



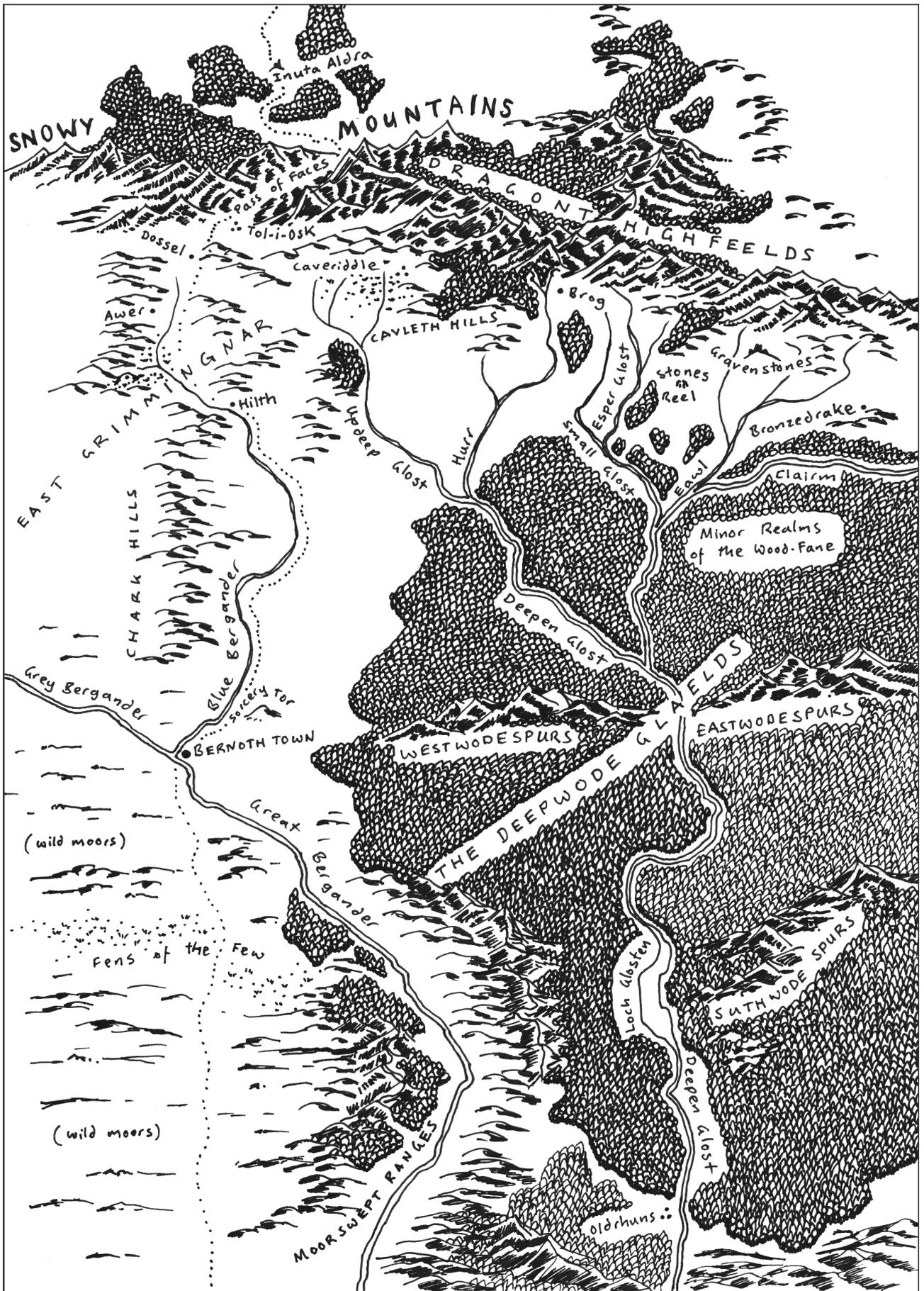
A TREASURE OF BONE & PROMISES

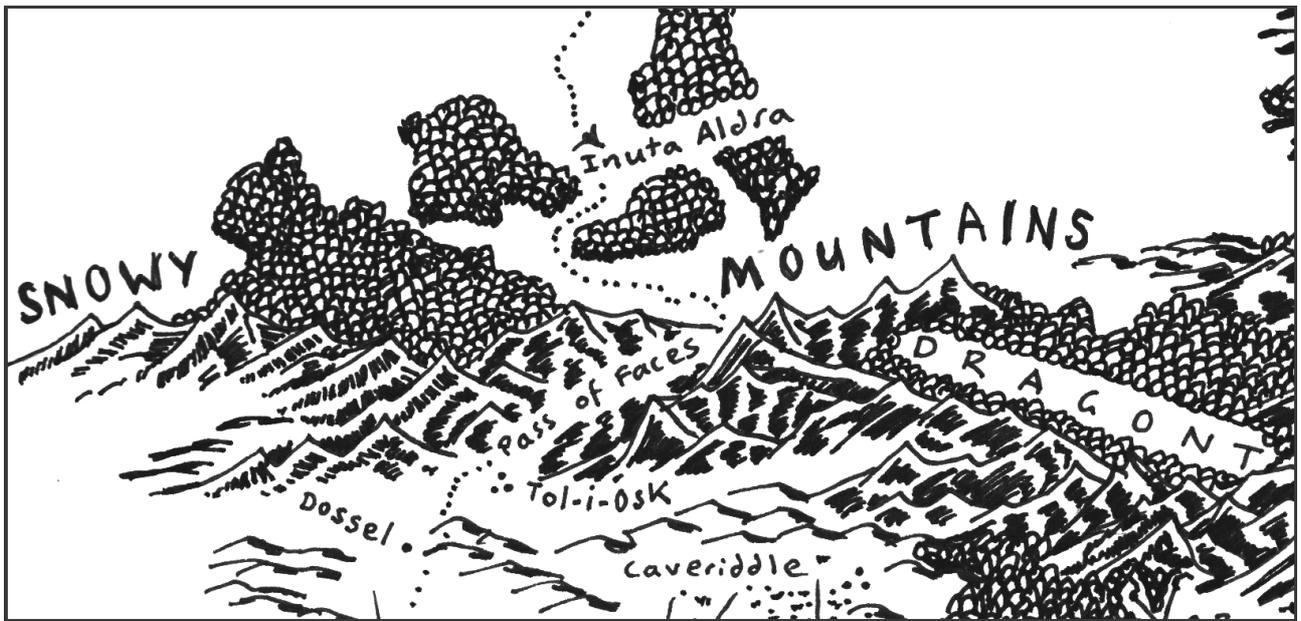
HOB GOODFELLOWE

PART ONE of THE WINTER KING

SAGAS AROUND THE FIRE (Author's Note)

This is the first instalment in *The Winter King*. My aim in writing this and other tales in this cycle is to produce a set of fantasy stories that can be read individually, but also build towards an over-arching storyline. *Crown of Bone* is a short introductory novella in which we meet a couple of the characters who will wander into later stories. At the time of writing this, the next two pieces (short novel length works) are complete as drafts and I am refining them. A few minor and perhaps academic points might be worth noting here. Mannagarm is a name adapted from one of the variants of the Norse mythic wolf Garm, although any resemblance stops there. Dapplegrim has been adapted and moulded out of the horse-creature that is the chief character of the fairytale of the same name. Wisht is an actual English word, though has fallen out of use. It is spelled variously wist, whisht and wisht, and means 'eerie', 'uncanny', 'eldritch'. The hounds of the Wild Hunt were in parts of Southwest England called Wisht Hounds, for example. What else to mention? I stole the idea for a sword dripped with the blood of nine wolves and poison of nine serpents from Beowulf. Writers that I have delighted in include Ray Bradbury, Ursula Le Guin, Alan Garner, Poul Anderson, J.R.R. Tolkien, Lord Dunsany, G.K. Chesterton, Peter S. Beagle, Peter Dickinson and the inimitable H.H. Munro, called also Saki (though I'd be a madman to claim my writing comes anywhere near the woven grace of just one of those tale-tellers). And that will do for now. Onwards then, to the tale told, the story unravelled, the saga around the fire.





Two rooks flew in the sky. They flapped together through the pass in the mountains, southward—gliding on long and feather-stretched sweeps—beating their wings and climbing higher and higher, then floating down atop the winds. They danced together, weaving one over the other, much like rooks will do when in a playful mood.

One of them was fat, almost chubby and sleekly black. The other was older, with a grey collar of feathers about his neck.

The grey-collared one paused in mid-flap, and cried out in the language that all birds know, and some other creatures too, hares and foxes for instance, "Hoy! Harrier!" And the rook folded back his wings and dove.

The marsh-harrier was perched on a dead old pine: a fawn-speckled, black and brown lord, surveying, waiting for some weak or sick or foolish thing to scurry into the open. It did not look up, and it did not see the rook until wings and beak mobbed it from above.

Crouching its head and ruffling its wings, the harrier called out, angry, while the old rook flapped away, laughing in the laughter of birds. "Worm-eating, mange-ridden git!" the harrier yelled.

"Egg-eater!" cried the rook. "Chick-robber!"

The harrier was rearranging its feathers and resuming some dignity when the second rook knocked it on the back of the head, then flapped away.

"Ugly, carrion-beaked... eh... *something!*" yelled the second rook.

-oOo-

The grey-collared rook spoke as they flew south. "Carrion-beaked *something?*" It chuckled in a rasping rook's voice. "A rook can do better than that."

"Haven't mobbed many harriers, have I?" The fatter, younger rook was indignant. "I'm still young, I am—and we don't get many harriers up north of the Snowy Mountains. Do we then?"

"Excuses, excuses," said the old grey rook. "Mind you, I do love a good mobbing myself. I wonder if we might see a lynx, or even a dog? Love mobbing dogs. They're all stuck on the ground, like rocks. Urm. Like rocks with legs. But furrrier than rocks. If you know what I mean? Anyways, more fun to mob than harriers, for mobbing purposes."

"I've never mobbed a dog neither," said the young sleek rook, hopefully. "Can they jump?"

"Not high enough." The older rook turned on its wing. It added, "This way. We've things to attend to. No dilly. No dally. Work, work, work. That's our lot."

"Suppose it is," said the young fat-sleek rook. "Wait up, then." He flapped to catch up.

They drifted over green and rolling foothills, thick with meadows in burgeoning flower and just barely alive with the first active bumblebees of the new spring. Twisting across the white and blue and pink spattered meadows, with their shadows chasing after them, they came at last upon a small house in a secluded vale. It was ringed round with apples and hawthorns that were full of buds ready to burst. There were early season daffodils in the earth, and clover and daisies too: the fresh struggling flowers of the season were everywhere. Out back of the tidy cottage stood five beehives, of that sort humans weave from reeds and willow—a kind of upturned basket, that to a rook's eye looked something like the threadbare pate of an elderly bear's head.

The two rooks lit on an appletree branch and waited—bobbing on the flimsy length of stick and twigs. In time, an old woman, a bit bent, a bit crooked, wandered out from the house and set herself to pressing flowers. She was pressing out perfumes for candlewax, and she sang subtle songs of power as she did her chores.

"Well," said the younger sleek rook, "she is a witch. Is that good enough?"

But the old grey rook shook his head. "No. Too old, too wise, too kind. She'll never go for it, and besides, even if she does, the bees will whisper in her ears and warn her about us, and tell her the truth. And that will be the end of that."

"I hear there's a magician on the rocky downs. Near Chark, I think? Calls himself the Piper-at-the-Heather."

"Pretentious."

"Could look in on him next?"

"Might as well."

And the two rooks took to flight, winging away southward towards the Hills of Chark.

But when they at last spied the Piper-at-the-Heather, they found him sitting on a rock, playing his small leather bagpipes in the growing warmth of day, taking in all the views of the wild westlands rolling away in heath and heather and sphagnum mossy tarns. He sang his songs, peacefully, and listened to the peacefulness of the world exhale from the moors.

They watched him for a while, listening. But before too long the grey collared rook shook his head. He muttered, "Won't do. Too much peace in his soul. No fight. No spit. No anger. Won't be any good, will he?"

The Witch of the Green Gloam Glens was too young, too pleasant and too flighty in her moods—and besides that, her songs, though earnest, were not skilful. It grated terribly when she sang. "Imagine having to listen to that all day!" said the young sleek rook, shaking his feathers, as they flew off.

The Sorcerer of Alb Tor was far too kind. He threw the rooks some grainy black bread—which, of course they ate hungrily—despite the disappointment of his turning out to be more or less rather nice. As he tossed the bread to the rooks, he smiled, sitting at his little stone table beside his ramshackle tower in the sunlight.

The Blue Magician of the Twilit Woods was rotund, brimming with laughter, and quite jolly. He didn't seem to have a nasty bone in his body.

"You would think," said the older rook, "that somewhere in this rook-forsaken land there would be at least one cantankerous worker-of-magic. At least one unscrupled, nasty, weasel-hearted hexmonger. At least one bleak magician! What's a rook to do? Who's next on the list?"

"Hrmmm... let me think..." said the younger rook. "I think his name is Mannagarm... Mannagarm of Dossel."

-oOo-

Mannagarm stood on the gravelly path that stretched from the threshold of his hilltop longhouse to the village below. The path twisted past the old dead mountain ash that clung to the cliff's edge there. And from where Mannagarm stood, beside the tree, he could see the trackway twist below him, down, down to where the houses and shacks and sheds of the village cowed together. The village was named Dossel, though it was the sort of small out of the way place that no-one important has ever heard of. Under the shadow of the great mountains that stretched like grey and white shards of a broken looking glass, there was little enough to farm and little enough for anyone outside the stoney hills to want. Kings and queens, raiders, traders and merchants: they did not cast eyes of avarice on these lands, not even the pettiest of them. And so these lands

were mostly clan-lands—villages, hillforts and small wooden castles scattered about, and controlled by the family clans that in years gone by had travelled out of the south and west.

Mannagarm's village was an exception to that rule. His village was his village. He was the self-proclaimed Witch-Chieftain of Dossel, Lord-Magian of All Purveyed, Watcher Over the Roads, Great Practitioner of Secret Arts... all titles he had bestowed on himself, of course... and he ruled his tiny chieftain with ruthless, angry jealousy. It was his. All his. And no-one would take it from him. Never. Even the thought of someone trying to take away what he had worked so long to rule, well, it made bile rise in his throat.

It was his village. He had, after all, been born to it in one of those small, drear cottages. He had grown up here. He had learned of the secrets of bone and root from the Dossel's old witch-woman, and he had secretly killed her and taken the secrets she refused to give him. He had sought out other, deeper secrets from the unseen voices and dark shadows that haunted the remote mountain glens. He had seen the words of spells in the spiralling flight of birds and found magic in the shapes that clouds make. He was jealous of it all—the power, the hard knowledge, all of it: hard won, and hard paid for too.

The old dead mountain ash that he stood beside was dead because of his magic. The sorcery had done strange things to Mannagarm over the years, coursing through him. It had changed his blood, and turned his shadow poisonous to plants—not only had his shadow killed the old tree he liked to stand under, but even the grass and weeds were withered beside the paths he walked. There were other odd things about him too. His hair sometimes blew as if lifted by a faint breeze, even when the air was dead still. He left no footprints, even in thick wet mud or snow. Strange things.

But he'd met other sorcerers who had it worse. There was that one man—what was his name? Anyway, his footprints oozed with blood where he walked. And there was that woman who caused carved patterns to appear on any stone she touched. Alright, he supposed, but annoying if you'd rather not turn your whole house into a mess of spirals and grooves and twisted knots just by living in it.

That was back when Mannagarm had been a young man. Back when he journeyed all the way south to the hill where the Convoke of Magians met once every seven years—the Sorcery Tor—the one outside of Bernoth. He didn't remember what the hill was properly called. It had some long name or another. His memory was not what it had been. Besides which, it strained him, and pulled his thoughts to breaking point just keeping up all the defensive wards and spells. The villagers hated him. He knew they hated him, and he knew any one of them would slit his throat if they could. One day, one of them probably would get the better of him. But for now, he was well protected, even if it did tire him sorely. Under his cloak of feathers and the necklace of wood beads his chest was increasingly hollow, his skin liver-spotted and his ribs jutted and visible. His was a miserable sight. Had he been such a miserable sight all those years ago at the sorcerer's hill? He cast an eye over the mountains with their distant, soft-hued shades and the clouds chasing above them. Maybe, he admitted. He had been an awkward boy, hardly more than a few years past childhood.

He remembered the smirks and the poorly covered laughter, the stares, the whispers and the nods and quiet conversations that stopped as soon as he neared anyone.

A Convoke of Magians was not a place for one such as him. Hexmonger, they'd called him. Charmpeddlar. Rattlebagger. Hedge-wizard. How he'd hated that last one. Hedge-wizard, hedge-wizard: a hedge of anything was the sort of person so poor, so miserable, so without talent that they slept under hedges and not as guests in good houses or inns. He hated it, because it was true, and in his unworldliness and youth, it had never dawned on him that such a thing might be an insult. At the Convoke all those years ago he'd admitted to sleeping under hedges during his journey, before he knew it was a byword for scorn anyway.

"Well, we haven't had our revenge against that lot but we never went back did we?" He leaned against the tree, listening to the rise and fall of wind and the creak of its timbers.

As he stood in his own thoughts, two rooks circled above him, then descended and landed in the higher-up branches. One of them was fat and sleek looking. The other was thinner, a bit of off-black overall, and quite grey around its neck, as if old.

The rooks fell to talking, which is not unusual for rooks. They are gossipy birds. Because Mannagarm knew the language rooks use to chatter, he listened. After all, they might be dim-witted birds, but rooks do sometimes know a thing or two that's worthwhile to hear.

"Oohahh," said the first rook, Fat-sleek. "I've been up over 'em ranges but there's no good eating up that way now. Them Wisht-Folk are keeping themselves to themselves this last season. They ain't been hunting, nor leaving any offal in the woods."

"Course they keeping quiet," said the other rook, Grey-collar. "Them's got that thing, that... erm... *thing*... lurking about outside their house-walls, hasn't they?"

"What thing?"

"It's a dead sort of thing, but not dead. Living-dead. What do you call it? A goule? That thing? Didn't you hear about it?"

"No, I ain't heard nuthing about no goule-thing."

"Well," said Grey-collar, "I was talking to a fox, and foxes are liars but I reckon this one was mostly telling the truth."

"True, true," said Fat-sleek. "Foxes are liars. Can't trust a fox."

"Well," replied Grey-collar, perhaps a bit testily, "This fox told me that the goule came out of the north during the winter and it's been hunting the Wisht-Folk. Killing them, and slaughtering them and leaving their bodies all about the woods."

"Pity," said Fat-Sleek.

"What?"

"I mean, it's a pity he's leaving dead Wisht-Folk about. Any other creature, I'd eat a bit of eye or tongue—if it were a dead humanfolk for instance, I'd gobble up a bit of tongue in a snap—but not one of them Wisht-Folk. They's uncanny, and their flesh is uncanny. Don't know what might happen. Might turn you into a sparrow."

"Or a fox," said Grey-Collar, with a touch of conjecture.

"Or it could turn you into a rook, only it'd be a different rook to the rook you are, otherwise it wouldn't be much like an uncanny changing at all. I suppose."

"Aye... I suppose," said Grey-collar eyeing his companion. "Anyway, the Wisht-Folk are all holed up waiting for someone or something to save them. They don't have fighting heroes, or none who are sturdy enough to tooth-and-claw it up with a deadly unliving creature."

"So then what?"

"Suppose it'll kill them all," said Grey-collar. "One by one. Unless some hero comes by, but that's not likely is it? Long way up in the Twilight Lands, over the Snowy Mountains. Long way from anywhere."

"And why would a hero would want to help them anyway? Unfriendly lot."

"Well, I suppose the creature has some treasurish whatnot it's taken from them it's killed. Gold and silver."

"Well, I guess. Don't see the appeal, meself," said Fat-sleek.

"But some folks like it. Magpies for instance. They love a bit of shiny gold to put in their nest."

Fat-sleek looked at Grey-collar askance. "Magpies?" said Flat-sleek. "Mad, if you ask me."

"True. Though the Wisht-Folk have their uncanny arts too. And the goule-thing keeps that big roundish object, the one made from bone."

"Ooh. Ooh. I know this one. It's a hat. Humanfolk wear them too."

"No. It's more important than a hat. It's like a *special* hat. It has a name." Grey-collar thought. "Crown! Like the crown of a skull."

"So it has a fancy hat?"

"The special hat has magic in it, sparrow-brain," said Grey-collar. "Lots of power. I heard the Wisht-Folk saying so. Enough magic to make anyone a great and powerful magicking sort of person."

Fat-sleek thought about this a moment. "Magic! Bleh. Can't see the appeal, meself."

"Some folks like it," said Grey-collar. "Wolves for instance. They're always casting spells. It's all that howling they do, and all that pissing on trees. They urinate the parts of giant magic shapes in the landscape. They do magic through their piss."

"Wolves? Mad, if you ask me."

Mannagarm had heard enough. If the rooks could not see the appeal of gold and silver, he more or less agreed... but an object of power? That surely must be what this bone crown was. Some

ancient artefact, handed down sorcerer to sorcerer, and now perhaps within his grasp? Age was telling on him, but there were stories of ancient magics so great they could slow ageing or reverse it. He never had got his revenge on those simpering, nasty, arrogant cretins at the wizard-moot.

And yet, as if by fate, now, he wondered if he might.

He could taste it.

He could see it dangling in front of him.

And with visions of a long and charmed life filling up his mind, he turned his back on the rooks and walked up the hill, back to his house. He needed to think, ponder, plan.

If he had glanced over his shoulder, which he did not, Mannagarm would have seen both rooks silently watching him go. Almost as if they had been delivering a bit of theatre for an audience, and now that they were done they were watching the reaction.

Before he'd reached the door of his house both rooks took to the wing and flew north, on a more or less direct line for the nearest mountain pass.

-oOo-

As Mannagarm approached his house and out-buildings the ground became sere and grey. Not a green blade or leaf grew near his home. His shadow had fallen too often on that soil.

The path to the house was surrounded by jutting outcrops of rock and when the light was right, twisted faces and agonised half-glimpsed bodies were just visible in the stone. Mannagarm did not have the power to actually turn a person to stone—he was not even sure that such a power existed—but he did have the power to snare the souls of those he killed and entomb those spirits in the natural spurs of rock. Over time, wind and water eroded faces in the stones where the souls were trapped. It was an effect he had not anticipated when he worked his necromantic trickeries, but he was pleased with it. A good warning to keep away the more foolhardy villagers.

His door had other warnings and wardings woven into it too. Jangling copper and bronze chimes hung above the lintel, and a set of skulls were embedded in badly troweled mortar around the doorframe. Their hollow eyes were full of soft shadows and softer cobwebs.

"What news?" he asked the skulls.

In voices only he could hear, the dead answered. They told him he was safe from attack tonight and there were no travellers nearby to rob or murder.

"Good enough," said Mannagarm, and he went into the house. Inside, the longhouse stunk of smoke from the cook-fire where one of his servants was making dinner. He looked around and scrunched up his nose at the assault of smells. The thatch was wet and mouldy. The floor was mere hard-packed dirt. A mouse ran across the floor, surprised by the entrance of the old man. "Heh," he sneered. Maybe he could do with some of that gold and silver too after all. It was embarrassing, living in a filthy hole like this, lord of a filthy village, king of a rotten little kingdom of nothing. He adjusted the feather cloak around his neck and said, loudly, "Fetch, O' my Fetch. Come to me!"

Up in the rafters of the longhouse something stirred in the shadows and one shadow detached itself from the others. A thing that was made entirely of darkness, and had something like a body partway between a cat and a mink and an otter, slid elegantly and with a fluidness out from its hiding place, then down the wall, and with a leap it landed on the table. It curled up beside some chopped white carrots and a turnip and a skinned rabbit carcass. The servants were not done making his dinner just yet.

"Tsh, tssch, tssh..." said the fetch. "Yes, oh wise and sagacious lord of lore? What ask you of me? Tssh. Tsch. Tsh." It blinked at him, though its eyes were the same dusky substance as the rest of it, so that it was only possible to see the blink by the slight shifting of the shape of its face.

"Hmeh," said Mannagarm. He tried to make himself imperious when talking to his fetch. The creature was the chief and greatest of his otherworldly thralls, and although a fetch was a petty sort of shadow-spirit—some wizards who thought themselves better than Mannagarm might have a dozen or a hundred fetches at their beck and call, after all—well, beside it being a petty sort of spirit, it was the best that Mannagarm had at his command and he didn't want it getting any clever ideas about who was in charge of whom... "Fetch!" he spat again, and gave the word a commanding air. "Go into the dreams of the sleeping village folk and find the bravest youth. Bring that person to me tomorrow morn. I've a task for such a one, and it cannot delay."

"As you desire, so shall it be done," whispered the fetch. It uncurled itself, jumped from the table to the floor and then to a window and out into the evening light outside. A fetch was too fragile to go about in direct sunlight, it needed to hide during the day, but at night it could go where it pleased, including into the dreams of sleepers.

Mannagarm watched it go and did not relax his pose until it was well out of sight. "Damn-becursed thing," he whispered. His shoulders sagged. He could feel twinges of pain in his shoulders and knees. The knuckles of his right hand were swollen again. Age was stalking him and death was not far behind.

"Heh," he said, angry. "Servants! Servants! Why's my even-meal not served and ready? I'll make you all writhe with pain tonight if I don't see food soon." It pleased him to order someone to do something.

With a huff he walked over to his cupboard of petty treasures, opened in and rummaged inside. At the back he found an old sword, made of pattern-welded bronze and cut with runes. It was as much an antique as a useful weapon, but it was the best piece of blade he had. Now... now... what else might a 'hero' need to slay an undead thing?

END

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The next morning Mannagarm had half-forgotten that he had even sent his fetch out the night before. It would have been too much to say he was enjoying his breakfast of oily herb sausage, white and black pudding and duck eggs, but he was swallowing it mouthful by mouthful. Sometimes he thought the magic had taken away some of his sense of taste, leaving him with an ashy sensation no matter what he ate, but he had heard other aged folk complain of lost tastebuds and smell, so maybe it was all just agedness for him too. Who could say.

He was knifing a sausage in half when he heard a soft shudder at the door. He looked up. He remembered the fetch. "Oh, he said," waving a hand, "wards be lowered. Come in. Come in."

The change in the air about the door would have been imperceptible to anyone but a worker of magic and caller upon old names of power. Thin veils of transparent magic shed and slithered off the door and the wardings that kept it locked against unwanted visitors were scattered. The door pushed open then and the fetch curled itself around the door like a lazy cat returning home after a night out mousing in the fields.

He watched the shape move across the floor. "Well, Fetch O my Fetch? What have your brought me?"

It answered with words full of the sound of shadows. "The bravest youth in the village."

As the door swung open, Mannagarm was able to see a young woman, rather underfed and a bit dirty as if she'd been living in a cellar or cave or somewhere equally full of dust and grime. She had a hard expression on her face and her eyes were as cold and flinty as any of those various persons whod come to kill him over the years. He was taken aback.

He had been expecting one of the young men, though he supposed the strict letter of his instructions was open to this turn of interpretation. Mannagarm spared a cool glance for the fetch. The little shadow-demon liked to play with words within the boundaries of instruction. It looked as if it was grinning at him, although it was difficult to be certain given its shadow-on-shadow expression. The other point of surprise was more surprising: Mannagarm kept an eye on all of the villagers who were old enough to be of any use as servants. He didn't recognise this young woman at all.

That was irritating. Somehow this girl had been hiding from him and his sorcerous spies. He scowled and waved at the stool opposite him, annoyed. "Sit. Sit. Don't stand there like a witless cretin. Come in. I sent for you didn't I? Come in then." Then a thought occurred to him. If the fetch could go into this girl's dreams last night and bring her here by charm and magic now, then the fetch knew about her all along. He glared. "Whyever did you never mention this charming young woman to me, Fetch O my Fetch?"

"You never asked," replied the fetch, curling itself into a ball in one of the darker places on the floor so that it very nearly disappeared among the ordinary shadows forming in the growing light of early morning.

"You might as well come in," he snapped at the girl again. "What was your name? How old are you exactly? And where have you been hiding? And how?"

With a sudden twist of her hand, the village girl jumped through the door and a flash of steel caught the grey dawn light. Mannagarm had barely enough time and quickness of old flesh to reel back and get out of her way. The knife, which looked sharp enough to peel skin, came within an inch of opening his throat. He twisted his hands into the shapes that could not be easily taught and a word of sorcery squirmed out of his mouth. It left a bloody trail. Words of power were sharp, like razors, and the inside of his mouth was bleeding as he spat the old magic at her. The knife she had in her fist shimmered and changed. In a slow blink of an eye it elongated, twisted into a long, rope-like form, gained a covering of silver-green scales and became a snake. It coiled about her wrist and hissed, threatening to bite.

She shrieked and shook her arm until the snake came free. By the time it hit the floor it thumped dully on the packed dirt, a knife again.

Mannagarm wiped the knotted, veiny back of his hand against his bloodied lips. He felt the old dry parchment of his skin rub against the wetness. In truth it never had been a snake. It was a mere glamour and yet the power had strained him to his limit. He had to let go of several wards and protections that lay like unseen cobwebs around the walls and fields of his hilltop house just to stay standing. He would resurrect his secret protections and alarums later, but for now he needed to gather strength. He could not let this one know how desperately close to being spent of all magic he was, what with his constant churn of protective weavings. Fool villagers, he thought to himself. Ingrates. Fools. If they were not so uncooperative and chaffing he wouldn't need so many protective wards. But once he had some of the the elder power of this thing of the north, once he had some true old power of a true old artefact in his mastery—well, things would change.

He eyed the woman. "There is a dance I can do, that if I do it right would make you fall down in a fit or drop to your knees and worship me. There are words I can say that would take your sight away for as long as I want it. There is a weaving of the fingers that would take your soul and stuff it into a jar of vinegar on my shelf. Do you understand me?" These were truths and lies. Yes, such things existed and yes, in principle he knew the arts—but the truth was that any one of these would be the last magic he would perform. Except for the magic worked through his spellbound things, the fetch, his feather cloak, the necklace of bird skulls and beads he wore—everything else was as like to kill him as not. But she needed to be convinced very definitely otherwise. "Well?" he asked, archly and with cold, calculating meaning.

She said nothing. Looking down at her wrist, and rubbing it as if the illusory snake really had bitten it, she walked to the stool and sat. Her face was a storm of fury. This one was going to murder him as soon as his back was turned.

Well, he thought, do not turn your back and do not show fear. Even vicious curs can be cowed. He shoved the cracked stoneware plate aside. The remaining sausage was cooling in its bed of congealing fat and he wasn't feeling hungry enough for it any more besides. Reaching across the table he dragged a parcel along the tabletop. It was heavy, wrapped up in an oilskin rag, and it ground noisily against the wood. Flipping the wrappings open one corner at a time he revealed the old-fashioned sword of pattern welded bronze. With a dismissive wave at the sword he said, "This sword no doubt had a name and has done some great dead or another. It has some subtle spells of venom and savagery woven into it: the man I took it from claimed that when it was made it was dripped with the poison of nine serpents and quenched from red-hot to coldness in the blood of nine wolves." He gave a slight shrug. "And who knows? It may even be true. Regardless, this is your sword now. You're going to need it to do the task I'm setting you."

"A sword?" said the woman. "I thought..." she halted.

"What? That I'd want another of you village clouts to drop my things and break them? That I'd want someone for my bed?" He snorted at her. "My manhood hasn't done anything more exciting than dribble piss these last twenty years. No. I'm not in want of a slave. I want a hero. You need to go kill a monster."

"What?"

"Go kill a monster. You deaf?" He flicked a glance at the fetch. "Have you brought me this clod-headed dunce as a joke?" But the fetch only shook as if it were laughing. "Heh. Be that way then," said Mannagarm.

"I'm no dunce."

"What?" The young woman, what-was-her-name, had said it, quiet, carefully.

"I'm no dunce. And that's why I'm so speechless. Go kill a monster? Have you addled? Are your wits gone?" Her eyes shot to the sword and Mannagarm didn't need magic to read the thoughts going on behind her gaze.

"None of that now!" he snapped. He had to put an end to her urges to kill him. He eyed her and considered argument, cajolery and threats but he was forced to arrive at the irrevocable conclusion that he was no longer a very convincing person to look upon. Old and withered, sour smelling and gap-toothed, he was not the image of one who had mastered the bleak arts. He needed to show her he did have those arts. He would need to dredge up some charm and put that on her. It would hurt him badly.

He got up and while he walked to the hearth he let several more of his protective wards and spells unravel. He could not maintain them and do this next bit of sorcery. He felt oddly naked with so many of his spells loosed and tattered, flapping about in unseen threads of magic.

Bending down hurt his back and his knees, but he scooped up a handful of the greasy ashes and carried them back to where the girl was sitting at the table. She had been watching him the whole time and her eyes were flicking to the sword and back to him.

"Now," he muttered, as he stood over her, "none of that." He wetted his free thumb in his mouth, dipped it into the ash and said, "As so shall you do unto me, so shall be done unto you. Blood of my blood for blood of your blood. Bile of my bile for bile of your bile. Hurt of my hurt for hurt of your hurt." He could see that she wanted to move away but the tendrils of magic enwrapped her and she could not move. Her eyes were wide as he painted a symbol on her forehead. It made him queasy to think about the symbol and he felt the urge to retch as soon as it was done and he was looking at it. "So be it," he hissed, and with the palm of his hand he wiped the ash into a smear of grey and black. The symbol was gone but the magic held. It was stark in the air between them to his eyes, though anyone without a sorcerer's sight would not see the threads that now connected her and him. He leaned closer to her while she was still reeling from the effects of the spell. "If you try to do me harm, whether through action or inaction, pain and hurt will redouble upon you. If you do not believe me, take that sword and try to strike me down. You'll be on the floor in agony before the blade falls. Rest assured of it, my brave young lass." With a "Hrumph" he sat down in his own chair again. Idly, he stabbed at the sausage with a table-knife until the young woman finished blinking like a startled animal and seemed to come back to her senses.

"What did you just do to me?"

"It's a spell of binding. Nothing fancy." He gave up on the sausage. Cold anyway. "Try to hurt me and the spell will hurt you. Disobey me, and the same. Trick me, or deceive me, or do anything at all against my good, and it'll be the same. Don't be foolish, and don't play the tricksey one with me either. I'll have half an eye on you no matter where you go, and if you try to sneak off without finishing up your, hrm, *chores*, I'll have your skin, I will." He let his out-breath make a hissing noise. "Oh, rest assured, I most assuredly will."

-oOo-

Caewen sat as still as if she had been hobnailed into her chair. She wasn't sure if it was the old man's magic or no more than her own fear. Her skin crawled with hate and resentment just looking at him. Mannagarm the Witching-man had found her after all the years of useless hiding, and now he had sent for her. The only thing she was determined to do was protect the secrecy around her brother now. Although, she realised, if old Mannagarm saw through the red chalk marks in the cellar and sent his shadow-thing to get her, then surely he knew about Tul too.

She felt sick at the thought.

Quickly, she shot a glance at the sword lying on the tabletop, the blade shimmering dully in light. The fingers of her right hand twitched. Almost, she reached for it then, but she held back. Mannagarm was watching her too closely and he had put that smudge of ash on her forehead. It felt cold. As he chided her and scolded her, she let herself raise a hand and touched the greasy ashes. They felt cold and the skin of her fingertips tingled as she drew them away.

What had he done and how long would it last? Caewen knew nothing about magic. Nothing at all. She'd spent her whole life afraid of the power it had given one man over a whole village, but she didn't know anything about it. Was a spell forever? Would it fade? And by what means did Mannagarm work his charms.

She considered the man.

He was not impressive in any deep and ancient way. He did not look as if he had the blood of eldritch creatures or faer folk in his veins from days gone by. In short, he did not look magical at all. And yet she had seen the shadow-thing—the fetch he had called it—and she could see as clear as sunlight that Mannagarm had mastery over unearthly powers. But if it were merely an art, she thought, an art like any other, like embroids or blacksmithy or rope-making... then could anyone learn it? Could she?

This thought hovered in the front of her skull like a fly buzzing against a curtain. Could she? How does one go about learning magic?

As she watched the old man shuffle clay pots around on a shelf looking for something, sayings tumbled over one another in her head. Meet swords with swords. Use a witch to find a witch. Wizard's fire is not doused in pond-water.

As she thought these things Mannagarm found what he wanted, and seemingly ignorant of her murderous ideas, he clunked two items on the table: a small bottle of redware pottery sealed with beeswax, and a wooden fluting-pipe. Indicating the bottle he said, "this has a rare unguent," with a sharp wave of the hand. "The boiled and reduced fat of the burach bhadi. It is a sort of nine-eyed eel... or leech...? I have never seen one living. Dangerous things. They are called sometimes the wizard's shackle for the counterspells they have naturally in their flesh. Rub this ointment into your eyes and you will see through illusions... for a time... rub it in your ears and you will hear no lies, which will be useful, I suspect, for you may otherwise be malscrunged by the creatures in the Twilight Lands where the Wisht live, and maybe the Wisht themselves." He sucked at his teeth, considering this. "They are illusory folk, as I have heard. As for the wood-pipe, you need only blow a note and I will know where you are. You will need it to summon me when your task is done."

"The Wisht-Folk?" she ventured.

"Hm. Oh, yes, The Wisht. I plain forgot. I need to bestow your quest. That would be the right phrasing, would it not?" And then he launched into a rambling instruction involving talking rooks and a pass through the northern mountains and a land beyond where eerie folk dwelled in their charm-woven halls under skies of everlasting twilight. When he finished, muttering about goules to kill, he seemed to be exhausted of words. He fell silent. She didn't dare to make a noise as she watched him. His eyes drooped fraction-by-fraction. Like any other old, doddering man he seemed to be nodding off.

With a jolt that shook the table, Caewen snatched at the sword. It was as heavy as ten fire-pokers to lift but she brought it in one sweeping arc above her head with strength fuelled by fury. But as she swung the blade down at the top of his skull a pain unlike anything she had ever known sprung through her skin. It jarred her bones and threw her to the ground. It felt like being punched in all her joints and she was dazed for a moment, staring at the soot-stained rafters as her thoughts tried to regather themselves.

She didn't know what had just happened, though soon enough the thin and grey-whiskered face of the old warlock hove into view.

"That was foolish, wasn't it, lass? Even when my thoughts are wandering and my eyes are hooded, my spells are not sleeping. If you try to do me harm through action or inaction, you'll get more of the pain. If you disobey me, the same. Do you ken me, little brave one?"

She nodded, weakly. And she hated him all the stronger and more fierce.

"Good." His face was gone. "Now, up. You need a horse for a long ride and I think I have one in mind. Nasty thing. Bites and stamps, but the flea-mottled nag be good enough for you. Come now, to the stables."

The stables were a rickety collection of horse stalls lashed together in the largest of the outbuildings that clung like scabs to the old witching-man's longhouse. The air within stank of horse urine and stale straw.

This was where Mannagarm kept the horses of the travellers he'd killed. There were half a dozen horses ranging from elegant riding greys to squat, hairy-hocked mountain animals. Mannagarm

was not picky in who he choose to kill and rob on the road. At the end of the stalls stood a larger, darker shadow—a horse that looked bigger and stronger than most bullocks. It was this horse that Mannagarm walked over to. He gave it a dismissive sniff and scowled. "Nasty thin-boned thing. Don't know why I keep it. Tries to take a finger off every time I go near it. Now—where's that stableboy? Boy! Boy! Where are you? I'll whip your ears I will." He wandered out a back way.

Caewen tentatively trod among the piles of horse-dung and rotten grey straw to get a better look at the horse that Mannagarm had decided to make her ride. It was a massive, frighteningly big animal, and she wondered why Mannagarm would want to give away such a beast. It's pelt was a dapple grey-black and it was so sleek and thickly muscled that she wondered if it were some manner of knightly mount.

Without warning, it turned to look at her. She tripped backwards and pushed herself flat into the plank wall. The horse had a skullish sort of cast to its face. Its eyes held a dull glow of red. And then it smiled. It smiled at her and showed sharp white teeth of the sort no horse should have. They were teeth that would make a bear think twice.

"What in all of Clay-o-the-Green are you?"

"I am Dapplegrim," said the horse.

A talking horse. A talking demoniac horse. It only made sense she supposed. Mannagarm would give her a beastly thing to watch her. Would it eat her if she tried to get away?

"Oh don't look like that," said the horse. He spoke with a masculine voice and although the stall was hiding the lower end of him, she guessed he must be male. It looked the other way, out the door where Mannagarm had gone. "Relax," snapped the horse. "Be calm. He doesn't know, so play it calmly, right? And then we'll both get out of here."

"What?"

"Are you an imbecile? That feculant toad of a magician murdered my master and took me as right of property, by the laws that are so old they are not writ but are heard in the winds among leaves, in the cascade among rocks. But he doesn't know, does he? My last master had some skill with charms and he put a small illusion on me. Just enough to stop other folk seeing me for what I am."

She didn't move any closer. "Why can I see then?"

"Because I want you to. You're my new master now and I want you to know what you're bound to. Mannagarm's gone and given me to you. He's gone and given me away. I knew he would. My kind are bound by old laws of ownership."

"Like a slave?"

The creature didn't answer at once, but remained still, silent, staring. "I suppose. Yes. Like a slave. Though the binding works both ways... demons and spirits can be bound by magics of keeping and owning... but the ownership works the other way too. You own me. I own you."

That last bit made her shiver. "You're a demon? A demon. A talking demon horse. Why do you look mostly like a horse then?"

"No, no, no. I'm only *half* a demon. My father was a forest-thing that lived in the woods and he must have come out one night and had fun with my mother in horse-shape. Or so I suppose. My mother was just an ordinary mare. You can't imagine how strange it is to be born and try to talk to your mother and find she just ignores you and eats grass. Made me question my sanity."

"Oh, well, that's a coincidence because I'm questioning my sanity right now." She rubbed at her forehead and felt that oily sheen of the ash there. Maybe the sorcerer's spell had touched her badly in the head somehow?

"Be quiet. The foul toad returns."

Mannagarm appeared at the door. He shot a suspicious look at Caewen, and she tried to look calm. She even smiled, which made him more suspicious if anything. Behind him trod a rag-clothed, wretchedly thin boy. Caewen realised with a shock that she knew him. It was Ely, the trapper's son. He was only a couple years younger than Caewen and yet he looked barely older than ten years. Starvation and cold had left him wrecked and stunted. Dirt smudged his face and his hair was a rancid thicket of knotted unwashed curls. She tried to catch his eye but he acted as if she weren't there, going about the business of opening the stall, fetching riding gear and tack, and saddling Dapplegrim with dreamlike movements.

It made her sick inside. Her throat tightened and her fingers clenched around the hilt of the sword she now wore at her belt. Just the tightening of her fingers made the invisible mark on her

brow squirm with pain. She wondered if she could bare the torment long enough to slaughter the self-important old man, who himself was standing and smiling thinly to himself and watching the whole business.

"She has the sword and the unguent. And a steed, such as this ugly nag might be. That's as much as I can do." He glanced at her then. "Be sure to blow the pipe when the creature is dead."

She nodded. "If it is a long way, how long should I wait for you."

His laughter was as dry and thin as the papery bark of silver birches. "I'll be with you soon enough, young lass. Soon enough. You'll not wait long for me." Turning his attention back to Ely, his spell-slaved stablehand, he said, "Now, be quick. Lead the horse outside. I'm not touching the thing. Always snapping at me." He frowned at it.

The sorcerer was seemingly utterly unaware that the huge grey horse gave him a sharp-toothed smile as it was led past.

Caewen followed the horse and boy out into the morning light, grey and sullen.

"Not an auspicious day for a quest," said Mannagarm, following her. "Grey skies and squally weather promising. Well and well. Better you than me. Ride north, go through the mountains and look for the city of Wisht-Folk. Off you go then."

She gave him a look that could have peeled the skin off a rock. But without pausing, she went to the huge, strange horse and stepped up into the stirrup. Ely was standing there, face cast down at the dirt.

"I'll return," she whispered at him. She even thought she saw him shift his weight a little, as if he were trying to look up without being caught doing so.

"I will," she said, with more steel, more for her own sake.

Not really knowing how to ride didn't matter. The horse turned its face about and said, calmly, "Neigh," at Mannagarm, then took off at a slow canter down the hilltop path. When they were out of earshot he said, "Asth shoon as we're outb ob sightb I neeb you to tage thish stubid bitb outb ob my moughth."

"Alright," said Caewen, unsure what else to say.

"Thanbs."

-oOo-

"Arh," said Dapplegrim as soon as Caewen cut the leather chords and pulled out the bit. She had been a bit wary of doing so—his mouth was full of teeth like ivory daggers after all—but he flexed his jaw and lips and said, "Thank you. You've no idea how uncomfortable it is having one of those things in your mouth when your jaw is full of teeth for cutting and slicing." They were standing on a rocky outcrop of a hill that gave them a view back down the valley where the village dozed under its early morning pall of fresh cookfires. It would be about this moment that her brother and parents would discover she was missing. The spell that Mannagarm sent had made her wake in a half-asleep sort of way, open the door to the root-cellar and sneak out in the pre-dawn dark.

"Do you think we could circle around and kill him?"

Dapplegrim looked at the view below. "Maybe, but he has all manner of wards and I don't know which of them are watchful and which are not."

Even as Caewen turned back to face the way they had come, the thin little wild goat track up the grassless slopes, she felt the pain stir in her brow. She closed her eyes and winced.

"He put a charm on you?" said Dapplegrim.

"Yes."

"It's to make you do what he wants, yes?"

"It is."

"Hm. We could just wait it out. Old Mannagarm isn't a very great magician. He'd like you to think any spells he weaves last forever and ever, but they don't. They'll fade quick enough."

"How long then?"

Dapplegrim shook his head. The dull red light in his eyes grew more intense. "Don't know. Some magicians can bind spells that last long after they are dead. Just look at the illusion my old master put on me. He's dead and the spell still works, and will do for a time. His bones are buried not far from the witch-man's house and I suspect the illusion will fade once we are far

gone from the mortal remains of my old keeper. Mannagarm's magic? A day? A week? A month? No longer than a month. Does it hurt to stay still?"

Caewen had to consider this. There was a growing pressure, very gradual, but noticeable and nagging. "Yes."

"Then we can't linger here too long. The intent of the spell is to make you go north and do his bidding. Standing about is breaking the intent, and it'll hurt you badly in time."

"So we walk north like good vassals and kill the goule or thing or whatever it is and blow a note on the pipe and then we are done?"

"Maybe, yes. But killing the creature may not be so easy. I know more about the Wisht-Folk than Mannagarm does it seems. They have magic coursing in their blood. They carry a cloud of illusion with them, charged full of power, and they can draw on it to work spells no mortal magician could ever do alone and without some manner of familiar or assistance."

"So why would powerful workers of magic need help to kill some creature that's bothering them?" said Caewen.

"Exactly. Either there is more to this than seems or the 'creature' is some manner of demonic or wraithly being out of the earliest dawn age of the world. Nothing less than an old power of the earth could make a lord or lady of the Wisht afraid."

"Strange, then."

"Very strange." She touched her fingers to her brow. The ashes were cleaned off now, but the pain still twinged there. "Maybe we should be moving. The pain is growing."

"Alright. Climb up then." Dapplegrim looked at her.

"Back onto the saddle. Is that alright with you. It's just, it seems sort of strange to be riding someone I'm talking to."

"I'm half horse too, remember. I really don't mind it and we'll go much faster this way."

She did climb up and settled herself into the saddle.

"Oh, if I see a rabbit or two I might ask you to climb down," said Dapplegrim as they began.

"Why?"

He sighed. "I'm half a horse, so I can live on hay and oats but I don't thrive on it. I haven't had flesh in years. A nice bit of rabbit would do me well."

"I see." Caewen was wondering just what sort of creature she was bound to now. "You don't eat people do you?"

He twisted his neck so that one of his black eyes with the red light within fixed her. "Only the bad ones." He laughed, and it was a light lilt of laughter, though Caewen couldn't honestly tell if the strange horse-thing was joking or not.

-oOo-

They followed ridges along the foothills all that day, then down into steep-flanked gullies, through chill, burbling brooks and up the mossy banks again. Occasional stands of black pines stood in their way, and Dapplegrim wove through the shadowy pinewoods looking left and right as if he thought they were being followed.

When Caewen asked him about it, he said, "Walking shadows like the gloom," but did not elaborate.

By evening they were close enough to the mountains of the north to feel the oppressive weight of them bearing down like piles of icy monumental clouds. Between two peaks there was a blue-white shadow where a deep rift cleft them.

When they decided to stop to rest, Dapplegrim nodded towards the rift. "That's the old pass north and there should be a road there. Back when there were kingdoms in these hills trade used to flow that way. We'll find the road sometime tomorrow I guess, though I don't know what's left of it."

Caewen meantime was trying to make fire with a flint and steel she'd found along with some food and a rough woollen blanket in a saddlebag. It was, she presumed, one of Mannagarm's bags prepared for his wanderings when he went hunting for travellers, for it had several hessian sacks stuffed into the bottom of it. Bags for stolen loot, she guessed. When the dry bracken she had piled into a small heap finally caught a spark and curled into a glow of white embers and fire-red

ashes she quickly added wood shavings and built the fire until she had a ruddy glow before her. "The mark isn't hurting me," she said, idly.

"The magic probably knows you need to rest, so it's not poking you and prodding you. We'll see how you feel in the morning."

"And if the spell fades we'll turn around and go right back and kill that bastard."

"Agreed," said Dapplegrim, though he sounded unconvinced.

Caewen stirred water into flour to make herself some damper for the fire. She cut some pieces of flesh off the hank of wild goat that Dapplegrim had dropped beside the fire. He's disappeared for half an hour or so when they made camp, bringing back the chewed up remains of a goat. Caewen took a cut of it and left the rest for the horse-thing to gnaw on, crunching up bones and everything. His mouth was spattered with blood by the time he was done and Caewen wondered if that was the origin of his name and not the dapples on his hide.

As she made up her own dinner she ventured to say, "You keep mentioning your old master. Who was he?"

"A powerful magician, but a kindly one. Not like that toad, Mannagarm. He tricked us with false friendship on the road. He went at my old master with a knife from behind. Stabbed him and slit his throat before I could do anything."

"What was his name?"

He laughed. "You've a lot to learn. Never ask for a magician's name. A name can be used to summon back the souls of the dead, or put a binding on a person, or torment a spirit. I'll call him my old master, and that is good enough."

She pulled the sticky damper out of the wooden bowl she was using and wrapped it around a green stick. "But I'm no magician. What does it matter?"

He looked at her oddly then, opening one eye and closing the other, and swapping his gaze. "Ah, but you could be. You've the art inside you, if you find a way to unravel it."

"And how would I do that?" she asked, cautiously.

Dapplegrim sat down, folding his legs underneath him the way a horse does. "Not something I know anything about." He snorted out a breath of air. "Wizards and witches and sorcerers all talk about secrets and power and anma, but most of it is borrowed I think. That Mannagarm for instance, he takes most of his power from the shadow-thing. The fetch. Very powerful magicians sometimes have half a dozen or a dozen or more such spirits. Himinglaeva of the Snows has fourteen spirits of the ice and storm, so the stories go. The the old tales Wythern the Myriad mastered countless of the minor colour and light spirits called hues or tints—or so the legends tell. But Mannagarm, all he has is one shadow-spirit, a shay."

"What does the fetch get out of it?"

"Tssch, tsh, tsch... protection..." hissed a voice from the shadows of the woods. The slinking, elegant shape of the shadow-thing crept into the leaping fringes of darkness where the fire's light just barely touched.

"Aha!" Dapplegrim jumped up. He bared his teeth and made a snarling noise that was entirely demonic and not even a little but horselike. "I knew it. He sent you to spy."

The creature curled up and gave them a languid stare before it said, "He did, but not everything Mannagarm tells me to do is done in quite the way he thinks it is, tssch, tssh, tsch. He never knew about you, for instance, tsssch, as he never asked about you. I'm not much in great liking of him you know, but matters are matters, and he caught me with a spell a long many years ago. So matters are matters are matters. Tsssch."

"So what now?" asked Caewen.

"I'll sneak back by shadow and dark dapple and under-murk of trees, quite avoiding the nasty sun, tsssh, tsssch, and I'll tell him the truth. You are on your way north undertaking his commanded quest."

"And you'll tell him we'll kill him at the first opportunity?" said Caewen.

"Only if he asks, tassh, tsch, but he won't ask. It's not in his nature. He's suspicious and afraid, but he's afraid of them that he thinks has power over him. Bigger and more fearsome magickers. You are below his fearfulness, young lady Caewen." It turned to look at Dapplegrim now. "And you! You! He never even knew he had a creature more powerful than all the petty demons of the night-woods locked up in his stalls. All those years. Tssch. Tsh. Tsss. Imagine what he'd have done with you, if he'd known."

"But you never told him," said Dapplegrim.

"Never ever did." Its face twisted into a little smirk of shadows. "Never ever. Tsssh. Tsch."

"Well you've seen all you need to see," snapped Dapplegrim. "Be off with you now and go back to your master and tell him whatever you want."

Without a word, the fetch got to its feet, stretched itself and dashed into the night. It was nothing more than a movement among the wind-tossed shadows of the ground, and then it was gone entirely.

"I do not trust that thing," said Dapplegrim.

"But it's true that it never told Mannagarm about you..."

"Only because it hates Mannagarm more than it loves the protection of a magician."

"What did it mean by that?"

Dapplegrim sat again. "Arh. Small demons are born out of the natural stuff of the world but they don't last very long. They are fragile. They fall apart. Some, like fire demons live only as long as a fire burns. Some will keep themselves together for a few days or months. If a demon can get itself a master it'll be bound together by magic and protected. And if it can get another master after that it'll become bigger and stronger and more real... the largest, most terrifying demons of the earth started as small servants. In time, they gain enough togetherness of flesh to be their own masters. That is what a spirit would hope for."

"But not you. You're already flesh and blood."

"And I am half-mortal and I'll die of old age eventually. I'm a rare thing. Chance breedings don't give rise to my sort very often at all. I'm stuck between the mortal flesh and the spirit, and there can't be more than a dozen creatures like me that have ever lived upon the Clay-o-the-Green."

"And I'm bound to you." She looked at the vaguely skull-like face. "Lucky me," she said as she prodded the damper to check if it was cooked yet. "How lucky for me."

-oOo-

Late the next morning they found the road that twisted north and south towards the rent in the mountains. It had been laid with cobbles a long time ago, but now was rank with green grass and grey toadstools. The leaves fallen in last autumn's storms were still papery shapes on the road, suggesting that no heavy feet or iron-bound cart-wheels had been plying the path in months.

They followed the road all that morning as the mountains grew and grew above them. Dapplegrim asked Caewen what she called them, and she said they were the Snowy Mountains. He snorted and said, "They were Ardse Nith last time I came this way."

"What does that mean?"

"Snowy Mountains."

Caewen caught herself laughing a little. "Some things do not change then."

Tumbles of stone began to appear on either side of them and they passed through the remnants of a great gate of stone flanked by walls that were cracked and split by the freeze and thaw of hard winters. The fortress on the road was long dead and only sightless statues of bearded men with round shields and shattered spears and women who wore armour and helms gave any hint as to who once had lived here.

The ruins soon fell away, buried by rockslips and tangled creepers. They were passing out the other side of them when a clatter of pebbles announced that something large had moved nearby. Two big shapes loomed into view in the half-shadow of tumbled wall.

Caewen had never seen anything like them. They were taller than any person she'd seen, though their legs were turned backwards, like a dog's leg and they had claws tipping their fingers and their skin was a brindle grey and white with shaggy fur in patches. Their faces were bestial and their yellow eyes gleamed. But these were not dumb beasts. They stood upright and wore clothing, such as it was—rags and bits and pieces of armour—and both of them had a long spear made of silvery ash and tipped with bronze that glowed a dull red in the morning light.

"Hoy there," said the first of the creatures. "Who's that then?"

"Are those Trolde?" whispered Caewen.

"Trolde?" Dapplegrim laughed. "Trolde! What a notion. No Trolde comes out in daylight. And no Trolde would be so small—unless it was a baby Trolde, I suppose," added Dapplegrim

thoughtfully. "Trolde must grow up from something, and Trolde-wives are always complaining about their brats."

"What are they then?"

"Just a couple of Boggarts. Easily run off. Show them your sword and they'll turn and run."

"But I can't use my sword. I've never fought with a sword in my life."

"They don't know that do they?"

"I'm unconvinced."

As they rode up to the broken wall the two Boggarts loped out into the road and crossed their spears. "You is riding on our road, you is," said one of them. "And there's a fare to pay."

"I see," said Caewen. She decided to try politeness before swords. The stories about Boggarts made them out to be savages and monsters who stole children to eat, but so far these two were acting more or less civil—they were civilly trying to rob her... true... but it was civil nonetheless. "My name's Caewen. And this is Dapplegrim. We're pleased to meet you but we don't have any money to pay for any toll."

"No money. You hear that, Bloacher?" said one Boggart to the other.

"I heard that, Blort. I did. But I can't believe it. Young lady with a terrible looking sword on her belt and riding a fancy horse like this 'un. Your typical young lady doesn't ride through beast-infested wilds with naught but a sword. Must be some manner of sorceress or wandering hero. Hard to believe she don't have anything valuable-like on her person."

"I agree, Bloacher. Hard to believe."

"Now, Blort, unless the young miss wants a fight, I expect she'll switch her song and be forthcoming with something of value. Like coins, but not necessarily."

"Could be gems, couldn't it Bloacher?"

"True. Or could be a gold dagger with spangled stones set in the hilt, Blort?"

"Quite right. Could be a nice ring of gold or a couple rings of silver, Bloacher?"

"Always a surprise what travellers keep on their person. That's what I've always said, isn't it, Blort?"

"It is, Bloacher. It is. That you do say it. I've heard you."

"Right," said Caewen with a bit less patience. "Here's the thing. It's complicated but we've been sent off north by this witching-man who—"

But the Boggart's faces had gained a strange expression. They had stopped paying attention to Caewen and were very carefully paying attention to Dapplegrim instead.

"Here," said the one called Blort. "That's an odd thing. Your horse. It don't look like a horse no more."

Bloacher took a step back, and then another. "That's no horse."

They both got off the road then.

"Very sorry to have inconvenienced you," said Bloacher.

Blort half-hid himself behind a square block of stone. "There's no need to pay no toll. Great big sharp-toothed, red-eyed thing like you. If you want to ride through here with a lady on your back, you're more than welcome."

"And Boggarts taste terrible," added Bloacher, "Just so you know."

"Poisonous," hissed Blort. "Boggarts are poisonous to big demon-thing, horse-things."

"Quite right, Bort. We are," said Bloacher.

In a second they were both gone.

"What happened there?" said Caewen.

Dapplegrim rippled his shoulders in a manner that suggested a shrug. "I think we just walked far enough from my old master's bones for his illusion to fade. One moment I must have looked like an ordinary horse to them and the next..."

"They saw you for what you are. There might be more of them though and they might rethink things with a dozen or a hundred fellows at their backs."

Dapplegrim nodded. "Onward then."

They left the ruins behind them and had no further problems with Boggarts, or with anything else. Once, while creeping up the twisting path that led to the narrow pass they heard a strange, eerie voice off in the woods singing. Caewen found it entrancing and asked if they shouldn't go and find out who it was.

Dapplegrim said, "We definitely should not. Things that sing like that in the woods want you to come and find them. And I'd bet gold to rocks that such a thing does not want to merely be friends."

The road soon became a path cut from rock and it curled and twisted. Sheer drops grew on both sides until Caewen was very happy to make it to the threshold of the pass where there were no more steep drop-offs a misstep away. The cliffs that rose on either side of them were decorated with carved faces and there were more faces within the crevice. Because the sun never quite reached into the space, the air was much colder and drifts of snow were heaped into the cliff walls. The faces here had bristling eyebrows beards of icicles. They were fierce looking and some were monstrous with fangs and leering eyes. "Who carved these?" asked Caewen. "The same who lived in the ruins?"

"No, not the people of the fortress. These are warnings against going north. There have been many wars between the people of the south, where day and night cycle in equal measure, and the folk of the northern lands, where twilight is everlasting, or beyond that, the night-swarthed realms where sunlight never reaches."

"How can there be a place that sunlight never touches?"

Dapplegrim stopped then and looked around at the ghastly faces that were cut into the walls of the cliffs. "I do not know for certain but they say that when the Queen of the Day and Queen of the Night made their bargain to share the world, the Queen of the Night cheated and reneged somehow. She chose to live in the very north of the world. The farther north you go, the closer you come to her realm, and the closer you come to a place where day ceases to have power."

"I don't know if I believe in old goddesses. Prayers to them never did us any good. Never helped us against Mannagarm."

"Who's to say goddesses hear prayers just because you mortal folk think they should? Who's to say that goddesses don't have more important things to attend to?"

"Like what?"

"Wars," said Dapplegrim.

"What wars? No one is at war."

"Not in your little valley. Not recently. But there have been more wars between the night-realms and the day-realms than can be counted and there will be wars again."

They started walking again then. Dapplegrim's hooves made a dull clip-clip-clipping on the ice and stone. The echoes fluttered like sharp-winged bats.

"But why? Shouldn't goddesses know better?"

"Should they? Should kings and queens know better? And lords and ladies? And magicians and witches? Power, even very great power, does not confer wisdom. You're right that many are sick of it. The Wisht for example. They were servants of the Queen of the Night, but they have slipped loose and made their own realms and they rule themselves now. But there are still enough servants—loyal servants on both sides—who still want land, power, glory or titles."

She wondered about that as they walked the icy rift between the mountains. She wondered about the point of endless wars and she wondered what would happen if either dynasty were to win. Would the world become a sun-baked ruin if the Queen of the Day triumphed? Would the whole of the Clay-o-the-Green turn into a icy nightland if the Queen of the Night won? Neither seemed attractive prospects.

It took most of the afternoon to pass through the cleft in the rock and when they were through the sun on the other side did seem dimmer and it was not just the dimness of oncoming evening.

Below their gazes the lands beyond the Snowy Mountains stretched in an endless wilderness of shadowy forests and mist-hung vales under a drear grey sky. These were the lands of twilight, as Dapplegrim named them. In the gloaming it was possible to see scatterings of orange lights here and there—cities or towns crouched in the deep dells. The nearest of these was near enough for Caewen to see white towers rising against the forest behind.

"Is that a city of the Wisht?"

"It is," said Dapplegrim. "Last time I came this way that place was called Inuta Aldra. I know not if it is the city we want, but it is a seclude of the Wisht-Folk. It will be as good a place to start as any."

They rode down the thin trail out of the pass and towards the wooded lands beneath them.

The day and night that followed was barely a day and night at all. They were in the Twilight Lands now. The trees were stunted and twisted, and their branches wove together so tightly that when the wind rose the whole of the woods rattled like bones clattering. The air would have been as black as marl under the trees if it weren't for their sparse, small leaves. The canopy seemed more skeletal than living.

About mid-morning of the next day Dapplegrim flexed his muscles and said, "That goat did me some good. I think I'd like a gallop—if you think you can hold on?"

"Alright," said Caewen. "I'm sure I can." Riding had become easier with the practise.

"Hold tight and knuckle your fingers fast about the saddle. I can run faster than any horse you've ever dreamt of." He smiled at her, sharply, then sprang forward with a snort.

Suddenly, the world was a blur, the trees were no longer gnurled and moss-bearded shapes, but mere ghosts passing in the grey light. The air tore at Caewen's skin and chewed coldly at her hair. Below her knees she could see Dapplegrim's hooves gouging the earth. They pounded onwards. The landscape passed by and it seemed to Caewen that they went so fast that surely they would fly straight up into the air soon. Dapplegrim leapt over a small river, and rode over boggy ground as if it were as solid as rock, and then, when Caewen felt that her numb fingers could not hold a moment longer the world ceased its headlong rush.

Dizzied, guts wound into a burl of yarn, Caewen wanted to slip from the saddle and sit on the ground clutching her head, but she didn't. She held on and clenched her teeth.

Dapplegrim spoke. "We arrive. Inuta Aldra, the city of vines and mists."

And it was. Peaked roofs climbed a hill and towers crested it, but the walls of the houses seemed to be made of twisted branches of a white tree something like a willow, and the town walls were woven from vines, thick and black, like iron cables. Tatters of cloud flagged the city, twining between roofs and drifting on the air. Red-orange lights fluttered in the rise and fall of winds.

"City of the Wisht-Folk," said Caewen.

"Well... more of a town really. Farther north and east and deeper in the Twilight Lands are the great cities of the Wisht: Lofty Olego Dava, Tormikt of the Golden Leaves, Tols Imona, the Kariska Towers. This town before us, Inuta Aldra, is the seat of a low queen."

"You seem to know an awful lot about the Twilight Realms."

Dapplegrim craned his neck around and looked at Caewen. In the darkening air she could see the strong light in his eyes—the pinpoint redness that mixed in his pupils like blood in water.

Caewen found herself involuntarily leaning away from the face. "It was only an observation. There's no need to look like you're going to bite my head off." Literally, in Dapplegrim's case. He said nothing, so she added, "Fine. Be that way. Let us ride to the city then."

He snorted. "More of a town."

They trotted downhill, among trees and then onto a road that cut a broad hatcheting of black earth through the green of grass and moss. The two of them did not remain unnoticed for long. Horns sounded on the walls of Inuta Aldra as they approached. Along the battlements the tips of spears gleamed in the twilight air like stalks of silvery wheat. Before Caewen and her peculiar horse were within two bowshots of the woven-wood ramparts a gate opened and light spilled out. So too did a column of Wisht-Folk.

They were beautiful.

Deathly, ghostly, wraithlike... and beautiful. Their skin was pearl, their hair was all the temperate shades of midnight and in their eyes rode silver stars. The nearer they drew, the more aware Caewen was of their delicateness too. Some seemed too light to put a foot solidly to earth and others too thin-boned to stand against the weakest winter breeze. Some were draped with mail of a fine mesh and others carried swords the colour of icicles or spears that tapered to needle-points... and yet... even so... Caewen thought to herself that this was a people who would not have fared well in war. They seemed too delicately put-together. Perhaps it was unsurprising that they had snuck away from their old mistress of the north and hidden themselves under new rulership in quiet valleys.

Although Dapplegrim had said that the Wisht could defend themselves with arts of sorcery, perhaps this thing that was hunting them was a better sorcerer or immune to their arts/ Perhaps

they did need a bold hero of strong flesh to fight for them? It seemed a pity to Caewen that they'd got her instead.

The Wisht-Folk gathered around and Caewen had the unsettling feeling that their silvery fox-eyes were assessing her, making note of her features or sizing her up and down, the way a buyer examines an oxen.

"I..." said Caewen, "I have come..."

One of the more elegant men stepped towards her then and reached out a thin and ivory-skinned hand. "We welcome you O mortal child of blood and flesh and soul. We welcome you to our palace in the mists. Come drink with us and dine in halls that know no mortal pain, where death does not visit and sickness never treads." He was a war-leader or lord perhaps, judging from the spirals of red gold on his armour. He had been focused entirely on her, with hand outstretched, but when he looked at Dapplegrim, his expression changed—first to confusion, then suspicion, then fear. They all moved away as one, a silver tide chased out to sea—spears lowered and bows drew taut. The noise of the bowstrings tightening filled the air with menace.

"He will not harm you," said Caewen, quickly. "Will you, Dapplegrim?"

"Whinny," said Dapplegrim, unconvincingly.

The spears lowered a little. The bows were relaxed. But the Wisht-Folk were still wary and kept their distance. "You may come with us," said the lord, "and you may walk the halls of the deathless light, sup with Queen Velmand Ina, but that thing you ride, that—horse—must keep itself without the walls of fair Inuta Aldra. Its kind is not welcome. We do not truck with demons."

Before Dapplegrim could say or do anything Caewen said, "Very well." She swung a leg off the saddle and alighted, then patted Dapplegrim's neck. At a whisper she said, "You'll be fine here. I'll be back once I've met the Queen I suppose and I need to find out what's going on here before we can do anything about it."

"Neigh," said Dapplegrim. He did not look happy with her.

The Wisht-Folk crowded around Caewen as they walked through the city gates. She cast a look over her shoulder and saw Dapplegrim standing beside the black dirt road watching her go.

The amber light that swelled in the gateway filled up the town and flickered in the streets, though it was impossible to see exactly where it came from. Either it was everywhere or the fires were well hidden behind stone and twisted branches to give that illusion.

They led Caewen to a towering hall at the brow of the hill. On entering the building she was not taken directly to the Queen, but instead she was told, without ceremony, "There will be a banquet." And then someone took her arm and dragged her through a doorway and into a thin corridor. It took Caewen a moment to realise that a young woman had her arm. The Wisht woman was deerlike in her features and movement, and she stepped with a wildness. Her eyes were liquid, soft and feral. She smiled slyly, shooting sideways glances at Caewen as they walked, and giggling, though throughout she said nothing.

They arrived at a room where there were six more of the Wisht maids. They moved nearer to Caewen, eyed her, and walked around her. Again, it felt like an appraisal. One of them reached out and stroked Caewen's hair and the others pressed closer still. Caewen realised with a quiet shock that they were trying to remove her clothing. She had heard of rich ladies being dressed by their serving girls, and supposed that this was what the Wisht meant to do, but their attempts seemed strange, too eager and even slightly aggressive. Although Caewen co-operated, she apparently did not do so quickly enough, and one of the Wisht gave up struggling with a knotted chord and tore at Caewen's blouse. The others began pulling and ripping too. Wild laughter followed and most of Caewen's clothing was removed in pieces.

Then, one of the Wisht began combing Caewen's hair, while two others now rubbed her shoulders with poultices that smelled woody and sweet. This continued for a time and Caewen, naked, now shivered from the cold. It was uncomfortable but not very worrying. Despite this she did catch herself glancing now and again at the bronze sword, which was lying where it had been dropped on the floor.

Then one of the Wisht touched Caewen in a way that she felt wasn't quite right for a woman to do to a woman—but she took it for a mild mistake. When the woman did the same again, and other hands moved with renewed aggression, Caewen jumped back, yelled at them, and broke a few more steps away. Grabbing what was left of her dress, she hid behind it.

"No. That's enough."

They all advanced a step or two, giggling and smiling, saying nothing.

"No," said Caewen. "I want some clothing. Now!"

This was a game to them. Although one stamped her foot and another pouted, it took only a little more forcefulness on Caewen's part to make the Wisht to shrug and give up.

Now, one of them spoke for the first time. "Bring the panoply and garb." The words were like notes struck from a flute. Caewen couldn't tell if it was the one who had originally fetched her—they all looked eerily the same—but she thought it might have been.

Clothing was indeed produced out of chests and strongboxes, wardrobes and drawers. Caewen took the items and covered herself, rapidly, without paying much attention to the new outfit. The clothing turned out to be cut for a man, jerkin and trousers, a sark of mail too, all of it made light and slender. It fitted well. Despite it clearly being a man's outfit, Caewen had the disconcerting feeling that the clothing had somehow been tailored precisely to fit her alone.

They tried to stop her taking the bronze sword and her satchel containing the eye-ointment and flute-pipe Mannagarm had given her, but she insisted. They kept resisting her trying to take the objects away until she eventually said firmly, "I've come to slay a monster. Well, in old sagas, monstrous things arrive during feasts and then they catch warriors unaware or drunk or asleep. Everyone knows that. It's practically their favourite time to attack. Clearly, I should have my sword." Though as she said this she pushed down another thought: though I have no notion how to use the thing...

Did they agree or did they give up? It was difficult to know. The faces of the Wisht were inscrutable and their foxish eyes held no emotion past the same kind of emotion that starlight has.

Once dressed, Caewen followed the maids out of the room and through a series of new corridors that bore no resemblance to the way they had come. It was as if the twisting white roots the walls were made from had silently reformed and grown themselves into a whole new set of hallways while Caewen had been in the dressing room. And yet each twisted root was massive with age and heavily caked with moss. It must have been some trick of light or magic, decided Caewen. The Wisht-Folk might be powerful magicians but it seemed more likely they would use simple illusions rather than grow whole new wings of a castle in a few moments.

Their destination turned out to be a vast feasting hall where pillars upheld a ceiling carved with a riot of gold and green leaves. Perched in the wrought branches were at least a hundred rooks, like black and swollen fruit. The birds had gilded the fine beams with their white droppings. Below this ornate canopy was a large crowd of the Wisht-Folk that was growing larger. Light flooded in a twilight pall through the many arched windows that lined the hall stained early autumnal colours by green and russet-gold glass.

It was all so spectacular to look at that Caewen's breath caught in her throat. The temptation was to look around at all the magnificence at once and she had to keep her mind on her feet just to remember to walk without tripping.

Caewen was led to a seat at the high dais and found herself settled beside a throne made of silver and the bones of some large creature. The throne was empty so Caewen turned her attention to the hall. The Wisht were arranging themselves at lower tables. They were rapidly served by creatures that brought out food and drink on platters. The serving creatures were short, pinch-faced and pale—they appeared to be a servant people that neither spoke nor met eyes with any of the Wisht and Caewen wondered if they were not merely servants but slaves.

One of these strange little servant people ran up to the high table and set down a bowl full of ripe apples, strawberries and rarer fruits that Caewen could not name. Honeyed cakes arrived soon after, steaming jugs of a hot wine as dark as the sky on the minute of sunset, strange brightly coloured sweatmeats. It seemed endless. Caewen picked up an eating knife and looked at it. She'd never seen anything so large made of something so precious, and here she was surrounded by opulence.

"What are you thinking, dear?"

She had not noticed the woman move into the throne beside her. There had been not a sound. Caewen found herself without ready words. "I was thinking," said Caewen, choosing honesty over mute stupidity, "that a knife of silver, such as this, could feed my family for two or three months

over winter. I was wondering how you can have such wealth, while in my village just across the twilight border, we have so little."

"We are long lived. We acquire things over time. But if you like our knife, you may have our knife. We do have so very many." The Queen—for Caewen was sure that this was who the enthroned woman must be—then lost interest and said softly, "We are pleased that you are here. The matter of the Goule has been troubling for us. We have been troubled over it." She then turned to talk to someone in lordly dress on the other side of her.

Caewen hadn't mentioned the Goule. No-one had. She prodded at the food with the knife she'd picked up, uncomfortable now. The Wisht at the gate had just assumed... the Queen had just assumed... Caewen looked at the Queen again, this time out of the corner of her eye. Why were they all so certain she was here to kill this night-terror? She felt as if everything was far too anticipated.

Not feeling any hunger, Caewen gave up even pretending to be interested in the food and turned her attention to the scene before her instead.

It was a strange feast.

The air was not heated, and although Caewen wouldn't have described it as chill—not quite—it was all the same uncomfortably cold. More from boredom than hunger she tried some of the lavish feast. The food, though it looked delicious, tasted the way spiced ash might taste. It had no aroma. In fact, nothing did. The air was as sterile as a dry cave.

But the spectacle of the banquet was unlike anything that Caewen had ever seen. There was a juggler who kept twelve fiery skulls in the air, tumblers and jesters, and the music—it was unearthly—at first the tune wandered, as if from the harp of an arthritic man as he remembered youth—and then other musicians joined—and then more and more—and it became a waterfall of noise, a surge of melody. Wisht stepped out onto the dance-floor when the music reached its peak. Throughout all this Caewen found herself increasingly dizzy. The flash of a gem-crust circlet. The flicker of shifting twilight shadows on silver thread. The glowing of grey eyes. The beautiful, beautiful deathlessness in every face.

And all of it was over-watched by the rooks above.

It was becoming too much for her. Just as Caewen was feeling that she must either leap up and join the dance or run from the hall screaming and clutching her skull, she remembered Mannagarm's leech-ointment.

No one noticed or cared as she found the jar, worked loose the stopper and breathed in a rush of the bitter air that escaped. When Caewen daubed the ointment into her eyes she did it too quickly to think about how much it stung. Thankfully, when she pushed the stuff into her ears the sludge felt merely warm. Over a few seconds the burning in her eyes diminished. She blinked until clarity returned.

The music had changed, or had it? It seemed different, more raucous and less skilful—there was no delight in it any more. Rote notes followed tired voices. Caewen looked around and she stared. The Wisht-Folk were no longer deathless and beautiful, but deathly. Their skin was sunken and veiny, their eyes not a smouldering silver-grey but a pond-water murk; hair, thin and ragged; fingers, bony as chicken legs; voices, harsh as the rooks.

She looked up. The rooks at least were real. They remained themselves.

All was illusion? No truth stood here at all? She searched everything more carefully. No. The building was still grand, the gold still gold, the silver still silver, and the clothing still richly worked. It was only the Wisht themselves that were now hideous and disfigured.

"What is wrong, dear? You look pale."

The Queen was leaning attentively towards Caewen. It was much like receiving the gentle attentiveness of some white-skinned corpse. Velmand Ina was worse than all the others of the misshapen things in the room put together. She was older and more ruinous than every last one of her subjects. Her face showed no sign of life at all except for the wetness of her eyes.

"Nothing," said Caewen. "No trouble. Nothing wrong."

Velmand Ina nodded and turned to the floor and the cavorting pallid creatures. "Are not the jugglers and tumblers wonderful? You could cut a merry reel, I wager? Why not join them? We are not bothered by station or decorum."

The juggler nearest the high dais had become shrunken and humpbacked. He was perhaps some strange half-breed of an animal-thing for he had hair thick as hedgehog spines and he dragged a tail behind him.

"Your jugglers are very fine. The music, too. But I am too tired to dance and perhaps I ought to save my strength for the Goule?"

"*Very fine?* Why they are the grandest creatures to ever draw the cold air of twilight into their lungs. Look at Gaoth." She motioned towards the spiky haired creature. "See how he keeps twelve goblets of wine in the air with such ease and never spilling a drop?"

They were not goblets, but withered apples and not twelve but just three, and besides which Gaoth had just dropped one and was stooping to pick it up. Without thinking, Caewen said so, her voice a whisper.

The world did not stop, the music did not end and the hundred Wisht-Folk in the hall did not turn as one to stare at the young mortal woman who had just contradicted their queen. But it felt to Caewen as if all those things and worse happened. The sudden cold feeling she had from the queen made her shiver much worse than the air of the hall could have. Velmand Ina stared at Caewen a long time in silence. She uttered not a word and twitched not a muscle of her dead face.

"We think," she said at last, "that it is high time that you, our *hero*, who we have fed and clothed, welcomed and promised great treasures to, we think that you should go forth and slay the Goule."

"Now?"

"Yes. Very much *now*. The hour, we think, is ripe. Overripe, perhaps. Lord Edualmar, call up your guard and take our hero to the lair of the Goule." Then, turning to Caewen, "And in case you should lose your nerve before the battle, we give you our word: if you should succeed and slay the Goule, then all the riches that it has hoarded are yours by right. Other fine things we will give you too, wonders, rare and valuable. But if you fail... if you flee... our hunters ride swift. We calculate that you understand our meaning. Now go."

As Caewen was led from the hall, she looked at the faces of the Wisht and tried to look past the ugliness and into their eyes. They were happy, she thought. Blissfully and childishly happy—she realised with a strange shock that the illusions were not for the sake of other creatures that might come stumbling into these halls. The illusions were for the Wisht themselves. What sort of being would need to live this way? What path had brought them to this?

She shook the thoughts from her head and pushed on, forcefully, stepping with purpose after the armed lord who walked ahead of her. She was walking towards danger now. Towards her own death maybe. She needed to be focused and aware. They passed through white stone halls spotted with living flowers and under great sharply carved arches over-swarmed by vines with leaves the colour of dead wine.

When they passed out into the air outside Caewen saw that it was still dusk and then it took her a moment to remember that it was always dusk here. Always and forever twilight. The stars poked the sky just dimly. How strange it was to never see the sun except for a red swell of sunset moving along the horizon. How strange that the stars would always be faint marks in a grey dome. How strange that the only bright light of heaven was the moon. Strange lands, she thought, strange lands. As she stood beneath the sunless sky it came back to her how far from home she was.

She saw Dapplegrim a way off, soaked in shadows, and surrounded by a picket of guards with spears in their hands and foul expressions on their faces. There was a bale of hay, which Caewen thought encouraging, and a small spatter of blood on the ground, which she thought less so.

"How have you been?" she said once close enough to speak in a low voice.

"A little cold. They brought some food. Nice enough, but tough and the haymakers have not made a good job of pulling out the thistle."

"Why is there blood?"

"Oh, that. One of the Wisht tried to put of gimmick on me and charm me asleep. I pretended to drift off. He came close with a harness so I snapped at his hand."

"That wasn't nice."

"No, it was not nice of him to try and put a spell on me at all. Unhostly, if you want to know what I think. And to make it worse I only took off two fingers when I wanted the whole hand. I'm still hungry." He kicked a hoof at the bale. "Stupid hay."

"Right," said Caewen, and "I see. What I meant was... oh it doesn't matter. I think they want us to slay their goule now."

They rode away from Inuta Aldra and onto a sandy and winding path that climbed upwards. A wind clattered in the overhead branches, making a sound like bones in a tossed-about bag. Ahead of Caewen and behind her walked a company of Wisht, armed and armoured. Their drawn swords glistened like wet tongues of flame in the half light.

"This isn't right," said Caewen.

Dapplegrim didn't seem profoundly interested, but said, "How so?"

"All these warriors, with their silver armour and spears and swords and shields." Caewen looked about. "Why don't they assail the goule together? What do they hope that I—me... I'm not much more than a waif—what could I hope to do that they cannot?"

"Or will not. Perhaps they don't want to risk their necks? Heroes are cheap and cost nothing if they fail."

Caewen shook her head. "There's more to it. Something's not right."

"Well, right or wrong," said Dapplegrim, "we'll find this goule thing and trample it and rip its flesh from its bones and drink it's blood. Only, you don't have to drink its blood. Not if you don't want to. Me? I might like a sip of blood now and then."

"Um. Thanks. I'll leave that to you then."

"I'm quite looking forward to it."

One of the Wisht was eyeing Caewen and her—evidently mumbling—horse. Dapplegrim eyed him back and said, "Neigh," rather threateningly. The Wisht looked away.

Up ahead, the way opened and the trees fell away. There was a rounded, grassy hill and a tumble of boulders... no, not boulders... it was the ruins of something, a tower or grand house? At the distance the ruin was a featureless-seeming blench against a winter-grey sky. From somewhere up on that ridge arose a low and wailing cry. It was a voice in agony, rage, fear. It was a heart-rending sound. Caewen felt her body tense. It was a sound that wormed into the brain and stayed there. It was the sound, Caewen thought, of something that had a powerful reason to cry out in pain.

The company halted and Lord Edualmar pointed towards the ruin. "The goule awaits."

"Well," said Caewen to Dapplegrim, "shall we?"

They trotted up a goat-track of a path, between rocks and then between half-tumbled walls. When they neared the heart of the ruin they found small piles of golden trinkets, coins and the odd bright-coloured stone shining in a mess of filth and bones. If the goule hoarded gold and gloated over it, then it did so in a strange way. "It looks like someone has just dropped treasure here," said Caewen, "among the creature's meals. I don't think—"

She heard a sound to her right, looked over and up.

A thing was crouched on the jagged rim of the nearest wall. It was barely two arm's lengths away and it was looking down on Caewen and Dapplegrim. It seemed at first to be made of tattered shadows, but Caewen looked closer and saw that the tendrils flagging in the wind were not flesh, but were mere rags of a dark silken cloth. Incongruous with its rags, the creature wore an elaborate crown strung together from carved fingerbones, yellowed and cut with runes. Mostly, it was human in form and proportion; it had arms and legs, a head and probably a body too under all those rags. Grey flesh clung to its face and its eyes were bulging and shining. When it opened its mouth Caewen saw what seemed to be flames flickering deep in its throat. The goule rose, and stood now fully upright. Its arms became more fully visible: too long for human limbs, too gangly, and too tapering, with stick-like fingers and black claws.

It leapt towards them, shrieking. Caewen didn't have time to draw her sword. She was knocked from the saddle as the thing flung itself into her. It's weight slammed her into hard earth, crushing the air out of her lungs, suffocating her under a mass of rotten cloth and flesh. The goule clawed at Caewen's face, but she moved quickly, twisting to the left and squirming free even as she gasped for air.

The goule did not press its attack and Caewen wondered why. Her thoughts regathered themselves and then she saw Dapplegrim was snapping and, quite unnaturally for a horse, snarling at the creature, backing it away from her. The goule circled Dapplegrim slowly. It seemed to be limping. The Goule feigned an attack, jumped away, clung to a wall, and then

sprang at Caewen again right over Dapplegrim's head. It seemed determined to kill her and avoid Dapplegrim altogether if it could.

This time Caewen was ready. She tugged her sword loose and she swung it clumsily overhead. The goule dodged. She went at it again, and again, blindly. Every swipe was a wild miss but she swung and thrust full of sheer fear and rage, cutting and slashing and stabbing. Despite her attacks, the goule was able to edge around her and press her up against a wall. They were on rougher ground now. The fight moved onto sharp, tumbled rocks and Dapplegrim wasn't able to follow them. He bucked about, yelling instructions that Caewen couldn't make out.

The goule's claws caught Caewen's wrist, twisted and dug in drawing blood. The sword slipped in her fingers and Caewen felt her fear become an icicle in her gut. There was a clinking noise as the blade bounced off rocks somewhere below. The goule grinned and drew itself up to its full height. It lunged, but missed. Caewen got under the claws, squirmed away and fled the only way left to her: up the side of the wall she was pinned to. She climbed, found a perch, jumped to a higher rocky ledge, then climbed some more. She could hear the sounds of heavy clawing coming after her.

Exhausted, hands bleeding, barely able to breath, Caewen reached the top. She pulled herself over the lip, and fell about a foot onto hard stone. Pain shot through her shoulder where she hit rock. She looked around and saw there was nowhere left to climb. She had just crawled up the last vestige of some ancient battlement. The ruin was so old that trees were growing out of cracks in the mortar, grown to old age themselves and long-since dead. Fallen branches and trunks lay scattered atop the battlements.

Up above, there was nothing but the churning sky. Wind whistled. There was no easy way down and nowhere left to run. Caewen peered over the lip of the old battlement. The goule was having trouble climbing the last few feet but it was still inching closer. She felt the hard stone and crumbling mortar under her fingers as if they were the only solid things left in the world. Dimly, she could hear Dapplegrim yelling something. Though the goule seemed tired and slowed, it would reach the top soon enough.

She looked at the old mortar, then at the loose stone perched on the battlement and realised she still had a weapon left to her.

Caewen charged at the battlement wall, thudded into it and achieved nothing more than a hurt shoulder. She tried this again, and pain jolted through her whole body. Seeing that brute force would not help her, Caewen looked about, saw a stout, dead branch and grabbed it. She jammed one end under the rock she'd been trying to dislodge and put her full weight into the lever. It did not shift at first, then there was a scrape of rock, a groaning creak of the branch, and the sudden sensation of the weight giving way. When Caewen looked up she found that the rock was gone. She peered over the battlement. On the ground, far below, was a shadowy shape, struggling and twitching, and on top of it a sizeable piece of stone.

The goule kept up its wailing, more plaintive now, more desperate, as Caewen climbed down the wall. She paused above it, looked into its eyes, but saw nothing there but hate and pain. She found her sword and brought it down on the goule's neck, once, twice and then on the third stroke the flesh came away easily, like a dead flowerstalk. It was as if there were no bones at all. The body withered and the goule become nothing more than a mound of greasy ashes. The only things that remained were a heap of the shadowy rags and the crown of bone, which had fallen from the goule's head, rolled and arrived at Caewen's feet, coming to a stop with a rattle.

She considered the crown and thought how it was rather peculiar how it rolled right to her feet, especially given she was uphill of the goule.

Given that it had rolled some way.

Given that it now seemed to be singing.

Dapplegrim was still yelling as Caewen picked up the crown. Where her fingers touched the crown, the skin itched and while she held it, she felt as if her head were underwater. All sound except for the low and wordless voice of the crown was suffocated.

Fingers trembling, Caewen set the crown down on the nearest stone. There was the rock that the goule had been crushed beneath. Its ashes blew about her boots.

"Are you all right?"

"Sorry?"

"You're pale. Shivering. You properly took care of that goule creature. Good work. Pity there's no blood to drink, but I suppose we can't have everything can we. What are you doing? You're not... surely you're not going to call him... not before you've had a look at the treasure and picked out a few nice bobbins and buttons? Oh, and, we need to make a plan about how to kill him. He still doesn't know anything about me and maybe we could encourage the Whist to murder him. You are their hero after all and if you call him-

"Call Mannagarm. Yes. I am," and she was. Caewen had already raised the wood-pipe to her lips, she took a breath, and blew. She'd expected something magical or weird or thunderous—the sort of sound that charmed pipes ought to make. But the sound was merely the off-key bleat of an everyday woodwind.

Caewen sat down.

Dapplegrim looked at her askance. "Why? The sorcerer will be coming now, and sorcerers are swift, swifter than you might think. We don't have much time for plans now."

"He'd murder my family if he thought I'd stolen a half-chewed piece of copper from these..." and she gestured at the little piles of trinkets, "...treasures. Do you think you could kill him from behind? If I distracted him?" The place where Mannagarm had put the mark on her forehead burned furiously. His magic ward was still alive and it was reminding her not to do anything to harm him.

"Maybe. I doubt it," said Dapplegrim. "He'd know and then he'd make short work of us both. Mannagarm is not powerful as sorcerers go, but powerful enough."

"That's alright. Don't do anything when the sorcerer comes. I have a plan but I'm not sure if it will work and if it doesn't you should get away. Be free."

They waited. The Wisht-Folk had withdrawn during the fight and did not return, though from time to time Caewen thought she saw some shapes under the trees watching the two of them. But she was not certain.

All this time the crown sung its soft song to her.

"Can you hear that?" asked Caewen after it had started to drive her to distraction. It was calling to her. Begging her. Pleading with her. Pick me up, the song sang. Take me for your own. Take power unto your flesh.

"Hear what?" said Dapplegrim.

"Nothing. Don't worry."

Time enough passed for Caewen to catch her breath. She even started to feel cold as her sweat cooled to a sheen of moisture. Then, a shadow passed overhead, wheeled and swooped over the ruin. It was an eagle of monumental size, easily the height of a man with gold-brown feathers and hooked claws. It alighted on a rock. There was a ruffling noise, a split formed down its front, some blood beaded and spread into a cobwebby red pattern. The line tore and Mannagarm emerged from within the eagle, he was covered with blood. Of the eagle, nothing remained except for a feather cloak that Mannagarm wore around his shoulders. Except for the tricklings of blood, the cloak and his necklace of bird skulls he was naked. Caewen could see that the ritual tattooing and scars continued across his whole body, even onto his male member which was small and just as withered as Mannagarm had intimated days ago in his house.

"Well," he said, "well, you have done well. Rather very well. Much better than I expected," he added with a curl of the lips and a hiss. "I had thought of some plans for you should you fail me—but in truth I had not considered what to really do should you succeed. I confess, I didn't think it likely." He smiled greedily as he looked over the dirty heaps of gold, the greasy gems, the tarnished silver.

Dapplegrim remained silent and was looking for the meantime as horselike as he could, standing as far from Mannagarm as was reasonable. Caewen hoped he remained that way. She glanced at him and thought, *don't do anything foolish... just wait...*

Mannagarm scooped up a handful of soil, gold and gemstones, then at last noticed the bone crown. He stopped. His eyes widened and he licked his lower lip, unconsciously, as if hungry.

"That is a thing of great power. A relic out of the dim ages of bygone gods. I can hear the rhymes of dead sorcerers in it. Bring it to me. At once."

Caewen picked up the crown as he asked, and took a step towards him. As she did so the rune on her forehead began to hurt. At first it was dull, but it grew in intensity, until it was blinding and Caewen had to clench her jaw and force herself to take another small step. The rune knew

she was planning ill for the sorcerer, but Mannagarm didn't. He was too fixated on the crown. He reached for it and the rune burned Caewen like her forehead was on fire. He took the crown, lifted it to his head and put it on. There was a sudden fire in his eyes. At first he was delighted, overjoyed with the rushing power. And then his eyes widened as the spells and charms rose up and bound themselves around his flesh. It was only then that he understood, perhaps.

His screaming went on a long time.

Caewen and Dapplegrim both backed away. Caewen half-expected Mannagarm to change all at once—she watched for his skin to turn to pallid greys, his mouth to drip with fire or his fingers to gnarl and curve. But nothing so exciting happened. Mannagarm scratched, pulled and scraped at his scalp in an attempt to rid himself of the crown, but it was no use. The cloak of brown feathers came off during his struggles, leaving Mannagarm completely naked. In time he gave up even just trying to remove the crown, and he stood motionless except for the occasional passing shiver and the hiss of air coming and going from his lungs.

"How curious. We will tell the Queen of this little trick. She will be intrigued and diverted."

Caewen looked over to see Lord Edualmar. His face had a silvery glow to it again, his eyes were dancing with the bright grey twilight. The ointment in her eyes must have run and rubbed. She was beginning to see the illusions again and not the truth.

"You're not unhappy?"

"No," said Edualmar, "No, not at all. You'd have made only a thin and petty sort of goule. We'd have needed to call for another mortal to slay you and take your place in far too short a time—but a goule born of a warlock—even a weak mortal warlock such as this one—such a creature is a thing of power. This goule will guard our walls for an age of the turning of the world. We are pleased."

"Then we may go?"

"Oh, yes, indeed you must go. No mortal is permitted to linger in our realm. We are pleased with you for now... but our pleasure is a thin thing, easily worn through."

She firmed her shoulders and said, "You promised me the goule's treasure."

Lord Edualmar looked left and right, perhaps thinking one of the other Wisht who where a way off behind him might raise an objection but none was forthcoming.

"The baubles can be replaced. Take what you can carry, then go." He pointed at Mannagarm. "You, Thrall-of-the-Crown, to your den with you. Watch the road. Kill any trespassers who approach. Go now."

Mannagarm—the crowned goule—obeyed, first clambering up an escarpment, then perching himself on top of a ruined wall like some madman who thinks himself a watchdog.

Caewen didn't argue with the Wisht lord. She worked quickly to tie Mannagarm's feather cloak into a rough pouch and then filled it with gold and silver, and then she filled the sacking that hung from Dapplegrim's saddle with as much as it could hold too. There was no time to pick through the filth and refuse so she took as much pebbles and chewed bones as gems and pearls—she could sort through it later or the folk of the village could. Her immediate plan was to return home, share the windfall and put a torch to the sorcerer's house of misery on the hill.

Once she had gathered all the treasures that she could manage, they left the Wisht at a trot. Dapplegrim didn't suggest leaping into a flying run and Caewen was glad of it.

"How did you know?" said Dapplegrim, after a time.

"A few things. The heavily armed Wisht and their numbers. The lack of concern in the feasting hall—they weren't worried about an attack. The position of the ruins, overlooking both the Wisht fortress and the approaching roads. But mostly it was how much I wanted to put on the crown. There was a voice, and it was screaming and singing and lulling all at once inside my head. Nothing that promises so many good things for free could possibly be honest." After a while she added, "You know, Dapplegrim, I've spent my most recent years hiding in a cellar, seldom looking at the blue skies, seldom feeling wind or sun and never thinking I'd ever see anything but the village and the hills and forests and that awful house on the hill."

"So now what?"

"We go home, let Mother and Father and my little brother know I'm alright, then tell them that Mannagarm will never return, and give everyone some of the gold and silver."

"Some?"

"Some. Most, perhaps. Maybe all of it, they'll need it more than we will. Have you ever been to Bernoth Town? I've heard it's beautiful, and busy and mad. A harpist who visited last winter said that there are fourteen towers overlooking a lazy river and there are willows all along the bank and a floating market ten times larger than our whole village."

"I see," said Dapplegrim. "Well, I have been stabled for a long time myself and it would be nice to get out and see the world again."

"Yes," said Caewen, "It will."

Afterword

Thank you for reading. Please feel free to provide a review if you liked what you read or if you didn't. I don't expect this will be to everyone's taste, and negative reviews and comments are better than silence. You can find an author page at cpjohnstone.com and my email is c.p.johnstone@gmail.com. The next story in this cycle is *Prince of Ghosts*, a short novel-length work.