



LOVEYOUDIVINE

THE  
GYPSY  
& THE  
WITCH

M. KING

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The Gypsy & The Witch  
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# **The Gypsy & The Witch**

**by**

**M. King**

The road could be a lonely place between towns: not so much as a church or village to whet the eye amid all this bare land. Just endless fields, dotted with cattle or sheep to frame the dusty ruts, and the calls of birds to break the wagon's rhythmic rattling. Samuel's sister, Hephzibah, kept a little finch in a cage that hung from the ledge at the vardo's bowed front, and the bird sang as Samuel drove. There was very little to do but listen to its sweet, chirruping tone, and watch the brown-and-white hindquarters of the horse, Rosie, shifting in time to each measured, powerful stride. Hephzibah stayed in the back with the old man, tending to his needs. He had more of them these days, like a child again, barely able to feed or wash himself, and so fretful when left. If Samuel strained his ears, he could make out the sound of his sister singing, a low echo of the bird's song, comforting and soothing.

He blew a long breath out through dry, tight lips. A hot day, and faint likelihood of rest before they reached their destination. Samuel thought fondly of a cold beer and felt beneath his seat for the water bottle that rested there. A few warm, stagnant sips moistened his throat, and he narrowed his eyes, peering between Rosie's ears at the bristling shapes of distant buildings against the sky. If they were lucky, they'd make town by nightfall, find somewhere to camp, and all would be well...or as near to that as might be, for now.

It wasn't the whole of the family these days. Their mother died bringing Hephzibah into the world, and that—coupled with the birthmark the child bore on her cheek—roused mutterings of the evil eye and of cursed blood. Added to his father's deteriorating mind, Samuel had to wonder if there wasn't a grain of truth to that, though he tried not to dwell upon it. His Uncle Isaac, Aunt Eliza, cousins Billy, Japheth, and Noah travelled with them, along with Noah's wife, Sal, and their two little ones. There was luck to that.

Sal bought them just as much bread as any of the men, dukkering the fortunes of the villagers at every place they stopped. Her sight was good—keen and true, in Samuel's experience—and, come fairs or county occasions, people had been known to seek her out, waiting long hours to hear what she had to tell them.

"Hoi! Sam!"

The sound shot through his thoughts, sending them scattering like dandelion seeds. Japheth's voice. Samuel glanced to his left. The rolling gait of the old spotted mare pulling his cousin's wagon nudged the horse's narrow head into his line of vision. She shook her mane and twitched her ears, Japheth urging her up to come level with Rosie, who snorted a greeting. Samuel nodded at his cousin, looking warm and dust-smeared in his white shirt and battered old black hat.

"Japheth."

The finch twittered in its cage, and the clop of hooves on dirt filled the air. Japheth squinted at Samuel, swapping the reins to one hand to shade his eyes against the lowering sun.

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"Couple of hour, y' think?"

"Should say," Samuel agreed.

"Can't come soon enough." Japheth grinned broadly. "I 'un 'alf got a thirst on. What say you helps find the tavern, soon'n uzz get settled?"

Samuel laughed and shook his head. "You think with your gullet, you do. But, aye. We'll see."

The lads were the same most places they went. The first thought was ever the closest pub and a pint to wash away the muck of the journey. Not that Samuel could argue with the reasoning behind that. He clicked his tongue, urging Rosie on into the coming dusk, and he could almost taste the beer on his lips.

\* \* \* \*

The town wasn't a part of the family's usual route. Most years, they followed the fairs, and the seasonal work that could be had picking fruit, peas and hops. But, with Samuel's father declining and the coming of the machines—great iron beasts that could cut more vines in a day a dozen men might—so much of that was fading. And, so, they had set their backs to familiar places and plied what luck they had on new roads.

The wagons drew up to the brow of the town as the sun was lowering, and it didn't seem such a bad place: quiet and modest, with neat houses all lining the streets and no smokestack chimneys blackening the skies. They set the vardoes to rest in an unused field beyond the edge of the settlement, where the streets bled into less well-organised gaggles of houses, and where those gave way to bare land, empty but for brushwood and the fringes of trees. Dusk rolled in, and each worked diligently at their task.

Samuel and Japheth chocked the wheels of the vardoes and unhitched the horses, rubbing them down with straw plaits and leading them to the small brook at the head of the trees. Billy started cutting slender branches of hazel for bender tents, the temporary blossoming of structures that marked each camp they had, and provided useful extra space. The tents weren't much, but they gave protection from wind and rain, and allowed everyone the small degree of privacy that made living so closely together bearable.

Uncle Isaac headed off into the copse with his lurcher, while Eliza set the children to sweeping and clearing the ground and Sal brought out pots and dishes for cleaning, cooking, and washing. From the cool water of the brook, Samuel watched her—busy, capable, endless—until Japheth splashed him and they fell to laughing and joking, the cares of the road forgotten.

Later, his father settled before the fire, with Sal and Hephzibah beside him and the children at his feet, full bellies and warm toes made them all quietly content. The old man wove stories out of the shadows and the curling wisps of tobacco smoke that pooled though them. They all listened, taking in the tales of dragons and princesses fought and won by cunning, lucky heroes. While he talked—bound to this place and this moment by the constant threads of the story, held tight by rhythms as old as the earth's bones—he

seemed young again, his mind whole and the fear that so often showed in his face forgotten. He talked of The Devil and the Fiddle, of far-off lands peopled by foolish kings and giants that lived in the clouds and, for a while, Samuel was almost a child again, the days of his youth reclaimed and his mother's hand upon his head.

Billy nudged him in the back. "'Ey, lad. Sal's puttin' the chavvis to bed. We're going to wet our whistles – will you come?"

Samuel glanced across at his father, sitting on the steps of the vardo, a momentary confusion washing over his face before each of the children came, in turn, to bid him goodnight. Hephzibah, holding the old man's hand and talking to him, looked up and smiled at her brother.

"Go on," she mouthed, her dark hair shimmering a little by the firelight, hanging down over the half of her cheek stained by the birthmark.

He nodded. "Aye. Drink'd do me good."

The lads found their way to the tavern with ease – one town is much like another, and another, after all – and the night lightened with the promise of a blink of relaxation and a spot of fun. Uncle Isaac's gentle warnings about not annoying the locals before they'd even introduced themselves had landed on ears, if not exactly deaf, then a trifle uncaring, and they clattered smilingly into the pub, a gaggle of strange and alien things.

Samuel knew how odd they must look to these people – these hardworking, simple folk who lived their lives in straight and narrow furrows, dictated by the church, the magistrate, and the seasons. For them, there were four turns of the year – one for farming, one for living, one for praying, and one for dying – and then in they came, him and his boys. They breezed in here, loud as jackdaws, with their brightly coloured neckerchiefs and the cut of their clothes like nothing these folks saw in the course of daily life. They would be met with suspicion, just as they were in every place. He always told himself it was only to be expected. They were foreigners, wherever they went. Perpetual wanderers, unclaimed and unhomed.

In Samuel's opinion, that rather depended on your definition of 'home', but people's opinions are strange things, and fear speaks over reason when the unfamiliar calls.

The tavern was like every other tavern.

Low ceilings, white-washed walls with thick, stout, dark beams, the wood studded with gleaming horse brasses. Their familiar symbols – hearts for courage, suns for strength, the emblems of ploughshares and harvests – comforted Samuel's eye, and he breathed deep of the pub's wheat-and-barley smell. The long, dark wood bar buffed to a polish with beeswax and the comfortable press of men and, from behind it, the landlord looked warily at them.

Samuel smiled an assurance, his cousins jostling up behind him, still wreathed with the last mutters of laughter and joshing.

"Boys, behave yourselves. We're new to these parts, and first impressions only happen once. Good evening, gentlemen," he added, raising his voice and

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his smile to encompass the whole pub, turning up the wattage of his charm. "These good souls and myself – my cousins – are come to stay here a little. 'Tis a long journey we've had. I wonder if you might see your way clear, sir, to drawing us four pints of beer?"

The pub turned quiet, the chatter of men whispering into silence and leaving nothing behind it but the dull wall of three dozen sets of eyes, staring in the wordless preparation for hostility. Japheth chuckled nervously and nudged Samuel in the back.

"Heh...four pints, eh, Samuel? What are the rest of us drinkin'?"

A dim murmur ran through the back of the assembled drinkers, no audible shape to the words, but the current a bitter and jagged one. Samuel reached out his coin purse and tossed it onto the bar. That simple action broke the tension, like a soap bubble, glistening and floating in the air and then – so easily – popping in an iridescent flicker of nothingness. The barkeep's broad face melted into a greasy smile, and sound flowed back into the world.

"What can I get yer, gents? Sit down...make yourselves at home."

Talk and laughter resumed, though the locals stayed chary for a while longer, each conversation the cover to a man looking over these strange newcomers, eyeing with distaste their oiled black curls and tanned faces. It riled Samuel a little, though it was no time for pride or obstinacy. Billy, Japheth, Noah, and he all knew who they were, what they were, and among themselves, that was enough. Among these people, different ways were called for, and that was as it should be. God never made all people equal, so his father used to tell him.

*We're all baked of the same dough, he used to say. There's some that's too white, for not being baked long enough, and some as is too dark, for being baked too long. And then there's us, right in the middle. Just right.*

And he'd laugh – that wheezing chuckle, with his dark eyes clenched up into slits – and turn back to whatever occupied his lean, strong, brown hands at the time. Sharpening knives, perhaps, or mending a pan. Maybe whittling a peg doll for Hephzibah and fashioning it a bright red dress from a scrap of fabric.

Samuel shook the memories as the landlord set four mugs of ale down in front of them, and Billy's elbow drove into his ribs.

"Whay! Drink up, lad! Hello there, my girl," he added, winking at the barmaid. "You ever have your fortune tole?"

Samuel shook his head. "Bill, will you leave it? 'Tis probably his daughter, and if you head down *that* road, you'll have all our fortunes told at the sharp end of a pitchfork."

His cousin grinned at him over the froth on his beer, and the atmosphere seemed to relax itself a little around that grain of disquiet.

Still, something felt strange to Samuel. Not so much the wary looks they received from the regulars, or the ways they stood out from these local men, but the men themselves. They were...tired? Yes, perhaps that. But it wasn't the ordinary tiredness of workers at the end of a long week, or the honest fatigue of a day's toil. Something darker clung to the edges of these people,

and it wore them thin by the doing so. The hang of their clothes, the patches upon patches and the threadbare cuffs, the lapels rimed with wear...something was wrong here.

He leaned upon the bar, careful to catch the landlord's eye when he was in a quiet lull, polishing a glass that looked as if it would never come up clean.

"Aye?"

The man's wide, red-hued cheeks sat at odds with the steely look in his pale eyes as he regarded Samuel. Distrustful, and maybe a little afraid.

"Tell me, sir – and forgive my curiosity, for as I told you, we ha' come just now to these parts – but is everything well here? You seem to sell plenty of beer, but it don't look to me like it buys happiness."

The barkeep gave him a long, hard stare that, for a moment, had Samuel thinking he'd overstepped the mark worse than Billy flirting with the man's daughter. Then his mouth twisted. Thick, pink lips worked themselves around hidden words, loath to be said, and he set the glass down on the bar, leaning closer to Samuel, his considerable weight supported on one beefy arm.

"We don't have your type in much, stranger."

"Samuel. You could call me Samuel."

The man frowned, as if this might be an extremely radical consideration.

"Can you... I mean, do you... Do you do what they say? Tell the future?"

Ah, this was familiar ground. Samuel took a swig of his beer, tasting the water with which his host diluted his wares. Yes. Problems indeed in this pretty little place.

"Some say. We tend to think the signs are there for all to see, sir. 'Tis all a matter of how you look for them. What's the trouble you speak of? We passed many fine fields of wheat and corn. I saw no sign of famine. Yet here I see what look like the marks of want."

The landlord shifted uncomfortably. "This is not a happy place. Not for some time. There are... things. Things of which we do not speak."

Samuel frowned. He'd so sorely hoped this would be nothing more than a few wet summers and maybe a case or three of sheep murrain.

"Aye? And what type o' thing should that be, sir?"

He was aware of his cousins halting in their usual flimsy chatter beside him and coming to listen in on what the barkeep said. The man looked guiltily around him before he spoke, and it acted as a clarion to the rest of the pub. One by one, the locals closest to the bar ceased their talk and settled to face him, countenances grave and eyes solemn. Their silence spun around the room, muffling everything like a thick fog, and a slimy trail of dread slunk down Samuel's spine.

"And why should we not tell them?" the landlord said, raising his gaze and his voice to the assembled drinkers. "The whole valley knows. Traders no longer come here. The only travellers who come our way are bounty hunters and fools! Saving your presence, gentlemen, I'm sure," he added.

Samuel and his cousins exchanged nervous glances.

"G-go on," Japheth prompted. "What does the whole valley know?"

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The barkeep licked his fat lips and spoke in a low, austere tone. "It is not from field to store that we lose our harvest. The finest wheat grows here, the tallest corn. Fruit as far as the eye can see in our orchards – beautiful russet apples, plump pears running with juice – and the hedges overflowing with brambles, damsons and hips. We raise the best beef and lamb in the valley. Yet our larders are empty, our stores dry. No family in this town ever has more than they can pick from their garden and cook at once. If you kill a chicken, you'd best pluck and boil it right away, else it won't be there once you've turned your back."

The tension in the crowd had grown palpable. Assorted mutterings of 'aye', 'that's right', 'not a thing', rippled through the men, and, for the first time, Samuel really looked at their worn, thin faces. Sunken eyes stared back at him, shrunken mouths working in agreement. He felt Billy, Japheth, and Noah pressing closer to him, and cleared his throat.

"Wh-what, precisely, do you mean? Once you've turned your back?"

"We can store no food," the barkeep said. "She takes it."

"Who?"

He didn't want to ask, but he knew he had to. Without the barkeep saying another word, Samuel heard the rising whispers.

*She...*

*She does. It's her.*

*The Witch.*

"At first, the Council said it was thefts. They decreed all tenant farms were to take their goods to the store in the centre of town, and there they would be locked, hid away, and kept safe. But still they went. Come the morning, every time, the vault is bare as a board."

The silence sucked at them the moment the man stopped talking. It prickled, as uncomfortable and unsettling as his words. Billy scoffed into the quiet, affecting disbelief.

"Aye? I-I think what that sounds like is there's not a night watchman in the town that can stay sober long enough to stand guard o'er a few sacks of grain. Wouldn't be the first time!"

An uneasy ripple of laughter filtered through Samuel's cousins, but he waved them into silence. "Bill, mind your mouth, shala? 'Tisn't for mocking."

"Samuel...." Billy tugged at the back of his sleeve. "We ought to get back. They're laughing with us, ain't they? No-one believes in mullos and witches. Not like this. Stealing a whole town's food? Can't be done."

"Oh, aye?" The barkeep slammed his broad hand down upon the bar. "A lie, is it? When we starve in our houses? You come to the square tonight, boy. You'll see. The bravest of our men have stood against this threat, and not one of them been able to tell what he's seen. You, who would come here – though you have no place among us – and mock our perils, you have no idea what you offend. Out with you. Go on, get out!"

A ragged, mean cheer went up from the men, and beating a rapid retreat seemed like the only option. Samuel and his cousins left the pub – Billy still

complaining that he'd barely touched his pint – and walked back to the camp in a ruminative mood.

Japheth drew alongside Samuel, nudging him in the ribs. "Eh."

"Hm?"

"D'you believe all that?"

Samuel shook his head. "No. Well, I don't know. There's something goin' on here, right enough, and I don't like it."

"Me neither. We should go."

"Go where?"

Japheth shrugged and looked at the sky. Stars had begun to prick through the ruffled blue velvet of a cloudy night. The moon was a day or so away from full...a witch's moon.

"Dunno. The road again. Jus'...head on."

"Aye."

Ordinarily, Samuel would have agreed. Yet they did need to stop, at least for a little while. The horses needed rest, and so did the children, and his father. They would need money, too, before long, and where were they to get that if there was no town in which to ply their skills?

Besides – though he thought ill of himself for thinking it – a town in trouble is full of desperate people, and desperate people will often pay well for a fortune, if there came with it a chance of hope in the telling.

He would have to speak to Sal.

Back at the camp, they told what they had heard. Uncle Isaac shook his head, bit his lip, and murmured a cuss under his breath. Sal spat on the ground and glanced over her shoulder at the parked wagons, where the old man and the children lay sleeping under the watchful eyes of Eliza and Hephzibah.

"Shall we go, then?" Japheth asked, still keen to press the idea.

"I don't know," Isaac said. His greying hair caught a wan glint of light from the rising moon, and Samuel shivered, without knowing quite why.

"We could wait, just a day or so. Rest. Let the town alone, then go on, But –"

"If there's evil here, I ain't stayin'," Sal declared.

Samuel looked at her curiously. "If there is?"

She shrugged, her dark blonde hair frizzy beneath her patterned red scarf. Her face was well-scrubbed and round, like an apple, two small but bright eyes set deep within it, and her mouth a firm, hard bow.

"I in't smelled it. I in't seen it. But if it's here...."

"The Council meet tonight," Noah said warily. "In the square. We could go and see. Just see what it is they're all about. I'll go."

Sal moved to speak, her gaze fixed at once on her husband and her dislike of that plan written large on her face, but Isaac nodded.

"All right. Good man. Just to see."

"Aye. Don't fret for me, Sally. It'll be fine," Noah added, though his comforting wink clearly did little to assuage her worries.

"I'll go with you," Samuel heard himself say, not quite sure why he said it.

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Perhaps he just couldn't bear the thought of watching Sal wait all evening for her husband's return.

\* \* \* \*

More than half the town must have turned out to the square for what, as they arrived, Samuel realised was already becoming a tradition. A ritual... not unlike the sacrifice of a virgin upon the rocks.

Tall, crowded buildings – clearly the oldest part of the town – leaned on each other here. The church, the hall that housed the Council, and on the corner the blacksmith's forge. In the centre, beside the wide, white steps of the church, and under the sight of all the carved angels, the heavy-bolted door to the store stood, fenced around with chains and pikes. Two men on horseback, wearing ornaments of office and the kind of authoritative expressions that immediately set Samuel's nerves on edge, reined their mounts in front of the crowd. The noise of hooves rang out harsh against the chatter, but it was those people who attracted Samuel's attention. Every last one of them looked like the men in the pub, worn thin and rubbed at the edges.

The sight of them tore his heart, though he didn't like to admit it.

They stayed at the back of the crowd, he and Noah, as inconspicuous as they could possibly be, and listened as the pageant began.

The first of the two mounted men – councillors, he realised – urged his horse forward and spoke to the crowd. His voice raised in pitch as he struggled to be heard, the sound of it querulous and womanish.

"We all know," he called out, his horse pawing the stones, "why we are here. Councillor Redman and I come before you to make the call. Who amongst us shall be brave enough to enter the chamber? Who, we ask, shall defend us?"

Not far from where Samuel and Noah stood, a skinny young man in a work-worn jacket and patched breeches cupped his hands around his mouth. "Not bloody likely!" he called, his insult echoing around the square. "We've all seen what happens to the poor bastards you send in there! They come out white-haired and gibberin', no ounce o' sense to call they own. We ain't falling fer it no more!"

Muffled cries of assent filtered through the crowd.

"That's right!" called a tall, raw-boned woman, the thickly bundled shape of a baby clasped to her chest. "And after my husband volunteered to stand these eight months past, what have I to show for it? A babe at my breast and another in the house. He can't neither feed hisself or look in the mirror for screaming. And still *she* comes, don't she?"

The murmurs grew uglier. At the back of the crowd, men began to push and shove, and jeers broke out among them. The councillors' horses shied, snorting and tossing their heads. Noah glanced at Samuel and raised his eyebrows.

"I think we should go. This in't our fight, Sam."

But Samuel was still watching the people. Their anger was growing – he could feel it, like the bitter taste of iron on the back of his tongue – yet, so far, it had not spilled over into violence. They were too afraid for that.

The first councillor urged his horse forward again, the hand not holding his reins lifted in an appeal for calm.

“Please! Please...let us remain civil. We are still human beings, are we not? Let us not descend to the realms of beasts. Who amongst you will watch this night in the chamber? Who?”

Someone, somewhere in the bowels of the throng, shouted “Why not you?” and a rock winged through the air, sending the reed-voiced councillor’s horse into a frightened spin. Noah tugged at Samuel’s arm.

“Sam. Come on. This isn’t going to end well. Let’s go. We can all be gone by morning. Leave ‘em to their riot, eh?”

Samuel nodded, but he hadn’t really heard his cousin’s words.

Something else moved him, some other compulsion that flowed into his legs and nudged the joints into action. Some different fire that edged him forwards and burned in his voice when he called out: “I will!”

Where all had been noise and burgeoning clamour, abrupt and heavy silence fell, broken only by the shuffle of feet on cobblestones. Around them, people drew back, staring at Samuel and muttering under their breath. Noah swore in their own tongue and pinched his sleeve once more.

“Sam!” he hissed. “What the devil are you playin’ at?”

Samuel ignored him. The councillors had pinpointed him amongst the townsfolk, and now the weedy, officious one and the other, the one he had called Redman, bore down upon Samuel, their horses moving through the path that the people were only too quick to make.

Councillor Redman, a broad-shouldered man with a head of dark grey hair, fat red cheeks, and the town’s crest upon his tunic, looked down at Samuel with curious, sneering eyes.

“Speak your name, stranger.”

“Samuel Hearst.”

The horse’s nose was level with his face; a fine, stout-boned gentleman’s hunter. It turned its head first one way, then the other, each dark eye in turn taking a hard look at him before the animal snorted and shook its mane. The tack the councillor had on it rattled, and Samuel resisted the urge to reach out and soothe the horse’s velvet nose. He stood, calm and unflinching.

“You have heard of our troubles,” the Councillor said. Statement, not question.

“I have, sir.”

“Then you must know that many before you have entered the chamber of which we speak. Many have tried to see the truth of the curse that ails us. None have yet succeeded...and all have paid the price of failure.”

Samuel nodded, just once. “So it’d appear, sir. Yes.”

The first councillor, peering over the hindquarters of Redman’s mount, pursed his thin lips.

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"And what makes you say you will try your luck? I suppose you have heard about the reward."

"Can't say as I have, sir," Samuel said, which was true, though he could have sworn he heard Noah straighten up beside him. "But you seem in a bind, and you asked for help."

The first councillor scoffed, but Redman stood firm, looking down his considerable nose at Samuel.

"You will watch the night in the chamber, though you know none have ever succeeded and most have lost their minds?"

Samuel shrugged. "I can try, sir. You ask for a man to see the truth. I've had practice at that."

Councillor Redman nodded. "It is a brave man who offers himself on behalf of those to whom he has no connection."

"Or a bloody fool," muttered Noah, just beyond the cusp of the councillor's hearing.

Samuel suppressed a smile, and inclined his head.

"Very well." Councillor Redman puffed out his chest. "We will accept your pledge, and with thanks."

With that, the councillor nodded again, and the crowd broke into a roar of uneven applause. Around him, a few people reached out thin hands and patted his back or shoulders. Samuel turned to look at his cousin, finding Noah's face white and his lips tight-drawn.

"Sam, what are you doing?" he asked, his voice low but sharp, his fingers claspings Samuel's sleeve. "Are you mad? What'll I tell the others?"

Samuel shook Noah's hand in a firm, sure grip, and smiled. "Don't worry, my friend. After all...there's no such thing as mullos and witches, eh? Tell Billy that I said that, and say that I'll see you all in the morning. With gold enough to get us far from here, whatever dogs these people."

Noah's eyes implored him to think again, to back away from his promise and run while he still could, but for honour and respect he said nothing. Samuel wished he could take the time to thank him for that. Instead, he squeezed his cousin's arm and inclined his head.

Noah understood, and he sniffed as he backed away, leaving Samuel to step forward, passing between the two horses. Their hard, high flanks rose either side of him, like brown cliffs, framing the storehouse and its ancient, carved stone façade. It must once, he supposed, have been an adjunct to the church. Perhaps —

*Oh, no.*

His stomach lurched. Not a charnel house. Anything but that.

Samuel had no desire to spend a night among the packed piles of ancient bones, but it was too late to back out now. Councillor Redman reached down, seized his arm and held it up, as if showing the people their champion...or perhaps a condemned man.

The reality of what he was doing began to sink into Samuel's consciousness. He wished he hadn't been such an impulsive fool but, when all was said and done, he didn't really believe in a witch that came in the night to

steal the food of a whole town, did he? Of course not. Sure enough, something must be going on here, but it was far more likely to be...well...

His train of thought foundered.

*Something.*

The people cheered him as he walked into the black maw of the storehouse, and the last face he saw was Noah's, pale and worried. They closed the thick, wooden door behind him, and all Samuel could hear was the iron bolts scraping shut.

On the outside.

It was a deep, high-ceilinged room, all cool stone and wide, broad arches supported by fluted columns. Samuel was relieved to see that – though it must lead to the lower cellars beneath the church – this place had never been a charnel house. More likely a store for wine, wool, or wax candles. Now, it was stacked with sack upon sack of grain, barrels of salt-packed fish and meat, flasks of oil and wine, and packets of spices: all the foodstuffs the townspeople had been so keen to protect.

A brace of candles lit the room, standing in a tall wrought iron sconce, and a pallet lay in one corner, a crude wooden stool beside it, though Samuel supposed the entire point of this exercise was to avoid the temptation to sleep or relax. If anything was going to come tonight – any spirit, demon, or flesh-and-blood evil – he needed to be awake to see it, and alert. He poked through the shelves and heaps, looking for...what, he wasn't sure. Something hiding, something waiting? No, that was ridiculous.

The candles guttered, and Samuel shivered.

There was nothing to do but wait.

He sat down on the pallet, his arms hooked around his knees, and thought of home. Home was the fireside and the steps of his vardo, Hephzibah singing as she combed her hair, or the children playing, running and shrieking in the grass. Home was his father's smiling face, a story that he'd heard a thousand times, and the presence of people who loved him.

The more he conjured those things in his mind, the colder the room grew. Samuel looked at the candles. Rivulets of molten wax had dripped down both sides of the cylinders, rendering strange, jagged shapes that coated both the candles and the sconce, hanging down in great, shaggy stalactites.

He shook his head and stretched out on the thin bed, the floor hard beneath him. Nothing to do but wait... and wait.

The night wore on, and sleep threatened to overtake him. Samuel tried trick after trick, playing games against himself, counting seconds and trailing back through ancient memories, dipping his fingertips into the past like the rippling reflections on a millpond. Some days, it felt as if there was nothing to him but thoughts... things he'd imagined, things he'd hoped for, snatches of desperate little thrills that had been nothing at the time, but garnered preciousness with the passing of years.

He'd never given much time to the consideration of love.

An odd thing, now he stopped to contemplate it. He supposed it was to do with chance, with always lacking either the opportunity to meet the right kind

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of man, or the possibility to take things further. Too often, passing through some nameless, faceless town or village, he'd been the first shameful fumble for a boy growing to manhood in solitude, thinking himself the only one in the whole world. Oh, he understood how they felt, how they tortured themselves in their self-imposed purdah, and that first flush of exhilarating, flawless joy they felt when along came Gypsy Sam, with his knowing eye and his many secrets.

He wasn't proud of it, but Samuel had long ago lost count of the number of boys he'd charmed that way. They were distractions, fleeting fancies... perhaps a few of them had spawned affections that lingered, rekindled when the family passed back by a particular route the following year, but nothing ever lasted.

*Nothing ever lasts.*

Life is change, Samuel supposed. His father had once told him that.

He tried to fight the shadows and the subtle, welcoming fingers of sleep, but they were beginning to get the better of him. Nothing was coming. There were no devils here. No horrors beyond the shames and regrets of his own head. Perhaps—just maybe—that was all anyone ever had to fear.

That was the last thought Samuel had before his body jerked, the final precursor to slipping into dreams. He gasped, sat up on the dingy pallet, rubbing his eyes. He mustn't sleep.

The candles were burned to stumps. How long could one night be?

Samuel rose from the pallet and looked around the storeroom. Everything was still there, all the food in its place. It had grown so cold; the chill stone walls seemed to shiver before his eyes. He spotted a narrow piece of wood—flimsy and thin—lying beside one of the crates of salted meat, probably broken off it in transit. Samuel snatched it up and snapped it into four pieces, which he set at each corner of the pillow, standing straight as guardsmen around the place he would lay his head.

He lay down again, pulling up the thin blanket—apparently provided, so kindly, by the Council, to keep warm the sacrifices they sent to their doom—and prepared to wait just a little more. The candles burned themselves out, dying in short, gasping puffs of smoking darkness, leaving behind them nothing but the sharp smell of burnt wick.

*All have paid the price of failure.*

These people were all mad, Samuel decided. Whatever caused their troubles—thieves, corrupt watchmen, or some other malign thing—it was no djinn in the night. He supposed there would be no danger if he slept. He could grab a few moments' rest, and no-one would know...

His eyes began to close, but his foresight paid off. Each time sleep came to lull him in its arms, a piece of the broken wood pricked his cheek, and he woke afresh, the shadows tugging at him with their cold, secret weight.

*What I'd not give for a fire!*

Samuel thought fondly of the wagon and of Hephzibah's rabbit stew. He sat up, arms locked around his knees, the pallet creaking beneath him and the soft dark kissing his face. Not long until morning, by the feel of it. He could

almost see the soft, silvered cast to the light, and wished the dawn would hurry.

Yet, even as he had begun to have these thoughts of salvation, Samuel heard a noise over by the door. He held his breath, listened harder...

*There.*

Again it came: a quiet, soft scratching in the shadows, the whine of the hinges as the door inched open. Samuel caught his breath, straining every quarter of his senses and not daring to breathe. He could see nothing but the shifting darkness, a block of dark that seemed darker than the rest, where the door slotted among the stones of the wall... and where, now, it let in a narrow chink of pale grey light.

Should he speak? Should he call out, give away his presence?

He held his tongue. Whate — *whoever* it was, they must already know he was here. And, if not, it would not pay to relinquish his advantage of surprise.

Slowly, so achingly, numbingly slowly, the door opened.

Samuel stared. The figure that stood at the top of the stone stairs was no more than two-and-a-half feet tall, its pale skin haloed by the thin shaft of moonlight falling behind it. Wide blue eyes, a white, soft face. Rosebud lips, straight brown hair, and tiny hands, the wrists fringed by the delicate lace cuffs of a frilly dress the colour of snowdrops.

*A child?*

The little girl tilted her head to the side, like a bird, and took first one faltering step down the stairs, then another. Samuel started from his pallet, hand outstretched.

"Now, then, chavvi. You shouldn't be —"

She smiled, and the words died in his throat. Every tooth a rusted nail of iron, lips pulled back over a fleshless mouth. The child gave a dark squeal of raw, hungry anger and launched forward, turning a somersault in the air. Her fragile little body bent and changed in flight, her hands lengthening, and sharp, blunt-bladed shovels grew where her nails had been.

Samuel moved fast. By the time she landed, he had sprung to his feet, scrabbling for a weapon. The wooden stool by his pallet made for a crude and ineffectual defence, but it was the first thing to hand, and he gripped it so tight his knuckles whitened, harsh breaths rattling in his ears. The creature came on again, metal claws grating on the stone floor. The ragged, incongruous strips of the lace-trimmed dress clung to the horribly distended, distorted body, its legs bowed out to the sides of squat haunches, the clawed hands held up before that ugly, nail-toothed face, its hideous lines stained with an evil sneer.

Half-remembered prayers and ancient words twined through his head, tumbling from his lips. He crossed himself, called on ancient gods, but still the witch came.

She dived at him again and again, no mercy and no respite. Those awful, tearing howls rent Samuel's ears, and he swung with his pathetic wooden stool, the thing splintering to pieces in her great bladed hands. He closed his

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eyes, tears of terror wetting his cheeks, and the pain split his flesh, cold and yet searing hot all at once, and endless, crushing agony. He folded to the floor, only aware of having done so by the sudden hardness of stone against his cheek, and the pain wouldn't end, closing over him in a dark, velvet fug that silently stole the breath and the consciousness from him.

He came to hours later, a brawny hand shaking his shoulder and the lined, concerned face of a city watchman hovering far too close to his. The mingled scents of sweat, leather, and cheap tobacco wafted over him, and Samuel's gut clenched. He tried to move, coughed, retched, and groaned. The man's broad face split into a grin, and he glanced off to the side.

"'Ere, Tom! He ain't dead. You owe me half a crown!"

Samuel muttered a few choice words under his breath and hauled his protesting body into a sitting position. Dried blood caked his sleeve, smears of it on the stone beneath him. Splintered pieces of wood and the torn remnants of grain sacks littered the room, yet he was still alive. Memories of the night, and the thing that stalked it, touched the raw places in his mind, and he shuddered, fighting the urge to vomit. The watchman nudged him, noting apparently for the first time the bloodstains and the pallid mask of fear.

"So what was it, then? What'd you see? Was it *her*?"

Samuel just shook his head and clasped his wounded arm tight to his chest.

"I...I have to go. Get...out," he murmured, for it seemed the only thing he could do. To get out of this filthy, unclean place and flee for sanity.

He stumbled to his feet, staggering out into the harsh, unfriendly sunshine. Too bright, too demanding, too garish.

A crowd had gathered to watch him emerge, to see how the gypsy had fared, and the whispers spread before him in ever-widening circles, pale faces and pointing fingers. Samuel flinched from their wide eyes and open-lipped mouths, wanting nothing more than the safe, secure space of his vardo. Even if he'd never be truly alone again – stalked always by that thing, looming forever in his memory – he wanted to be somewhere familiar. Somewhere *right*.

Samuel looked about him, this way and that, caring only for escape. The councilmen bore down on him, their fine velvet robes and chains of office catching the light, and their great fat cheeks shining with anticipation. They wouldn't believe him. None of them would. That knowledge struck Samuel, clear and sharp, and he breathed deep, trying to quell the panic rising within him.

"Now, then," called Councillor Redman, stepping forward. "What did you see, my friend?"

*No friend of anyone's but himself, a man like that.*

Samuel glanced away to the side, catching sight of Noah, Isaac, and Sal gathered in a huddle at the edge of the crowd. Samuel's arm throbbed harder, and tiredness seeped into his very bones. He dragged his gaze back to the

councillor, standing there in the sunlight, beaming for the people, as if this would somehow be the answer to all their problems. Samuel wondered what the devil they thought he could tell them, standing here bloodied, battered, and failing. He cast one last look at them all: thin women with babes clasped to them, ragged children and hollow-cheeked men... and Sal, shaking her head.

"Bandits, your honour," he said, loud enough for the assembled crowd to hear. "Eight men, perhaps more. An expert thief among 'em. Picked the lock and snuck his brothers in, silent as the dusk. One must have struck me down. Jus' lucky they didn't kill me, sir, and no mistake."

The councillors murmured amongst themselves, disquieted and clearly not sure whether to believe him. Samuel swayed a little, the glare of sunlight sending blue shadows across his blurred vision.

Noah and Isaac came forward, Samuel barely aware of his cousin's arm around his shoulders before he toppled backwards, consciousness trying to desert him once again.

\* \* \* \*

That night, he awoke in the camp. It didn't feel like home ought to.

The fire crackled hungrily, the sounds familiar and comforting, but Samuel shivered. He sat upon the steps of his vardo and flinched as Sal wound the bandage tighter, binding an oatmeal poultice close to his bloodied flesh.

"I seen this," she remarked.

"Aye?" The word slid out through his gritted teeth. "Damn thing don't 'alf sting, woman!"

Sal took another small stone jar from her apron and uncorked it. She smeared some of the green ointment – greasy and smelling strongly of wintergreen – over the edges of the plaster.

"Don't keep jaw-aching so, Sam. You'n I both know how lucky you been. I told you. I *seen* it. The iron witch in the dark."

He said nothing, frightened to admit it, as if his silence could hide the truth. Sal's dark eyes flicked once to his, then she puffed out a short, hard breath and turned her attention back to dressing his wound. Samuel held his breath until his lungs grew sore.

"You're a good woman, Sal," he said at last.

She snorted. "There. You're as mended as I can make you."

He nodded, and she waited a moment longer, expectation passing briefly over her face. Samuel pressed his lips together.

"Sal?"

She sat back on her heels, hands on her knees, the fire's glow shading her blonde hair amber.

Samuel cleared his throat. "I can't stay."

"I know." Her expression didn't change. She had, he assumed, expected it. "I seen that too. The Tower. The Devil. Ten swords, and the Knight of Wands.

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It's marked you, Sam. Put its blight on you, an' you'll not escape that, not ever. T'ain't no running from it, save for finding the land where age and death won't touch 'ee."

He hung his head, and she put her hand to his shoulder. He reached up, blinking back the weight of tears, his fingers brushing her warm, dry knuckles.

"Sal...."

"Hush, now. Don't let them see you cry."

Samuel took her at her word. He steeled his will, pulled back the burning sting of his desolation, and sniffed.

He returned to the fire, sat with the men, and laughed and joked into the night. They asked him about it more than once.

"Come," said Noah. "What did you see?"

Samuel shook his head. "What did I not see?" he murmured, half to himself.

Beyond that, he refused to be drawn. Naming the thing could call it here, into the circle of firelight where the children played and Hephzibah sat, darning old clothes and humming to herself. He couldn't bring that here, the taint of it and the thick, choking evil. It had already put its mark on him, tasted his blood... he had angered it, for he had left the storehouse with his sanity – and the truth. He kissed his sister goodnight and watched over his father until the old man fell asleep, face softening as he fell to dreams, no doubt once more young, strong and in the arms of those he'd loved.

In the morning, Samuel left them all.

He set off, a small bindle slung over his shoulder and his heart sore with the burden. Life is change, his father had once said. That it was true made it no less painful.

Samuel walked, and walked, and walked.

The road, that constant friend of so many years, did not fail him. Its embrace was almost a comfort, as long as the sun stayed in the sky.

But the nights were bad.

The witch owned his dreams; just as he'd feared, the evil Samuel had encountered in the storehouse continued to stalk him. That child's face, marred with terrible blackness, came to him again and again through the night, staring out of the shadows and biting, rending... killing.

Every night in his dreams, Samuel died a dozen agonising deaths, and every night she promised him she would come again. She would find him, and his waking death would be worse, a thousand-fold.

Samuel would wake, sweating and shaking, the fear cold as a knife in his chest. Yet, for all he suffered, he knew he'd done one thing well. He had laid the seed that would kill her, in telling the Council that their plague was human in origin. If they believed in thieves, they wouldn't fear witches, and without fear the evil would cease to have a hold upon them.

Not that this knowledge did much to ease Samuel's dreams. If anything, they grew worse. That fleshless, lipless mouth – gaping and stinking, rotten and cavernous – loomed at him from the knots on the trees he passed, the

very clouds in the sky. The rasping metal voice ground out from the sound of his feet on the road, making over and over the same promise:

*Wherever age and death go, go I.*

*Wherever thou live, seek I.*

*Wherever thou breathe, feed I.*

*You are mine.*

He could do nothing but walk on. Though forgetting was hardly an option, Samuel supposed he might at least try to suppress it. He tried to focus on the blue of the sky, the greens of leaves and grass, the burnt yellows and ochres of the road ahead. Dragonflies shimmered lazily in the breeze, and overhead the black silhouettes of birds dipped against the clouds. It should have been beautiful but – with every curve, every circle – the lines of a different face seemed traced in the air. The witch saw him, he was sure.

And her anger burned.

His one pure gesture, his unselfish desire to help the people of that ragged town, had marked him in her eyes. The fact he had won – left the night with his mind intact, seen her, seen the truth – meant she would not rest until she claimed him.

\* \* \* \*

Samuel steered purposely away from villages and towns, not daring to threaten any other place with the burden he bore.

After many, many miles, he drew within sight of a strange dwelling, outlined against the lowering, grey sky: a cottage, its roof thatched and the door swathed with roses. The cottage lay at the mouth of a great forest. The trees stretched farther than Samuel could see, but he smelled them. Their great weight, ancient air ripe with dark earth and the sharp astringency of leaves, of the symbiotic cycle of growth and decay.

He knocked on the tall, white-painted door and, after a while, a young woman opened it. Samuel had to admit that she was beautiful – tall and fair as a mountain ash – and smiled when she looked upon him.

"Greetings, traveller. You must be weary. Should you care to come in and rest?"

"I thank you kindly, miss," he said, stooping low to bow.

He followed her in and found the house most beautiful. Everything was light, clean, and comfortable. The girl entertained him with great attention, offering good food, wine, and hot water. As the evening drew in, she put her arms around Samuel's neck and tried to kiss him. He disentangled himself as kindly as he could, not wishing to hurt her feelings.

"Miss, your hospitality has been faultless, but I can't –"

"Say you'll stay with me! Please. Say you'll stay."

The desperate hunger in her face frightened him. It roused memories of the storehouse beneath the church, of a child's innocent blue eyes stained black with wickedness.

"I'm sorry," he said and shook his head.

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Crestfallen, the lady fell to her knees before him, tears welling in her eyes. "But wilt thou not stay? Stay, and I shall offer you all that I have to share. What more could you want than this?"

Samuel looked down at her, his heart heavy with pity but his body unmoved. He took her hands in his and squeezed them.

"I search for a place where neither age nor death come. Can you give me that?"

She brightened and pulled him closer. "Aye! The forest! As long as a single tree stands, this place is sacred. Neither age nor death will touch me here until the very last twig is gone. So come...come sit before the fire with me. We shall be happy, shan't we?"

Samuel kissed her hand. "I think not, my lady, though it pains me. They *shall* come, d'you see? One day, they shall come."

He left her and journeyed on.

Once again, the miles melted together, no distinction between the constant, footsore hours. Even Samuel's dreams blurred together, the darkness an invariable, continuous presence at his shoulder.

One blisteringly warm noon, the sun shimmering on the path ahead of him and raising a heat haze before him, Samuel made out a new mirage: a grand house at the foot of an enormous mountain. He headed towards it and, taking a moment to make himself as presentable as the road allowed, he went to knock on the door, hoping for a hot meal and a cup of water, if not the ultimate end to his quest.

A beautiful woman in a gown of russet silk received him. She fed Samuel well, a rich meal of guinea fowl, honeyed ham, and syllabub, and led him to a chamber bedecked with fine tapestries and carvings.

"This could be your home," she whispered, slipping her hand into his. "If you would stay. Stay with me? I shall make you lord of all you see."

Her breath was sweet on his neck, her body pressed close to his. Samuel drew delicately away.

"And how long should that last, madam?"

"Until that great mountain is worn to a pebble," she said, her fingers straying to the fastenings of his shirt. "Is that not long enough for you?"

Samuel shook his head. "I seek the place where neither age nor death will come, and this is not the land for me."

At that, the beautiful woman grew angry, her face fierce and clouded. "Then leave!" she cried. "Get out, and do not return!"

She chased Samuel down the stairs, screaming obscenities after him, and out into the stables. Samuel leaped up onto a chestnut mare he found tethered by the gate, and he rode out at a full gallop, clinging for dear life to the horse's mane.

Tears of desolate hopelessness blinded him as he rode, and he was thankful the mare seemed to know where she was going. A dark, metallic voice whispered in his ears.

*You come close now, Samuel. So close.*

*Do you feel me?  
You're mine.*

The horse pelted on, sweat foaming on her shoulders, until the mountain receded far into the distance behind them and the grass and dirt of the road gave way to endless, sandy ground, pocked with dry, stubby tussocks and gnarled, ugly stones.

No sooner had Samuel begun to cross this plain than a terrible, aching sadness seeped into his bones. The swelling buds of hills rippled the horizon, the distance smeared with a tainted, bluish mist. He could think of nothing but his family and the way he'd left them... all the things he'd done which he should not, and all the things which he should have done, but never had. The feeling gnawed at him, crippling in its intensity, until he feared he'd never breathe again.

The horse switched her tail and — as if bitten by a gadfly — surged forwards into a desperate, panicked gallop. Samuel clung on, unseeing, aware of nothing, the world passing in a blur around him.

Eventually, that sense of hopeless defeat lifted, and he hauled himself upright in the saddle.

A third house, not as grand as the others he had seen, rose before him. It was set away from the fading margins of the plain, where the dreary, coarse traces of sand leached into sparse, patchy grass, and a merciless sun beat down. The building clung to the land, low and narrow, roofed with square cedar shingles. Its wall-timbers had long been bleached by the elements, and a veranda wrapped around the house, its hard lines broken up by pockets of beautifully placed plants. Tall spikes of flowers and loose, fluffy, billowing grasses fell in drifts around the building and marked the boundaries of what appeared to be a large, well-tended garden.

It wasn't a sight Samuel could have expected to see. He slowed the mare to a walk, soothing her heaving breaths with a tender hand upon her neck. As they neared the house, he dropped lightly to the ground, trying to distance himself from the lingering, malign claws of his journey. The mare nodded, snorted, and coughed.

"There, girl," he murmured, patting her wet coat. "We'll get you some hospitality, shall we? And pray God there's not another bloody woman in there."

Samuel looped the horse's reins around the fence post and gave her one last rub on the nose before, cautiously, he headed towards the door.

The house had a strange feeling about it; the outside looked worn and fragile, yet there was something terribly familiar in the way the place felt. Like a home. Like...*his* home? No. That was ridiculous. Samuel had never been one for houses. Even so, he folded his fingers into a fist and rapped smartly on the peeling wood of the door.

After a few moments, it creaked open, revealing the shadows within and, standing bright against them, a young man, lithe and slim. The skin of his face was brown — tanned, but not as dark as Samuel's — and the open collar of a

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white shirt showed the promise of a long neck peppered with freckles. Deep red hair, slightly wavy, curled to his ears, his forehead half-hidden by a thick sweep of fringe. He stood a shade over six feet tall, grey breeches encasing narrow hips and well-shaped legs, a pair of scuffed old riding boots on his feet.

Samuel stared. The sight of this man struck him like a shaft of sharp sunlight sifting through mist, and scattered every hope he'd expected to have of rational thought or sensible speech.

"Wh.... Um. Hello?" he managed.

The man smiled, a bright white beam sliding through the air between them. He had the most wonderful dark eyes, kind and expressive, wreathed with networks of fine lines. Samuel couldn't stop gazing into them, aching to lose his worries there.

He shook himself, embarrassed at the strength of his own reaction. The man bowed – a small incline of his head, old-fashioned and gentlemanly – and his smile widened.

"Hello."

"What is this place?" Samuel breathed, fighting to keep the tone of awe from his voice.

"My house. You are welcome in it. Your name...?"

"Samuel. Samuel Hearst, sir."

"You are very welcome," the man said, with the last wreath of that stunning smile. "Samuel."

A peculiar current seemed to shiver beneath the word, a ripple on an unseen pond that ran right to Samuel's core, and reminded him of the simple, ineffable power of words... and of names.

The man stepped back and gestured into the dim hallway.

"Please, traveller. Enter. Consider my home most humbly offered to you, for you must be weary." He peered past Samuel's shoulder. "And your horse could do with some attention. There is a trough at the back, and a small stable, though it has been without use for some time. I keep no horse."

Samuel wanted to ask how, if he had no mount, the man ever journeyed from this remote, inhospitable place. The memory of that strange plain he had crossed, where he'd felt he could never find happiness again, plagued him briefly – how could such an obstacle be passed? But, his host was right. The horse needed watering and rubbing down and, as his stomach growled with embarrassing volume, Samuel realised his own body was sorely in need of succour.

"Thank you, sir," he said, bowing again. "You are a gentleman, truly."

The man laughed. "I doubt that. Oh, and my name is Leste. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Before he let Samuel go and attend to the mare, he held out his hand. Samuel shook it, the simple contact of skin thrilling him beyond all proportion. He cleared his throat and tried to drag his perfidious body back under control. Had he really been so long on the road, travelling with neither company nor release, that he could be so affected? Or was he going mad?

Either way, he was glad of the chance to take himself away.

Through a side gate, he led the chestnut mare to an overgrown stable and small fenced paddock, running beside the length of the garden he'd noticed from the road. It was every bit as beautiful as he'd thought: wildflowers and cultivated specimens, a riot of colour and shape stretching right out in the distance, framed by banks of bright shrubs and verdant trees. The plain, the grey sand, and the patchy, mean road could not have seemed further away.

Samuel watered, groomed, and stabled the mare, wondering for a brief moment if her previous owner would come looking. He had, in all technicality, stolen the horse... though he doubted there would be any repercussion. Still, he hated the thought of bringing trouble here. This place felt so tranquil, so comfortable. Maybe it wasn't possible for anything bad to happen, for any evil to enter. At that, his mind fell at once to the witch.

*Strange.*

He didn't feel her here. He hadn't, if he stopped to consider it, felt that maleficent presence since crossing the plain. Perhaps he was tired. Yes, that must be it. The truth of it—once again, the denial of that freedom he doubted he would ever find—would be proved in the night, when the dreams came.

A sound at the gate alerted him to the presence of a very different figure, and Samuel turned. In the fading daylight, gradually giving way to the evening's softness, Leste looked even more appealing. He tilted his head to one side, a wordless question in his face that he soon cloaked with dissimulating excuses.

"Would you like...a glass of wine? There is food, too. You must be hungry after your journey. You came across the plains, yes?"

Samuel nodded. Midges had begun to fly. Did time move that quickly here?

"It is a hard route to take. But I think you will be glad of it."

Samuel said nothing and followed his host indoors.

Leste served him a banquet, the like of which Samuel had rarely seen. Oysters and beef, fresh bread slathered with soft butter, great wild mushrooms, and tender green beans. Samuel ate until he could have burst, and they talked of poignant nothings, the words skirting around meanings hidden deep beneath their voices.

By the end of the meal, Samuel was spellbound. Leste offered him more wine, and they withdrew to a small, cosy room at the back of the house, its walls painted a strange, dull shade of red. They sat beside a wide fireplace and drank wine from broad crystal cups. Leste's every glance brushed Samuel's skin like a rose, until he feared his face must flame with embarrassment. Yet he couldn't deny the want that raged in him, keen and hungry. How long since he'd had a man? Not the quick, awkward assignations he could snatch with village lads—those boys who gave him everything if he charmed it from them, but never held what he really wanted—but something more? A real man, live and proud, powerful and vital.

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Someone like Leste...he was no coarse, callow, eager lad, no child with man's eyes. Samuel sipped his wine and wondered.

When finally he took his leave and retired for the night, Leste guided him to a guest chamber and made sure Samuel knew it lay just across the landing from his own. Unspoken promises passed beneath the platitudes they shared, and the lingering goodnight was torturous.

Alone at last, Samuel surveyed his room. Broad, simple furnishings; a chest, a small table, and a wide, soft bed covered with a patchwork quilt, perhaps the handiwork of female relatives no longer in evidence. He frowned. What sort of a man lived set this far apart from everything and everyone?

Despite the distractions, it seemed strange to Samuel to be fenced in so with roof and walls, the sky and the road pushed so far from him. A half-caught tune whispered between his teeth, shaped around the words his father used to sing while they rode:

*And born in a ditch, I shall never grow rich  
And that's why they call me the Romany rai....*

Yet, for all the itch in his feet, Samuel remembered the thing that had come from the darkness, and that waited for him...would wait for him forever.

Rather anything, than go back to that.

He stripped off and dove into the cocooned warmth of the bed. Samuel lay there, still and quiet, hoping in vain that those memories would not crawl from the shadows. Surely she would come, her every step echoing out of the dark, with those claws of steel and great iron teeth. He could feel her, sniffing around the edges of his world, waiting and yearning, hungry for his blood.

For his soul.

The more he thought of it, the harder it was to force the darkness to lift. He tried, but nothing Samuel could do made the shadows recede, nor the evil memories that loitered in them seem any less vivid. He still heard the scraping of metal on stone, still had the greasy warmth of rank, foetid breath on the back of his neck.

Samuel shivered, groped for a candle, and succeeded only in knocking everything on the narrow table to the floor. He cursed and swung his legs out of the bed, feet touching the cool wooden boards tentatively, as if he expected them to be slimy beneath his toes. The night air raised goose bumps on his flesh, and his skin seemed to him grey, dead and shrivelled, hanging numbly from his body. A violent, choking chill wrapped its arms around him, and he struggled to breathe.

Blindly, he stumbled from the bedroom, across the landing to Leste's chamber. The door yielded easily to his touch. Unlocked, it swung open, creaking in the dark. Samuel couldn't make out much of the room, just the dim shapes of the wooden furnishings and the bulk of the bed, closed in with heavy fabric drapes. Leste had left them open, and Samuel supposed, when there was moonlight, he liked to sleep bathed in it. He could picture that all too well, and he held his breath, listening for the sounds of Leste sleeping.

Samuel wished he'd stayed outside. This felt like trespass, something wrong and unforgivable, yet he didn't leave. He didn't dare more.

Leste slumbered peacefully, his breathing slow and regular. Samuel's gaze hungrily traced the shape of his body beneath the blankets. One arm lay above the covers, the skin softly kissed by the grainy, blue-tinged shadows. He stirred, and his movement seemed to send a ripple through the air, like a breeze across still water. Samuel fancied it brushed his arm, that gentle caress of the wind, and he shivered again...though, this time, it wasn't such an unpleasant feeling.

"There's room," Leste murmured sleepily, "if you wish it. Join me?"

Samuel blinked. "I...I thought you were sleeping."

"I was." He turned over and sat up in the gloom, his expression unreadable.

"It wasn't my intention to wake you," Samuel said, instantly regretting it. What had he meant to do, then? Stand there all night and stare? He cleared his throat. "Um. I mean—"

"Come. If you wish it, join me. There is no ceremony, no great weight to bear. You are cold, and I can warm you."

Samuel's legs had already begun to carry him across the floor—a small distance, yet so yawningly wide—and he fought to check the movement, suspicious of this sinuous, wonderful creature.

"I never said I was cold."

Leste tilted his head to the side, and a smile might have touched his lips in the darkness. "No, but I saw it in you from the moment you arrived. You have a touch of ice on your soul. A burn, if you want to call it that. A scar. I can help, if you'll let me."

His voice sounded so reasonable, his words so honest. Samuel stepped forward again, seeing no point in resisting. He stretched out his hand, finding the bed covered with what seemed to be soft wool blankets and crisp linen. There was a smell, like dust and wood shavings—pleasant, and comforting.

Leste drew back the covers, and Samuel slipped easily in beside him. True to his word, he was warm. Samuel reached for him, sliding his palm down the hard lines of Leste's body, the firm ridges of hip, ribs, and shoulder. He smelled like sea salt and long, clear days of spring sunshine, and he pressed back a little into Samuel's touch, ready and pliant. It would be so easy to take him, use him, stretch him out and apply him to all those deep, aching hurts, a balm and a plaster. Samuel pressed his mouth thoughtfully to the back of one well-shaped, solid shoulder.

It occurred to him that Leste hadn't moved. Almost as if he was waiting, holding his breath in preparation to yield.

*Yes...easy.*

Samuel moved his hand lower, fingers gliding over the gently rounded curve of Leste's belly, the planes of firm flesh that led up to the hardness of his chest. Sparse scatterings of hair trailed the skin, each motion of Samuel's hand brushing against new findings, new discoveries. Leste stayed still, silent but for one low breath, contentment and assurance whispering into the quiet.

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He made it so easy. So easy for Samuel to touch him, taste him, take from him everything he needed. His fingers closed around Leste's wrist, drawing him closer, his body rolling over where Samuel guided it, flesh to flesh and skin to skin. A few strands of that deep red hair hung down, his fringe tickling Samuel's forehead before Leste bent his head, a hard, hungry kiss unleashed on his mouth.

Samuel had meant to use him, to plunder a kind of safety from him, but it was clear he had underestimated his match.

Leste's kisses overwhelmed him, eroding everything but the swelling repetition of sensation, over and over as if Samuel were a rock against which beat wave after wave. A sense of that clung to it; the feeling of being underwater, islanded in the silent green world of the surf, muted and hidden, enveloped and so totally removed from the world. Thoughts fled, memories slid away into nothingness, and all that existed for Samuel was the weight of another body above him, all roaming hands and the taste of warm cider and sunshine on fur.

His body awoke to the expertise of this new lover. So long accustomed to going gently with callow lads – maybe once or twice the eager embraces of a boy he'd known before, should a rarity occur and he not shun Samuel's presence, embarrassed and ashamed when he returned from the road – Leste's assuredness thrilled him. Samuel clapped his broad hands to the firm globes of buttocks, ground hard flesh tighter to his own aching body, each bright star of arousal both clarion call and desperate plea.

He rolled Leste's arse in his palms, thumb working up the narrow crack, rubbing from the mouth of a hidden valley to the juncture of his spine. He'd forgotten how badly he needed this. Leste's mouth mauled his neck, hot breath and wet tongue. The scent of his sweat – their sweat, Samuel supposed – grew strong in the tangled world of shadows and covers. Hard flesh on hard flesh, damp and unyielding, chafed to a painful pitch, trapped between the firm planes of their bellies. Leste sank down to his elbows, his chest pressing close to Samuel's, a low, hungry sigh leaving him.

"Hm," he murmured, deep in his throat, open mouth resting on the ridge of Samuel's jaw. "You can, if you wish it. Anything."

Eyes closed, his whole being just one long breath of desire, Samuel nodded his assent. Leste had promised to warm him, but it was no adequate word for what he felt now. He rolled them both over, Leste pliant but never weak beneath him as he wrestled his way across every inch of this new land, first traversing and then claiming the unknown territories of his flesh and – finally, after so long, falling to it like a starving dog to meat – sinking into the hot clasp of his embrace.

Heavy, muscular thighs, crisp with thick whirls of hair, pressed Samuel's forearms, squeezing in time to the movements of his hips. He took it slow, not wanting to cause pain to one who had willingly given so much, but he couldn't stave off the ache within him, the clenching, gnawing soreness that begged for obliteration. Leste's clear, guileless face looked up at him from the shadows and seemed to urge him on. The soft green eyes, half-lidded in

ecstasy, the bottom lip drawn in, these Samuel took as permissions, and he lost himself in his desires, hungry and determined. He ended, crying out in the dark, a mantle of white-hot fear and bliss around him, Leste's body clutching him tight, his breath searing a path over Samuel's cheek as he lay his head on his shoulder.

He thought he heard himself sob, but warm, reassuring hands stroked his hair, trailed the nape of his neck and his back, and he fell into sleep, for once out-running his dreams.

Samuel slept the rest of the night in blissful, untainted sleep, his mind at total ease.

\* \* \* \*

The morning light touched Samuel with gentle fingers, barely stirring him until the sun was fully up. He stretched his arm out across the bed, his whole body riven with aches from the unaccustomed softness...not to mention the night's exertions. Leste wasn't there, however, and that roused Samuel quicker than a pail full of cold water. He rose, pulled on his clothes, and went in search of him.

He found Leste in the garden—in the most beautiful part of the place, where fragrant herbs grew, intertwined with tall white, yellow, and blue flowers and shady trees. Birds called in the bushes, tiny flashes of movement between the leaves. Leste stood in the middle of it all, tall and so handsome, his face crinkled up against the flare of the sunshine, his white shirt transparent in the light.

Samuel watched him for a few moments, almost hoping he wouldn't be noticed, so he could just stand here, absorbing the sight of that slender body waving against the swaying grasses. He had no idea what he was going to say to Leste, how he would explain last night...or even if he should.

Leste looked up, appearing to notice him for the first time. He smiled, and Samuel's world softened a little at the edges.

"Sam."

"Good morning."

Samuel eased his way over to his...what? His host? His lover? He didn't know where he stood with this man, what he could hope for, nor what he might accept. Embarrassed, he glanced down at the lush growth of plants, reaching out to trail his fingers across the wide, pale blue bowl of a convolvulus flower, its throat flushed an intimate, vibrant pink.

Leste smiled, and it woke a shiver in Samuel's blood.

"I must go soon. To attend to business. I shall return within an hour or so, but while I am away, please consider the house your own. Make yourself comfortable. Stay...as long as you wish. If you so desire."

Samuel inclined his head. "Thank you."

He raised his glance once Leste had moved away, and his gaze followed that fair figure across the garden, a tumult of confusion bursting in his chest.

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Not least, Samuel wanted to know how the devil Leste could possibly get anywhere from here...but he had missed his opportunity to ask.

So, he waited. He idled away the time once he'd checked on the mare – turned her out into the paddock and watched her kick up her heels in joy, running and rolling among the flowers – in Leste's study. Books lined the walls, their contents a beautiful mystery to Samuel, though the smell of their leather bindings intrigued him, and in one corner stood a large globe. It was painted with pictures of all the world, of countries and continents drawn up into lines and segments, sea monsters and titans sprawling through the painted seas. Illustrations of the winds – faces with puffed-out cheeks and frowning brows – decorated the cusps, and Samuel spun the thing a few times in its stand, watching the way it moved and wondering what it all meant.

He should go, he supposed. Wonderful though this place was, surely it wasn't his ultimate goal. All the same, he would wait for Leste's return. How could he go without saying farewell?

Samuel didn't hear Leste come back. He was caught unawares, standing out in the garden once more, lingering by the paddock as the mare grazed.

"Sam?"

He caught his breath but didn't turn around. "You're back."

"Yes."

He wanted to ask so many things.

*Where did you go? What did you do?*

*Who are you?*

None of the words fell easily from his lips.

Leste stepped forward, rested his chin on Samuel's shoulder, and wrapped his arms loosely around his waist. Samuel inhaled deeply, enjoying the feel of his proximity, of his own body expanding against the other man's, held safe and secure in his embrace. Leste's breath tickled his neck, and a ripple of pleasure ran through his whole body, shivering just under his skin.

"Stay," Leste murmured. "As long as you wish. Will you stay?"

His fingertips scribed patterns on Samuel's side, tracking from hip to ribs and back in a mesmerising rhythm. Samuel watched the grass and the flowers sway, and they seemed in perfect concert with Leste's touch, as if the world was nothing more than a dream they both shared.

"I..."

It was true, wasn't it, that since he had been here the witch had not found him? He thought of his family, the town where it had all started...and of Sal. He turned his head, seeking Leste's mouth but not quite finding it, murmuring his apologies into the muddled air between them.

"I'm sorry. I can't. I...I seek only a place where age and death will not come."

Leste laughed – a warm, full sound, like waves on an empty beach – and he kissed Samuel's jaw.

"Beautiful fool."

Samuel tightened, disliking the implication of disbelief. "It's true. I –"

"You have found it. Neither age nor death will ever come here, for I am the Wind. This is my house, and it is untouchable."

Samuel turned in his arms, seeking in Leste's face the confirmation of what he couldn't believe possible.

"What?"

"I am the Wind," Leste said again, those dark eyes filling Samuel's vision.

Their mouths met in a breathless agony of relief, and it seemed to Samuel that a warm, sensuous breeze, soft as the first sultry air of summer, wrapped around him, ruffling his hair and caressing his skin.

He stayed. Who would not?

Leste proved to be everything Samuel could have hoped. He gave without restraint, sharing both his home and his heart. All that he asked was that Samuel did not wander too far from the house, back into the dangerous territories over which he had first come.

"Go wherever you will," Leste said, as they lay together in his carved oaken bed. "Go to the mountains of gold and the rivers of silver, but go not back to the Plain of Regret. You would forget me, and I could not bear that."

"I shall never forget," Samuel retorted, rolling over to smother his lover with the proof of his devotion, and sending them both into fits of laughter, limbs intertwined and mouths alight with promises.

\* \* \* \*

Time had little meaning in that place. At first, Samuel didn't give it much thought. The freedom from the dreams that had imprisoned him – and the elation on a new love – distracted him from worldly cares, and even from those aching memories of home.

But that was understandable, wasn't it? And not wrong. He hadn't been long in this place. He couldn't have been; he hadn't felt the time pass.

His hair hadn't grown, nor his nails and, slowly, Samuel realised the strangeness of that.

He rose early one morning, Leste already having vacated the bed to begin his circuit around the world. Samuel didn't fully understand the workings of that – nor how the wind itself could be made flesh – but it hadn't mattered. All that had felt real was their love and, after the things he had seen, he supposed he had little grounds to deny the likelihood of anything.

Samuel dressed, went downstairs, walked a while in that beautiful garden, and wondered why the blooms never faded.

Leste was still not back. Samuel wished he'd hurry. He wanted to touch him, to be touched; to hear his voice and smell his skin and not care about anything else. He wanted, he realised, to forget, and that thought tasted sour in his mind. Had he really been doing nothing more than blotting out his life, all this time?

*All this time...*

"Time?" he murmured to himself. "What time?"

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Samuel padded out to the stables and brought out the chestnut mare on whom he'd first arrived here. Slipping ably onto the horse's back, he rode hard the way he'd once come.

The verdant ground yielded to coarse sand, and they entered the Plain of Regret. At once, Samuel gasped, those agonies of rueful misery flooding back through him. The faces of his family flickered before his eyes and felt anew the pain of every mistake he'd ever made, heightened a hundred-fold until he could hardly bear to breathe or blink, every shred of self-awareness crushed to a burning sense of failure.

He must press on. He must see them again, just once more.

Samuel urged the horse onwards and, finally, they passed through the plain.

Rising along the road before him was what looked like a rock, a slumped form of broken rubble. As they drew closer, Samuel realised it was no natural thing, but the remnants of a grand house...the grand house he had passed before. He pulled the mare up sharply and dismounted.

"How can this be?" he murmured.

Where once there had stood a beautiful building — where once he had been received like an earl, eaten guinea fowl and honeyed ham — there was now nothing but scattered ends of stone. The mountain that had risen so high behind the house was gone, worn down to the mere numb of a pebble. An old woman, clad in a tattered gown of russet silk, filthy and ragged, crouched over that last, sad piece of stone, sighing and cooing to herself. Hunched over the final dying grain of the mountain, she barely saw him, and Samuel slipped away, too afraid to speak to her.

He rode on, full of dread at what he would next find, only to have his suspicions woefully confirmed.

Where the ancient forest had stood, only bare tree stumps remained. The house of the beautiful young girl had long since fallen to ruins, covered over by moss and lichen. All that remained of her was a shrivelled, ash-pale creature, more skeleton than living being, clutching the last twig in her frail, translucent hands.

Samuel didn't even get off his horse. One look from those half-dead, milky eyes was enough to send him riding on, faster and faster, his thoughts fixed on the ugly birth of a horrible truth.

*They can't be...it cannot be so.*

At last, weary and numb with sorrow, Samuel came to a great, empty desert. Nothing around for miles but sand: dry, coarse, dull, grey sand. It rippled for endless leagues, shifting against an equally grey and featureless sky. Samuel looked about him for some sign of life, but he saw no trace, just a few broken pieces of rubble beneath the surface of the sand.

"What is this place?" he said to himself.

"You knew it once," a voice replied.

Startled, Samuel spun around. A woman stood before him, no footsteps on the sand, her tall frame wrapped completely in a black fur robe. Her face,

white and heart-shaped, framed by the spiked wisps of a fur hood, seemed familiar, though he had no idea from where.

"What d'you mean?" he demanded, forgetting his manners. "Who are you?"

A cruel smile twisted her perfect lips. "They are all dead."

Samuel slipped from his horse, feeling the tension bunched in the animal's muscles. The woman still stared, unmoving, and a horrible sense of triumph touched her cold, black eyes.

"It is gone, Samuel."

Dread washed through him, and bile surged in his throat. "You?"

Slowly, the witch smiled. Her every tooth was a nail of rusted iron, and the smell of decay – rotten meat and the stale, dead air of tombs – gusted from her horrific mouth.

"A thousand years have passed, Samuel. All who loved you are long gone. The town that once was here has been ground to dust and rubble. All that remains is me. Just me...and you. I have waited for you such a long time, Samuel. Would you like to hear how they died?"

The paralysing grief, the pain and sorrow and disbelief, all solidified in Samuel, melting together into a throbbing, steely core of hatred.

"You should have died! Withered. If they stopped believing in you –"

"If they had." She smirked. "They did not. You underestimated my power, Samuel. You underestimated everything."

Anger moved him, sent him lunging towards her, even though he knew how powerful she was. Time had certainly not diminished her strength or her violence. What once had been a child had now grown to full maturity, hardened and practised in its evil.

Samuel felt every blow, every strike of her bladed hands into his flesh. Her raging screams rent his ears, but no pain – no matter its force – could bow him. He didn't care whether he was able to hurt her or not, though he wanted her dead with an intense desperation. Every agony she inflicted upon him hurt like redemption, as if his sacrifice could, after all this time, somehow make things right. Bring them back, pay his debts...balance the world again.

Blood and tears stung his eyes as they fought. Around them, the sands rose, sharp grains biting, whipped by the –

–*Wind?*

The storm enveloped them, sand blinding the witch and stripping the skin from her dark metal bones. She yelled, infuriated, and Samuel eased into the warm, fortifying touch of familiar hands on his shoulders, the press of well-loved lips on the nape of his neck.

*I am with you, my love. Always.*

Samuel closed his eyes, the warm breath of the wind cradling him, lifting him. The witch's vile, saw-edged fingers closed around his throat, and he knew how to defeat her. He pushed forwards, shoved his face into hers, and spoke her name.

The witch screamed and began to crumble. The sands dissipated, the wind fell, and Samuel watched her die. A mangled, horrific thing, all grotesque,

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twisted iron, and rotten flesh, she gave a final convulsion and collapsed back, dead.

For several moments, Samuel stayed hunched on the ground, his body burning and throbbing, blood clouding his vision and the sheer weight of agony crushing his lungs. Leste touched him gently, carefully.

"Sam?"

He turned his head, unable to see, but he moved towards the sound of that voice like a moth to a candle. He opened his mouth, nothing leaving it but a raw gasp of pain.

Leste held him, soothed him, and murmured calming words. Yes, they were gone. Yes, everything had changed. But some things remained real, remained true.

"A thousand years? How...?"

He pressed his face to the top of Samuel's head, his breath warm and filled with apology.

"I'm sorry, Samuel. Truly sorry. I should have warned, should have made you see. But you shall see them again. You know that, don't you? One day. When you are ready to leave this world behind you."

Leste's fingers smoothed the sweat-matted hair from Samuel's face, and he looked up into those brown eyes, filled with a new apprehension.

"Leste?"

"Are you ready now? I cannot – will not – ever keep you against your will."

"No." Samuel caught Leste's hand in his own. "Not yet. Not quite yet." He kissed Leste's knuckles. "Take me home?"

Leste nodded. He raised a hand, and a breeze began to move around them, the currents spiralling and winding until Samuel felt himself supported upon a cushion of air, wrapped in Leste's arms, and in the very fabric of his existence.

A kiss pressed to his mouth, he closed his eyes and held on, the feeling beginning to seep back into his body, and with it the pain of his wounds bursting anew. He would return to the house of the wind, and there he would stay until he was ready. Perhaps forever. His grief would fade with time, he hoped, and his losses would burn less vivid.

"Life is change," Samuel murmured, the words coming back to him from a long, long time ago.

"Like the wind," Leste agreed, whispering into his hair as they flew, coiling high over the Plain of Regret, back to the little house nestled among beautiful, constant flowers.

Samuel put his arms around his lover's neck and buried his face in Leste's chest. One sacrifice had bought him so many agonies, and yet unearthed such a rare gift. He supposed he must learn to live this strange life anew; this time, unburdened by guilt, shame, or regret.

There was, indeed, great power in names.

M. King

## About the Author

M. King lives and works in a damp, verdant corner of South West England, where she may usually be found behind a keyboard and a vat of coffee. She has a deep and wide-ranging interest in folklore, and the Travellers' Tales series is inspired by her long-time affection for Romany stories.

You can find more of her work, including free reads, excerpts and competitions, at [www.lavengra.co.uk](http://www.lavengra.co.uk)

