set to watch had stood their ground, but even they had looked at him with awe on their faces. He regretted having left the shrine. When he was in it, he felt closer to that hidden place that called to him. He felt peaceful there, but the villagers had wanted the use of the structure and the constant muttering and calling voices had broken his serenity. He had decided to depart shortly thereafter.

Hanicke felt the hidden place calling her, too; he was certain of it. Last night, she had stood under the statue of the faceless god and stared up at it, her expression questioning. Then her head had tilted to the side as if listening to something. Sticks had watched without comment. This silent call, it was an experience to be dealt with alone. Somehow, he knew that. So he always said nothing and merely listened as it called to him as well.

Last night, Hanicke had been first to abandon her attempt to comprehend the mystery and had seated herself upon the cold marble. He had picked her up and cradled her in his large arms, letting vines tangle around her limbs to shield her from the cold. She had fallen asleep like that, and he had drifted.

It wasn't sleep really, not like the sleep that Hanicke had. It was sort of a relaxation of who he was, until he became merely a thing that waited and watched. It was more like becoming a tree, he supposed. They waited like that, but didn't watch, not really. Well, he had eyes that would not shut, so he watched, whether he wanted to or not. It was time to watch again.

He walked to the edge of the forest, found his favourite cedar and stood under it. He suspected that this time he would wait longer before seeing Hanicke again. The prince had made it clear that he wanted the bush girl. Sticks didn't care much for this, but Hanicke showed every sign of returning that want. She was human. It was in her nature to have such a want. Sticks, however disgruntled he was over this, had no choice but to submit to the inevitable. Nature would take its course. He just wished it weren't with that annoying prince.

He wondered how many babies humans had. Pigs had ten.

He frowned. Hanicke only had two teats. Well, that meant two babies were normal.

Two babies. How long would it take for them to appear? It should be fun to play with them. They would grow up without any fear of him. This was a comforting prospect.

He settled himself into a fork of the cedar, cleared his mind, and watched.

“What will you do with this?” Ugoth asked. He was seated at a chair, peeling half of the odd root with his knife. It smelled very unappetizing. “You can’t want to eat it?”

“Not this root,” she said definitely. He’d put her back on the cot. Currently, she was reading the packet of related letters and reports concerning the hag of Petrich. “Did you know that there’s been an increase in hauntings in Morelith County?”

“It’s not so surprising, what with all the disappearances and deaths,” he said. “What do I do with this now?”

“Cut a nice flat slice.”

He did so and brought it over to her. She poked her unbandaged foot from beneath her dress, took the slice and plastered it against the cut.

“Now I just need to hold it there for a time. Kara should be sent for, and we can get this sewing over with.” She twisted the dress around her foot and used that to keep the slice in place.

Ugoth was looking at his bare fingers, his brows high. “My fingers are going numb,” he said.

Hanicke smirked at him. He realized then that she’d purposely let him cut the ugly root without protection, knowing he’d numb his hands. He said nothing and went out to send for the serving woman. He’d repay the girl for the joke later. She didn’t realize it, but he’d been raised by a consummate trickster and new how to pull some fairly harmless but very embarrassing pranks. He returned shortly after, his hands wet from washing.

“Are they better now?” she said blithely.

“No thanks to you, yes.”

He barely smiled, but she saw it. At least he could take a joke, she thought, but that wicked glint in his eyes promised revenge. Uh, oh.

“What can you do to counter water magic?” he asked, seating himself on a chair at the table.

“Me?” she said, taken aback by the question.

“Please do not pull out that tired refrain again,” he said impatiently.

“Which one would that be?”

“It runs something along the line of your not being a witch, I believe.”

She looked away, her lips becoming a thin line. With papers scattered all over her lap and her hair a barely controlled cloud of curls around her face, she looked a truculent girl child, but he knew she was capable of what he asked. "Tell me what you can do?" he insisted.

"If I admit to being able to do something, you can hang me for a witch," she protested.

"Once again, I didn't say you were a witch," he retorted.

"Then what are you saying?" she said hotly.

"I don't know!" He jumped up and strode toward her. He tugged the bodice of her dress down until the opal was exposed. "This says you are not or at least weren't a witch when it was given, but what you did to the horses says something else. You have power in you. Whether you got it from this," and he pointed at the opal, "or from that fool's journal remains to be decided."

He returned to the chair and sat with crossed his arms. If she didn't stop glowering at him, he would go back over there and smother her with kisses.

He was disappointed when she turned her head and looked pensively down at her lap. She made no effort to tug the dress back up over her bosom. This guileless immodesty almost undid his reserve. He stood again and began pacing the room.

"And what will happen to me if it came from the journal?" she asked him softly.

"I've already decided to smuggle you out of the realm and into Stohar," he confessed. "The Church of Heavenly Light isn't prevalent there. Everyone who wants a bit of magic goes to Stohar for it. There are practitioners working freely therein."

"Oh," she murmured, her green eyes round with wonder. "You'd do that? Trouble yourself for a nobody?"

"Gods damn it!" he hissed. "You're my cousin! I won't have a cousin persecuted by the damned church!" He raked his hands through his golden hair and spun about, momentarily glaring at her in passing. "What of my request, then? Can you do aught?"

She found it rather interesting, his disdain for the church. Why was he so against the Heavenly Light Order? Did he consider their members to be as avaricious and without compunction as she thought them?

“There are references in the journal about objects that can act as wards against different elements,” she said.

He halted to face her. “Such as?”

She shrugged. “Different things, stones, minerals, herbs, a combination of all of them.”

“Do you know which?”

She shook her head. “Rhuger was vague on that. He wasn’t all that methodical, you know. He seemed more excited by the various terrifying aspects of each hag than he was concerned over their methods. There’s so much he left out, so much I don’t know because of it.”

Ugoth frowned. “Can you come up with something of your own?” She gazed him worriedly. He approached and knelt before her. “If I’d wanted you drowned, it would have been done by now. I swear to you, I will see you safe, whether that should be here or north within the Stohar realm.”

“You would have drowned me if I were still ugly,” she said morbidly.

His lips thinned. “Do not be so certain. It was your eyes that arrested me the first time we saw each other, and it was your eyes again the second. You may not have worn the same face, but my thoughts were the same.”

“You were sorry for me again?”

“No! You still show your soul in your eyes, Hanicke,” he said sincerely, “and I see nothing evil in it.”

She blinked in surprise; then her expression stiffened and a caustic rejoinder spilled out. “I was wrong. You do know how to be charming.”

Ugoth realized she didn’t believe him. She thought he was trying to charm her into co-operation. “Oh, you irritating creature!” he snapped. “I can’t decide whether to shake you to death or smother you!”

“Since I’m supposed to be some sort of witch, you might as well choose the latter to avoid getting my last curse!” she shot back.

Ugoth turned red with rage, grabbed her, shook her, and smothered her. With his lips. And sometime during this punishment, the kiss changed from brutal to desperate to soft.

Once again, Hanicke clutched him to her with all her might. She made a wordless protest when his lips parted from hers, but he ignored

her and walked to the entrance of the tent. When he lifted the flap, Kara was there, waiting to enter.

Hanicke blinked. Had Kara announced herself? Hanicke blushed and peeked at Ugoth, but his face was a careful blank. Hanicke could barely hear anything, for her heart thundered violently in her ears. Perhaps she'd missed the servant's call because of this.

With downcast eyes, the woman went directly to the basket and dug in it for the needle and thread. When she looked up, her eyes arrested at the level of Hanicke's bosom, which Ugoth had semi-exposed with his previous mishandling. Kara's eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed in fascination.

"What is it?" she said. "We saw it before, when we bathed you."

Hanicke looked down, noted that her bodice was in disorder and tugged the offending fabric upward. While she was thus engaged, Ugoth knelt next to the end of the cot, snatched her injured foot out from beneath her skirt and held it fast.

"It is a divine token from one of the nameless gods," he said. "Only the pure of heart can bear it."

While Kara's eyes rounded in further awe, he glared a silent warning at Hanicke from beneath his lashes, for she had just attempted to pull her leg free. He gave her leg a small squeeze in reprisal, and she looked away, pouting. Stubborn woman. She'd do better to relax her leg than fuss at him for keeping it still.

"How did she get it?" Kara said.

"She underwent the Supplication for Heaven's Grace," he answered. He plucked the slice of root from off of Hanicke's foot and let it drop. "You may begin sewing."

"Oh! Yes," Kara said, remembering her purpose.

She threaded the needle and moved into position. Hanicke instinctively wanted to jerk her foot away, but the prince held it firmly on the cot. Ugoth stared at her, his gaze mocking. Once again, she couldn't resist glaring back. Kara began the first stitch before Hanicke realized it.

"Doesn't it hurt?" Kara asked in surprise.

"Have you started already?"

"Yes!"

"Oh. Well, it doesn't," she said.

Triumphantly, she folded her arms and looked anywhere but at Ugoth. Kara continued the procedure wordlessly, but after another minute Hanicke began to find the silence wearying and broke it.

“If you went to a monastery half of every year, why didn’t you know about the Supplication for Heaven’s Grace before you...” She hesitated, choosing her words more carefully. “...met with me several days ago?”

“I didn’t take any vows,” Ugoth said. “The monks taught me subjects other than the skills of a cleric. When it came to their own calling, they taught their juniors without me. As for herbs and medicine, I only learned basic field dressings and such.” Ugoth suddenly noticed how slowly Kara was moving and decided to hurry her. “Do be quicker, woman. You’re here to sew, not listen.”

“Not too quick!” amended Hanicke. “I don’t want to get sewn in the wrong place.”

Ugoth smirked at her, aware that she was afraid she might be jabbed and feel it.

“It’s too bad really,” Hanicke said.

“What is?” he asked.

“If you were a holy cleric, you could take care of the phantoms we are certain to come across at Petrich. Owwww!”

“I’m sorry! Truly! I’m sorry!” Kara pleaded.

The prince scowled at her, because the needle was stuck in Hanicke’s big toe. Kara plucked the offending metal out quickly. Hanicke repressed a shriek, because the woman was in enough trouble without adding to it.

“I’m fine! Just finish the job!” she said.

Kara bent to obey. She had begun to sweat in fear. She must be thinking of her poor head, Hanicke thought.

Ugoth looked up at her and lifted a brow, daring her to speak again, but she pressed her lips firmly shut, then lifted a brow back at him. His face transformed. A large grin played over it. She found his mirth irresistible and let a smile of her own answer.

He looked so wonderful smiling. What must his childhood have been like to turn him into the cold-eyed prince everyone knew him to be? Did this warmth ever come out anywhere else, she wondered? In this monastery perhaps, where he felt safe?

Kara finished the last knot and straightened. She sighed volubly. "There, all done." She glanced up at the prince uncertainly.

His expression once more impassive, he inspected the work, nodded and stood. "Thank you. We will call you if we think of anything else that might be needed."

Kara curtsied and hurried to depart. Ugoth waited until he heard the woman's footsteps recede in the distance.

"So, you think I should have been a priest?" he inquired of Hanicke. He turned to look down at her.

She shook her head. "I don't think you would have made a good one," she said bluntly.

"And why is that?"

"Well for one thing, you can't be a priest and pester women."

"Pester? You call that pestering?"

"Well, I'm not sure that it counts as pestering. I didn't have all that much time to really notice," she said.

Ugoth proceeded to give her the time.

Later in the day, when the sun hovered just above the trees at the edge of the encampment, Ugoth sent for sheriff Kraf. The prince stood outside his tent as he waited, shrugging his shoulder gingerly beneath his armour. The padding was doing nothing for the bite mark he had there. He considered fetching the remains of that ugly root to put on it, but changed his mind. The last thing he wanted was for Hanicke to kiss him where he'd placed it and have her lips go numb.

He grinned to himself, and the guards standing a few feet outside his tent pretended not to notice. They had overheard enough to know what was what.

Ugoth went back into his tent. Hanicke sat at the desk, reading more of the correspondence belonging to the late Captain Isidur. She was intent on the task and didn't seem to notice him. He watched her for a moment. The need he had for her, though no longer burning in his guts, was still there. He suspected it always would be.

He shrugged his shoulder again, wincing. He'd deserved the bite. He'd been out of control. She'd been a virgin, and he hadn't been gentle. Such a tiny thing, she'd used his flesh to keep from crying out. He didn't think he'd pleased her this first time, but he intended to the second.

It had been odd, the intimacy they had shared. He could hardly remember his actions. He'd been wild. He'd tossed his armour across the pavilion and nearly ripped his under padding, so desperate to feel her flesh against his that he'd only managed to get his undershirt off and his breeches down before he'd plunged into her tightness—hence the bite. And he'd had the strangest sensation of consuming her as they'd coupled. She had swooned at the end, as if he'd ravaged her life's energy and not just her body.

Not a single protest from her lips, not a motion to refuse him. Even when biting, she'd clutched him hard to her body, up until the end. She'd been a little goddess in his arms, stronger than she appeared, accepting, passionate and possessive. Rueful though he was over his brutal behaviour, he knew he wouldn't resist the urge to have her again, when time and circumstance permitted him.

"If you're here thinking of having seconds now," she said without turning her head, "you had better think again."

He approached and bent to kiss the nape of her neck. He didn't ask how she'd known what he'd been thinking. He felt so very connected to her now, as if the coupling had made them one.

"I can wait," he said. Damn, she smelled so good. How long did he have to wait? A day? Two? Dear gods. He couldn't wait that long.

She looked up at him and smiled. "I was thinking of using the root on my sore parts."

He frowned, and then his expression became somewhat alarmed. He at once sought out the offending remains of the black root and tossed it out the entrance. He had a good aim. The tuber sailed directly through the crack of the flap. Hanicke laughed. He turned on her, glaring, but only in jest.

"Do not think to numb the parts of me that matter, lady mine," he warned her. "You may not like the lonely bed you must sleep in thereafter."

"Oh, I'm really worried," she said and giggled. "Lady mine! You're so charmingly poetic to a near peasant."

He laughed. A cough at the entrance caught their attention. Startled, they both looked at the flap.

“Sheriff Kraf is here to see you, Highness,” Liudger announced from just outside.

“Enter,” Ugoth said.

Liudger came in holding the black root. “This just hit me on the chest,” he explained.

Ugoth rolled his eyes. He grabbed the injurious vegetable and made to toss it out again—just as sheriff Kraf came in. Finding himself faced with an impending pelting, the man stepped back in alarm. Ugoth at once dropped the root, kicked it aside and turned his back. This time, when he glared at Hanicke, he meant it, because she barely repressed her laughter with her hands. Ugoth walked to the table and faced the men again. By then, his features were schooled into their usual cool expression, but Liudger’s hinted at amusement.

“Come in, sheriff,” Ugoth said to the uncertain man, ignoring the smirking knight captain. “I hope you have recovered somewhat?”

“Yes, Your Highness. Thank you.” Kraf entered and bowed. He noted the girl sitting at a desk to the side of the shelter, a girl very much resembling the prince, but decided he must ignore her for the moment. No one seemed inclined to introduce him just then, in any case.

Ugoth swept his hand across the table, indicating a map. The sheriff approached and examined it. The map, well drawn, detailed his county and some of the surrounding ones. Lake Petrich lay near the western border of the map. A single island sat in the middle of it. Further beyond the lake were mountains, and to the southwest, a marsh lay. Along the remaining eastern and northern shorelines were forests, fields, and the marks of villages.

“I want to know if there is anything up here,” Ugoth asked and pointed at the western mountain region near the lake. “Habitation, small villages, any human presence?”

Kraf shook his head, somewhat confused. “There was a village on the shore once, but it’s been abandoned for years. How can this knowledge be of help to us?”

“Wait a moment,” Ugoth said. “This deadly mist, then? You cannot confirm that it creeps into this area?”

Kraf shook his head.

“Are you thinking of coming at the hag from behind?” Liudger asked. He’d come up to the table and stood beside Kraf.

Ugoth nodded. “It’s doubtful she would waste energy on an area from which she gains no benefit.”

Liudger agreed. The sheriff, however, could not comprehend how the prince could manage such a feat. “Your Highness, I beg of you to forgive me if I offend, but you can’t possibly get to this end of the lake in time.”

“Why not?” Ugoth asked.

“Well, for one thing, the road leading around it passes through the affected areas and it would take valuable time.” Kraf pointed to the route leading around Petrich from the south going east, then north. It would add weeks to the operation. “And how could you possibly get to her without her noticing? Most roads in this area pass within view of the lake.”

“That’s not the route I intend to take,” Ugoth said. His finger travelled from their current position, which was just to the south, along a different road leading toward the Balar Pass. Just before the road entered the pass, the prince’s finger diverged from it and passed through a line of woods to the south western side of the marsh.

Kraf’s eyes widened in alarm. “But that’s the marsh. Men have been lost there.”

“That was twenty-five years ago,” the prince pointed out.

Kraf shook his head in refusal. “It hasn’t changed, the evil place. There have been villagers going missing there for years. It is reputed to be haunted.”

“What marsh isn’t?” a female voice spoke from the side.

Kraf turned, startled. He’d forgotten the woman. She stood next to her chair, one hand holding her skirt up at ankle height. Her feet were bare, and one was bandaged and lifted off the floor.

“May I see the map,” she asked the prince. He at once went and helped her hobble over.

Kraf stared at her in astonishment. Who was this tiny woman?

The prince answered his unspoken question. “This is my distant cousin, Hanicke,” he said.

That explained the uncanny resemblance, but not her presence. Prince Ugoth obliged him with an explanation.

“She is a learned expert on arcane matters.”

The sheriff’s eyes widened, and he watched, most respectfully, as the prince seat the woman at the table. He thought perhaps, for a woman to be an expert on any such matter, the Holy Sisters affiliated with the church must have educated her.

She was fiddling with a large, unusually white feather in one hand. This she rested on the table as she examined the map. Its gilt edge trailed across the chart slowly. She was so tiny, almost child-like in size. And her foot was injured.

“This young woman?” Kraf said hesitantly. “She is an expert on witchcraft?” Ugoth nodded. “But you can’t possibly want to bring her?” Kraf protested. “The danger to such a frail creature...!”

Hanicke snorted impolitely. Liudger repressed a smile. Ugoth merely lifted a brow. “This frail creature is responsible for the destruction of the old hag inhabiting the woods here,” he informed the man dryly.

Ugoth had gotten the story out of her at last, dragging it out whenever she had resisted. This had occurred in the aftermath of their lovemaking, or Hanicke’s ravishment, as Ugoth more honestly thought it. They had still been in each other arms. Whenever she had pressed her lips together in mutiny over his questions, he’d kissed her and touched her until she’d given up the information. The inquisition had taken a great deal of time, more than the ravishment. He suspected that the torture had become more interesting than the story for both of them. She had resisted very strenuously.

They looked at each other briefly, remembering, and barely containing familiar smiles.

Sheriff Kraf stared down at the small, young woman in disbelief. “This girl? She destroyed the old witch personally?” he said.

Hanicke shook her head, but Ugoth agreed with the man. “I had help!” she protested.

“Help?” Kraf repeated, thinking of divine assistance, hoping such was the case.

“We’ll explain later,” Ugoth promised. “Suffice it to say that she has the knowledge and the wherewithal to be of assistance to our task.” He

turned back to the map. He pointed once again to the strip of woodland between the second road and the marsh.

“We will leave half our troop here at the road. The second half will walk or ride, depending on the density of the forest, through here to the edge of the marsh. At this point, we’ll make for the west of the lake and seek this abandoned village. We needn’t enter the marsh at all. We are perhaps only a week and a few days away from our destination.”

“But how will we cross the lake?” Liudger said.

“Did the villagers leave any boats behind?” Ugoth asked Kraf.

The sheriff wasn’t certain. “It’s possible. But they may all have rotted by now.”

“We may need to carry one in,” Ugoth muttered.

“Where would we get a boat around here?” Liudger said.

“That will be for you to find out. If not, we will have to make one, a raft if necessary. We *must* cross the lake.”

Hanicke swept the white feather across the map, from Lake Petrich to the marsh and back again, slowly and lightly. She spoke quietly into the sudden hush after Ugoth’s last edict. “The island is of no consequence.”

Ugoth looked down at her, startled. The other men frowned at her as well. Slowly, Ugoth knelt and peered into her eyes. The odd green light danced in them again, the same that he had seen at the dead campfire a few days ago. She seemed far away, in thought, in time, in place.

“An island has limits,” she spoke softly. “Too many for her. She has gone from it. Here is a place with power, mired in horrid depths. Rotting herbs and putrid roots. Bones of corpses, human and animal. The dead still scream in anguish, the pain of sacrifice a boon to her spell casting.” Her voice drifted into an eerie whisper. “At the highest point, she hides inside her ancient abode, gathering, gathering the dead.”

Her face had gone white during the last of the prophecy, and her eyes fairly shimmered with power. Mentally, she was far gone from the place where her body sat.

“Hanicke!” Ugoth said urgently.

She blinked and withdrew her hand from the map, the feather trailing away from the position at which it had pointed, the centre of the marsh. She looked at the prince and the terrible light faded from her eyes.

Off to the side, Kraf backed away in alarm, certain that nothing divine had aided this woman and that, however she had been educated, there could be nothing holy about it.

Liudger grabbed him by the upper arm and shook him slightly, his eyes warning the man to be quiet and to be still. Kraf swallowed nervously and averted his face in capitulation, but Liudger sensed there'd be trouble from him later.

"Are you certain she is in the marsh?" Ugoth asked, his voice soft. Hanicke nodded. He stood and ran a hand through his hair, thinking quickly. "This changes everything." He began to pace. "Will we be able to get behind her?" He spun and faced Hanicke. "If her power is coming out of the marsh itself, will she know if we set foot in it?"

"She might, especially if there are too many of us," she answered.

"It makes no difference how many of us there are!" Kraf interjected. "Men go into the marsh and are lost forever! There are places in it that a man can step on and sink without a warning. There's not a hint that the ground isn't safe."

"He has a point," Liudger said. "What would be the sense in sending men in there to die? Perhaps we should draw her out somehow, away from the marsh and her power."

"You are assuming that she will have less power out of the marsh than in it," Hanicke said. "She is still a witch. She may have learned to use the element of water, but I suspect that it can still weaken her if she were surprised. She is in that marsh for another reason, one more to do with the dead and this place she hides in. I think she now has more power from the tortured souls she has collected than from her water magic."

Ugoth bent to his knee to look her in the eyes. "Are you suggesting that we fight water with water?"

"A witch can drown," she reminded.

He remembered her story about the golem's hag and nodded. Hanicke continued with her logic.

"If we manage to force her into the marsh itself, she will have to divide her attention between controlling the element and protecting herself from it. She may have to make a choice. She will be weakest at the point where she remains undecided."

“But how do we traverse the marsh to get close enough to do this? If Kraf is correct, we may not be able cross safely.”

Hanicke thought quickly. “What if we had someone who could sense the safety of the ground underfoot?” she asked.

Ugoth’s brows lifted questioningly. “You?”

“No.” She shook her head and stood carefully. The prince followed her up. “I need to talk to Sticks.”

He stared at her, then nodded. He went to the entrance and pushed the flap aside. “Find Ripper,” he ordered one of the guards. The man saluted and left.

“Who is this Sticks?” asked Kraf in confusion.

“We will explain shortly,” murmured Ugoth. He came to a stand before Hanicke. “What about protection for the men?” he said.

“I will think on it. I should be able to come up with something before we leave the road.” She held his arm, and he helped her hobble toward the exit. Ripper appeared at the entrance. Ugoth nodded at him.

“Take her to the golem,” he told the man, “and see that she doesn’t injure that foot any further.”

“Yes, Highness.” Ripper took the woman’s arm and steadied her. “It would be faster if I carried her and safer for her foot,” he suggested.

Ugoth’s eyes narrowed, but he granted the act with a curt nod. Ripper noticed the warning tightness to the prince’s expression and intended to heed it. He bent to pick the girl up and was circumspect where he placed his hands. He walked away with her.

“I won’t go into a marsh wearing skirts!” Hanicke yelled over Ripper’s shoulder.

Ugoth nodded wryly. No, of course not. “I’ll get a message to Kara,” he promised resignedly.

He waited until they had gone around the corner of a tent and disappeared from sight and then, with a stern demeanour, turned back inward. Kraf needed an explanation. Ugoth proceeded to give him one. If the man had thought the situation strange before, he was soon enlightened as to the surprising truth of it.

Ripper carried Hanicke toward the forest edge. He was sure he wouldn't have to go any farther. The golem was certain to be watching and would come out to meet them.

Ripper's assumption was shortly proven correct. No sooner had he stepped away from the last of the tents than the monster strode out from beneath a cedar. He waited just at the edge for them. Ripper walked onward resolutely. He thought he might just be getting used to the thing. His legs were feeling steadier.

They became less steady the closer he came.

"He won't hurt you," Hanicke said.

"That's easy for you to say," Ripper whispered.

"Don't be silly. He's very gentle." Ripper rolled his eyes in disbelief. Hanicke huffed. "If you drop me, it's the prince you'd have to worry about, not Sticks."

She was probably right. The prince had a brutal temper when it came to this woman. Ripper braced his courage as he approached the last few feet to the monster's position. He set Hanicke down carefully, kept a hand on her arm to steady her, then looked up at the giant, uncertain whether he should stay or leave. The girl began to speak immediately, forestalling his decision.

"How good are you at feeling what is beneath the ground?" she asked the golem.

Sticks frowned down at her. *What do you need me to feel?* he asked in turn.

"Could you find solid ground in a marsh? Before someone were to sink into it, for example? Yourself especially?"

You want me to know the ground before I step on it?

She nodded. "Can you?"

He thought about it. Was it like feeling the trees without touching them? *I know where the roots of the trees are, he said. But I can't see them. They are only a few inches beneath our feet.*

"What about water? Can you feel water underground?" He was more than half made of vegetation. Hanicke reasoned that he might have an instinct for finding the element of water.

Sticks tested the extent of his perception. There was certainly water nearby. The sense of it came from a stream several yards away, a spring deeper in the forest and a well inside the village. The water seeped up into that from somewhere deeper in the earth. He nodded.

I can feel it.

“Would it stand to reason that you could then sense where solid land rests and where there is actually too much water to make the land safe to tread upon?” she asked.

He nodded again. *Why do you need to know all this?*

“There’s a witch near a lake called Petrich. Ugoth must go after her.”

Sticks at once shook his head. *I don’t want you to go!*

He would not have her at risk again, but she looked up at him resolutely.

“The hag is killing people. Over half a village just disappeared. There’s an evil mist spreading inland every night, closer to the other villages. She grows stronger with each death. We can’t afford not to help him, Sticks!”

If Sticks could have shut his eyes and not looked at her, he would have. *I will help him. You stay here,* he offered, but she shook her head.

“He needs both of us for this. Remember what you said. We are stronger together than apart.”

That’s not what I said! he objected. *I said I was strong with you, not without!*

“It comes to the same thing,” she pointed out. “You don’t think I’d let you go alone?”

I think you wouldn’t let him go alone! the golem shouted. That prince! This was his fault!

Hanicke nearly stamped her feet, but remembered her injury in time. She sighed and tried to calm herself.

Ripper continued to steady her unnoticed. He was getting the drift of this one sided conversation and it was all very alarming. Not another witch, he thought. He much preferred dealing with falsely accused crones. The most they ever did was spit out false curses.

“It’s true that I like him,” Hanicke admitted to the golem. “I can’t help that. But it makes no difference to this. We have to help.”

Sticks regarded her mutinously, but he knew she was correct. Something had to be done before more people died, and they were just the two to do that something. It all seemed so very inevitable. He sighed, a great long groan of reluctance. Hanicke knew he had relented.

“I’ll be careful,” she promised him.

I refuse to hide in the woods while we travel, he said. I will be at your side, or I will not let you take a step forward.

“But not until we leave the village,” she bargained.

He nodded and withdrew into the cedar. He didn’t want to talk to her anymore. He had to think.

That man, that *prince*! She had coupled with him. He was certain of it. There was something different about her. It was as if not quite all of her was with him any longer. That prince had taken something of her away. He didn’t know how, but he knew it was so.

He should never have agreed to let her leave their home. Nothing would be the same anymore. Dismal to his stone core, he stomped beneath the cedar, refusing to look back at Hanicke, though he sensed her watching anxiously.

Hanicke sighed unhappily. She knew he was upset—with her, with the current situation, with her affection for the prince. Between Sticks and Ugoth, she felt as if she was being pulled in half, but she hadn’t lied to the golem. As much as it would hurt her to give Ugoth up, she would when the time came. It didn’t occur to her that Ugoth might not agree to let her go.

She signalled to Ripper to pick her up, and he carried her back to the prince. Within the cedar, Sticks turned to watch her go. Foreboding nipped at his mind. She was being carried away from him, not just physically, but spiritually. He thought his stone heart might break with grief, that or explode from this burgeoning rage.

Damn that prince! Damn him!

Well, he wasn’t going to let it happen. Somehow, he would get Hanicke back, even if he had to tear her from the prince’s predatory grasp to do it.

The Soulstone Chronicles continue in The Gryphon Taint: Volume Two.

