



THE HOUSE OF SNOW AND APPLES

HOB GOODFELLOWE

PART TWO of THE WINTER KING

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The road ahead ran down through a sheltered valley. Elms and stands of hazel evergreen overhung the muddy span, and every leaf on every branch was clasped by stillness in the descent of evening. Though the vale was not steep, it was large enough to hold a hollow at its heart. There was a twist of a brook there, coiling through its own small water-carved gully--some stray thickets of reeds--the hard broken lines of some old stone walls. Further off, grassy hummocks and tumbled stones hinted at a whole village buried beneath the quiet soil. But if something terrible had once happened to the people who lived here long ago, there was no whisper of it now. In the stillness of the evening, the noises that drifted up from the hollow were scattered, pleasant, relaxed: frogs in the reeds, a murmur of human voices, a few scattered laughs, the low of an ox.

A little way to the north--at about the point where the road vanished over the brim of the nearest hill--a large shape emerged from shadow. It was a monster of a thing, this creature that trotted out into the open evening air. A hoof hit the wet soil, squelching out a wavelike fringe of mud around it. A few Autumn gnats flew up from the puddles, spiralling, disturbed from the slick surface of the road by that careless hoof.

The creature stopped. It stood atop the hill, looking down at the roadside camp below. Hot breath poured from nostrils, flaring. The beast was large in its bulk, angular in its shape, and mostly horselike. Other descriptions might be used, but horselike certainly gave a reasonable sketch--even if it were also true that the creature's head looked more like a horse's skull, with skin, mane and ears, than actual living flesh. A casual observer would also have noticed the thornpricks of red light agleam deep inside its eyes. It wore no bridle, nor bit, but it did have a saddle and a rider.

Sharp teeth reflected light as the creature spoke. "Hur. I smell magic."

The rider leaned forward. The cool stir of a northern Autumn wind caught up her hair and her clothing. What was revealed by the passing breeze, was a young woman. She was not the sort of rider that one might expect atop a demonical looking horse. She had an open, curious expression on her face; her hair was tied into a rustic braid; and she wore what amounted to roughly cut and restitched farm-lass clothing. Her dress was knife-slit up the side with workman's trows underneath it. Old working shoes covered her feet. Her vest and blouse were of a rather plain linen. Her riding cape was of not very good quality. All her various things were much-patched. As riders in the twilight go, she was not heroic, not dramatic, and certainly not frightening. The sword belted to her left hip sat a little ungainly. The silent thrum about the blade, as if the air was a bit more alive near the metal tongue, was not quite enough to make up for an overall impression of someone who was not entirely settled into the business of travelling about by dangerous roads, chasing wild adventures and that sort of thing. Almost, perhaps. Just, not quite.

"Magic?" she said. "Do you mean, like a sorcerer?"

Dapplegrim snorted. "More like a bundle of sorcerers. A bevy. A nest of them. A whole sackful."

"All camped together? In the wilds? Down there in the gully?" She sat back in the saddle then. "Perhaps we ought to go around? I don't think I really trust magicians. Not really. The sort of person who grasps and grasps after power? It's, well it's--"

"Suspect?" said Dapplegrim.

"Exactly."

He shook his head, and his mane stirred with the motion. "No. I don't much trust sorcerers and witchling-men neither, but I'd prefer to know what a scrum of magicians are doing camping on the roadside together than sneak by and be ignorant. Could be there's something dangerous about. Like a demon, or monster, or something. You know, other than me." He took a deep in-draught of air, taking it into his nostrils, throat, lungs. "Reckon it'll be safe enough. There's a stink of oxen and ale, wheat, barley, salt in casks too. If there's a score of magicians down there, there's also score of workaday folk. Them witching ones can't be up to too much mischief. Really bad mischief tends to want more secrecy."

"Alright. I suppose it'll be safe to go down there then, but cautiously."

Dapplegrim launched himself into a quick trot. His tail whisked as he pulled his head a little higher. "You? Me? Incautious? Never."

They had been travelling together for some three weeks now, the girl Caewen, and her uncanny horse-creature. As it turned out, being in the company of a talking, slightly deathly looking horse, all black and grey dapple, with sharp teeth, and dull red eyes--well, it did make for safe passage along lonely roads. Of course the company was not without its problems also. People in towns and villages and lonely wayside cottages were surprisingly predictable in their reluctance to open their doors to a young woman atop a talkative, red-eyed horse. In the town of Awer, the Auldermen had kindly, if nervously, asked Caewen to move along as soon as it pleased her. By which, the Auldermen meant it would please the folk of Awer if she moved on very soon. Outside Hilth they'd been reluctant to so much as open the gates for her and Dapplegrim.

The gate-warden had gawped down at them from the palisade, eventually managing to say, "Here now. What's this? A young lass, sword-belted, riding a dragon?"

But it wasn't Caewen who answered him, it was Dapple. He snapped back, "Dragon? Dragon? Hur! Do I look like a dragon to you? Do you see scales? A nasty beak? A snout? Flames? Why, a dragon would be ten times larger. A dragon would've knocked your gate down already. And make no mistake."

"Might be best not to talk about knocking down gates," had been Caewen's whisper.

After a period of argument, and then some promises from Dapplegrim to obey certain town rules about not eating people, dogs, pigs or cats, the men on the gate did allow them to enter. Even if a jittery youth with a cudgel was given the job of following them about, at least they were able to stay at the town inn. Of course, Dapplegrim did somewhat have himself to blame for uneasy welcomes. In the stables at Hilth, he would periodically raise his head above his stall, and mumble through a mouthful of hay, "Hur! Dragon! I never!" at the reluctant guard, adding things like, "A dragon would've eaten you up in a single bite by now." This probably did not help the situation.

Nonetheless, all in all, if the journey had been at times wearying, at other times frustrating, it was still a wonderful thing to be doing. Caewen had the wind and the vast blue sky, the stars at night, and the green hills too. More than once, she had breathed the cool air and looked up at the sky, at swallows minueting far above, and wondered to herself why anyone would want jewels and gowns and grand houses when the wide free world was so beautiful.

All in all, it had been a good three weeks.

And yes, perhaps she was a touch guilty about being so happy to escape the village of her birth, but she was happy. It wasn't like she hadn't stopped at home to give her parents most of the goule's hoard of treasures. That heap of coins was more than ten years hard farming would fetch at market. And she had assured her family that she would be quite safe with Dapplegrim as a friend. They had taken one look at the beast and agreed with her. The flickering recollections of her family mused up the thoughts in her head. She sighed, inwardly, then pulled her thoughts away from home and family. She was away from the root cellar now. Away from the dingy place where she had hidden from the unkind lord of the village for all those years. As Dapplegrim trotted in the light of evening gold and dusky blue, she thought to herself: Well, here I am--travelling, free, and seeing the world. There are worse places to find oneself.

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The campsite was dotted with wagons, each piled with goods. Oxen and horses stood tethered, here and there about the hollow, pulling at the rich rank grass with hungry mouths.

As Caewen and Dapple trotted nearer, they passed close to one of those broken walls that had been visible from above. From the look of it, there must have once been something like a fortified village here. Ivy hugged the tumbled stones in scraggly mats, and a few escapee descendants of garden flowers spotted the earth.

"I wonder if any of the traders are going north or south?" said Caewen. She looked at the shapes of people around two blazing campfires. "We could send a message to my family, if any of them are going that way. Let everyone at home know we're safe."

"Yes, sounds good," said Dapplegrim, distracted. He looked around. "You know, there really is quite a stink of magic here. I wasn't joking before. It's quite a stench." Caewen understood the wariness. A number of years spent with that old, foetid warlock Mannagarm would make anyone suspect of sorcerers.

As they came up on the camp a wide-set man with a tuft of soft curly brown hair and a carpet of stubble running over several weighty chins detached himself from the campfire to meet them.

"Welcome!" he said, arms thrown wide in a slightly affected manner. "We've a cook-fire to share and stories to share too, and good beer by the lashing, if you've a coin for the latter that is... the beer being the thing we weary ones insist on payment... that is... for..." He slowed in his words when he set eyes on Dapplegrim. "I see. Beg me, for assuming. That is, I expect you would be wanting to join them?" He indicated a bent knuckle towards a cluster of folk around the other fire.

Caewen looked. Men and women, old and young, in various states of fine, rough and vagabond clothing sat in a rough cluster.

"Them?" said Caewen.

"The weirdworkers," replied the trader. "That is to say, I presume you are..." he waved a meaty hand at Dapplegrim. "You are a worker of the arts?"

Caewen was about to say no, she was not actually a witch or wizard-lady, when Dapplegrim interrupted her. "Well of course she is a powerful magician. How else do you think she'd have bound a great and monstrous demon of the dark forests to her will? And don't get any ideas. Hur. Why she could turn you into a stone. Or a newt. Or a newt made of stone." Rather unconvincingly he added. "Or a stone made of newts."

"Er. Right," said the trader. "I'm Endric, by and by, if you please you. You're welcome to join them as are travelling south for the meeting. I understand the moot is yet some days off."

"Thank you," said Caewen.

As Dapplegrim moved to trot past the man he shot the trader Endric an overwrought glare. "Stone made of newts!" Dapplegrim hissed, though he was grinning as he said it, and the wagoner seemed more bemused than frightened.

"Be nice," said Caewen. "Behave. We don't need a repeat of Charkling Tump East."

Dapplegrim snorted. "How was I to know the sheep belonged to someone?"

"Sheep always belong to someone. Have you ever heard of a wild sheep in the woods? Sheep don't survive wolves and bears without *someone* looking after them. That's one of our rules now, remember? Sheep always belong to someone."

"Yes, well. Hm. Hur." Dapplegrim, after all, was only half-horse, and only half his diet was grass and apples and straw. The other half... well... his teeth were good for meatier things too.

At the small gathering of the weirdworkers, as Endric had called them, Caewen and Dapplegrim stopped and Caewen dismounted. A number of faces turned their way, some frail, some fat, some thin and wretched, some pale, some dark. People from all over the lands were here, from a great many nations, all stations and all walks of life. Rich and poor. Some sat in elaborate robes. Some sat in rags. They had been conversing quietly, in knots of twos or threes, but the talk had ceased when they saw a new arrival. Their stares were attentive, though perhaps not intensely interested.

"Hello," said Caewen. And then she remembered something Mannagarm had said about a wizard moot he had attended once, long ago. "Just so you know, I am not the sort to sleep under hedges. Um. If that is of any interest. Um. At all."

A few of the expressions twisted into puzzlement, others looked away with a shrug. They all seemed to say: *oh, some upstart of a nobody has walked in among a crowd of proper magicians--alright then.* And the crowd promptly ignored her.

"It really does stink of magic here," said Dapplegrim, under his breath.

"Quiet, you." She could feel herself blushing a little. "Of course it stinks of magic. There's at least a dozen magicians isn't there?" The lack of a single word from the company left her feeling awkward, a

little embarrassed too. Maybe she ought to encourage Dapplegrim to go back to the traders? They seemed friendlier. But as she looked at the merchants and tinkers, sitting apart, she realised that she had picked her bedfellows, and now she had to grit her teeth and tolerate them. At least it would only be until dawn. "Dapple?"

"Yes."

"You keep saying that, about magic, but what does magic smell like?"

"Oh, sort of like the smell of gold and lead mixed together, or the smell before a oceanic storm out of sight from land, or the smell of the first drop of rain on dry soil if there is also blood in the soil from a battle fought seven years ago. Sort of like that."

"I see," said Caewen, though she really didn't. "How would you know what a storm at sea smells like?"

"Questions, questions," said Dapple, rolling his eyes. "I just know."

"Alright." She undid the saddle, pulled down their bags, and set about brushing down Dapplegrim whilst he glared at one sorcerer after another. Then, making herself something to eat from their travel-box, she sat down on an old fallen piece of masonry to have her dinner. As she was finishing off some seedbread, mustard and cold meat, one of the magicians got up and walked over to her. The firelight was behind and a little to the left of this person, so Caewen wasn't able to see any details clearly until the stranger were nearly at her feet.

"Oh," she said, without catching herself. "You're a child?"

The girl, who looked to be about the age of fourteen--maybe a year or two older--sat down crosslegged in front of Caewen. She wore a travelling gown of vivid fern-green velvet, and had a curious foxish expression. Her hair was a red tint of fair, and her eyes matched the colour of three dark green stones she wore on her throat. "You're not so very old yourself. And besides, appearances are deceiving," said the child with an off-cadence lilt.

"Is that so?" said Caewen.

"For one," said the child, "I am no child. For the second, you are no binder of spells, nor spirits, nor folk of the air, are you?"

"Well, you see--"

Dapplegrim cut her off. "I'll not have you insult the great and powerful--"

"Be quiet with you," said the child who was not a child. A pause. She laughed. "I know a magician when I see one. I've had a long enough life to learn how to see the spark of magic inside a person. You," and she tilted her head and considered, "yes, you have a little ancestral native talent, but it is sleeping in you. Have there been many sorcerers, witches, magicians, cunningmen, cleverfolk or the similar in your lineage?"

"None that I know of," said Caewen.

"Hmm. Your bloodline might be hard to open then. Some talent, but locked away tight. You might need a powerful key to open it. Blood drunk from a raw dragon's heart. Nine years' teachings from a bodiless voice in a cavern. The water of a nine storms caught, and drunk from a raven's skull." A shrug. "Teachings and charmings of that ilk."

Caewen frowned "I don't really follow what you mean. And why did you say you're not a child? You look... I couldn't say for sure, but young. Somewhere about fourteen? Fifteen? And not more than a slip of a lass, at that." She wondered then if the girl was not of mortalfolk. "Are you some sort of dwarfie creature?"

"Oh no, I am no Dwarghe, nor Awvish Folk. I am of mortal womb born, and mortal myself, but... well, appearances are deceiving. Why, look over at Old Cartholom the Alchemsmith. He's the one all in grey and black. Hawkish nose and great beetling brows. Woolly robes the colour of gritty stone. How does he look to you?"

"Stern," said Caewen, and after studying him a while, "and alone. He isn't in anyone's company."

"Watch him then. But don't stare. Don't let him know you are watching him. Just watch."

So Caewen did. Out of the corner of her eye, she kept her focus on the birch-thin man, sitting stiffly in the dark. As she watched, Cartholom seemed to glance about, checking if anyone was

paying attention to him, then, with a flash, a red face peeked out of a corner of his robe and he fed it a bit of bread from his hand.

"Oh." Caewen started. "He has a squirrel in his robes."

"Many squirrels. He likes them. Keeps a family of squirrels about his person. Not what he first appears, yes? Dull, and sour and grim: but with a family of squirrels running up and down his trousers."

Caewen turned her face to study the girl. "And you are not what you seem?" She gave herself a moment, then said, "I'm Caewen of Drossel, and this is my friend, Dapplegrim. We rather are what we seem though I'm afraid. Not a lot of secrets."

"Names? Names? You shouldn't gift away your names like that."

"Why not?"

"You really are not an ounce of a magician are you? I was wondering if maybe you were cloaking your arts? Hiding them down deep. But no." She shook her head. "Listen. Names are special. Names are how we dominate things... how we take away their mystery. What is thunder without a name? It is a terrifying miracle sent by gods. With a name, it becomes mere thunder. What is a snake without a name? It is an assassin born out of the earth, mysterious. But a name reduces it to an adder, or a grass-snake or a milk-snake. Now, the name has taken away the poison, if it is the right sort of name." She affected a country voice. "Oh, that's just a milk-snake. That's no nameless terror at all. Not even poisonous."

But Caewen still wasn't really certain that the girl had properly answered her question. She wasn't quite sure that the girl was not playing games with her. "So what do they call you then?"

"Many things. The Witchling-in-Green. The Penitent Witch. If you want something more like a name as you think of them, call me Tamsin."

"Alright, Tamsin, how old are you then? If you don't mind me asking?"

"She's very, very old," said Dapplegrim, cutting in. He took a sniff of the air. "Older than me. Older than anyone else in this valley, or the next, or the next. Old as old. Old as rock."

"I am that." She gave a pixieish smile, slyly. Though shifted where she sat too, perhaps a little self-conscious. "It would be fair of me to warn you that it will do you no favours in the standing of other, more reputable, magicians to be my friend. I am not merely disliked. I am quite despised. It is one thing to achieve grand old age and long life with magic, but it is quite another thing to achieve everlasting youth. I have done some things. If you knew what, I suspect you'd not want to talk to me either. Though in my defence, my worst... hmm... *crimes* were very long ago."

Caewen considered this. "How long ago?"

"A very many years ago. I was at my worst when men heaved up temples of raw stone, when they lived in round huts, when they used flint more than they used bronze, and iron was not yet known, nor steel. You see, I lived quite some time. But I am the Penitent Witch now, you see. Going here and there. Travelling about. Trying to make up for a few of the things I did so many years ago. I have a lot of blood to wash off my fingers." A sigh. "There are things that..." and she paused before adding with a more bitter note, "well, things that I regret."

Dapplegrim meanwhile had been running an eye over the others in the gathering. "There's a moot on then, is there?"

"The Seven-Year Moot. Yes." Tamsin seemed neither impressed nor deeply interested. She shook her head, dismissive. "There will be the usual squabbles and arguments, and petty accusations, alliances made and broken, and a great deal of noise-making. But nothing much will come of it. Still, I have my own reasons for going, as I suppose we all do. There are matters I must put before the moot. It would be wrong not to. Whether anyone will listen to me? I cannot say. Though I fear, perhaps it is a wasting effort." She smiled, and it was a childish smile. Like a smile for a bowl of cream and cut fruit in summer. "If you want my advice, you probably ought not go there. If you are a pretender magician, someone will work it out, and that someone may decide to punish you for the insolence. We magicians are people too, after all, and people can be petty and nasty and jealous of their self-importance."

"I'll take your advice to mind."

Dapplegrim added, "We both will."

The conversation lulled. Haltingly, they chatted a little about the road south, and how fast Tamsin was expecting the travellers' train to progress, and when and where they might stop along the way. Privately, Caewen thought that she and Dapplegrim might as well travel with this wagon train for a day or three, although the two of them would need to talk about that later privately.

As the night lengthened, the voices around the fire dimmed off to sleep, one-by-one. Tamsin said goodnight, and stood, stretched, then walked to the place where she had set out her own travellers' bed and canopy beside a tethered pony.

Caewen untied a sleeping roll and bedded down next to Dapplegrim's warm bulk. She put her head onto the hard ground and felt the exhaustion thread through her muscles and bones. She blinked a few times, looking up at the star-powdered sky, but her thoughts immediately detached themselves and drifted away into images without focus. Her eyelids fluttered and she was asleep within moments.

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Caewen came awake with a start. It was dark still. Night shadowed the ground. A few thin clouds troubled the starry sky, reaching out like groping fingers from the east. Why had she woken up? A movement stirred near her head. She froze. Something was creeping up close to her. It stopped, then jumped and landed with a light patter on her chest. Then it peered closely down at her face. She almost cried out in alarm, but managed to stop herself--forcing her body to remain motionless, she blinked and tried to take in what she was seeing--immediately in front of her face was a red squirrel with tufty ears, a twitching nose and liquid eyes, all lit up in the moonlight.

It rubbed two tiny paws over its face, as if itchy, and then it spoke--though its lips did not move and the voice was a deep, fragile man's voice. It was difficult to be sure whether the words came from the squirrel, or from the air and darkness.

"I saw you watching me," said the squirrel.

"I'm sorry." Caewen felt a brush of fear. She had been sleeping on her back, and could not tell if the grey magician was awake, or standing, or waiting in the night-shadows nearby. "I did not mean to offend."

Whiskers flicked. "Oh, that's alright, alright. But you ought be more trepidatious. You seem a pleasant girl. I'm not angry, am I? Am I? No. Just, tread with caution, you hear me? Hear me? Some persons don't like being looked at. And no one much likes your company, either, either, neither, neither. Step with heedfulness around that one."

"Tamsin?"

"Is that what she called herself? Yes. The Bloodspeaker. The Necromant of the Old Hill Cave. Lady of the Carven Pillars. She's a lot of other names. Worse. Those who live long lifetimes gather nicknames and folk-callings like dandelion fluff in summer. Be cautious of that one."

"But she seems... I don't know. Sad? Regretful? Are you sure--?"

The squirrel grew irritated. It chattered. Words bloomed around it like flowers in the night air. "Don't ask that. Don't ever ask a sorcerer that. Sure? Sure? I'm not *sure* of anything. That's what magic does to you, it does. Uncertainty. Everything could be this, or it could be that. A bird could be a fish, or it could be a seed that will grow into a tree that sprouts more fish, or it could be turned to living ivory, or nine unreadable letters painted on a piece of stone. Nothing is certain. I only know this much--be careful of that one. She's not innocent. Oh, she claims to have changed her ways. But does a rich thief ever give up dreams of glittery adamants? Does a milk-fed cat give up its wish to catch some tasty, tasty squirrel? Oh," the squirrel whispered, "Oh, how I hate cats." The creature sniffed. "Or, does a well-fed squirrel leave acorns where they lie?" The voice murmured then, and made a sound like licking of lips. "Hmmm. *Acorns*." The creature shook its little head. "But I distract myself. Nature is nature. Magic is magic. Hunger is hunger." The squirrel twisted and took a hop away in that fluid sort of way that squirrels do with a tail bobbing. Caewen allowed herself up on an elbow, and looked around. The grey sorcerer with the hooked nose was definitely lying down and he

was snoring loudly. It was the sort of snore that isn't easily faked: deep and resonant in the nose and throat. His red squirrel jumped and skittered over the grass and stones, until it vanished itself inside the folds of the man's clothing. It took one last peek back at Caewen, then was gone.

"That was odd," said Caewen to herself.

"Hur. What was?"

Her heart took a jump before she realised it was Dapplegrim. "Oh. You. I forget you don't much sleep."

"That little squirrel was talking just now. You didn't hear it?"

"No, but that doesn't mean it wasn't speaking. Might have been speaking in your head." Dapplegrim's eyes were catching the moonlight. They shone with the colours of the bordertimes between Autumn and Winter--dull and red, with gleams of moonsilver all through. "Enchanters and suchlike can speak in thoughts." He shook his mane. "And folk think I'm spooky. Hur."

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In the morning, Caewen and Dapple did decide to ride with the magicians, but towards the tail of the caravan where they could keep an eye on everyone. Just in case. It turned out that Tamsin had the same idea. She rode along at the end of the merchant train too, perched sidesaddle on a small roan pony. Her mount jingled as it trotted--its barding was all hung with tiny bells painted green. The small horse was a touch nervous around Dapplegrim, as horses tended to be; they never seemed to be quite sure if Dapplegrim was another horse, or if he was actually a monster only mocking a horse in shape. They would sniff the air and look sideways at Dapple, always a little on edge. Tamsin's pony was no different.

Caewen talked idly with her as they travelled, but it was all a surface chatter, a skimming over the top of things: the weather, the green of the fields, the calls of birds and late season insects and other idle topics of long travel.

Around midmorning, the wagoners, riders and walkers were wending along a shallow rift between two hills. Tamsin started paying increasing attention to the eastward sky. A crease lined her brow. The horizon, which had been only an hour before as clear and blue as a hollowed-out sapphire, was gathering a snowy tint--then, more rapidly than seemed natural, grey thunderheads loomed upward like monuments raised up for dead gods. The winds rose and rose, turning sharply cold. It soon felt as if the howling and whistling of the sky was doing its best to drown out all other noise. The magicians and traders alike began talking worriedly, and pointing at the eastern skyline, the dull hills, the distant black-green of trees.

"It's too early in the season for a blizzard this far south," said one.

"That's an unnatural storm, mark me," spat another.

"I have tried a countermagic," added one magician. "But it's no use. None at all. Whoever has conjured the weather-working is a potent old charmer. Will like iron chains. I can feel it." He wrapped himself in his arms, hugging in his body warmth.

"Why conjure up a storm out here in the wilds? To what end?" asked another.

"It's coming our way. Shouldn't we put up some cover?" asked someone. A few of the merchants started pulling canvases and oiled tarpaulins off their wagons. But the storm was coming on quickly. It was clear they weren't going to have time to do more than tie down some rudimentary shelters, if that. There wasn't much that could be done for the animals. The horses and cattle would simply have to weather the storm.

That was when Caewen noticed that Tamsin was staring fixedly at the churning clouds. The witch-child's lips were moving, near soundless, muttering and murmuring under her breath. Her skin grew damp looking, and lost some colour. Sweat beaded her upper lip and brow. Her voice rose in a start, and she said three words that stung Caewen's thoughts, leaving her thoughts dizzy, blood thumping momentarily in her skull. Tamsin twisted her hand at the sky and for the briefest of

moments the clouds did pile back upon themselves, driven by a ferocious wind that whipped up from the west, where the Chark Hills marched.

But then Tamsin collapsed forward in her saddle. When she looked up again, breathing hard, her left eye had a spot of red in it where a vein had broken. She was trembling. "No good," she whispered. "If I were at my seat of power, I could counter it, but not here. Not when I'm away from all my tools and wellsprings." She cast around, looking at the other magicians. "This is certainly an attack. We cannot be idiots and fools about this. Who lives east of here? Who waylays us? Why?"

But no one seemed to know. There were mutterings that the lands to the east were wild. There were no kingdoms to speak of, and no sorcerers of any great power that anyone had heard of. Only old ruins. A few scattered woodland villages. A handful of petty farmyard witches maybe, but no great magician had a home in those wilds. Someone said there had maybe once been a powerful woods-sorceress out that way, but she was long dead. Or had she been a witch-of-the-wolves, rather than woods? The stories were old and more than half-forgotten.

"Strange then," said Tamsin. She studied the sky as the clouds tumbled upwards and upwards, so high that they looked as if they could not possibly support themselves. When the snow-clouds finally crashed westward over the land it was like being blanketed in a frozen, blinding winter's night. The snow and sleet was so sudden and so powerful that it nearly knocked Caewen off the saddle, and she immediately lost sight of everyone, even Tamsin who had been quite nearby. Warmth, a kindling inner fire stoked up from Dapplegrim, burning upwards, warming the air. She was grateful for it. His demonic warmth might soon be all that would keep the both of them alive.

"What do we do?" she screamed. Her lungs felt frozen. Her ribs didn't want to work.

"Keep going," said Dapplegrim. "Find shelter. Dig into the snow if we have to. We can't stay here. Staying out in the open in this is death." He snorted and white steam billowed from his nostrils. "Even for me."

"Maybe we can get down next to one of the wagons?"

But as they trudged forward through sheets and blasts of white, the wagons did not resolve out of the swirls of murk.

"Where is everyone?" said Caewen. She was shivering now. "Are we off the road?" She listened. Dimly, she thought she could hear other voices. All of them sounded scattered, like they were being driven hither and thither by the storm, broken apart on purpose, or sent off wherever it was the storm wanted them to go. At that moment something seemed to pass overhead. It was a presence, deeply cold--casting a blue-grey shadow that looked like a person flying, arms outstretched. Everything the shadow touched was immediately rimed with beards of frost. Dapplegrim wheeled away from it when he saw it passing over the ground. "Don't let that thing's shadow touch you," he screamed. "This winter blast--it's no curse, nor wizardry at all! It's a demon of the elements." He stamped at the earth to get purchase and took a few cantering steps away from the sweeping shape that hove to and fro in the air above.

Dapplegrim turned himself around and bolted. It was hard to tell what direction they were fleeing, but whenever they turned or bent away from a path ahead, the thing in the air appeared nearby and rounded them away again, back on a more or less straight track.

"It's herding us!" yelled Caewen over the noise of winds.

"I know."

"But why?"

"I've no idea."

The further they went, the deeper the snow became, until Dapplegrim was up to his belly in drifts and having a hard time moving forward. They must have been trudging and pulling away from the thing in the air for an hour, growing colder, growing gradually closer to death, when a tall thin shape appeared before them out of the snow blasts. It was grey, lichen-splodged. A tree trunk. Then there was another, and another. They had been forced into a forest of pines, but when Caewen tried to remember where any forest had lain in sight of the road, she could not recall seeing any trees except in the far distance. There was some more lumbering in snow on the part of Dapplegrim, and then the snowbanks, thankfully, grew a little less deep, and the way became somewhat easier. The storm

still raged, but at least the snow had reduced down to Dapplegrim's hocks, and soon they found a place where five huge pines stood close enough together to provide a sort of shelter within their boles.

Caewen dismounted and they crouched down, in among the trees, doing their best to keep some warmth and wait out the storm. At least the patch of earth was sheltered enough that there were more pine needles than snow-spatters. There was nothing else to do now but curl up, and try to keep warm.

But as they crouched there, the snows started to encroach, and the winds howled and howled with what could only be called an animalistic voice.

-oOo-

Caewen pulled a woollen blanket from the saddlebag and hid herself underneath it, up against Dapplegrim's warm flank. Icy blasts wracked the branches above, rattling cones from the trees, cracking and splitting wood. She was covered by a layer of snow as she huddled, so that when the shrieking, tearing noises of the storm abated, she had to shake herself free with some effort.

When she emerged, she found that Dapplegrim was buried under his own great mound of snow too.

"Are you alive?" she said.

His head came up, snow tumbling off it. "Mostly, I think."

"Where are we?" She looked around and saw endless pines. "Aside from the obvious, I mean. In a forest. Look, there's sunlight beyond that ridge. Might be the forest ends and we can get a view?"

Dapplegrim stood, and snow came off his flanks in heaps and icy chunks. His haunches shivered in spates. "I need to walk to get some blood back in my legs anyway. That is the coldest I've ever been. That was worse than being inside in the arse of the Queen of Old Night and Chaos herself."

"Dapplegrim!"

"What?"

Caewen started moving her arms for warmth. "Don't be so crude. It's embarrassing."

"There's no one here." He shook the last few streaks of snow from his mane.

"There's me. Come on. I need to walk too. We both need to warm up."

They picked a path through the woods. At the ridge, the trees turned sparser, then fell away, giving ground to scatterings of low junipers and wind-stunted wildling pines. Beyond the forest's edge, sweeping out before them, lay a vast open meadowland, currently, white with snow. Beyond the rolling meadows stood another small woodland of trees. Yet those trees were not given over to wilderness. Smoke in blue-grey tendrils bled from the treetops. Chimneys poked up here and there. And above the trees rose a towerhouse on a craggy hill.

"You know," said Dapplegrim, "I've a feeling that if we double back and try to find the road again, we might just find ourselves back here. I don't think the demon was simply playing with us for fun. It felt too... how can I put it?"

"Purposeful?" said Caewen.

"I was thinking malignant, but purposeful too, yes." Dapplegrim turned his ears and listened. He sniffed. "Here. We're not the only survivors. Over there."

Caewen looked and saw a figure emerge from the woods. She was small and slight, and wore a fern-green dress. Caewen called out to her, and Tamsin turned their way, looking for a moment surprised. After a pause, the girl started to sweep through the snow towards them.

She spoke to Dapplegrim first as she approached. "You must have some fire in your bloodline, old demon. I didn't think another soul would be alive at the end of that." Tamsin seemed to tremble a little then. "I found a wagon, and some of the traders, and their oxen, just back away. All dead. Frozen through to the bone." Only now did she seem to notice the village in the trees across the snowy meadow. She looked at the smoke, at the towerhouse on the hilltop, at the hints of a village among the trees. "I wonder if it is a robber's snare? A net to murder travellers and take their things?"

"But you survived. And we did. Where's your pony?" asked Caewen, though as she spoke she realised that there were brown-black streaks of dried blood across Tamsin's hands, under her fingernails, and spotted up and down her dress too.

"I needed a life to make such charms as I required to preserve my own." Her voice was uncomfortable, even a touch ashamed perhaps. "That's the sort of trick-of-the-art that I swore I'd never do again..." she hesitated. "Yet, if had I not, then I'd be frozen dead, and poor old Clover would be dead all the same from the cold. I suppose we do as we must." As she said this, looking again at the view of meadow and woods, a new, strange emotion came over her face. A trembling started in her hands, and became uncontrollable, moving to her arms, then her shoulders. Her eyelids drew wider. For as much as a minute she had difficulty controlling her voice as she tried to speak, until at last she drew several deep breaths, and said, "I'm sorry. I was startled. I didn't think to find this here. It is unexpected."

Caewen had already taken several halting steps towards the girl-magician, reaching out a hand, ready to catch her if she fell. She looked as if she might fall. Tamsin looked that ill. Her face had a clammy look. "Tamsin?" Caewen said.

"One of my deaths is here." Tamsin's voice sounded closed within itself, as if she were speaking for her own sake only, as if she did not expect anyone else to hear, or respond, or even care.

"Tamsin? Are you alright? What do you mean?"

But Tamsin laughed and the tension drained out of her. "I have faced the others. I can face the last of them and outwit it too. And then? Maybe I'll have another dream of many dyings? Or maybe I'll have cheated all my deaths and I'll live unto the ripe world's end?"

"You've foreseen this place," said Dapplegrim. It was more of a statement than a question.

"Yes. I have. When I was still a toddler at my mother's calf, I saw a vision of nine deaths. They were my deaths. Nine traps that the spirits and the petty earth-gods and the great goddesses of day and night would contrive for me. I've met eight of them already. I've outwitted and outfought eight of my foreseen deaths. This place, this is where I saw my ninth and final death." Her voice grew quieter. "I'm long-lived, but no less fragile than anyone else. I live by cheating death. I am not invulnerable." She was shivering again. "I've lived so long. Learned so much. And I must speak at the moot. I must. I can't die here: there are things that must be said, things that must be done."

"Oh, I don't think you've anything to worry about," muttered Dapplegrim. "Hur. I'm increasingly certain that you're rather good at doing what is necessary to keep out of death's clutches." Dapplegrim swished his tail. "I imagine you will be fine. Your travelling companions on the other hand--"

Caewen tapped his neck with the back of her hand "Dapple!"

But Tamsin said, "Hmm. No." She gave Dapplegrim an odd look. "Perhaps that is fair enough. I know how to make use of heart's blood in my spells. It is always a temptation." And she smiled her childish, foxlike smile. "Who knows what I might be seduced into doing if I think I might just possibly cheat my last and final death?"

That last bit might have been meant only as a joke, but it still sent a cold twitch up Caewen's spine. There was something distinctly unjokelike about the way Dapplegrim and Tamsin were talking: Caewen felt as if she were missing some vital piece of information that the other two were teasing apart between them, yet refusing to outright state. She would have ask Dapplegrim later what this was all about.

Meanwhile, Dapplegrim spoke up again. "Did you see in your vision exactly how you might die?" he asked, with sugary innocence.

"No. Only the place."

He leaned towards her. "Then listen to me with care." His breath came out as a great steaming phantom on the cold air. "Hur. If you so much as hint that you're going to make me or my lady into blood-tools for your dirty magic, I will devour you piece-by-piece-by-piece. It could well be that you cheat death here, simply by *not* making me angry. Yes?"

Tamsin blinked. They were rapid flickering blinks. She processed this suggestion as if she had not considered it. "That is plausible, yes. Death has tried to sneak up on me sideways before." She was

contemplative now. Introspective. "I wonder if that's why your name came to mind? Were you warning me? *Sgaotha, ah Tamsin, ana sfarri sgorr ë?* Like when we were children?" She trailed off then and turned silent.

-oOo-

After talking it over, and deciding there was little point in trying to find their way back to the road, they walked all three together out onto the snowy meadow and towards the village. But they had not gone far when a new disturbance arose on the air. Somewhere in the woods a wolf howled. Then another and another. Looking back at the woods behind them, a mass of grey and black faces were now gathering, peering out from under the pine shadows. Yellow eyes pushed forward, caught the light and glimmered. As soon as the first wolf, a huge, dark and gold-streaked beast padded fully into the open, the others came creeping after it. The pack was large, two dozen at least, and they were all unnaturally big. Most were the size of a yearling cow, whilst the great gold and black creature that lead them was taller than a bullock.

The pack jumped into the chase as one.

Dapplegrim stomped a hoof. "Up! Up! Both of you."

Caewen pulled herself into the saddle first, and dragged Tamsin in front of her. With a thud of hooves on frozen earth, Dapplegrim tore forward, fast. The snow and the soil sprayed and mixed behind him as he ran. And though he was faster than any mortal horse, the wolves still gained on them. Soon a pair of jaws was snapping at Caewen's heels, while other wolves worried Dapplegrim at the hocks, nipping and snarling.

Caewen drew her sword and brought it down in a heavy arc. The wolf she'd aimed the blow at pulled away just in time to avoid having its skull caved in, but only just. When one of the wolves managed to sink teeth into one of Dapplegrim's hind legs, he bucked, nearly throwing Caewen and Tamsin into the snow. The wolf was thrown clear, at least. Angry now, Dapplegrim rounded on the wolves, snapping with his own sharp teeth and snarling like a creature out of the deepest pits that tunnel the rock under wild mountains. That startled the wolves enough to make them pause.

"Dapple..." said Caewen. "Dapplegrim!"

"What?"

"They're circling around us. They're going to hem us in. We can't fight them all. We must run."

Dapplegrim gave a frustrated snort, wheeled about and made for a gap among the grey bodies, dodged through sets of bared teeth, and then was off again, renewing his speed. It became a contest of who could span ground the fastest, and Dapplegrim pushed himself until foam and blood was coming out of his nostrils and mouth. Finally, he edged ahead of the pack, bursting out of the meadow and into the trees at the foot of the tall hill.

As soon as they were past the treeline, the wolves stopped. The pack padded around, frustrated, snarling at the fringe of the pines. They walked in tight, angry circles, growling and growling in low snarls. Now and then one gave out a frustrated whine of a howl.

"Down. Get off now," sputtered Dapplegrim. "Off. Down."

Caewen and Tamsin both slipped from the saddle, and Dapplegrim let his legs fold under him into a collapsed heap. "That near killed me. First the cold. Then the run. I've never met anything that runs as fast as those things. A day for firsts," he muttered without humour. "Those are not nature-born wolves or I'm a woodlouse."

Caewen was stroking Dapplegrim's mane between the ears. "But you saved us. You outran them." She looked back through the heavy, grey bars of the trees. There were scratches cut in all the trunks, small angular patterns and grooves made by small, sharp tools.

The wolves had calmed a bit, by now. They were just staring, their tongues lolling, breath rich and puffing hotly on the chill air. The look in their eyes was that of keen intelligence. It was as if they were judging the situation, assessing it and considering what they might do next.

"Are they evil spirits in the shape of wolves? Or mankind-wargs?"

Tamsin, who was watching the wolves just as intently, said, "You mean skinling-wolves? Werelings? Maybe, but I've never heard of skin-changers together in such numbers." She looked around at the trees then, at snow and the white glow of sunlight dappling through the branches, studying it all intently. At last she said, "The marks cut into the trunks are full of power. This place is walled against wild spirits and beasts. There are unseen runes drawn in the air too. As long as the power that lives here holds, those things cannot tread here. We're safe."

Dapplegrim was starting to catch his breath. "Safe from the wolves, you mean. Certainly not safe. There are wards for the wolf-things? Hur. Whoever can run a ring of magic the whole way around a little woodland and hill could just as easily make themselves master of a great snow demon. I do not think we are very safe. Not at all."

Caewen meantime had turned her attention from the wolves to the small woodland of pines and open clearings. There were thatched houses at the foot of the hill. "There are cottages... mostly poor, ramshackle." She scanned the roofs and walls, the gardens and yards. There were a few larger houses too. Fields for winter greens. Chicken hutches. Pigsties. "It's a humble enough place to look at." Some movement stirred amongst the cottage yards. "Look, there are people. I think they know we're here." She turned to face what appeared to be a gathering crowd. "They're coming."

With a touch of irritation, Tamsin shrugged. "Well, the howling would announce us as sure as any bell at the gate. First, a demon of ice and winter. Now, unnatural wolves? This place has charmed servants. And those servants seem to want us to be here."

"You think the wolves were only herding us to this place?" said Caewen. "Like the demon?"
"Aye."

Dapplegrim pulled himself slowly to his feet. He was still shaky. "No. I disagree. Those wolves were quite happy to feast on us down to hair and bone. You did not have one of them biting you in the leg, did you? Believe me, that was no warning nip." He stretched his leg where there was a bite-mark. "I can feel uncanny poison in the wound. It won't be enough to kill me, hur, but it would have killed either of you. No. That was no game. Maybe the elemental was herding us, but the wolves weren't. They wanted us dead. I'm sure of it."

Throughout this, Caewen had kept one eye on the approaching villagers. They were near enough now for her to decide it was probably sensible to slide her sword out, ready. The hard sound clipped the air. "No time for that now. We've company."

The knot of villagers approached--men and women carrying heavy, sharp tools--pitchforks and mattocks, bilhooks, scythes and sickles--all oily edges and hard whetted gleams in the intermittent light of the pine canopy. Dour, craggy faces stared and assessed. One man, middle-aged, weathered and leathery in look, took a step out from the others. He used a free hand to doff a crimson cap, accompanying this with a brief nod, while he clutched an iron sickle in the other. The edge had been honed to a bright crescent. "Hullo there. Seems you're here to visit the master on the hill."

Caewen fingered her sword's hilt, adjusting the weight of the blade. "Given we've barely survived a snow storm, I'd have hoped we'd see some hot cider and blankets, not weapons. This is not the sort of hospitality I'd look for at a lord's hall."

"Lord? Him?" The farmer rubbed his nose. "I suppose so. In his odd way, though Old Coldballs don't give himself titles, even if he might give himself airs." The villager looked over his shoulder and nodded. A line of men in armour were coming down the path from the hilltop now. They were still some way off. "That's his fellows strolling this way. Listen, you want this to go well on you?" He rubbed his nose. "Here's some advice then. Be polite. Don't offend the master. Don't say nothing against neither of his two sons. And don't go trying to upset any of them who live on the hill, nor think you can hurt them folk. You can't hurt them none." He sniffed. "Others have tried."

One of the farmwives cut in. "That's enough, Gareth, best hush it."

A man with a mattock said, nervously, "He might be about, remember."

"Oh yeah, he might," conceded the speaker. He looked up then, into the air, as if searching for something hard to see in the branches. "Aye," he said. He sniffed again. "He might be listening, too right. But he dislikes the master anyway, doesn't he?" He paused and said, "One last thing. If the master do decide to let you go--if he loses interest in you--come asking for me. I'm Gare of Gare's

Yard." He turned and pointed at a large, sturdy cottage. "Over there. I'll see you right 'til you can leave off. The master may have his ways, but the folk of Pine-under-Tower do our best to make up for it. We do what we can do."

The woman who had spoken earlier added, "Another last thing: you'd best not call the master Coldballs, neither. He doesn't like that. Not a bit of it." She shot a remonstrating glare at the farmer as she spoke.

The villagers then settled into silence, waiting for the column of guardsmen. As they waited, some of the men and women noticed for the first time that wolves were still lurking about the edge of the trees. A few of the folk walked over, going right up to the edge of the trees, and stood there, hurling abuse. "Here! Off with you now, yowler!"--"No meat for you today!"--"Get! Get! Go find a dead field rat somewhere." A few pinecones and rocks were thrown. The wolves hunched their shoulders and retreated, slinking away, casting dark looks behind them.

Not long after the wolves departed, the guardsmen arrived. The difference in the cast of face and appearance between villagers and the men from the hill-tower was striking. Where the villagers were grim but wiry and thin, keenly alert, the guards were dull-eyed and well-fed, red-faced, and sporting a bit of fat around the middle. Yet these were not idlers. They were big, meaty-fisted men, broad in the chest, and to Caewen's mind, thuggish looking. Many of them had broken noses, scars or both. Each wore a knee-length coat-of-plate and a surcoat of sky blue with three white apples in a triangle arrangement. The difference between the villagers and guards struck her as the same difference between an underfed farming dog and a pampered, ill-tempered hound.

"Do three apples on blue mean anything to you?" asked Caewen, turning her head slightly towards the others.

Dapplegrim shook his head. "Afraid not."

Tamsin only shook her head, saying nothing.

-oOo-

As the guardsmen fanned out, the cottagers and farmers all pulled away, like wool teased out of a bundle. One of the guards gave out a short, sharp bark of an order. "Travellers. Attend. The master of The House of Snow and Apples does invite you to share of his hearth and abode."

"Doesn't sound the sort of invitation we are expected to decline," said Caewen. She still had her sword drawn.

"Not an invitation declined prudently," suggested Tamsin.

The man's tone shifted from bored to serious. "No. It is poor to displease the Master of Snow and Apples. That is true." He shot a look at the villagers then, perhaps wondering what they had told these newly arrived strangers.

Looking from Dapplegrim to Tamsin and back, Caewen said, "Very well." She slipped her sword away. "I don't see us as having much of a choice. You might as well lead on, I guess."

"Oh, I don't know. I reckon I could take this lot," grumbled Dapple, voice low, threatening.

But Caewen could hear the bluster in his voice. He was too exhausted from the storm and chase to fight, and she suspected the exhaustion was obvious to the guards as well. Though before Caewen could cut in and calm the situation, the head of the guardsmen spoke back at Dapplegrim. "You wouldn't take *this* lot," he replied, rather flatly. "Jack would see to you first."

"Jack? Who's Jack?" asked Caewen.

The guard's face soured, just a fraction, but noticeable. "Never you mind who Jack is. The master will tell you if the master wants to tell you. Now, best be walking. Come along."

The armed men fell about, arranging themselves so that it would be hard to make a break one way or another. They did not stand impolitely close--it wasn't quite like being an escorted prisoner--but they certainly close enough to raise a feeling of being hemmed in. As the three of them were marched off, they passed Gare, and he shot her a look from under his crimson hat. He wore a wan, apologetic expression. As he looked, he gave a nod and a knowing frown.

Alright, thought Caewen. We have some cottagers and townsfolk who do not much like their lord, whoever he turns out to be. Some guards. And perhaps some magic thing too: something called Jack, whatever that is. So what do we do? Watch, wait, listen. Be polite. That seemed the best course.

The path leaving the village took a snaking way from the cliffs, up and around outcrops of rock, twisting around the hill. Large fitted stones supported the road and faced the expanse above. Much higher above them, the fortified house--too small to quite justify such names as 'castle' or 'fortress'--loomed with a heaviness that made the whole edifice seem ready to topple. The higher they climbed, the more the pines gave way, until a view above the treetops opened up, giving them a wide expanse of sight over the landscape. A lone nutcracker was sitting atop one pine calling in its rough voice. For as far as it was possible to see, snow blanketed the land. The Wenderway road, which etched its way from northern hills all the way to Sorcery Tor and Bernoth Town, was nowhere in sight: or perhaps, it was buried so deep under snow it was invisible? Wilderness, hills and pinewoods brindled the earth. The unseasonal snowstorm had stretched its fingers wide and far.

At around the same height where the view of the land opened out, a few smaller thravn trees appeared, clinging to the hill, growing out from between the fitted stones, sometimes self-sown in cracks, sometimes in small, walled-in soil-beds. They were twisted, grey-barked and bare of leaves. Dragging beards of lichen hung from branches that twisted like rope cords. After the first few trees, which had been completely bare, fruit appeared. They were apples, but snow white. The higher the road climbed, the more appletrees grew from the cliffs and dirt, until, at the base of the fortalice wall, the trees ran thickly all the way around the hillside, covering the cliffs and stonework completely from view.

Caewen paused to examine one of the strange apples, fruiting so late in the season. She noticed at once that they were not blemished, nor bird-pecked. There were no grey blisters of applescab. No signs of fireblight. No birds had marred the white skins. No wormholes pocked them. If the apples were not enchanted, they were poisonous. Either way, where wild animals avoid a bounty of fruit in early winter, the cautious take note.

"I wouldn't eat the apples," Caewen whispered.

"No risk of that," Dapplegrim replied. "They smell like that thing in the snowstorm." His nostrils flared. "I'm not even sure they're really apples."

"Wait a moment. I wonder if that's the mysterious Jack, then? The snow demon." She said it loud enough for the guards to overhear her, and a visible shiver of discomfit that went through them at the words 'snow demon' suggested that she had guessed correctly. "Hm," she added to herself.

There were two more of the guardsmen on the gate, but in the courtyard, where there should have been a noise of ostlers and servants, the flagged space was empty and silent. Above everything the fortified towerhouse stood its watch, rather gloomily, and above its great timbered and shingled roofs, rose a taller spire that had not been visible from the village. This part-hidden spire had an open space atop it, and crenelations decorated with carvings of windlike whorls, swirled clouds and faces.

"That is a tower for talking to the sky," said Tamsin, her voice flat. "We have certainly found our master of the snow demon."

They were directed towards a large doorway into the towerhouse, but as the three of them, Caewen, Dapplegrim and Tamsin neared it, the guards grew agitated and got in their way. The lead guardsman mumbled something, seemingly uncertain of himself.

"Speak up," said Dapplegrim.

"Well, that is," said the man, "The master has spoken. He spoke only *two* guests. The lady and the child. He said nothing of the beast. The master does not make mistakes." The man seemed almost apologetic as he said, "We have do have some fine stables here." He continued, clearing his throat, "if that suits."

"There's hay, if you're hungry," said another man.

"I'm hungrier for meat. Lamb for preference, though I'll take mutton or cow if that's all you have."

That sort of thing would usually get a stir out of people. But the guards just blinked dumbly and nodded. Caewen started to nurse a suspicion that they might be not wholly in command of their

own free will. They did seem... what was the best word for it? Incurious? Blank? Somehow, inured against emotion? There was no sense of personality to them. Each man's face looked similar, not because they shared the same features, or family resemblance, but because their expressions were so alike. Blank. Dull. Incurious.

"We'll be alright, Dapple," she said. "And besides, most folk don't make the inside of a house large enough to fit anything as big as you anyway. I'm sure it's better if you stay outside. And maybe you should cut back on the lamb?" she added with a smile. "Otherwise you'll end up twice as big, and then you won't even fit in a stables."

Dapplegrim scowled. "I can always make the doorways a bit bigger," he suggested. "If you understand me?" He said cast a very intentional look at the guards. But if they registered it as a threat, they showed no sign. Blank. Dull. Incurious.

The chief of the guards simply turned to the door and said, "This way, if it pleases you, missuses."

Entering the first hall gave a stronger impression of an uncanny household than the empty courtyard or weird appletrees had. The air was not warm. Usually, the inside of any great house or tower would be stuffy in this weather, from the cookfires and hearths all lit to chase away the chills. Everything should stink of smoke and dogs and cooked food and unwashed people. In these halls, there were not even rugs or tapestries to keep back the cold. Light was provided only by a few spare candles, and a draught whistled in the hallways, sneaking in through loose shingles, rattling lead windowframes and making the air as cold and clear as it was outside.

After following some turns, this way and that, they came to a large eating room. A long table with enough seats for twenty diners was already set. There were loaves of fresh bread, honey and sweetmeats. It was more of a repast than a meal.

"The master will attend when he wakes. His habit is to rise after noon."

"Until then, we are expected to sit and do what?" said Tamsin.

"Wait. That is as it is done."

The guardsman turned to go, but before he was out the door, Caewen called to him. "Just a moment. I didn't catch your name? Who do we ask for, if we want you?"

He stopped, blinked, and his face twitched twice. At last he said. "Name? I don't--that is to say--I'm the captain of the guard. Just the captain of the guard. That's who you ask for."

"I see," said Caewen.

Tamsin didn't say a word but her expression was enough to make it clear she had come to the same conclusion. The guardsmen weren't in their right minds. Spell-slaved, all of them.

Left alone now, they looked around the room. Tamsin walked over to what appeared to be two large, shallow copper bowls set on tripods near one wall. Steam rose from the water. Tamsin sniffed it, then dipped her hands in, and went to work scrubbing the dirt, grit and dried blood from her hands and arms, working to get the brown crusts out from under each fingernail. Caewen made use of the other bowl, though her hands were cleaner, and she had to only rinse a little to bring up the colour of her skin under a layer of road dust and sweat. There were suds in the hot water, probably from soapwort, given the subtle earth-like smell of the steam. She splashed a little of the water on her face too, and in the absence of a proper bathing tub, the hot water was cleansing and pleasant.

Afterward, they sat down in two of the chairs, and picked, without much appetite, at the food. A few high, narrow windows let in only thin beams of light, and the candles cast just small, bare warm spheres into the air. The two large hearths in the room were empty, and did not look as if they had been filled with wood in years. Even if Caewen had felt game enough to start a blaze, there were no cut logs, nor pieces of kindling.

As the two of them sat at the long table, alone except for each other, Caewen noticed again how strange Tamsin looked. The girl seemed even more like a child now that she was sitting in a big heavy block of a chair. She was not quite tall enough to be comfortable at the table and had to reach for platters of food, or a clay jug, just as a child might. A look of irritation crossed her face every time she did so.

In the stables, Dapplegrim chewed a lamb shank, sucking the flaky flesh off it, and grinding his teeth into the bones until the bone snapped and the marrow came out in fatty globs. The man who brought the meal wore the blue and white tabard of the household. He carried a pot of meat and soup bones to the stable as if he were hauling the daily water. He was just as blank-faced and blank-eyed as the rest of them here.

On the bright side, no one had tried to put Dapplegrim behind a bolted door, or tie him up, or hobble him. The disinterest in him was palpable, strange, even disquieting. It made him much edgier than if he'd been surrounded by a whole village of folk who thought him a monster. That was understandable. This lack of all fear was far colder, and he suspected, far more dangerous too.

As Dapplegrim was crunching up a shin bone, he felt a change in the air. A shiver passed up his flanks, and the blood ran cold in the veins around his neck and muzzle and chin groove. He looked about, and said at last, "There is no point hiding. I can taste you in the air."

A shimmer of a shape appeared up in the rafters of the barn. It looked something like a lanky boy who was not quite yet a man, all gangly limbs and scrawniness. Traceries of blue and white ran through his skin, like veins in rock, or, thought Dapplegrim, more accurately, like fissures in a hunk of ice. Blue eyes, totally blue and without whites, blinked down at Dapplegrim, though the rest of the face was not yet fully formed. The creature drifted down and crouched on a rafter. It seemed to be manifesting itself from the inside out. It started with veins of ice and sinews of snow; it grew flesh in layers of white muscle; it sprouted hair like a billow of snow; finally a covering of skin, as glistening as sheets of hoar frost, glittering, covered the flesh. The teeth came last, sharp and clear as ice.

"Ho now, ho now," said the demon, from where it perched on the thick beam, "I've been spied, and what charmings upon relied, are all for naught. How fraught. How fraught. For in my sneakings, I've been caught." It grinned with a sad, manic smile.

"Rhyming," snorted Dapplegrim. "I don't like creatures who speak in rhymes. Altogether too clever by half. Hur. You were the demon in the air? The snow-devil that tried to murder us?"

"Murder? Murder? You malign, I would not to that depth decline, nor work my chills on any soul, save but that the grave enchanter's toll doth chime and bell, and conjure me, poor Jack-in-the-Mist, poor slave-to-spell, poor mastered me." The demon, whose name was presumably Jack-in-the-Mist, now allowed itself to fall forward from the rafter, but it did not come down to the straw and dust of the stables. Rather, it floated languidly over Dapplegrim's head, and stretched itself out as if relaxing beside a brook in the summertime. "I come to look on you, my halfblood thing, and see what charms in you do ring, and think myself upon your uses, for the master seldom looses what to him I faithful bring, strange and misbreed halfblood thing."

"I've been under a sorcerer's thumb before. Tell your master it will not happen again." His voice grew taut with an undertow of anger. "Do not play games with me. Do not trifle. It will not go well for you when you lose." He growled, voice lowering. "And you will lose."

"Trifle? Trifle? No, not that. Do you think me like a cat, toying with mice, all fat and nice? No ho, ho no. For you see, if you see, I look to see, and spy and scry, and find, a purpose for which poor Jack might put you to use. I wonder rather..." and here the creature did grow more serious. The music in its voice ebbed away like so much water seeping out of the melting thaw. "No. I wonder if I may use you to put and end to him? That is all. I wonder if you may be of use to me." The demon vanished. There was a brief, violent flicker of light that marked out every last detail of the stable, every crack in the palings, every knobbly iron nail, every fleck of straw as if they were traced with bright white ink. And then the demon, Jack-in-the-Mist, was gone. Not merely invisible, but gone. Maybe the creature had been recalled by its master? Maybe it had seen all it wanted to see?

And though Dapplegrim was himself half-demon on his father's side, he muttered to himself, "Demons! Nonsense creatures. Whoever knows what they are always going on about." He sniffed the meat-juice spattered tub, found a piece of marrowbone at the bottom that he'd missed, and lapped it into his mouth with his tongue. As he crunched down on the bone, dwelling on the fatty marrow, he did think a little on whether there might be an unlooked for ally in the snow-demon after all. If the

spirit was seeking some way to break free of its shackles, then that might give them all some common ground.

A bargain might be struck? Though the foppish rhymes were confusing, the demon did seem to intimate as much.

The problem was, who knows what the demon might do if freed? Such a creature would view human life as brief, and beneath care. It might even have nurtured something of a hatred against all humankind, if it sufficiently disliked its sorcerer.

It was true enough that weaker and younger sorts of demons are inclined to look for a magician to make bargains with, and to protect them from other, nastier spirits. Some spirits and uncanny creatures even get to quite like people over time. Dapplegrim himself thought that people were mostly alright, really, once you got to know them. But the very ancient and the powerful? No. Old creatures of the elements were more likely to want worship. Such elder children of the earth did not take kindly to being bound by the arts of mortal wizardcraft. And Jack-in-the-Mist struck Dapplegrim as something much older and wilder than its shape betrayed. This was an elder thing of the earth, and that meant that every conversation with it needed to be carefully measured.

Of course, the next thought that struck Dapplegrim was that the sorcerer who had bound Jack-in-the-Mist was either extraordinarily powerful, or extraordinarily arrogant, or extraordinarily stupid. Or all three. Powerful and arrogant and stupid was not a good combination in Dapplegrim's experience. He crunched the bone as he thought this over.

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Caewen tapped a knife against her plate with absent distraction. She looked up at the light in the windows, fading to a pale waft of afternoon glow. "Do you think we're being kept waiting for a purpose? Or just to annoy?"

"Difficult to know," replied Tamsin. "And annoying someone can have a kind of purpose, you know." They had already eaten what they wanted from the table, and both of them had, in their own ways, grown anxious from the wait. "We are dealing with a practitioner of the art, that is clear enough, and magic never leaves a person unchanged." She took a sip from her cup. "A magician who performs too much magic of darkness and night can be altered by their own magic until they find daylight painful. I've seen the like happen before. And there are some creatures that look like men but aver the day and have more death in them than life." She tapped a fingernail into the pewter goblet making it ring. "On the other hand, some men are simply lazy and like to rise late." She shrugged. "We shall see."

Throughout the smattering of talk between them, Caewen had been working up a question in the back of her thoughts. Some things that Tamsin had said earlier--back at the roadside camp--had caught in her mind, like a bee in a cobweb, buzzing there. She decided to prod, and said, tentative, "Tamsin?"

"Mm? Yes?"

"You were going to the wizard-moot? And you said you had something to speak about there. Do you mind if I ask about it? I don't know anything much about Sorcery Tor, or the moot. What were you wanting to speak about? How does it work there?"

"Curious are you? Wondering about the ways of witches and warlocks and conjurers of ghosts?"

"A little," she confessed.

"Haven't you ever heard the old saying?"

Caewen wasn't sure which saying she meant, and said so.

"I suppose there are many, really. Curious men and wizards make for curious toads. Wizardry is best left to wizards. There are three things in which the wise do not meddle; a dragon and her gold; a wizard and his secrets; a mother and her children." She gave a small, polite shrug. Her lips curled into a faint smile. "There are other sayings. A dozen. A hundred. A score of them for every language

of the Clay-o-the-Green. They all say the same thing, in the end. Don't ask impertinent questions of them that dabble in magic."

Caewen felt hotness rise in her cheeks. She picked at a moth-eaten hole in one of her sleeves. She never could quite get rid of the moths in her things. "If you would rather not--"

But Tamsin only waved a dismissive hand. She sat up in her chair a little straighter, leaning forward. "I didn't say that, did I? It gives us something to talk about, after all, and we do need something to talk about. Maybe it will come to some good?" A small grin. "I suppose that one of my deaths is hereabouts, isn't it? Might be sensible if someone else knew what is worrying me. I might never get to speak at the moot." She sighed then, a little sad, deep in the back of her throat. "You know that beyond the Snowy Mountains are the lands of everlasting twilight?"

"To the north, yes. I've been there." Caewen corrected herself quickly, in case Tamsin thought she was boasting about grand tours of faraway places. "That is, only a little way. Just beyond the mountains, to--" Concentrating, she couldn't remember the name of the place. "Oh. I've gone and forgotten it. It was a city of the Wisht Folk. Although Dapplegrim said it was more of a town really. Not big enough to be a proper city."

"The Wisht? Indeed?" Tamsin arched a brow. Her expression suggested she was appraising Caewen anew. "And you live to walk free and tell the tale? The Wisht don't often let young mortal lads or ladies out of their grasp. Their own blood is too thin and frail." She waved a hand in a dismissive weave. "Their pureblood babes are deformed and sickly. They need to keep adding healthy lines of blood into their lineage--the Wisht will tend to keep hold of fertile young things that stumble into their clutches--sometime, you'll have to tell me about how you got away." She picked up a piece of bread, decided that she wasn't hungry after all, and dropped it back on the plate. It made a soft sound as it hit the platter. "Well, anyway, beyond the twilight lands are the lands of enduring night: the darkness place that stretches over the very north of the world, where it is freezing cold and no living things stir and the sun never rises."

Caewen tried to recall stories from the hearthside. Things her grandparents, mother and father had told her. "That is the portion of the world given to the Night Queen. When the two Goddesses of Night and Day saw that their war was going to break all of everything, they divided the world instead. The Sun Queen took the lands south of the Snowy Mountains, and Old Night took the north."

"Really? Is that so?"

Caewen realised from the tone that she must have said something wrong. "It's what I've always been told," she hedged.

"If that's so, then why is there both day *and* night in the south, and *only* night in the north?"

"I don't--that is--I guess I never thought about it."

"The agreement--miss lady who thinks she knows the history of everything--was for a division of time, not lands. Day and night, turning and cycling forever. In the south, day and night turn over just how the twin goddesses agreed that they should. But the Queen of Old Night and Chaos cheated. The ban they agreed to was that neither of those two goddesses would ever again set foot on living earth, nor stone, nor sea, nor river, nor step anywhere that any living thing has ever dwelled. But the Queen of Night knew of a secret rock so far in the north, so barren, and so blasted by ice and snow, that no living thing had ever stood there. No plant had ever put down its roots there. Not even a scrap of lichen had ever grown there. Not so much as an ant. Not a midge. Not a moth. Not the smallest mote of any living thing has ever touched it. The rock has been lifeless since before life had come into the world, and as such, it is in the strictest sense, not yet of living earth. And so the Night Queen went there in secret, carved it into a throne for herself, and sat her great buttock down in it."

Caewen had to struggle to comprehend the scope of this trick. "And the Goddess of the Sun did nothing?"

"What could she do? Unless she wanted to reignite the full-blown wars that had almost destroyed the world anyway. The agreement had been held to, strictly speaking." A shrug. "More or less. The Queen of Day departed the mortal world and now looks upon us from the void outside our living sphere. She is removed from us. The Queen of Night dwells upon the Clay-o-the-Green, served by

spectres, guarded by lifeless giants and monsters of her making, governing her northerly night-realms from afar. Her presence is what spreads the everlasting night in the north. Her own potent nature. Her breath is shadow. The sweat that rises from her skin is darkness. But she is awfully alone too. No living thing can come near her, or she will be forced to either break the Great Ban and invite war, or depart the world forever. As was agreed."

"And that's why you wanted to speak at the wizard's moot? To warn everyone?"

Tamsin's face betrayed a brief look of incomprehension, before a laugh shook itself out of her. She laughed and laughed, until she was a little puffed, and a tear was streaking her left cheek. "No. No. Everyone who has any sort of education knows *that*. Everyone knows the Night Queen cheated and never left the mortal world. That's not a secret at all."

"I didn't know."

Tamsin ignored this. She said instead, "What I need to speak about is another thing altogether... A new power in the north. A thing that has come out of the lands of everlasting night. I don't know what else to call him. A thing. He calls himself the Winter King, but no one seems to have really seen him, and no one knows if he's a god of the old earth, or some trumped-up magician of unusual talent, or some other creature else again. He is in service to the Night Queen, that much is clear, and he has already swept south, raising huge fortresses in the twilight lands. He draws allies and armies to him. He is, I fear, preparing for war, and it will be a war unlike any the world has seen this last two thousand years."

"But who does he want to wage war on?"

Tamsin was quiet for some time before she said, "So far as I can tell? Everyone. He looks to the south. All of it."

"But that would be madness. It would rekindle the old wars between day-folk and night-folk. It would be near as bad as breaking the ban of the goddesses."

"Yes. It would. But here is the strangeness in all this." She paused. "It's too ludicrous. That someone would risk bringing about the ancient wars again. I did not believe the rumours myself--I've known many night-folk over the years--and they may be many things--but they are not, as a rule, insane--so, I have spent this last year trekking the northern tracks, through wild woods and witching mountains. I have seen the Winter King's armies with my own eyes: boggarts and night-folk, elbgasts, trolde and worse, worse things. But here's what is truly troubling: everyone of the night-people I spoke with, was quite convinced that they were only acting in defence. All their enchanted spies, all their oracles, all their seers report the same whisper over and over: there is a vast army gathering in the southlands, and the day-folk are preparing to conquer all of the north and put it to fire and sword. Even unto the throne of Old Night."

"Wait? Is there an army gathering in the south? I'd have thought I'd have heard about it."

Tamsin shook her head. "None that I know of. And you'd think that would be the sort of thing that would be difficult to hide. A hundred thousand soldiers, sun-magicians with red and white gryphons, and fell bright monstrous lions, and serpents with white fire for tongues. That's what the night-folk believe, and there's no telling them otherwise."

"So the wizard-moot?"

"Is a place where all come in peace once every seven years, to trade, to talk, to settle disputes. No bickering is permitted, nor fighting. The punishment for fighting, whether by knife or by spell, is harsh. Night-folk and day-folk alike will be there." She paused then. "I don't wish to warn one side about the other. I want to speak on behalf of everyone. I want to do my best to avert madness." As Tamsin was speaking, she picked up her goblet and was examining herself in the polished pewter. As her eyes flicked across the surface, her expression fell into an angry look, and she stood so suddenly that she knocked the chair back, so that it fell. "Spy! I've seen you. Reveal yourself!"

The air grew cold. A slight whiteness of soft frost appeared on the window panes, and a wind arose, and rattled its way through of the room and out the far door. A low laugh, barely audible, went with it.

"Cave the sky. Blood the earth. That thing was probably listening the whole time."

Caewen had stood also, her hand on her sword, alert. "What thing?"

"The spirit in the snows. It was here, invisible up in the air above us. I saw its reflection in the cup." She muttered to herself. "Spirits may go about unseen, but reflections do not lie."

"Do you think it might be a spy for the night-folk? Is this place in league with your Winter King?"

Tamsin fumed for a moment, but took three measured breaths, and calmed herself enough to pull her chair back into place and flop down into it. She considered the question, but shook her head. "No. I've turned that over in my head already. If I thought that this place was a spy-house for the Winter King I'd have been far more cautious just now. No. We are simply in some petty sorcerer's house. That is all. The world is full of elemental beings and demons. At any given hour there must be thousands of snow demons, though most of them barely exist for a few moments before they fade away. Mere hues on the air, born in the storm. Not every demon of a given ilk, nor every magician of a kind, is allied and alike. There are thousands upon thousands of snow demons. Hundreds of winter-witches and wizards." She considered the possibility a moment longer, but shook her head and refilled the goblet with the cloudy cider they had on the table in roughly fired clay pitchers. "No. We're too far south. Too far removed. The reach of the Winter King is not long enough yet. It cannot be."

The conversation subsided after that. They spoke a little about the rules of the moot, and when and where Tamsin was planning on speaking, and what she was going to say, but after a few minutes, even that halting talk eroded.

They sat in a sticky, uncomfortable silence of their own making for some time, and were still in uncomfortable silence, when the big door at the other end of the dining hall opened.

"At last!" Tamsin looked up. Irritation crossed her face, flashed in her eyes.

Caewen arranged her own expression to be calmer, trying not to give away how angry she felt.

The couple who entered were young, richly dressed in blue and white velvet, their hems trimmed with silver fox. They were laughing at some private joke. He stepped lightly, with energy, and a humour shone in his eyes. She was more demure, more attentive. When they saw Caewen and Tamsin, they both stopped short, as if surprised. The reason for this became clear enough when the man, who looked to be somewhere on the less world-weary side of thirty, said, "Oh? My father has guests." He continued towards the table then, though his lady companion hung back a step. She looked curious, even a little wary. Perhaps meetings with 'guests' had gone poorly in the past? Meanwhile, he gave a slight, not overly deferential, bow: first to Tamsin, then Caewen. "Lady fair," he said, "Fair lady," and his smile returned. The flash of white teeth made him look like a man who was selling something at market. "I am heir and son to the master of this humble home, The House of Snow and Apples. But isn't that such nonsense? Call me Varrel." He turned then to his lady. Her smile had warmed a little. "This is Isthinthaë. Call her Issie. She detests Isthinthaë. So formal."

The young lady bobbed a curtsy, far more respectfully than Varrel's curt half-bow. Her voice was softly calculated, as if she considered every word with care. "Most pleased," she said. "Delighted." The words were like the soft steps of paws around puddles of snow, edgy and careful.

They sat themselves down, the couple, him to the right of the empty chair at the head of the table, and her beside him. The seating arrangement caught Caewen's attention, and she noted it. If Isthinthaë were of equal status, she should surely have sat on the other side of the table, beside the head chair on the left? Instead she sat, and then arrayed herself, as if she were present entirely for Varrel's amusement, serving him food and doting on him with hushed little words that Caewen could not quite catch.

"When will we be expecting your father?" said Tamsin. "I don't mean to sound impolite, but demons, wolves and storms make a person, how shall I put it? A touch less than patient."

"He will be along." Varrel was breaking bread up in his fingers and dipping it in lard from a bowl. "His slave, Old Jack, is rattling about the house, and that means my father is awake and working. He'll be in his tower."

"Will he now?" said Tamsin.

Caewen saw the iciness in her eyes and heard the brittleness in her tone. Interrupting, Caewen said, "Will we be expecting anyone else? A fellow in the village mentioned something about two sons?"

But as soon as she said the words 'two sons', Varrel's whole manner changed. He grew stiff. The bread he had been picking apart froze in his fingers. The way his expression altered, it looked as if he was now chewing something unpleasant instead of soft bread and lard. When he swallowed, he might well have been swallowing ashes. In a voice, cold and hard as iron, he said, "My father has but one son. One son only. That other bastard *offspring* is not deserving of any politer name. Do not mention him again." Then, seeming to catch himself he grinned, widely. "But look at me. All misbegotten gloom when we have such fine guests. My father's, er, bastard, is well out of the way. You do not need to worry yourself about him. As for me, I am a much merrier fellow." Turning to the young lady beside him he said, "Isn't that right, Issie?"

"Without measure," she said, and added a carefully constructed girlish giggle.

"That's my pretty lass." He laughed. "Now, turning to you and yours, what sends you out on wild roads? I know, of course, my father's slave has been at his mischief again, and chased you to our doorstep, but no one takes themselves along remote roads like the Wenderway without some purpose spurring them on." He rolled a hand on the air, as if mimicking the turn of a wagon wheel. "The way is too remote. Too dangerous for casual jaunts."

"I was travelling south," said Tamsin, "to the wizard-moot, along with many others. A large number of whom are now dead from cold. I imagine." She allowed the comment to sit in the air between them.

But Varrel just shrugged and smiled as if to say: nothing to do with me. He threw a glance at Caewen.

She felt an awkward inner twinge as she said, "Well, actually, I was just on a jaunt, as you put it. Dapple and me didn't have anywhere in particular to go. We just wanted to--you know--see the world."

Varrel made a movement to say something, but he was cut off: a new voice fell like a curtain on the conversation. It was an older man's hard intonations, firm, commanding, and just a touch terse. "You seem to have fallen in with rather odd company then." The owner of the voice stepped through the far doorway at a stride. "For a simple traveller."

Both Varrel and his lady stood. The young man's demeanour changed to be less joking, more obsequious. "Father," he purred. "Wonderful that you should join us."

"Is it?" said the older man. "Perhaps it is." He was thin, bald, but wore a small, grey-white beard about his jaw and lips. His whole face was carved with wrinkles and hollows of an expressive nature, and his eyes were clear and grey, so that he looked as if he were always watching everything, always assessing everything, even perhaps staring right through things a little bit. As he arrived at the empty high-backed chair, his smell carried forward: a sort of burnt sweetness, like smoke from beeswax candles. He smiled at his son, and the smile did seem for a flash of a moment warm, almost beatific. Though there remained a cooler note to the old man's expression, that chill undercurrent was barely at the surface until he looked over and noticed Issie at the table. As soon as his eyes lit on her, a crust of irritation froze his lips. At about this same moment, Varrel remembered himself, and darted forward, pulling out the older man's chair. "Father."

The old man said, "Thank you. I will take a cup of cider, too. If it is not too much trouble."

"Of course, father." Varrel busied himself filling a goblet and offering it, before returning to his seat.

Throughout this, Caewen noted that Tamsin had not stood, and Caewen found herself also in a sufficiently resentful mood to risk offence by remaining seated. She looked the old man over, noting the marks and twists of silver cloud-shapes on his trimly tailored shirt and leggings, long winter coat, embroidered vest, tooled belt. Quite clearly this was their sorcerer of clouds and winter. This was the master of the house.

"Now," said the man, as he looked over both Caewen and Tamsin. "It would be impolite not to introduce myself. I am Vespertine." A smile. "But who are you? And what should I make of the two of you?" He glanced at Tamsin. "One of you brimming with power and old magic." Now, he turned his glance to Caewen. "The other, seemingly just some lass with a strange horse and a dusty old sword-of-runes. But appearances will deceive. You may rely on it. For, my Jack has his talents for

foresights and premonition. He brings me only those who are of great importance, one way or the other. Them who have already changed the world, or those who are fated to. Which is it? Which are you?" The question was aimed squarely at Caewen.

"I haven't done anything of any renown," she answered. "So far as I know."

"Ah, but then you must be destined for great things." The magician changed his tone, just a fraction. "Or not. Old Jack has been known to make mistakes. His visions of past and future are not perfect."

"Two mistakes then," said Tamsin. "For I am nothing more than a travelling witch myself, on my way to the moot. I suppose, given the lateness, you are not planning on attending, Lord Vespertine?"

"Just Vespertine will do." He reached for some cold meat and cut off pieces for his plate. "And I have no like for your lies, little child."

Tamsin started to object, but Vespertine spoke over her.

"Do you think me idiot-born? Do you think me toppled on my crown as a babe? My wits all gone and scattered? I have no need to ask your name. I knew *you* the moment you entered my dominion. I've read my books and my histories. The spirits of the winds tell me their memories of bygone years. I've recited the old myths and tales, yes, even when I had a young man's voice. You are calling yourself Tamsin these days, are you? That's quite the joke. She was your--half-sister, wasn't it? Is it guilt that made you pick that name?" He took a bite of meat. "After what you did to her?"

"Whoever it is you think I am, you are mistaken," said Tamsin through gritted teeth.

"Do not be coy. You know quite well who you are--who you used to be, at least--or are you grown forgetful? Should I remind you? They called you the Child-Queen of Darkenhenge. But they also called you the Bloodsport Queen. The Sorceress of the Tears. I think your enemies had names for you too. Worse names. Forgive me for being impolite, but history is full of impolite names: the Bitch of the Bones; the Cunny of the Corpses; the Wretched Child. You once had a half-a-thousand warrior-poets competing to pile the tallest heap of severed heads at your feet, little one. You once ruled an empire of blood and darkness; you were feared, hated; you were a queen of unrestrained power. You were as close as it is possible to be a living goddess on earth." He brought the knife point down with a soft clink and speared a bit of meat. After chewing and swallowing, he said, "And you walked away. Just... gone one night." A shrug. "If the histories tell the truth of it. You left quite the blood-feud in your absence. Quite the emptiness of power. There was fighting. Decades and decades of fighting." He smiled now. "Though that some thousand years ago." He looked her up and down, casually, slowly. "If nothing else, you have aged well." He performed a slight shrug. "If perhaps a little on the younger side of what most people would prefer."

Tamsin stared in a daggered silence. She said nothing, until Vespertine seemed to decide he wasn't going to get an answer without more needling. "I have always wondered: is it that you prefer to eternally be this... particular age... or was it a spell of everlasting youth that went awry? I would not ask, except that I consider myself a student of the old histories, and it has made me wonder. And after all, how often does one get to ask questions of a historical personage? Quite seldom." Following a further silence from Tamsin, Vespertine added, "Very well. I see you want to keep your secrets. At least tell me this: why *did* you walk away from it all? Not many tyrants decide to just up and leave it all behind one day. Goes against the grain, one would say."

Varrel added, with a grin, "Quite. Seems counter to the type of person who becomes a witch-queen in the first place, if you were to ask me."

"No one was asking you, Varrel," said his father, quietly.

At that, Varrel's shoulder's hunched and he fell into a more hard-edged wordlessness.

Tamsin was barely holding her temper in check now. Her fingertips were trembling. After a drawn pause, she spoke, pulling out the words until they were thin and brittle, "Would it end this oh so clever prattle?"

"I am all ears," said Vespertine with a smile.

"Hm. People who are all ears, tend to be less mouth." She sounded more defeated as she added, "Anyway, if you care to listen, I'll tell you. It was all very long ago, so you will forgive me if I forget the exact details. Maybe you can go and check those history books of yours if there's something I'm

unclear on?" Her voice had soaked up the a barely restrained anger now. The brittleness was cracking and there was fire underneath. "So what do I remember of those days? Yes, I was once queen of some petty empire in ancient years. I slept on a bed of furs and cloth-of-gold. I owned ten-thousand slaves. My bedchamber was a place of incense, and magic and opiate dreams. And I thought I would rule forever. After all, had I not already outwitted death so many times? Then, one night--not even a very special seeming night--no different from any other evening so far as I can tell--well, I simply awoke in a strange fever. There were stirrings in the air. Voices calling to me. I slipped from my chambers and out of the Great Hillfort at Darkenhenge, past my drowsy guards. The voices drew me out upon the road. So I stood there, under the cold moonlight, and there, along a muddy roadway came a spectral parade. Men and women, children, warriors, the aged, the sick, the weak and the strong, the young; and all of them dead. They were all pallid and ghost-faced. As they drew near me, I saw their bones shine with sickening light through flesh. And as they passed, each ghost looked at me, and I knew that I had killed them. Maybe not personally, not all of them at least--but, these were the victims of my armies, my monsters, my creatures of magic and sorrow. And what they whispered, over and over was this: *We are your servants. You made us. You will join us. You will rule us. You will be as we are.*" She took a long, gulping drink from her cider. Her hand shook a little. "I am prone to visions, now and then. I think I saw something true that night, in that moment... my destiny... that is, if I kept to my path. Death was so thick in my blood, magic-of-pain, sorcery-of-torture, it was all so soaked into my skin, that I was--sooner or later--going to find myself more dead than alive, yet bound to this earth by the souls of all those I'd murdered. There was a ghostly kingdom awaiting me, hungering for me. I merely had to keep walking my old dark road. I would arrive there. My reign would have been terrifying."

Everyone else at the table was attentive. Even Varrel, who seemed to be naturally inclined to attend to nothing so much as his own immediate inclinations.

Tamsin's face fell into a slight frown. "So I left. I simply left. I turned my back, and walked away. Barefoot, without even taking any of my tools of the shadow-arts, without one of my attendant spirits or spellbound demons, without so much as a bronze knife or flint dagger to clutch in my fingers. I walked away. I vanished. And the Child-Queen of Darkenhenge ceased to be. I've walked a lot of roads since then. Worn out a lot of shoes. Taken a lot of names, and let them go again, and taken new names. I still change my name, time to time. Why Tamsin? Maybe you are right. Maybe it is guilt. She was there in the parade of spectres, after all, and she looked at me with especial hatred." Another drink of cider in shivering fingers. "Who can blame her?" She twisted an angry smile at the sorcerer. "Now, are you satisfied?"

At the head of the table, Vespertine did an odd thing. He clapped, slowly and with a ponderous rhythm. "Very much satisfied. That was quite the story. Yes. I am pleased. Ah, but now, what shall we do with you? That is quite the other question."

Through lips that were barely parted, in a whisper colder than any words Caewen had heard Tamsin speak before now, the child sorceress said, "If you keep me here against my will, you will regret it." Her eyes narrowed to slits and the white of her teeth barely flashed behind those thin, drawn lips. In that moment Caewen could well believe that Tamsin had once been a beshadowed queen ruling a beshadowed realm.

Tamsin and the sorcerer Vespertine kept their calculating eyes fixed on each other. If one of them could have outright murdered the other at the table, right then and there, Caewen was more than half-certain they would have.

The palpable silence was broken eventually by Varrel. His voice shook a little as he said, "Yes! What a fine tale! But how serious! Let us have some other entertainment? My Issie, she loves to sing and tell stories. Don't you? Of course you do. Why don't you tell us a story? Get up. Get up." He had enough sense to be worried by the brittleness scratched in the air between his father than the guest. The tremor was clear in his voice.

Issie, if anything, looked more worried than Varrel. But she obeyed, got to her feet. Considering what she might perform, she asked, "What about the story of the Soul-Eating Owl?"

"Too grim," said Varrel. Something happy, or something more of our village? Something local? Our visitors would like to hear something with local colour. Wouldn't you? Of course you would."

"Well, how about the tale of Herself-of-the-Woods, then?"

"Still a touch grim, but..." Varrel looked at his father, and seeing only a focused silent coldness there, he licked his lips and said, "But it will do. A tale of the village. Very good. Issie, please, go on. Go on."

"Grim?" said Issie. "Yes. A little. But it has a happy ending. The story of Herself-of-the-Woods: There was once a group of women collecting flax for spinning into linen and rope down by the riverside. It was hot work so they sent two girls--sisters--to fetch a bucket of cool water from the village well. But the sisters liked to play games, and when they got to the well, they both forgot all about their task, and they decided to play at being wolves instead. The older sister played at being a wolf, and she was so good at pretending, that it would have frightened anyone to see it. But when the younger sister played at being a wolf, she was so much like a wolf she bit her older sister's throat right out with sharp wolf-teeth, and the older sister fell down dying, and she bleed everywhere. The younger sister didn't mean to lose herself so deeply in the wolf-game, and when she saw what she had done, she keened and keened, screaming and crying, for she loved her sister deeply. All the weaver women came running up the hill. They saw what the youngest had done. She was covered in blood all down her mouth, lips, chin--and she had her sister's corpse flopped dead across her knees where she knelt on the red-soaked soil. The women could still see the wolf in her too, and they saw that she had killed her sister, so they chased her out of the village, throwing rocks and those sharp sticks people use for the flax collecting. But when the younger sister was by herself in the woods, without a fire, or a house, or human food, she forgot she was a person at all, and she thought she was a wolf so badly she really turned into one. She became a huge white wolf. And in this wolf-shape, she started stalking the fields, the wilds and farms, killing sheep, killing cows, killing people. For years and years, the youngest haunted the village fringes murdering and eating anyone she could ambush, and no one could stop her. The villagers grew to despair. Many of them fled, but few of those who ran made it past the ravenous wolf. That is, until one day, a kindly witch wandered past the village. She saw the wolf from afar, running through the woods. She said to herself, 'That is not a wolf. That is a little girl. I must go speak to her.' So she went right up to the wolf, and the wolf leapt at her and tried to eat her, but the witch's magic was too strong. She said to the wolf, 'What's your name?' And the wolf told her. And the kindly witch said, 'You should not go about eating these people. They are the family of your family. The blood of your blood. The children of your cousins. Blood and family. But you cannot come back into the village to live with mortal people either. You are too changed. No. Instead, you should go up to the place in the hills where there is a sacred hollow and a hot spring. Go there, and lie down and sleep. There are good spirits there and they will heal you inside. When you wake, you will remember that you are a little girl, and you shall remember to look after your family.' So the wolf went away, and she did lie down in the enchanted ravine with the hot water and the cliffs and the caves, and she did sleep and sleep. When she awoke at last, she was healed. She was a person again. She knew she could never come back to the village, so she made a house there, among the rocks, and grew to womanhood and took lovers. Her children prospered and grew, and they guarded the whole of this valley from dangers and threats, because all her children, and her children's children, and their children too--they were all strong because they have a bit of the wolf in them. And they still do." She gave a slight curtsy and sat down again.

Throughout this little folktale, Vespertine had been watching and listening, chewing his food with slow, deliberate bites of the jaw. Something of a sneer was growing on his lips. He spoke up as soon as Isthinae had reseated herself. There was no mistaking his displeasure. "Son. Varrel. We have discussed this before. I dislike you making a spectacle out of your whore. I permit you to keep her only if you do so with decorum. I have tolerated quite enough of this... this... mistress of yours tonight. That tale was not well chosen. You both think you are cleverer than you are."

"Father, please."

"If you cannot act with a modicum of restraint, then I am forced to remind you that you have private rooms to which you are free to withdraw. I advise you to find your manners. Or find your door-keys. I don't care which, but make a decision, and be quick about it."

"Very well, father." He turned to Issie. "Go. Leave us. Father does not want you here."

She rose to go, looking ashamed, and stepped around the chair where Varrel sat. But as she passed the old sorcerer in his chair, he reached out and grabbed her by the wrist. "I see you," he hissed. "Don't think I don't see right through you."

She stammered, trying to find words. "Sir... m'lord, please, you're hurting me."

"Stop this. I'll not have pretence in my house. My son may be a fool, but I am not. I see you. I see the thoughts behind your eyes. You will never be the wife of my son. You will never be the lady of this house. Remember that."

Her demeanour changed then. It was like shedding an act. "And which son do you mean?" she asked, voice flat.

The silence that followed was as thick as tallow. But the sorcerer first smiled, then laughed. It was a brief, harsh noise. "Ah. But you are right to remind me. Neither of them. You'll never be a wife to either of them. Now do as you are told, and go." He let go of her wrist and turned to Varrel. "When I said I wanted you both silent or gone, I meant both of you. Are you going to cause more irritation for your father?"

"No," Varrel replied, a little sulky.

"Good." He reached, and took up the cider jug, refilling his own goblet. "Right. Shall I call for the full dinner then? This small meal has not much blunted my appetite. I have been hard at work since rising." Vespertine did not wait for anyone to answer. "Jack! Jack-in-the-Mist! Attend! I evoke you, and call you. I abjure your tricks. I put all the art's geas upon you. Present yourself."

A voice fell out of the empty air like snowflakes. "Yes, good master."

"Go and tell the kitchen that we will have the evening dinner now. This bread and cold meat is too thin. Go."

A whisper of a chill passed out of the room. At no point did the snow-demon bother to manifest itself into a visible shape. It was merely a voice on the air.

If Vespertine had been planning conversation, the tirade at his son and Isthinthaë seemed to have put him out of the mood. He brooded in silence, drinking heavily from the cold cider. When the food arrived, the silence continued. The meal was uncomfortable. Only when Vespertine finished, and left, did Varrel dare to speak again. He only muttered, "Blasted old goat. You know what the villagers call him? Old Coldballs. Old Withergrim. Other names too. They're right to laugh at him. Old goat of a man." He dabbed a kerchief at his lips, wiping away the grease of the meal. Then without saying anything more, he got up and left too.

Caewen and Tamsin were left alone at the table.

"Well," said Caewen. "That was pleasant."

-oOo-

Not long after the father and son had left, one of the dull-eyed guards came into the hall and announced in a flat, toneless voice that he was to take the two guests to their rooms. They went along with him, Caewen merely silent, while Tamsin fumed.

Their rooms turned out to be smallish, thinly appointed, but not gaol cells. There were no locks on the door, and no bars on the narrow windows: though when Caewen did glance out the nearest windows she saw why. The fall alone would kill.

"Can I go and check on Dapple? My horse?" she asked before the guard departed.

"If you can find the way," he said, but didn't offer to escort her, or show her the way. Evidentially, he was happy to let Caewen find her own way to the stables; he just walked off down the hall, ignoring her.

"You know," said Caewen, "I am starting to suspect that one disadvantage of keeping your guards in a spell-stupor is that they don't have much initiative."

"That's one drawback, certainly," answered Tamsin.

"Would you like to come with me?"

"No. I need to sit and think for a bit."

So Caewen went out the door, turning to her right, but before she was even a few steps down the hall Tamsin called after her and stepped into the corridor. "Caewen?"

"Yes."

"That's all true. About me. I was that sorceress-queen, cruel, and worse. There is no escaping the things I did. The thing I was. A queen of darkness and blood. Aren't you... I mean... I understand if you would rather not be anywhere near me, after finding this out. There are times when I don't want to be near me."

Caewen had to let her own thoughts pause on this for a moment. She turned her intuitions over, examining them. "No," she said slowly, at last, coming to a conclusion. "You were that person. That may be true. Now you are not. That is also true. Maybe you should have been locked away like a criminal, or branded, or, I don't know. What would one do with a sorceress-queen?"

Tamsin's lips flickered with a wan smile. "Beheading is popular. Often, but not always, followed by dismemberment and burning on a pyre made of rowan and woodbine. To be safe."

Caewen shook her head. "You are not that person now."

"No," said Tamsin. "No. I try not to be."

"Then I'm happy to be in your company. We do things we regret. It is the measure of the thing that differs only. But, also, we all change. The measure of the person is that we change. A person can be redeemed. A soul can be illumed, no matter how deep in shadow it may once have sunk." She shrugged. "At least that is the way I see it. I'm no great thinker."

Tamsin smiled. "Thank you."

Caewen gave her a friendly nod and smile in return, then turned her attentions back to the corridor, and took herself off down it. She heard Tamsin go back into her room, heard the door shut with a dull clink. Now. Was it left from here, or right? Or should she go back the other way and head down the stairs at the other end of the hall? If only that guard had not just wandered off? What did he have to do so urgently, anyway? Stare at a wall blankly? Say mindless things to other mindless guards?

-oOo-

About ten minutes into being thoroughly lost, Caewen felt the air noticeably chill around her. A fringe of ice crystals appeared along the lead frames of the nearest windows and the one threadbare tapestry hanging in the corridor billowed as if a wind were creeping behind it.

Caewen stopped short. She sighed inwardly, and said, "Hello, Jack."

Thin, ice-like teeth appeared on the air, and blue eyes shone above them. "She spies poor Jack. Has she a knack, for arts and charms? Alas. Alack. This wastreling, this waif-a-thing? Such words has she, to make Jack sing?"

"I've no magic in me. No spells. Leave me be. Go off and bother someone else."

"Bother? Bother? Poor, old fragile me? Oh, poor Jack-in-the-Mist. Alone. Lonely."

"What do you want?" said Caewen.

There was a silence before the spirit answered. When it did, the voice was more serious. "What all souls want. To be free."

"Then go. Leave. Be gone. Be free with yourself, if you want. Go lark in the air, or whatever it is you do for fun."

"I cannot leave, nor flit away, I am spellbound. I must stay. I must serve the sorcerer, must do his bid, for in his flesh my chains are hid. Chains cold, and true, intangible, and well hid too, but they will grow and sprout anew, and shine like snow, when death at last strikes old Coldballs low. I think, I think, yes, you may do. Yet you needs be quick. Needs be nimble. Sharper than a needle prick. Harder than a thimble. But if I put matters in motion, with whispered word, and thought and dream, sweet power may yet await, deeper than lake, wider than ocean, swifter too than any stream."

"I don't want power. I have no desire for it."

Jack's whole face and body resolved into a more full solidity. The smile grew bolder and more bright. "You know, you know, you speak a'true, I see the truth, through and through. And is that so? If so, if so, then this is what I offer you: just say the word, and I will turn such machinations as needs be, that will set the both of us free, both you and me. For in return, I have a thought, that you will free me too, or now say naught. To that you must avow, and speak true, just one word, or two, I suppose, will do."

Caewen looked hard at the creature, half-real, floating in the air. She looked at the blank, glimmering blue eyes and the ice and flecks of snow drifting from its lips every time it spoke. Each word a snowflake. Each sound a crystal of ice. The face of the snow demon faded in and out of the air. Was it making itself insubstantial on purpose? Did it feel uncomfortable under her scrutiny?

"Do we agree?" said the demon. "I free you, and you free me?"

"How can I trust you? You might turn me into a pillar of ice the moment I set you free?"

"My kind are bound by promise, oath and vow. I speak in troves. I speak true now. I'll do you no harm, by any means, nor hurt your horse-thing, nor work a charm, nor control, nor master you, nor use any tricks, nor sways, I swear by it, 'til end of days."

She nodded, thinking his words through carefully. There might be a loophole in them. If half the hearth-side tales were true, then spirits love their little worming word-tricks--but the promise seemed good enough for now.

"Agreed. If you free us, I will free you."

"Good! Delight! My vows do not break. They do not bend. And now to plans I must attend."

"Wait!"

The spirit stopped in the air, where it twisted and moiled, only barely human in shape. "Aye?"

"Why ask me? Why not the other one. Tamsin?"

"Her? I do not trust her. Too much magic in her blood. Too much blood in her magic. Too broken a soul. That is all." And with a sound like a fire being put out by a strong wind, the spirit was gone. A few small flakes of snow settled on Caewen, on her eyelashes and cheeks, and that was all there was to suggest the demon had ever been there at all. Only after the demon was gone did Caewen realise that his last spoken words had not been wrung together in bad rhymes. Did that mean something? Or was it just Jack allowing his word-trickery to slip at the last moment. She would ask Dapple. Maybe he had experience with these sorts of creatures before?

-oOo-

Caewen pushed on, getting herself, if possible, more lost, before finally coming out of a narrow stair, and down a servants' way that spilled out into the same dining hall they had all been sitting in an hour earlier. The room appeared to be empty. The table was clear, and there were only three candles burning, casting a low and sallow light from the tabletop.

She was halfway across the floor before she saw a movement in the darkness, off at the fringes of the room. Whirling on it, she put a hand on her sword but drew it only an inch from the scabbard, freeing it, so that she could slide it out smoothly if she had to.

A laugh came from the shadowy shape, and then one plucked note. A lute lay across his lap where he was sitting in the gloom by himself.

"Varrel?" said Caewen flatly.

"I suppose," he said, "that you are trying to find your way to go and check on that demonical horse of yours. Father mistrusts the creature, but is happy enough with it being here--so long as it stays outside the house. You aren't be thinking of trying to slip away, are you? It would be a pity if you tried. I think I rather like you a little, and Father, well, he would send Jack after you. If the slave's icy fingers didn't kill you, the wolves would."

"I'm not planning on leaving. If that alleviates your worry?"

He grinned. "It does. You know, I was wondering at dinner: why *would* Jack bring you to the Snow-Apple Tower? I mean, that other one, she is clearly a toy and a puzzle for my father: she has

been brought her for his entertainment: but what are you? What purpose did Jack think you might have? As much as I find my Issie delightful, Father is correct. We cannot marry. The sheets upon which she slept were dirtied long before I elevated her to the household." He plucked a note. "Do you like to dance? To sing?"

"Not especially," she replied. With a more suspicious tone, she said, "Why?"

"Oh, I love to dance. I love music and singing too, but I am barely permitted any. Father is so very serious. Very serious about this. Very gloomy about that. Very dour about everything else." He plucked a harsh note. It rung and thrummed on the air. "But, he is also very old. I am wondering if Jack is thinking ahead. I wonder--" Although the man's face was largely in shadow, Caewen still felt his eyes on her, as if appraising. There was a faint gleam of reflected candlelight, as he blinked.

"You see," said Varrel. "I am the heir of the House and all my father's chattels, which means I am also the heir of Old Jack. I wonder if the slave is thinking ahead--if he means to quietly please me before the inheritance proper?"

Caewen comprehended. "You think he brought me here for you?" She could hardly hide her incredulousness. "That's--no, you are quite wrong."

"Then why did he bring you here, Wennie?"

"First, never again call me 'Wennie'. Second, how should I know? Does he even need a reason?" As she spoke she wondered: were the father and son totally ignorant that Jack was secretly moving against them? The son seemed to be.

"He does have his ways. You are right, perhaps. The minds of spirits are like the whirring of bird wings, or clouds, or dragonflies in summer. They are not... how can I put it... they have no bedrock under their thoughts." He shrugged. "But still. My theory makes better sense than any other reason I can think of. You seem so, er, inconsequential. I cannot think of any *other* reason he'd have brought you here."

"I suppose it would puzzle you," said Caewen.

Three notes sung from the lute as his fingers danced. "In any case, the question is simple enough: did Jack see that you would be a good wife, or did he mean you only to be a passing distraction?"

"I assure you, if you rise from your seat and come even a step towards me I will distract you with my sword. Very thoroughly." She drew the blade another inch out of its sheath. The bronze glowed a soft, dull red in the candlelight. She could feel the song of the runes whispering in the metal, like a vibration from a distant earthquake. Swords, especially charmed swords, can be hungry things.

But Varrel only laughed. "You mistake me, m'damosel fair. I'm not inclined to take by force that which tastes better when won with good humour and bright lit words."

Caewen studied Varrel carefully, before saying, "It doesn't strike me that Isthinthaë would call that truthful. She does not seem wholly willing to me."

He snorted, waved a dismissive hand. "Issie is different. There is a need for some punishment for her. She wronged me by, er, dallying with someone else--to put a polite word on it--and I am exacting only such retribution as is appropriate, measured, and fit." Then, more darkly, he said, "But you are not planning to wrong me, are you, lovely sword-damosel?"

"Perhaps you could direct me to the stables."

"That is not an encouraging answer." A broad smile. "Come now..."

"Perhaps you could direct me to the stables," she repeated, more forceful.

"Oh, very well. You're nearly half-as-serious as my father." A shrug. "So, maybe the squall-thing meant you for him after all? You'd suit each other. No sense of humour." A chord sung from the instrument, followed by a few dancing scales. "Go out that door, and turn left, then straight on. You'll come to the grand entryway. The stables are just without, in the courtyard."

"Thank you," said Caewen. As she strode away, anger smouldering inside, she heard Varrel strike more notes and start up a low song. His singing voice wasn't bad, as it turned out. He might have made a half-decent droll-teller or wandering bard, had that been a life open to him. She paused at the door and looked back, wondering if life had done him a disservice, delivering him into this house of snow and sorcery and secrets, and not some wandering company of troubadours? He might have been happier, if he had been born to less fortune.

In the stables, the moonlight was straining through old leather and canvas curtains and peeking between gaps in shingles above. The knotty, lantern-blackened beams, heavy and twisted, hung just as ponderous as clouds in the cool dark air. The only other light was from a wisp-lamp that was burning fitful at the doorway. No guards were in sight, although when Caewen looked carefully, she thought she could see some lumpen shapes atop the battlements of the outer wall, rendered featureless and blank by the dusting of starlight behind them.

"Dapple?" she asked into the gloom.

Two eyes, each a dull, burning coal, lit up in the recesses of the stables. "Caewen! I am happy to see you. I was starting to think about visiting the house after all."

"There's been no hurt or threat," she said, walking into the darkness. The smell of the stables was oppressive, dusty, itchy. A few other horses stirred in their stalls, thumping hooves. "Or, nothing that I'm very worried about, anyway." Reaching the stall where Dapplegrim was standing, she leaned against the wood and reached out to scratch him behind the ear. "This place is a nest of spiders. The sorcerer of the house has a son, who he seems to mistrust, and there's another son who--I don't know--maybe he's bolted behind a door in the tower? Maybe he's a lunatic? Or he's in the dungeons? Whatever the other son is, or has become, whether he's a madman, or deformed, or something else: they don't want to speak about him at all. The first son, Varrel, is keeping some woman in his chambers, and really, I think he may be torturing her. Maybe not with hot pokers, or anything like that, but with words and taunts and threats. He's a nasty little piece of work underneath, and all smiles on the surface. The sort of man who genuinely can't understand why the whole world shouldn't be served up for his pleasure."

"What about the magician?"

"Vespertine. Harder to say. He seems vainglorious, serious, yet cordial enough. Though, also, not an innocent man by any stretch. I suspect he's been using his enslaved spirit to murder travellers and chase others unfortunates up onto his doorstep for years. Who can say why? I wonder if it's all just petty theft? When the snows thaw, there will be wagons in the woods. He might send his guards and take anything that's worth having after the winter?"

"Hur. Maybe. There's another thing. That spirit of his, Jack-in-the-Mist, he came here and looked at me. We spoke, but he's one of those awful spirits who talks in riddles and thinks in circles. I'm not totally sure, but it seems he's planning to rebel against his master."

"You too then?"

"He spoke to you?"

Caewen paused a fraction of a breath before answering. "He did. And I'm afraid I may have said 'yes' to him."

"Yes, in what way?"

"I agreed to set him free, if he frees us."

After a silence, Dapplegrim said, "That's a dangerous game, Caewen."

She let out a small sigh. "That is true. He offered to put in motion some plan to free us from this house, if we would, in turn, set him free. I agreed. Jack-in-the-Mist might be a tricky, word-spinning ailing, but I more than half suspect he's still the most trustworthy creature in this forsaken house. He hates Vespertine, that is certain. And that might be enough for us to be allies--for a while at least."

"Still a dangerous game, moving against a lord in his hall."

"Oh, Vespertine isn't a lord." Caewen shook her head. She furrowed her brow. "I mean, I take your point that it is dangerous. I only mean that Vespertine thinks it's too much of an affectation to call himself 'lord'. Who can fathom the mind of magicians?"

"Who indeed?" Dapplegrim became quiet, thoughtful. "Caewen?"

"Yes?"

"There's another thing. It's important. I need you to listen."

"Of course. What?"

He seemed reluctant to speak, but found his voice. "Don't trust Tamsin. She seems harmless, but she is not. Remember, when she came out of the snows, when she was covered in blood?"

Caewen thought back on it. "That was just horse blood." Then, realising that maybe horse-blood wasn't the most soothing thing for Dapple, she added, "I mean, I'm sorry. I didn't think that might prey more on your mind. That is I guess--"

"Oh. No. Hur! It's not that." Taken by surprise, he gave a small snort of a laugh. "No. It's not that at all. I'm not bothered because she killed her pony. I'm bothered because she *didn't*. That wasn't horse blood. I can smell all the fine little details that humanfolk with your dull, stub noses miss. That was the blood of a human. A man, to be precise. Slightly fatty smelling. Probably one of the tubbier, jollier merchants. At a guess."

"She killed a person to feed her magic? You mean, and then she just outright lied to us about it? She saved herself with magic fed on someone else's life? But she told me... she said... why didn't you say something?"

Lines appeared on Dapple's eerie, skullish face. He answered thoughtfully, "I thought about it. It seemed better to pretend ignorance. That one has magic smouldering in her blood. She's so full of charms and spells that she would be quite dangerous to upset. It just seemed, hm, better to pretend not to know. But, listen, the truth is this: she is dangerous. And she is a liar. Whatever her actual intents, it is not what she pretends. Do not trust her."

Caewen allowed her shoulders sag forward a little. Had she been taken in so thoroughly by an act? Was the hexen-queen, a hexen-queen still? "I'll tread lightly around her then. I found out some other things too." She told him about Vespertine's accusation, and the stories about Tamsin, and her admissions of past guilt.

"Well, that puts a dog in with the rats," said Dapplegrim. "Hur. If that's true, the old sorcerer is the real fool here. And he might as well be a babe playing with an adder. I wonder what he thinks he'll get from this situation?"

"Who knows? I think he's just too full of himself to realise he may have made a mistake. Thinks more of himself than he ought. I don't even think he has proper control of the winter-spirit, Jack, either. Some control, yes, but not total, and not all the time. And I think Tamsin's patience is wearing thin. She is nudging closer and closer to just outright murdering the old man." Caewen was about to say that she should get back to the house, when one last thing occurred to her. "Wait. Dapple--have you heard of someone calling themselves the Winter King? I don't know if it's true, or another of Tamsin's lies--but she said he's a power, a godling, or something like a god--up in the north. That he is gathering armies. She seemed worried. I mean, really worried. I don't think it was one of her lies or tricks. I can't imagine why she would make up such a thing for no reason."

Dapplegrim narrowed his eyes in thought. He shook his head, "No. Wait. I suppose--but only in very old stories. When I was a foal, there was a Winter King, but he wasn't a lord commanding armies, he was a sort of, I don't know, a wandering spirit of the north, beyond the mountains. The stories were all about him going about in the Twilight Lands, divvying out justice and gifts; being good to the good, evil to the evil. I think he was supposed to be the youngest child of Old Night and Chaos; but changeable as wind; mercurial as quicksilver. Not the sort of creature to gather armies." A turn of his shoulders suggested a shrug. "If he existed at all. Hur. People are prone to making up stories about gift-giving gods and spirits. I suppose such stories make it easier to bear the cruelties and vagaries of actual spirits and gods."

"It might just be he same name and a different thing?"

"Maybe," said Dapplegrim. "Though spirits do not like to share their names with others. It's too *murky*--too confusing. And tales out of the Twilight Lands are always hard to countenance anyway. Could all just be rumours. On the other hand, look at me. I was born in those shadowed places, and there've been no more than a handful of creatures like me in the many ages of the Clay-o-the-Green. As a rule, demons do not breed with beasts of blood and flesh. But in the Twilight Lands? Strange things happen. Weirdness blooms there, thick as flowers."

Caewen gave him a small smile. "Weird would know weird," she said. "I really should get back to the house. I'll be missed sooner or later. You'll be alright here for the night?"

"Yes. I'm fine. And I'm keeping half-an-ear out for trouble. If there's a fight or yelling, I'll know. Just call for me if you need me. I will kick down whatever doors are in my way."

"Hopefully, it won't come to that." She gave him a scratch behind the ear. "What does 'mercurial' mean, by the way? You said it earlier. Mercurial as quicksilver."

"Something that changes a lot."

"I see. And 'quicksilver'? Isn't that some sort of magical thing? Living silver? I thought it was something in stories with sorcerers and alchemists?"

"Oh, it's also just something that changes a lot. That's all."

"You know," said Caewen, a sly, humorous lilt in her voice, "I half suspect you're repeating fancy words you've heard other people use."

"Hur. Is that so?" He snorted, but his tone was not unfriendly. "Shouldn't you be going back up to the house and finding a way to get us free of this place?"

"Yes." She smiled at him again, if a little weakly. "I should. Alright. Be good, Dapple. No biting the fingers off guards."

His sharp teeth shone as he grinned. "But then whose fingers will I bite?"

-oOo-

Caewen returned to the house. In trying to find her way through the rooms and halls by memory she ended up quite lost again. She passed through rooms she hadn't seen before: strange little annexes, odd galleries with uncanny and primal looking ornaments, or heaps of rusted, broken old things, too decayed to tell exactly what they once had been. In one room, there hung a large ornate mirror with small songbird-claws apparently growing out of the frame. When Caewen went up to look at it, the claws all twitched and she left the room hurriedly. The magician's house was turning out to be an odd place. The whole construction, which looked modest from the outside, was really a honeycomb of passage, rooms and tunnels. It occurred to her that some of them must delve into the rock of the spur. Otherwise, there would not be enough room for all the passages to fit. It was odd then, how there always seemed to be narrow windows onto the outside world.

When Caewen did, at last, stumble across the hallway to her room, it was more by luck than good memory. Turning a corner, she finally saw the familiar door--breathed a sigh of irritation mixed with relief--and made her way towards it.

As she walked down the hall, she was brought up short by the sight of someone slipping out of Tamsin's chamber. At first, Caewen thought it was Tamsin, but on looking again, more carefully, she saw that the woman was too tall, too thin. Realisation struck: it was Varrel's lady. Isthinthaë. When the young woman saw Caewen, she paused, as if surprised. She had a look of indecision on her face, perhaps considering whether to be friendly or just scurry off--but she squared her shoulders and walked over, a faint smile brushing her lips.

"Hello," said Caewen. "You were visiting Tamsin?"

Issie nodded, but was reluctant with her words. After lightly tapping her tongue to her lower lips she said. "Don't tell anyone. Please. I just wanted something for the nightmares. Vespertine doesn't often tolerate another magician in his house, and he refuses to give me anything to stop the dreams. Thera hurt his heart too badly."

"Thera? Sorry, who's Thera?"

"Oh." She lost some colour, and a hand shot to her mouth. "I didn't mean to say that. Forget that name. Never say it." She paused for a long time, as if considering how much it was safe to explain. "Thera was the mother of the *other* son. Do not ever say her name in front of Vespertine. He'll fly into a rage."

"I'll be sure not to." Caewen could see that Isthinthaë was growing agitated, anxious. She changed the topic. "Did Tamsin give you something to help you sleep then?"

"Yes. And a charm to ward away evil, hurtful magics. It's Vespertine's son," she whispered, her voice lower. "He sends dreams to torment and master me."

"Varrel?"

At that Issie's expression dropped into a blankness, then reasserted itself with bemusement. "No. I mean the other son of course. Whyever would I mean Varrel?" An uncomfortable, shy laugh. "But Tamsin was kind. She made me a protection against controlling spells by tying some magic up in a piece of old rope: I have it now. And she instructed me on how to make potion for sound deep sleep, just using kitchen herbs and a few other things. She is clever. And so kind."

"It does seem so. I hope it helps."

Her smile had the sort of faded warmth of a landscape just after the setting sun. "Yes. I hope that too. Good night... Caewen, wasn't it? Please--if anyone asks--"

"I won't tell anyone I saw you here."

"Thank you." And the young woman went on her way, head bowed, shoulders curled just a little, her cape trailing, her rose-black hair shining in the now-and-again light of infrequent candles.

Caewen cast a look at the door to Tamsin's room, shut fast--then looked back down the hall to where Issie was disappearing around a corner. Although she wondered if she maybe ought to knock and check on Tamsin, she also remembered Dapplegrim's warning, and her thoughts cooled a bit. Giving Tamsin's door a slight berth, she crept to her own bedchamber, lit a candle from one of the standing candelabras in the hall, and once she had the door firmly shut, she began to peel off her clothing. With care to make as little noise as possible, Caewen then pushed a small but heavy linen chest against the door and leaned her sword and scabbard upright near the head of her bed, where she could easily reach it. She felt so tired, but as soon as she lay down her head was abuzz with thoughts. It soon seemed like she would never sleep. Maybe she ought to ask for the recipe of that sleeping draught herself? Just relax, she told herself. Just think of other things. Something else. Anything else. Just sleep. You need to sleep.

-oOo-

Caewen woke with a start. She reached, groggily, for her sword even as she heard the noise of the door being shoved forcefully against the strongbox she had pushed up into it. The box was never going to stop someone who was determined to get into the room, but it gave her enough time to reach for the hilt--and find that the whole of the blade was encased in a small pillar of ice. Her fingers slid off the cold, slick wetness of the surface. She swore and swung her feet from the bed. Wasn't there an eating knife around somewhere? Where had she left it? Too late. She stood, pulling on a tunic just in time, as three big, dour-faced guards shoved their way into the room.

They said nothing but surrounded Caewen and grabbed her by the shoulders and hair, hauling her forward, towards the door.

"With us," said one of them, without emotion.

"Let go of me."

"You'll come with us."

"Fine. But let go of me." It surprised her when they did. The men's fingers slackened and they looked at her with their gloomy faces.

One of them said. "This way. The master calls for you."

She rearranged her clothing and followed them out into the hallway. Behind her, a stir of coldness on the air hinted that Jack had been with them too. That, she realised, explained the frozen sword. With a sickening in the pit of her stomach, she had an additional flash of thought: if the spirit could so easily encase something as big as a sword in ice, then he could just as easily have turned her heart into a lump of frozen meat and blood while she slept, or her brain, or lungs or whole body.

Outside in the hall, two other guards had Tamsin's door open too, but they were staring dumbly into darkness within.

"Gone," said one of them.

While Caewen tried to put together in her head what was happening, she noticed a faraway noise: a voice, raised in rage, screaming, over and over. It was an old man's voice. A creeping sense of fear came on her. Thoughts rattled in her head. Oh no. What have you done, Tamsin?

The guards were not rough with Caewen, and as long as she walked with them, they made no effort to put a hand on her either. If the magic that Vespertine employed to sap these men of their freewill worked to take away any ideas of rebellion, the same enchantments seemed to have taken away thoughts of cruelty, or violence. The guards were perfectly behaved, because they were perfectly blank. She suspected that they couldn't imagine doing anything except exactly what they were told to do.

Of course, that still left the possibility that Vespertine might have some cruel imagination in him. Caewen tried not to think about that.

The sounds of an old man screaming and raging grew louder, clearer. As the guards and Caewen passed into a more richly decorated part of the household, she was able to look out a passing window and see that it was still night. One of the small appletrees that grew so precariously out of the fortress walls stretched itself outward, just beside the windowsill. It sported several white fruit as bright and gleaming as the moon above. The brief view of the twisted small tree and stars and moon above was all quite beautiful, though rapidly lost as the guards nudged Caewen on.

A final turn down a final hall, and they came to a large, somewhat ajar door, iron-bound with whorls of clumsy leaf-shapes bolted into thick wood. Just beyond, a warm brazier glowed full of coals, and there were furs, cushions, tapestries... this room did not have the same character as the rest of the house. It was altogether more comfortable, more luxuriant.

Inside the room was a sight to stop Caewen's mind in reeling mid-thought, and turn her guts to ice. A large down-bed was soaked right through with crimson. There was blood everywhere, pooling, and running off the sides. In the midst of the wet red lake lay Varrel on his back, opened from throat to belly with what appeared to be dozens of savage stab wounds. A low, wordless simpering was coming from one corner. Issie crouched there, her eyes as round and mindless looking as marble balls. She had blood on her, but given the amount of blood on the bed--and everywhere else for that matter--this was hardly surprising. Issie was rocking back and forth, staring fixedly at the bed.

At the other end of the room--more animate, pacing, ranting, screaming--Vespertine turned and saw Caewen. He gave an animalistic snarl, and turned on her. His hands were covered with his son's already drying blood.

"Betrayer! Murderer! Murderer, foul! How dare you do this? In my house? Under my very roof!"

Caewen could only half-stumbled through some words: "I didn't... I'm not... I know nothing about this..."

Vespertine crossed the floor with two long strides, and, reaching out, he grabbed Caewen on either side of the face, pressing his thin, aged fingers into her flesh. He stared into her eyes. "Look at me! Look at me!" He screamed. Then, words like shards of ice came out of his lips. The words flowed into the air, wrapped around Caewen, and crept into her skull, through eyes and ears and mouth, like a cold living fog, lacing into her brain. She shuddered. She felt her eyes opening wide, involuntarily. She felt his mind inside her mind, seeking, teasing apart thoughts. She was trembling all over now, but after only a few seconds, the old man screamed, even angrier, and shoved her backwards so that she stumbled into one of the guards.

"She's ignorant. Where is the other one? Bring me the murderess!"

"Not in her room."

"What? Fled? How? These walls watch for me. My spells guard for me. Don't be idiots. She cannot have snuck out, not unless she can crawl through solid stone. There are no keys but the words of the household. Jack! Jack!"

Jack's voice, like ice scraping against steel answered: "Yes. But they tell true. The witch is gone. If you speak, so I do."

"How could she be gone? She can't have just left without assistance." He fumed, and snarled to himself. "It doesn't matter. Where is the child-witch? How far fled is she?"

"Out past fields, beyond town and wall. She flees, and scampers, through woodland tall."

"Go find her. Destroy her. And call up the wolves too. Set them upon the chase. Let them tear her apart piece-by-piece if they can catch her. If they cannot, freeze her into a slab of ice. Kill her!"

Jack's voice whispered through his ice-blue teeth, suspended in the air. "The wolves? The wolves? They may not wake willing. They sleep a'night. Daytime's for killing."

Vespertine turned on the spirit and screamed at him. "Then turn one of them to bloody chunks of snow for all I care. *Make* them give chase! *Make* them hunt her down! Obey me, slave!"

"As you command, as you say, I cannot and will not disobey. And so, I think, Jack must away." Jack twisted out of the room leaving a glimmering, floating trail of whispering white shadows after him.

"I will go to my tower." Vespertine paced still. "I will talk to the clouds and the stars, and I see what they know of this. I will conjure such storms as the world has never seen." As he passed Caewen he stopped a moment to glare. "Do not think you will escape punishment for this. Even if you knew nothing of the witchling's particular murderous intent, you were in her company. There's guilt enough to be shared." His face disfigured into a sneer. "Oh, I remember her words: if you hold me, you will regret it. Oh, how I rue that now! But there will be vengeance. So far as I see it, you are complicit too." Turning to the guards, he spat, "Take her back to her room. I will decide on what to do with her later."

-oOo-

Caewen was walking in frustrated, tight circles in her small chamber. The guards had not been rough-handed, but they had firmly escorted her back to the room and shut the door behind her. Some time had passed since. More than time-enough for her to dress and ready her belongings for a quick escape, if the opportunity presented itself. Two or three times, she'd already gone to the window and called out to Dapple, yelling his name into the endless night, but got no reply. If Dapplegrim was planning to knock down doors, this would be a good moment. She turned on her heel, fuming. Had Tamsin really done it? Had she murdered Varrel out of spite, then fled? And left Caewen and Dapple to bear the brunt of Vespertine's wrath? But then, how had she slipped secretly from the house, if it was so carefully watched and warded? Or was Vespertine mistaken? Perhaps his nets of magic were not as tight as he assumed. After all, Tamsin was a powerful sorceress in her own right, Caewen supposed. Her magic might have provided her with some clever way to vanish in the night.

But as for Caewen, and her present situation? An angry shrug. She could do nothing but wait. And pace. And worry.

An hour went by, and then another hour. There was no sign of Dapplegrim. Assuming Dapplegrim could sense that something was amiss, then Vespertine had found a way to prevent him leaving the stables. Dapple would surely have heard the screaming, and Caewen calling for him. He'd probably smelled the human blood on the air too. He ought have come barrelling into the house by now.

Finally, at last, feeling depressed and exhausted, Caewen sat down on the edge of the bed and rested her head in her hands. As she did this, she noticed something that made her start. There was a small trickling puddle of water at her feet.

She looked over to where the sword was resting against the wall.

They had left her alone so long, that the ice encasing it had melted substantially. A cold seep of water was spreading on the timber, running along cracks and grooves. The hilt was nearly free of ice. With Jack gone, they'd forgotten about the sword. Leaning towards the hilt, she gripped it and pulled: with effort, the ice cracked and she pulled the sword and scabbard free. That gave her enough confidence to think about breaking out herself. Even if her skill with a blade was middling, the blade was rune-cut and charmed. From experience, she knew the sword would dance its own dance in her fingers: seeking blood; looking for dumber, more lifeless blades to turn aside and nick and shatter. The magic had been faithful before. She hoped it would prove faithful again.

Gingerly, she tread to the door and leaned close into the wood, listening. There were no noises on the other side, but that might only mean the guards were standing in silence. "Hello?" she asked. "Hello, out there? I need a chamber pot and I can't find one in the room. You couldn't come in and show me where one might be, could you?"

Nothing. Maybe they weren't as stupid as she thought.

"Hello?"

Carefully, she prodded the door. It was not bolted or locked. She pushed the door open with the tip of her sword. The old iron hinges creaked as the door swung. She looked outside. The guards were gone. "Hello?" she tried again, but there was not a stir of movement anywhere up or down the corridor. "Alright. So the guards are missing... for some reason?" said Caewen. Her voice sounded strange and clipped in the cold, stoney hallway. "Called away perhaps? Or fled? Why?" She took a step out of the door. Nothing happened. No one came charging at her with weapons flailing. No one tried to stop her. "Alright. Well, it seems like I just need to find my way out. Fetch Dapple. Escape. How hard can that possibly be?"

-oOo-

The myriad catacomb-like corridors, dead-ends, empty rooms, annexes, chambers filled with strange objects, the battlement-walks that lead nowhere in particular--it all added up to be, if possible, more confusing than before. Caewen was starting to garner half-a-suspicion that the house was more deeply enchanted than she had thought. There seemed to be many more halls than previously, and yet more rooms packed with dusty curiosities and relics. As she passed through one chamber after another, it felt as if the whole interior must have been twisting around on itself, regrowing, opening and closing, like the living guts of a huge beast: spitting her out into one weird chamber, and then another, another, another. She neither saw, nor heard actual evidence of stone grinding or changing--but it was hard to imagine how else to explain the endlessness of the place.

Where she remembered there having been a gallery of ordinary looking, though rude, stone statues on her last exploration, the gallery was missing, and instead there was a withered open-air garden with pieces of broken glass on strings hanging from dead potted trees for no obvious reason. A room decorated with taxidermy heads of shaggy brown creatures, sporting one old yellow horn apiece, was completely new to her, as was the room with shelves of empty glass perfume bottles, and the room with small, delicately carved ivory butterflies on stone pedestals. And she was certain that she'd never passed through the room with hundreds of brightly painted wooded birds piled in one corner. Some of the rooms gave off a distinct feeling of wrongness: in one chamber there were seven broken swords arranged in a circle on the floor, as well as a feeling of palpable discomfit until Caewen left through the far door. Stranger still, the only room she definitely recognised appeared to have been neatly reversed since her last visit: the reversal of the position of everything in the room included the tapestry on the wall, which now showed figures facing the wrong way. Unless there were two tapestries, one a mirror image of the other, Caewen could not explain the reversal by any means other than magic. Increasingly, the house of a magician seemed to be the sort of place a person ought not go wandering about unaccompanied.

After passing through the tenth or twelfth of these strange rooms, Caewen stumbled up short: in the hall ahead--a little way down the corridor, a person was slumped on the floor. A gush of red gore welled out of the body, and made a sticky mess of the floor. She walked up to it, and rolled the corpse over with a foot. It was one of the guards. His face stared at the ceiling. An uncharacteristic expression of fear sat on his dead features. Caewen bent down and closed his eyes. She examined the wound that had killed him. His throat had been cleanly torn out.

Caewen had grown up in the mountains, where bears and wolves and larger, more dangerous creatures roam, and sometimes kill. She'd seen her share of animal attacks, and this was an animal attack. There was no mistaking the jagged edge of the tear, the stripes of claw marks on the back of the man's hand. A large and dangerous beast had killed him. Examining his hands more carefully,

she found some red-black fur clutched between his fingers. She sniffed it. The hair looked and smelled like wolf.

As Caewen rose up from her crouch, an old man's voice pierced the air, echoing around the stone walls. She stepped over the corpse, and advanced with her sword out in front of her. Sounds of a scuffle and more yells and cries--and animal yelps and snarls too--were coming from a twisted stairwell that climbed away to her right. She could, of course, simply move quickly past, and keep looking until she found a way out of this place. But even as she struggled with a moment of indecision, she knew that she wasn't going to leave the old man to be killed by wolves. The scrabbling and fighting noises continued. Presumably the wolves that Vespertine had been controlling with his magic were now somehow freed of the enchanter's shackles. They must have come for their own revenge. Tamsin might be responsible for that too, she realised. It made sense--and Caewen had to admire the efficiency of it--if it was Tamsin's gambit. Set free some creatures who already have a reason to hate the master of the house on the hill, and the wolves could be relied upon to find their own way up here. One potential guard against escape was removed with the same stroke.

As much as she'd rather not get tangled up with enchanted wolves of unnatural size, Caewen also couldn't just leave Vespertine to be torn apart either. He might be a miserable, ill-spirited old man, but she couldn't quite just walk from this. A sigh. Even if she wasn't completely sure herself why she felt this way, it just seemed too wrong to leave him to die like this.

Caewen took the stairs two at a time, pausing only to catch her breath at the last stretch where she could see the night sky glowing through the stairwell above her: the stars sparked amidst deep, deep rifts in clouds. The fight sounded vicious and desperate. Gritting her teeth, Caewen came up into the open and found herself on the stone platform that rose above the rest of the house. Carvings of clouds stroked every surface, and contorted gargoyles, in shapes not unlike the snow-demon Jack, surmounted the walls all around the platform. A faint blush of light touched the eastern sky. Dawn was coming.

Given the noise, she had expected to find half the pack up here, and was surprised discover Vespertine facing down just one single wolf: a large red-black beast of a thing. Well, she thought, one is better than a dozen, and at least it wasn't the big wolf-chieftain they'd met outside the village earlier: the huge golden and dark-grey creature. Caewen adjusted the sword in her grip. Alright--just the one wolf--but how many others were in the house? And how long until the rest of them heard the commotion and came running?

As Caewen took in the situation, the elderly magician made to strike at the wolf using a ceremonial staff of the sort wizards seem to like. Dull white flecks of light bloomed subtly where the staff hit the stone floor of the tower. It was immediately clear that the sorcerer's wand would do more than deliver a slight knock to the head. It was also clear that the wolf was not stupid enough to get in the way of the staff. The creature dodged and crouched, leapt and wove, always keeping just out of reach of Vespertine's increasingly frail and weak attacks. He was flagging; already cut and bleeding from half-a-dozen bites; some quite deep. Sooner or later, he was going to stumble--whether through blood loss, or a bloody hank taken out of a leg--it was just a matter of what brought him down first.

"Ware there, wolf," said Caewen, drawing its attention from the old man to her. It growled. She advanced towards it, sweeping the blade in an low arc, left and right. "If you can understand me, be off. This bronze tooth bites right through armour. It'll bite right through your fur and flesh. Be sure of that."

The wolf gave out a rather unconcerned sounding snarl, but did reposition itself, edging away from Vespertine. It looked from the old man, to Caewen, and back again. Seeming to make a decision, it launched itself at her. Perhaps it thought to kill her quickly and return to Vespertine without distraction? If that had been its plan, it did not work. Caewen gave a short, quick stab that sent a flair of blood out of its right shoulder. The wolf stopped where it landed on its paws, and looked at its wound. If a wolf could look shocked, it did.

"Ha!" spat Vespertine. "Weren't expecting that, were you? She's not fibbing. That sword's got old dark sigils cut into it. It's not mortal steel. Not rusty iron. Ha! Fool! That one's more dangerous than she looks. She'll wound you. She'll kill you. Get! Get off with you. Vermin!"

The wolf curled its lips up away from its big, sharp teeth. The anger in its growl was palpable. But it also seemed to decide that it was now outmatched. In a blur of movement it twisted, shot past Caewen, and was gone down the stairs.

"Off to fetch the rest of the family," said Vespertine. The staff slipped from his weak fingers and he slumped to his knees. "We've little enough time now. We must make do with what we have to hand."

Caewen stepped towards him, but he waved her away.

"No," he said. "I'll do it." And he fumbled around his belt, took out a long, glittering dagger and without any warning, he plunged it into his belly. Blood immediately spilled down the white and icy blue embroidery of his tunic, dribbling down his legs, staining his knees. Red bubbles formed at the corners of his mouth as he slumped down to a slumped kneel.

"Are you mad?" said Caewen. "Is everyone in this house mad? What are you doing?"

"Not mad," he said through a blood-smeared smile. "I am dying. There are too many deep bites. And that sort--" he indicated a hand towards where the wolf had vanished down the stairs. "--that sort--their bites are always fatal, eventually. There is a rot in their bites. Do not let them bite you. Even a shallow graze will mortify and kill. Their teeth are unclean. Me? I've lost my life already. I have lost my heir too. My line is ended. There will not be another master of the House of Snow and Apples. I am accepting of it. And this means, there is only one problem left now." A broader, red-toothed smile. "I am not dying fast enough. This needs to be remedied. Before that one returns with the rest of the family."

"I could have tried to fight us past the wolves."

"It would not work. I'm old. I'm wounded. I can't move quick enough. No. They'd catch us, and they'd surround us, and bring us both down. So instead, I must die here, quickly. It is the way of things." He shrugged. "Thus the world turns. Now. Now. Listen to me, young lady-of-swords. Listen to me. I see everything clearly now. I was puzzled before, but I understand now why Jack brought you here. He *knew*. He must have known that the other one was a danger, and that the wolves would come, and he knew that the magic of my forefathers cannot be allowed to fall into the hands of that foul witch-wean child, Tamsin, nor the woods-wolves, nor my surviving son for that matter. There had to be someone, someone... an outsider. Someone who could be trusted to carry the magic away from here. Far away. They cannot have it. None of them can have it." He slumped forward a little more, now sitting on his haunches as his life leaked out through the wound in his stomach, puddling around his knees. "Oh, it hurts to speak." He drew in a rattling breath. "My other son doesn't know the truth of the magic anyway. He thinks a person needs only eat the apple-flesh. But the apple doesn't matter. It is the *seed*. He doesn't know *that*. Ha. More fool him. And the seed is in here." He tapped his chest. "Do not leave it for him. You must eat it instead. If you eat it, the seed will find a way through your blood, it will lodge in your heart. And there, it will be safe from him, and his vermin-sort. I will not have my family's magic dirtied by the brood of that... that... filthy woman." He turned his face upwards and yelled at the sky. "I'll not let you win, Thera! You hear me! Is your ghost here? You'll not win! Oh, you thought you'd won when you poisoned my wife and took me to bed. You thought you'd won when you got a bastard off me. But I saw through you. I saw right through you." He laughed. "Even when you were alive and scheming. Right through you, like the ghost you are now."

"I fail to understand anything you're saying. Lie down. Ease yourself down." Caewen could see nothing else for it. He would be dead in minutes, but the old man might as well die restfully, rather than sitting upright, ranting at the pre-dawn sky.

"You are not listening to me! Listen! When the apple grows, eat the seed. Though--wait--no--be careful. It will send you into a daze, hours maybe. Days? I don't... know... I don't... If the wolves find you dazed and out of your wits--they'll kill you, and they'll eat you, and probably one of them will swallow the seed by accident, and then they'll have the magic. That cannot be permitted." His whole chin and beard were red now.

Caewen spoke softly to calm him. "I understand. Eat the seed. Don't eat the seed. Perhaps you can lie back and rest?"

"You're humouring me," he spat.

"Yes," Caewen admitted. "I am. But now, lie down, please."

"You must eat the seed! But swallow it only when you are sure you are somewhere safe." He heaved in a burbling, blood-soaked breath. "The tree will bloom. The apple will ripen. The seed will be within."

"Right. Tree. Apple. Seed." She hovered near him, reaching out, resting a hand on one shoulder.

"And the last thing. Last thing. Last. I nearly forgot. I forget so much now. My thoughts are all just mist and blood. But you are lost? You can't find your way out of my house."

"Somewhat, yes..." Caewen shook her head. "It's confusing, but I'll find my way out. Don't worry about that."

"No you won't." His voice was weaker and thinner with every word. "You have to be *told* how to leave the house by one of the household. The words are the keys: go down the stairs, turn left and you will see a door you didn't notice before. It will lead through some corridors, then to the great hall, and the yards without. Your horse-thing will be waiting for you in the stable. He has not been harmed." His voice rasped and choked in his throat. "I am cold." He shrugged and gave a short laugh that bubbled with blood. "But does it matter? I have always been cold. It is my nature. It is the nature of my bloodline. The dawn light is fading all around me. And now I am fading," he whispered. "And now I am dying."

A wisp of breath came out from between his blue-tinged lips, like a curl of steam. It blew away on a slight stir of wind that caught the breath-fog and teased it out into nothing. As he died, the sun broke the horizon, and the tower and landscape was flushed with the soft, old-gold light of dawn. Vespertine's whole body tensed once, then relaxed into death. The enchanter's staff, which had been lying nearby, immediately crumbled into flakes of wood and hoar-frost, disintegrating until it was nothing more than a long thin pile of frozen sawdust.

Caewen approached the sorcerer, and eased him flat on his back, shutting his eyes with a brush of her fingertips. She said one of the small, hopeful folk-prayers they say over the dead in the mountains, and she got to her feet. Only, when she turned to leave, Vespertine's corpse gave a shuddering heave, twisting, as if there was renewed life in him again. Backing away, not a little horrified, Caewen watched as his chest ripped open at the point where his heart would be. A curl of sap-green colour arose out of the ruin of his ribcage, a seedling, dribbling blood, bending back and forth at the touch of the light wind. It grew as Caewen watched. It's two cotyledons greened, and fell away as it put out the small, new leaves of young growth. Caewen watched it grow and grow. Ten, fifty, a hundred years of growth happened before her eyes: what had been a sapling, became a strong firm tree, then turned knotted, hoary and heavy with age. At last, once it had stopped putting roots down through Vespertine's corpse into the stone, once it had grown into a ancient looking appletree, grey-barked, pale green-leaved--at last--a single blossom appeared. In seconds, the petals blew away and fell. And then the tattered flower-remnants swelled until they formed a single, perfect snow-white apple.

Sisters of suns and darkness... he had been telling the literal truth. There was a seed inside him and when he died it grew into a tree, out of his flesh. And now there was an apple. He'd wanted her to eat the seed inside the apple? But what would happen then? He said something about a daze. What did he say? A dizziness that would last for hours? Days? And if she did eat it, would she end up with the seed alive inside her? To what end? To what purpose? Eating strange magic things at the behest of mad old dying magicians was, to put it mildly, reckless... and yet, and still... she couldn't leave this charmed apple for just any passerby to find either. Not least the wolves: for if the wolves wanted the seed that was inside Vespertine, then Caewen was pretty well sure that they should not have it. The uncanny, wild, savageness of the creatures alone hinted that it would be a very bad idea to let one of them take ownership of a powerful old magic.

But she couldn't just eat the thing here and now either. That would leave her in who know's what state of mind.

If she tried to hide the apple in a pocket, then surely the wolves would smell it on her.

And she couldn't fight all the wolves. Not the whole pack.

Could she just crush the seed? Destroy it? That seemed foolhardy also. Who knows what forces would be unleashed, even if she could split it under heel? For all she knew, the whole top of the tower might be blasted apart in a flash of ice and lightning.

As she looked at the white apple, lit by the dawn, she wondered what she could possibly do with it. And then a thought occurred to her.

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As it turned out, Vespertine's instructions were precise and correct. There was a doorway in the hall that she had not noticed, and when she went through it she found her way easily enough to the grand entranceway. But Caewen didn't immediately escape. She retraced her steps a small distance, until she was in one of the corridors that ran along an outside wall. There was a set of windows here, and she stood, and as she waited beside the first of the openings, she looked out and enjoyed the cool wind, the soft, gold light. It was just a matter of time now.

And so she waited.

It did not take very long. After a few minutes, someone called her name. The tone was cold, bitter, steeped in rage. It echoed around the stone halls.

She looked around. "Over here!" she called, rather more cheerily. She hadn't expected this... not exactly. She thought one of the wolves would find her first. She would have to play things by ear then, work it all out as she best she could.

There was a span of silence, then some sounds of doors opening and closing, and then the door at the end of the corridor was pushed aside with a jerk.

"You!" Out of the shadows stalked Isthinae: except she was very little like how she'd looked when last Caewen had seen her. For one thing, she was naked. For another, she had blood congealed on her lower lip, down her chin, on her hands and bare chest. Her body was hard, small-breasted and muscular: there was barely an ounce of fat on her. Rose-black hair tumbled loose and wild down her back. The same colour curled at her crotch. When she moved, it was with a predatory grace. All her mousiness, the willowy shape under her dress, it was all gone. Her naked athletic power told it for a carefully arranged lie.

"You!" snarled Issie again. "You little chit. Chase me off, will you? Oh, just you wait. I've my friends and family. They will be here soon, and we will make fine meat of you." As Issie spoke she moved into the light and a long open gash in her flesh became visible, snaking over her shoulder. Blood seeped from it unhealthily.

Suddenly Caewen understood. "*You* were the wolf?" she said, then checking herself added, "Wait. None of this makes sense now. Did Tamsin kill Varrel, and then free you, so you would kill Vespertine? Why would she do that?"

"You stupid fool. You nasty little idiot. I killed Varrel. Oh yes, the demon whispered the idea to me. Old Jack hated his bonds as much as I hated mine. And oh, he may have hatched the idea. But I did it! It was me! I freed us! I got the sleeping draught and the warding charm off that sorceress. Her little knot-spell was enough to break Vespertine's enchantment that controlled me, and kept me in this human-shaped flesh. And so long as I was under Vespertine's enchanted thumb, I could not harm father or son. But once I had the little protective charm in my hands..." She grinned, and the smile was deeply predatory.

"And the sleeping tea..." said Caewen with realisation. "That wasn't for you either."

"Of course not. It was for Varrel. Oh, he snored so deeply before I plunged the knife into his soft belly." Gleefully, she added, "Over and over and over."

"But what did you do with Tamsin then?"

"Nothing. I told her how to get out of the house by a secret way, a tunnel through the rock. She was so afraid--so very afraid of this place--she waited until everyone was asleep, and she scurried off.

After all, I am of the household. I can instruct a person how to leave, and so she had the keys made of words. She just ran off in the night, like a frightened little goat."

"And that gave Vespertine a reason to send Jack away from the house... so Jack wouldn't be here to protect the master of the house when you came to kill Vespertine... Jack was off chasing Tamsin." Caewen was starting to see how it all fell into place. "And when Varrel was saying that he was punishing you..."

"He *wasn't* punishing me. He might have said that. He might have even pretended it to himself. But he was really just keeping me to torment his brother. He despised Vaire so much. And Vaire is my love, and I am his. We grew up together. In the woods. As outcasts from our own ancestral home. So Varrel took me away. Just to be cruel to his brother." She sniffed the air, and cocked her head to listen. "Vaire comes for me now. He runs in the snows, baying. Vaire is the true and rightful lord of this land. His mother was the chosen of Our Lady of Wolves. His father the Master of Snow and Apples. The two old powers of this dominion are united in Vaire. Snow and wolf. My love. My one love." She breathed deep. "He runs. I can hear him. I can feel him. He knows Old Coldballs is dead. Oh, he runs so swiftly. So eagerly."

"The big gold and black wolf. That is Vespertine's other son." He's a wargling, like you. All the wolves of the woods are wolf-skinlingers. Shape-changers." By now Caewen was standing very tensely and thinking of her sword. She laid fingers on the hilt, but she knew with a certainty that she could not fight a whole pack of warglings. As she stood there, waiting, the woman, Issie, leapt forward, taking a jump as swift as a blur of wind, supernaturally fast. Isthinthaë was suddenly much closer--snarling through her bloodied mouth. Red streaks had stained the grooves between her teeth. Her eyes shone with a yellow inner light. "Yes. And so you finally figure things out. Now. Now. Were you fool enough to try and steal the apple? Give it to me. I can smell it on you. I know Vespertine is dead. Oh, Jack thinks himself clever... but I know the secrets of this place too... I have lived here long enough, watching, listening... I will present the corpse-fruit to my love and the demon-of-snows will be slaved again. But this time, to the wolf-kindred. And then? And then, we shall rule this land eternally with the winter-demon our everlasting servant."

"Ah, the apple," said Caewen. "You mean this apple?" She reached a hand into a pocket and pulled out a white, shiny skinned apple. "Vespertine did go on and on about it." She threw it in to the air and caught it backhanded, as if she were playing a children's game of ball.

Isthinthaë's face turned ashen. She froze. "Stop! What are you doing? You'll drop it."

Caewen tossed it again. "True. I'm not much of a one for ball games. I suppose, as children we used to play cat-and-dog with a leather ball, stuffed with wool. But that was some time back. Before I went into hiding from the old bastard Mannagarm." She caught the apple and tossed it to herself a couple more times. "Do you think that if the apple is bruised, then the magic will somehow be damaged?" She peered closely at the apple. "If it splits open, will the magic spill out? I suppose that is possible, isn't it?" Then, with a wry smile, she asked, "I wonder what it tastes like?"

Isthinthaë was a very good performer. When her face contorted into a fearful mass of lines, when she looked almost at the edge of tears, when she said, "No! No! Don't eat it! Please!"--all of this was *almost* convincing.

"Ah," said Caewen. "Well, now I know Vespertine was telling the truth now, don't I? He told me not to take a bite of the apple until it was safe to do so. That it'd put a person into a trance? A sleep?" She pointed at Isthinthaë. "And you are just a little too keen to beg me *not* to eat it. What would happen? I eat the fruit... I fall asleep... and then you'd kill me while I was out cold, and just wait for another tree to grow out of me?" She tossed the apple again. "Seems a waste of time. Seems inefficient." Then she looked out the window. "I can see tree-tops from here. It's a long way down."

"You wouldn't," said Isthinthaë, now actually afraid.

"You know," said Caewen. "I don't much trust people who want power, and more power, and more power. Me? I'm not all that interested in great and glorious magics." She looked through the window and said, "I suppose that if you ran very quick, you'd be able to find a white apple in the white snow before some scrub-jay or field-rat finds it and eats it first. What would happen if it was eaten by a bird? Would you end up with a magic bird?" She smiled. "Let's find out." With a twist of her shoulder,

Caewen threw the apple out the window. It sailed up in an arc, backlit by the sky above, until it was a grey dot falling among the trees. Caewen peered out the window. "That did go a long way. Right down into the snow and trees. Might be best for you to hurry."

Isthinthaë blinked, her expression caught up in a turmoil of thought. She had a clear look to her eyes that suggested she was trying to decide whether there was time to murder Caewen now, or whether she ought to just go after the apple. A moment later, she broke and ran for the door, and the great arched way that led to the outside world beyond. Her bare feet padded against the stone, leaving little wet trails of blood behind her. As soon as she was out of sight, the sound changed into the clicking noise of claws on a hard stone. She had shifted into the wolf-shape.

Caewen didn't wait long to follow. She ran through the door, down some stairs, through the entry hall, out the far arched opening, and into the dawn light--all the time following a trail of bloody footprints that turned into pawprints about a third of the way along. Outside, she found more dead men, sprawled ungainly on the dirt, throats in red ruin. A dull thud-thud-thud was coming from the stables. At once she saw what had happened to Dapplegrim: the whole stable was encased in walls and buttresses of solid ice. Jack had been busy here too.

Another crack split the air. It sounded like Dapplegrim was trying to break down the door from the inside--and it looked as if he wasn't too far from succeeding either. Splinters and fractures were running through the ice that held the door shut.

"Hold on!" yelled Caewen. She attacked the ice from the outside, using her sword to lever chunks of ice out of place and exploit weaknesses. Soon, working together, big pieces of ice were coming away, and then with a final kick from the inside, the ice around the stable doors shattered and Dapplegrim came trotting out, furious. "Where is he? Where is that demon? I'm going to pound him into snowflakes. And then I'm going to pound those snowflakes into even smaller snowflakes! How dare he do that?"

"There's no time for that now. We have to leave. Immediately."

"Why?" said Dapplegrim.

"Because," said Caewen, about twenty minutes ago I cored an apple, took out a seed, cleaned it carefully and put it in my pocket. Then, I leaned out a window and picked one of the other white fruit that grow all over the outside of this place." She shrugged. "I figured that one white apple would look a lot like another white apple. I expect that very soon..."

A howl full of rage and horror rose from somewhere outside the walls.

"That was fast," said Caewen. "I think it's safe to say she's guessed that I've pulled a trick on her."

"She? Who? Tamsin?"

"Not Tamsin. Tamsin's dead. Jack would have been forced to follow his commands, whether or not he wanted to. He was told to find her, and to kill her. She will be long dead by now. I think her final death was here after all."

"Caewen," said Dapplegrim, "I'm quite confused. What exactly is happening?"

"Well, it turns out that... no. There's no time. I'll explain while we escape. Where's your saddle? Actually, there's no time for that either. I'll just hold onto you mane, alright?"

"Fine. Pull yourself up, then."

She jumped to get her arms over his shoulders and pulled herself onto his back. Bareback, they trotted out of the gate and down the steep incline of the path that ran up the crag. Another howl of anger arose from the woods. Before they reached the foot of the twisting road, a dozen or more answering howls drifted up from the village and woods.

"Oh no," said Caewen. "They're here. They're all here already."

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At the base of the cliff, Dapplegrim wheeled around on his hooves, first going this way, and then that, but always backing away. The wolves were thick in the town already. Not one person of the village were anywhere in sight, alive or dead, but tellingly, every door and shutter was locked tight. The people must have seen or heard the wolves approaching, and run for their houses.

Caewen was hanging on tight to Dapplegrim's mane. "It's going to be hard for me to swing a sword without stirrup or saddle."

"Hur. Agreed. Maybe we can just outpace them?"

"We barely got away last time. And now, they're angrier. Much angrier. They'll have heard that howling from Issie too. They know we've done something. Even if they don't know what it is exactly just yet."

Dapplegrim danced in a circle as one of the bolder wolves crept out from behind a tree, eyes lit with the dawn, like sallow bronze.

"Speaking of that, I don't know what we've done either," he said, as he rounded on the wolf, and jinked to one side; he got close enough to give the creature a resounding crack of a blow with his right hind hoof. The wolf caught the hoof on the chest and left the ground, arcing backwards as boneless as a rag-doll. It hit a nearby pine trunk, making a sickening sort of crunch as it did. Dapplegrim snorted. "One less wolf."

But Caewen shook her head. "I wouldn't be so sure. There's a charmed power thick in their blood." She pointed. "Look."

Although the creature looked more dead, than alive, it shook itself and stood. It was unsteady, and blood was gushing from its mouth and nostrils, but it heaved a few breaths and it retreated only a short distance; casting a rueful look back at Caewen and Dapplegrim; then it threw up more blood on the patchy snow and pine needles. Though it looked as if it ought to just lie down and die, the wolf remained standing, and within seconds, it started to stand straighter. The bloody mess in its mouth reduced to a trickle. It breathed heavily, raggedly. Before long, it seemed to be recovering.

"They heal fast," said Caewen. "I think my sword can hurt them more seriously, maybe kill them... but just pounding at warglings, and crushing them underfoot--it's not going to do us any good."

Throughout this, the wolves were circling and tightening their ranks--backing Dapplegrim up into the mouth of the road that climbed the rocky spur. They constricted themselves inwards; like a band of grey iron; though when the pack was close to be shoulder-to-shoulder, they all stopped as one. Their attention turned back on the village: a voice rose and spoke at them from somewhere beyond the ranks of grey fur and yellow eyes, from somewhere among the trees and houses. "Hold," the voice said. "Make a way." He came slipping out from the pines like a shadow. The wolves edged aside and made room for a tall, muscular man with a hunter's physique. He had a dull yellow glow in his eyes, and otherwise, he looked much like Issie, naked, pale-skinned, and powerfully built. Clearly whatever magic governed their changes from one shape into another was not civilised enough to include clothing. The hair on his head was that same shadowy black and gold-streaked colour as the wolf-chieftain from the chase outside the village.

"Vaire," said Caewen, and added after a pause, "I presume."

That actually made him stop, made him pause. He tilted his head and his whole body tensed as he adjusted his weight. His fingers flexed, as if they had claws on them and he intended to use them. A low snarl turned into guttural, brooding words: "Now how do you know my name?" He drew out the 'how' until it sounded bestial.

"Oh, I got to hear some stories when I was up on the hill. That's all. Your lady, Isthinthaë is alive and well, if you were wondering. The same cannot be said for your father... though I had little enough to do with that."

His voice grew arched. "And who did then?"

"Issie, to start with, but in the end he took his own life."

A shrug. "I've no love lost on the wizard. He took his own life? That would be his way. Coward. But then, who took the apple of the snows?" His voice was keener now. "Was it you?" His eyes grew more intense until it was possible to imagine that there was a strong yellow fire behind them. A low, murmuring growl arose from the other wolves too.

Caewen paused. How much could one of these wolf-people communicate by howls? Had Issie already told them what Caewen had done? Was Vaire toying with her and Dapple? Or was there a chance she could spin some tale, at least until Issie turned up.

"Well..." she said, but then noticed something in the near distance. Behind the pack of wolves, past a hedge-of-thorns, the great doors of a substantial villager's house had just nudged open. That man who'd talked to them the evening before... what was his name? Gare? He was standing in the doorway beckoning silently. Unsurprisingly, his face was a knotted twist of anxiety. But he had opened the door, and he was waving for them. The wolves were all positioned so that none of them could see this.

"Dapple!" said Caewen, her voice rising. "There!"

"I see it." Dapplegrim ran and launched himself over the wolves. Heads shot up, maws opened, backs arched over, and there was snapping and clawing--but they landed safely on the other side of the grey mass of bodies. At once, Dapplegrim sprang into a run.

The wolves were only confused for a moment, and were in pursuit quickly. Just bolting and trying to escape the village would not have done Caewen and Dapplegrim much good. The wolves were too fast. They were soon gaining. Caewen looked over her shoulder. The pack, snarling, determined, was surging after them. Their yellow eyes and teeth glistened. Behind them stood Vaire, laconic, watching with an amused, detached appraising sort of expression. He did not expect the chase to last long, clearly. He hadn't even bothered to change shape.

But at the hedge, Dapplegrim veered right, wove left past a hoary-barked old pine, and with more urgency than grace, he stumbled in through the open door, ducking his head. Gare slammed it shut after them, and two other men pulled a heavy beam over the door to bar it from the inside.

Looking around, trying to take in what she could see, Caewen found a mass of faces, all huddled, all hiding in the shadows of the shuttered-up house. Children and the elderly, men and women, all crowded together. At several places where the shuttered windows provided chinks on the outside world, men and women with hunting bows started shooting arrows into the yard. Several high, painful yelps answered the twangs of bows.

Caewen slipped down from Dapplegrim's back. "You probably shouldn't make them angry" she said, waving a hand towards the archers.

Gare, who was as heavy and ponderous in his speech as he was in his body, gave only a slight nod. "Arrows shorn of elderwood. There aren't many things that can hurt our warglings, but that will smart more than it doesn't. There's old magic in the pith of an elder. Enough to make a wargling think twice."

Fighting a desire to simply collapse and be thankful that she was alive--for now--Caewen walked to one of the window-cracks, and bending down, she looked out. Through the narrow opening she could see that the wolves had retreated, forming up into a mass, half-hidden in the trees. As she watched two young men and a woman--all naked--stood upright out of the wolf-pack, and shook their shoulders and stretched as if they had been running a long jog. All three pulled arrows out of their flesh, and threw them to the ground. Did elderwood force a skinlinger to change back into their human shape? That was knowledge worth knowing.

The three naked people shared the same hard, dangerous look, as did Issie and Vaire. It was clearly in the family bloodline. But instead of changing back into wolves they turned and looked calmly, irritatedly, at the house--and then they all smiled, with keen, small, sharp smiles. Walking towards the house, the three of them spread out and stood, waiting. Blood was running in trickles from the wounds where the arrows had gone in. They didn't seem bothered. So perhaps an elderwood arrow might make a wargling turn back into human shape, but it wasn't lethal? As Caewen watched, the wounds stitched themselves up with scabs and closed over.

"They're not attacking?"

"No," said a middle-aged lady-archer beside her. "When they're ready, they'll be going up to the house-on-the-hill no doubt, and fetching themselves human armour, and weapons and torches. They'll smoke us out, or burn us out, in the end... if the teeth of the wolf don't work, then the swords of the human hand will do instead." She wrinkled up her brow. "Guess they do have the best of both worlds, as they say."

The other wolves detached themselves. They formed into a loose ribbon of grey shapes, and twisted away towards the castle. At the foot of the castle road, Vaire waited. When the wolves reached him, he walked at the head of them up the road, still human-shaped.

"If they don't know already that I took the magic they want, they'll be figuring it out very soon."

Dapplegrim, who had been catching his breath, took the two steps he needed to stand behind her. He tried to look out the gap, but found it a bit narrow. With a snort he said, "Maybe you could explain that to me now? I'm still confused by all this. Howls and wolves and dead sorcerers? What is going on?"

"Old Coldballs is dead?" said one of the men.

"I'm afraid so."

There was a murmur of worried voices, some sniffing of held-back tears.

"We're all dead then," said the same man. "There's no escape now. Only him could have chased off the warglings. We're dead as dead."

Caewen turned to Dapple, and lowering her voice, said, "Don't make a fuss." She fished around inside her pocket and pulled out a single, brown, unremarkable looking appleseed. Everyone else who was standing nearby, Gare, the lady-archer, the others with the bows: they merely looked puzzled. "What've you got a little seed for?" said Gare.

But Dapplegrim reacted as if Caewen had thrust a red-hot poker inches from his nose. He pulled back, and bared his teeth into a grimace. "That," he said through tight grit teeth, "is unkind magic. Burn it. Crush it. But do not allow it anywhere near me."

"And I suppose we ought not give it to the wolves?"

"By all that is holy and unholy in this world, do not give that to anyone! Least of all a pack of savage things. That's... that's... it's sorcery from the old north, sorcery at its most rotten. It's a binding and a harvesting of power from something... some creature... distilled down into a single mote of pain. It may look like a seed, but it is a small hard bit of pain. Whatever person, god or spirit is bound by that... that... thing you have in your hand... the poor creature must be in constant torture. It would be controlled and masted by dismal never-ending pain." He snorted. "Destroy it."

Caewen looked at the small seed in her palm. "Poor Jack," she said in a whisper. "And for hundreds of years, I guess? Or even longer?" But after a long pause, she added, "And yet I am not sure we have a choice? I said, I would free the demon, Jack, and I will. If you think it is safe to just break the seed... but..."

"But what?" Dapplegrim shook his head. "Do not tell me you're thinking of trying to master that power yourself? Hur. Even if you could, even if you might, it would change you forever. Magic never leaves a person unchanged, and magic of that bleak ilk is the worst sort. If you did master it, who's to say you would be able to make yourself give it up? Power gets inside a person. It'll warp you badly before its done with you. You'll be like a bit of green wood dropped in hot water."

More faces inside the house were turning towards Caewen and Dapplegrim. She looked around at them. "Unless anyone else has some other suggestion? We need a power to match the wolfskinlings. Unless someone here happens to own a wishing cap, or a cloak of the unseen, or some old ring of mysterious power... I don't know what else to do?" But Caewen was met with silence.

Dapplegrim looked around, with a slightly frantic air. "Someone else. Someone else can take the magic. You," he turned his head towards the nearest villager. "You look young and full of adventure. Why don't you eat up that bit of magic? It's be a tale to tell, that's for sure."

"Dapple, stop," said Caewen. "If what you say is true, if the magic is that dangerous, that harmful, I'm not going to inflict it on someone else." She looked over at Gare. He was standing uncomfortably, scratching his jaw. "Well? Have we any other chance of escape?"

He shook his head. "We'll all be dead before evening, I expect," said Gare. "That's the sureness of it. These walls are sturdy enough to hold them out for a bit, but only on cause it's convenient for them to keep us penned in." He sighed. "I don't fully fathom what you're debating, but if you think there's a hope for us, and our families, please... please... me and my wife have our wee ones in here with us. I suppose that's all I'll say on it."

Caewen nodded. She walked away from the window, to a corner of the room, shadowy and cool. People moved out of her way, making space. Dapplegrim followed, his tail whisking worriedly, his head low on a bowed neck. "Don't," he said one last time. "Please don't. You and I might still get away. If we wait for the right moment, and I run fast."

"But it'd only be us two who get away, wouldn't it? I can't live with that. You couldn't either. I know you too well, Dapple." Caewen put her back to the wall and slid down until she was sitting on hard-packed floor. "It's alright Dapple. Just promise me that you won't let me turn into something bad. If it looks like I'm going to end up that way... just don't let that happen."

Dapplegrim gave no answer. He laid his ears back and then got down on his haunches, sitting the way horses do with their legs folded.

"So here goes a throw of the gambler's die," said Caewen, and she lifted the seed and dropped it onto her tongue. It was bitter, like wild almond. With a wince, she swallowed it. At first, nothing happened.

And then the world fell away. The room; the light and the shadow; the people and their fearful, staring faces; the noise of a child crying softly somewhere in the darkness; and Dapplegrim too: his long face and red-aglow eyes. It all tumbled backwards, folding in upon itself, as if the world had simply been a painting, lightly daubed onto a deeper reality, and the paint was now crumpling up and flaking away.

Caewen discovered that she was falling. She felt the weightless giddiness. She could sense the darkness rushing past her, a high wind in a roar, deafeningly loud. If there had been anything in her stomach other than the now blistering, searing, pain-wrenching pip, she was sure she'd have retched it all up. She felt the pain jab at the inside of her gut. She felt it worm into the flesh inside her ribcage as she fell, tumbling head-over-heels through infinite darkness. She felt her flesh turn cold, as the sharp seed found its way into a blood-vessel, as it crept through her bloodstream, seeking her heart.

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In the beginning there was darkness. An everlasting night. For age upon age, cool, silent darkness was peaceful upon the land. The spirits of the darkness were beautiful and happy in their quiet peace. And then, for the first time in all the years of the world, the sun rose, and there was disquiet.

-oOo-

In the beginning, the valley had been a wild place. There were bears and otters, badgers and wrens, red robins, and wolves in the woods. In those days, there were no people, and time was a spinning cycle of day-and-night, after day-and-night, and winter-and-summer, after winter-and-summer, endless, endless. The creatures did not have long memories, although a few of them still told their stories of a time, very long ago, when there had been two goddesses treading the earth, fighting, warring, a time when the day and the night fought each other. The two goddesses, the night and day, created all the living things to be their soldiers and spies and servants in the wars. The foxes told those stories most often, and they boasted that they had never been on either side, because they belonged to a wholly different creation. But few of the other animals believed them. Least of all the wolves, who were proudest of the creatures in the wilderness, and though the wolves had forgotten whether they had fought on the one side or the other, they were sure they had fought and hunted well, and in good service. This land had been their reward, for nothing else that lived here--except perhaps an angry mother bear--was a threat to them. They were the first true masters of the land, and they lived in the caves and overhangs of the spur, and they looked out over all the world that was theirs.

-oOo-

In the beginning the people came. They journeyed out of the east, from where the sun rises, wearing skins and hides of the beasts they had killed, carrying fire and sharp flint and polished spears of hard

wood. Most of the people wandered off westward and northward, but a few settled here, chasing the wolves from their home on the rocky spur, and making it into a place for people, painting the walls with ochre and heaping the floors with furs around their saga-fire.

-oOo-

In the beginning there had been a tribe. The tribe had worshipped the wolf, and they made carvings of wolves, in wood, in stone, even out of ice in winter. They buried their dead with wolfskins and gave respect to the wolf whenever the hunt was successful. But there were other tribes, neighbouring clans who snuck-by-night with their stone axes, and bronze knives, and their arrows with heads of flint. There were countless bloody skirmishes, and many deaths. After years of sorrows and losses, the wise of the tribe met and talked, and they agreed: what was needed was a provender, a protector. What was needed was some sheltering hand to hold back the slingstones and darts of the enemies. All the called-upon wolf-shades were not enough to protect the tribe. What was needed was a new, more potent, singular god.

-oOo-

In the beginning, she lived just as any other child of the tribe lived. There was the family roundhouse behind the ramparts of earth and sharpened poles, nestled in alongside the jowls of other roundhouses. She helped her mother grind the barley and the wild oats. She teased her brothers and her younger sister, and she was teased by her brothers and her sister in return. She played at games and wondered about her future, who she might one day marry, if she would one day have her own children, and all the other things that children sometimes think about.

But one day, the wise of the village came to their house and said that the ghosts of dead wolves had spoken to them, and they had chosen the little girl for their own. She was required, for the good of everyone: those who lived now, those who might live for years to come. She was afraid at this, and clutched at her mother's deerskin dress, and she cried a little. But she went with them when they told her to. For they were the wise of the village, and were not to be disobeyed.

For three years they fed her on wild deer culled from the woods, and rich sweet berries, and the little brown and white mushrooms of the forest that let people see spirits and talk to the dead. No cultivated food passed her lips. Wild things only. And the powdered, bitter dust of the ghost-mushrooms. They kept her in a dark, smoky sacred house, with all the carved figures that were spirit-vessels for the dead ancestors of the people and their wolf-spirits. And the dead watched her out of their lifeless wooden eyes. And the dead spoke to her. And the dead approved of her, and so they told her secrets that only the dead know. They hissed and whispered and snarled until she was full of their sayings, and hardly knew who she was any longer.

At the end of the three years, the wise of the village came to the house in the dead of night, and they said that the great time had come at last. It was a bright night, when the full moon was at its largest and most powerful. The hunter's moon, they called it, and under the light of the hunter's moon they took her away from the village, through woodland and field and wild meadow, uphill, through a rift in the hills, and to a sacred place in the wilderness where the water bubbles hot out of ground fissures, and the rocks are grey and shadowy.

A few wise people of the village were already there when they arrived. They had already lit nine fires, and were feeding the fires with dried wolfsbane, making the smoke into a choking and stinging pall. They chanted and called for the spirits of wolves, alive and dead, and they blew the spirits and ghosts of the wolves into the smoke, until the smoke was churning with a hundred wolf-minds. As she waited, wondering what would happen next, unsure of herself, dizzy from the long walk and the ghost-mushrooms, the girl saw a familiar face. It had been three years, but she recognised her sister, seated on a stone, just beyond the fires. The girl wanted to call out to her sister. She had been so lonely without family, without friends, in the dark house where the ghosts whispered... but she knew better. She knew that if she was supposed to speak to her sister, the wise would tell her to do so. If she did anything that

she was not meant to do, then they'd clip her with a willow switch or thump her with the back of a hand. So she stood, waiting, watching as wolf-shapes grew and swelled in the smoke.

At last, someone pushed the girl forward, into the place where the fires were smoking and the wise were chanting. Somewhere far off she could hear wolves howling: dozens of them: whole packs of them: howling as if they were raised up in alarm, or in worship. She could not tell which. And then, her sister was made to move too, prodded until she was standing not quite among the fires, though near them.

That was when the chanting stopped, and the smoke curled, and swept upwards and outwards, stretching out in shapes, like noses sniffing, like tongues lolling, looking for warmth and flesh. There were wolf-faces in the smoke.

They entered into her. Through her nose and eyes, stinging the flesh, through the very pores of her skin, until she was full of wolves. There were so many wolves in her she didn't know how to be anything but wolfish. She heard the quiet crying. She heard the snuffles. She smelled the fear.

She lost herself in the wolves.

When the girl came to her senses again, it was dawn. Blood in a terrible mess was all over her hands, all over her face. Bloody footsteps were everywhere in the dust. Uphill, the wise were gathered in a tight knot, their shoulder's hunched under cloaks of fur and feather, fixed expressions of stone-cold, hard horror mingled with triumph on their faces.

There was a torn body at the girl's feet. She didn't have to look down to know who it was.

They had made her do this.

She was sick with terror. With anger. With horror at herself. At the wise ones.

Why would they make her do this?

The wise trickled down from their place on the hill and they surrounded her, closing in.

"You killed your own sister," they said. "You murdered kin," they hissed. "That is an accursed crime. The ancestors despise kin-killing." Snarls and mock-anger rose up around her. They had practised these speeches already. Their accusations were perfunctory. They made her do this to her own sister... and they were pretending to be angry? She loved her sister. She didn't understand. Old, wrinkled faces with tattoos and ritual scars crowded over her. "You must redeem. But there is only one redemption. You killed family. Now you must protect family. Forever and ever. Forever and ever and ever. We lay this curse upon you." One of them reached out with fingers full of white and grey ochre and streaked her face with the colours. Other hands pulled at her clothing, tearing it off until she was naked. And then they put a leather thong around her neck and they pulled it tight. The air in her throat stopped. Her eyes fluttered shut. Her heart stopped.

They said words over her to bind the judgement, to bind the spirits of the wolves, to bind the spirits of the ancestors, to bind the curse. And then they threw her body into the hot spring, where the waters are sacred.

And then they knelt in the bloody earth and they prayed to her.

Through sorcery and curse, they made her into a small, fragile god.

-oOo-

In the beginning, the Tribe of the Wolf-Mother would sacrifice people at the sacred spring where the goddess was. They would raid other tribes, and take whoever they caught and bring them here to bleed into the water, turning the steaming, bubbling spring red. They made their small goddess bigger and greater with worship and sacrifice. But the years eventually ate away at their lust for blood. The goddess gave them gifts and she put the wolf into their bloodlines in return for their worship. In time, they had less need to make other tribes afraid, because the other tribes kept away from them now. Skin-changers, the other tribes whispered. Wolf-people. Eventually, they stopped bringing children and old men. For a time they brought deer instead. But after a while, that gave way to small carvings of deer made from antlers. A few bronze coins. Sometimes a sword or a spear. Times changed, and people forgot the first purpose of the tradition. But the goddesses who lived in the earth, the water, the air: she remembered.

And what she remembered was the aching, terrible pain of knowing that she had betrayed and killed someone she loved. What she remembered was that the only path to redemption was to protect her family, forever and ever.

-oOo-

In the beginning, the man wandered out of the north during a time of war. He was a sorcerer of the snows, and he brought his magic with him, hiding it in his heart, and so he brought his chiefmost servant with him too: the demon of the snows and winters that his family had bound long ago. He was escaping something he had done in some war or another--war may well be war--but sometimes a person goes too far, does a thing too evil, even for wartime--and sometimes the families of the victims decide to get their own revenge after the wars are done. So he fled, southward, looking only to find a quiet place to settle. Looking only to quietly slip away, to escape his past.

In those days The Pass of Faces was freshly carved, and there were people living in the stone city of Tol-i-Osk. But the people of Tol-i-Osk disliked and mistrusted the sorcerer. They told each other that soft, menacing footfalls followed the sorcerer about, as if hunting him, and there were whispering noises in the shadows when he passed, and the air always turned cold wherever he stood for any length of time. So they made him move on. He wandered south, wending through small petty kingdoms and past little hillfort villages atop their drab dales.

When he came to the town beside the winding road where the people refused to even open their gates for him, he grew enraged--sick at last of the small-minded fear--so he bid his demon destroy them all, freezing their blood into ice, and shattering the walls, and bringing down the whole edifice. That place is ruins now. Nameless. Lost. Just a tumble of stones beside the road with a bad reputation for eerie noises in the night.

He wandered eastward then, off the road, seeking comfort in solitude. But instead he found a strange tribe that lived in the woods, a tribe that had hardly changed in a thousand years, a tribe little in contact with the outside world. If he had asked anyone about them, these people who wore hides and used flint and bronze, the farmers and woodcutters of the surrounding villages would have called them cannibals, monsters, skin-changers. Were-things. Warglings. But he saw in them the possibility of useful servants.

They tried to drive him off. They tried to kill him. But the sorcerer of the snows was more powerful than they. He was more powerful than the small, petty beast-goddess they worshipped in the hills. She fought him, and she lost. He drove the wolf-tribe away from their rude huts, off into the woods and he bound them with his magic. He bid that his demon torment them, and make them be wolves always, and make them guard his new home. Then he commanded that his demon build a great house on the hill, a place fit for a sorcerer of repute. He dwelled in his new house on the hill, guarded by his demon, guarded by his wolves. And for a time he was happy to be alone, and then, eventually, he thought of companionship, of human talk, and of food that wasn't brought to him by the cold hands of a resentful demon.

So he told the demon to watch the road and bring him servants, farmers, tradesfolk: people enough to make a small village at the foot of the mount. And a wife, too, he added. He wanted a wife so that he might have a child, so that he might found a lineage.

After a year of living in the house, the snow-apples sprouted and grew out of the rock crevices, embracing the hill with soft grey leaves and white fruit. The snow apples were the ancient sigil of his house, and given time, they would grow wherever his family lived. It was a magic that came up out of the earth: when they sprouted, he knew he had found his new home.

He was the first sorcerer of the House of Snow and Apples. When he died, the death-tree grew out of his chest, and his eldest son took the apple, and ate the pip, and became the sorcerer and master of the snow demon. And so on, and so on, through the years. Son after son. Grandson after grandson.

And all the while, the wolf-people, the original people of the land, lived in the cold and survived on thin, fatless game, and were forced to go about and do the sorcerer's bidding.

And all the while, she watched from her place in the hills, fuming, enraged that she could do so little to protect her family from this miserable little clan of sorcerers with their pet demon.

All the while she smarted in rage that the sorcerer had so easily dismissed her attempts to destroy him.

Slowly, gradually, an idea formed in her mind, as she watched the sorcerers bed their women and spawn offspring, and start it all over again. Such small, momentary lives had they: but if she might merge the bloodline of the sorcerers into her own tribe... that might allow her to regain her rulership of the land... so she looked among her family, living in the woods, and she found a young she-wolf who was as lovely to look at in her human form as she was in wolf-shape, and this she-wolfing was clever, and daring too... and the forgotten goddess in the hills called to the young wolf-maid in dreams, beckoned her, and bade her to tread the sacred walk, up to the place where the water is hot and there is a huge wolf carved into the stone, cut by long-dead hands. And there, the spirit of the sacred place whispered to the young woman and told her how to be in human form, not wolf, and how to sneak past the sorcerer's magic, how to hide her own true nature, how to poison the wife, and how to work such charms as would seduce the sorcerer with a sureness of getting a babe off him.

Go, she whispered to the girl.

The girl's name was Thera.

-oOo-

In the beginning, Vespertine did not suspect Thera at all. She was just some young thing, come up from the village to help in the grand house. She was convenient when he wanted someone to warm his sheets and take his mind off the sudden, unexpected death of his wife. She was too meek, too lowly. She was below suspicion, until that is, she swelled with child and the babe came. If she had known that the child would betray her, she might have run off before the birth. But she did not know. Even the goddess in the hills did not know, for surely she would have warned Thera? Although Thera could master her form, keeping herself in human guise, the babe could not. Vespertine only had to lock eyes on it, and it's shifting form--wolfish and humanish and wolfish again--to know that his blood had been mingled with the wolf-creatures of the woods. He flew into a rage and ordered young Thera hanged from the outer walls as an example to the creatures that lurked outside. Then he took the naked babe, with the afterbirth barely cleaned off, and carried it to the edge of the village. His wolf-slaves had already gathered in a silent, watchful mass. So many yellow eyes were lit on him. He ought have killed the child in front of them, but he stayed his hand--at the last moment, he could not do it--it was his son, after all--and he could not bring himself to do that. So he gave it to the wolves instead, dropping it into the snow and mud at their feet. He spoke then. "Take your unwholesome pup. Slaughter him. Or raise him. I do not care. He is no proper son of mine. And do not ever think to get into my house with trickery again. I'll send my Jack down to freeze all of you into hanks of blood and frozen bone if ever you do that again. Understand me to be serious in this." He turned his back on them and walked off.

-oOo-

In the beginning the babe was sickly, but another wolf had recently given birth and still had milk. She took the babe and suckled him along with her own newborn daughter, Isthinthaë. And the wolves gathered about and watched. For they could tell that there was something momentous in the making. One of the old wolves, half-blind, nearly toothless, foretold that there would be a child born under this turn of the moon that would be their saving. And this child: this one who's blood was that of the sorcerer and the wolf-people. Surely, he must be the one to deliver them back to rulership of this land? This weak babe would save them. He must. They had suffered so long.

-oOo-

Caewen awoke. She gasped deeply for breath. It was as if she had surfaced from a sea of blood and years. The darkness around her was suddenly alive with motes of power she had never seen before. She saw secrets in the curls of smoke that drifted in the stagnant air above her face. Unseen, minor little spirits wafted around, dancing in the smoke, playing among the embers that floated from the peat fire. The small spirits sung to each other in wordless, silent quips of song: each a mindless thing, joyous, but momentary. As she watched them play, she understood that the spirits were smoke-hues: born out of the smoke, living only a few seconds and disintegrating again: their whole lives thumbed out as a tiny drama in the air--born--here--gone--over and over.

She sucked in another breath and was glad to be alive. As she twitched her fingers and toes, she felt blood coursing through her, but also she felt as if it was dripping off her skin, runnelling down her cheeks, hot and red. Was it really blood? She looked at the back of her hand. The red, pulsing wet stuff was visible to her, and invisible to her at the same time. She could both see it, and not see it. This was certainly a strange experience. She turned her hand, looking at the drip of the illusory stuff from her fingers. But was it blood? Or was it her own afterbirth? Or something else again? Something more primordial and salt-watery. Was it the red ocean at the dawn of time?

Although the liquid rivulets that ran even now from her skin were not entirely *real*, she was captivated by the stuff, obsessed by it: this salt-blood-birth water. As she watched, as seconds passed, the red liquid dried and faded from her senses. Until, at last, it was gone, as if it might never have existed. And maybe it never had?

She looked around then, blinking, dazed. Apparently, the hour was late. She had been in a trance-state for how long? Hours, at least. Those who were awake, including Dapplegrim, were watching her, looking alert, concerned. She tried to smile to reassure them but her whole face felt numb and strange. She spoke, and the first words out of her throat were weird, even to her own ears. "There is no beginning. It is all beginnings. Beginnings, all the way back."

Dapplegrim snorted. "That's the sort of nonsense a magician would say." He was trying to slide a humorous note into his voice, but the worry was clear and thick. He swished his tail and leaned closer, nostrils flaring. "Are you alright?"

She pushed herself upright on her elbows. The shadows tasted of spices. The air tasted like the richest darkest red honey. Every breath she took curdled like burning sugar in her throat.

"I am," she said. And then, taking in a draught of the smoky, rich air, she said, almost exuberant feeling, "The world is alive. There are so many small, invisible points of life, all drifting on the air. We are full of names and spirits. And I am a name, spoken. And I am a thought, flickering. And I am a word, murmured by the universe." She breathed in a deep breath. "We are all but names and momentary thoughts and worn-down memories."

Dapplegrim spoke, hushing her, "Quiet. Quiet. Please. You'll scare everyone, Caewen. Don't talk like that. Be still. Don't talk in circles."

"No." She tried to get up but found herself unsteady. "There's no time for that. The wolf-people will be angry, wanting revenge. I must speak to Jack. That is the path now." With effort she got herself upright, and feeling more dizzy than steady, she stumbled across the floor to the outside door. There, she started to fumble with the heavy oak bar that was thrown across it. Others in the room saw her, and said, "No!" and "Stop!" and hurried to their feet. But they were not fast enough. She threw off the bar and pushed the door open. There was a brief moment in which it was possible to see two naked people in the starlight, both looking around, startled, but also quickly smiling. They must have thought that the villagers in the house were going to try and escape, or maybe that they had simply given up, and were about to surrender.

But Caewen raised her left hand and pulled it through the air feeling the knots and threads of the world that hung invisible there, beyond the usual sense of touch. She twisted the knots and pulled the threads, so that mist rose, churning up out of the ground. Magic flowed into her from somewhere else... from *someone* else... it was a cold magic, alive, throbbing, angry and pained. The rush of power felt awful and wonderful all at once--but she grit her teeth and made the fog into a confusing blanket. She did not have to think *how* to do this. It was like eating an apple. It was like walking down a road. She simply knew the correct movements as if she had always known them. The

wolflings who were caught in the ice-cold fog started stumbling about, calling to each other, trying to find the house. But they would not find Gare's house, no matter how much they hunted and yelled and howled angrily. The magic in the mist was too strong. It would mislead them around and around.

She sighed out a breath and small ghost-shapes blew from her mouth.

She had summoned him.

And as she stood, waiting, she heard now some distant sounds: the whistling, high-pitched aria of a storm-wind approaching--whipping over the tops of the pines--bending them and crusting them with all the glitters of frost as it passed. And then the wind was here, in a whirl before her. It took form. It alighted on the ground.

Jack was no longer the rail-thin, joking creature he had been when he floated on the air in the house on the rock. He appeared now as something inhuman, tall, muscular and beautiful in the way a threatening storm is beautiful. It seemed as if small stormclouds played about him and flowed through his hair. Lightning flashed in his eyes. His veins shone with a blue light under ice-white skin. Caewen wondered if the sorcerers who made him into a slave found this appearance frightening. Perhaps they had commanded him to take a lowlier, less threatening form. In this taller, menacing shape, he looked as much a god as a demon. A hard circle of burning white frost spread around where he stood.

As he looked at Caewen, Jack took a prowling step closer. "So," he said, "As I thought. Betrayed. My trust was all for naught."

"No," said Caewen. "I ate the seed. That is true. I have summoned you. Yes. And maybe I should have simply destroyed it? I don't know any more. It is an evil thing to have inside me. I can feel it changing me, corrupting me. I cannot hold back the power-longing forever, but I will struggle against it. I will free you. I made a promise. I will free you."

"Then be done. Free me. For of lies, I want none. You need speak only that word, freedom, just the one."

"No. I'm sorry. Not yet. I have some final tasks for you first. Then you are free."

"Ah. But that would be how it starts. Just one task. Then one more, and more. And now the moral fibre smarts. It bends. It breaks. And then, for poor Jack? Freedom? No. Not for Jack, Jack, old and poor. No freedom, no, not nevermore." His voice was despondent. Angry too. And sad.

She steeled herself against the waves of magic and power that were washing into her soul. It would be so easy to keep the demon bound. To keep him as a familiar-thing, and take such vast power from him. And what would be the balance of that? How much good might she do in the world with a creature like this at her beck and call. No. That was the path to unthinking dominance. With a tightness in her throat, she said, again, "I *will* free you. But I cannot let these people die. You cannot let these people die. They never did anything to deserve being torn apart by weird-wolves, or hacked up, or burned... or whatever it is that the wolflings are planning to do. You think that is unfair? Or a breaking of our bargain? Well, I cannot hold it against you. It is a bending of my promise. I said I would free you, though I did not say exactly *when* I would free you. So, when you are free, you can come looking for me--for revenge--if you want. But first: I will command you if I must. I would rather you agreed to act out of kindness to those who are weaker than you. But I will command you, if I have to. I have that power now."

He seemed to consider this. "If I agree, if I assent, you must promise this to me, you will not conjure, abjure or place command on me."

"The commandment inflicts pain, does it not?"

"It hurts so. Through and through. Like fire in snow."

"Then, Jack, please do this for me. I will not put a command or spell-sway on your actions. I will let you decide. But please... go about the houses and find everyone who is hiding. Tell them to gather their belongings, bags of seeds, what animals they can drive easily. Then, take them away from this place. Lead them safely to the ruins by the road. Make a mist, or a wall of ice. I don't know: whatever you think is best." She paused in a moment of thought. "I think you destroyed that town, years and years ago?"

"I was made to. Through and through."

"Rebuild it then. You have that power in you. Raise up the stones, carve such shapes as please you, but make many strong houses and gardens and put a stone wall around it all, with good strong gates. Make a place for the people to be safe within."

"And then?" He whispered.

"And then, freedom. I ask nothing more of you after that."

"It will hurt you, sure and true. You've had a taste of maddening charms. You cannot simply give it up without the suffering of some harms. My power will be swept away--you will be left... bereft... hollow... empty... grey."

"I will take that chance. I know that giving up the power that flows from you will be hard on me. I know that." She became more reflective, saying, "I think... it could kill me, couldn't it? To just have it all rush out of me at once?"

He did not reply, except to simply nod.

"But I made a promise. You will go free, Jack-in-the-Mist. I'll not keep you bound to me." And she laughed, and the laughter sounded lopsided, even to her own ears. "Ha!" she said. "You see. Now you have me rhyming, you bastard. You get inside a person's soul, don't you?"

"It is the way of things," he said, "and now, if you will permit, I will begin the task, and then at last, at long last, my service will remit." More solemnly he added, "Thank you, little mortal child. I will live a thousand, thousand years, in icy wild, and if other demons to me do say, 'how did you escape the sorcerer's chain?', then I will remember you, and your kindness, today."

"Actually, before you go may I ask one last thing?"

He nodded, perhaps a touch suspicious.

"Dapplegrim and I will not be coming with you to the ruins beside the road. We are riding off east instead. I will leave you, and trust you to do what you have agreed to do. We are going to the sacred place in the hills. The place where the hot waters come up through the stone."

"Ah..." he said, and his voice was full of meaning: you are going *there*...

"If you might keep up enough fog to confuse pursuit, it would be helpful."

"But of this, of fog and mist, you do not demand of me this?"

"No. As before, I ask it only. If you wish to give it."

He nodded. "It is trivial for me. It is done." The fogs grew thicker and more curdled when he spoke. The noises of the lost warglings grew dimmer and more suffocated by the curtains of cold whiteness.

Caewen turned back to the open door behind her. "Did you catch all of that?" she asked.

There were several round, worried faces hanging back in the gloom. One of them was Gare, and he replied. "I think so. The sorcerer's demon will take us to safety, and make a place for us to live--out of stone at the ruins place, aye?"

"Yes."

Dapplegrim lowered his head and flicked his ears back and forth. "But we're not going that way?"

"No, Dapple. We've a last thing that needs to be seen to. One last thing." She turned, and she tried to peer into the thick white fog. She could see nothing at all, hardly even her own hand outstretched in front of her face, but she could feel the rough direction of the east, towards the place where she knew the old spirit of the wolf-people was in the rocky hills. She could feel the loneliness that drifted from that direction. She could feel longing. Pain, too, just as viscerally as she felt the cold droplets of moisture gathering on her face, on her eyelashes. "Just one last voice to talk to."

-oOo-

Somewhere, out upon a frozen hillside, half-hidden in a deep drift of snow, there was a icy body dressed in fern-green under the cloud-choked stars. Her open, dead eyes were the same colour as the stones at her throat. Both stones and eyes were frosted with patterns of ice.

Slight stirs and whispers of the nearby air gave off a feeling that something was present nearby the corpse. A chill on the air that was deeper than mere Autumnal coldness hinted that the soul had perhaps not yet departed.

And this was so.

The otherworld was grey, muted and full of the weird swishing and whisperings of all the thousands of spirits of the sky, the earth, the trees, the snow and the winds. Within this turmoil, a pallid ghost crouched down, invisible, huddled beside the frozen corpse. This frail apparition looked around, glancing over the expanse of shimmering white-greyness that was the spirit-world. The sky was an odd inverse of its living colours: an flat chalky white where the night clouds should have been. A scatter of blazing black holes gouged into the sky where the stars should have sparked.

She had no thoughts and no plans now. No cunning tricks left. No escapes. She was dead. Her fate had caught up with her, and now, here she was, alone with the shadows, with the swirling winds and weird noises of the world that is just beyond the veil. Waiting. Waiting. For what? Eternal punishment? Justice? Or would the rulers of the afterlife leave her to simply wander about here, a lost soul? She knew enough of the grey otherworld to know that this was a dangerous place for one small ghost. After all, the void was not just a place for the ghosts of the recently dead--there were demonic things here too, and unkind spirits, terrible, mad gods.

The flickering expanse seethed and danced all around her, even as she huddled down beside her own dead corpse.

Dead is dead.

But worse things can happen to a soul. There are things that eat souls. There are things that make clothing out of them. There are things that commit other cruelties.

Even as she worried about the wandering monstrosities of the otherworld, she felt increasingly tired. She felt as if she might simply lie down in the snow and earth and sleep forever. And maybe that is what the dead do? Some people do say that. The dead just lay themselves down and sleep. Some say that's all there is to the afterlife. A long sleep.

But then, as thoughts of dreamless slumber filled her thoughts, she noticed movement, far off. A gleaming and flickering light emerged from a few distant ashy-white pines, and the light drifted towards her. It took an interminable time. She watched it come. After waited for what seemed like hours, at long last, she could make out that the light was another ghostly form: a young woman, about her own age by appearance.

The ghost of the sorceress who had called herself Tamsin, stood up. She had no throat with which to swallow, and no heart to feel pumping: but the memories of these things twisted through her, causing her to feel afraid, giddy, slightly sick.

The walking ghost drew nearer. She watched it shed its light across the dim snow, flickering and casting weird patterns of intermingled ghost-silver and shadowy black. When this other ghost drew close enough to speak, the soul who had been using the name Tamsin said, as firmly as she could manage, "Sister."

The other ghost stopped, and she smiled, a wain, faint smile. "And my sister."

"You have caught me at last then? After all these years."

"You have been running swiftly," said the other ghost. "Always running. And it has been many long years. Yes. I have followed you. And now here we are."

"Where are the others? All the others I murdered? Should not they be here too?"

"Oh, they all gave up long ago."

"There are more recent victims of course."

"The merchant in the woods."

"Yes," said the soul who had been calling herself Tamsin. "I worried about that. Killing again for blood and magic. But I was so afraid... I wanted to live."

A shrug. "Oh, he wasn't a vengeful sort. I spoke to him after you slit his throat, and I told him how to find his way home, and how to lie down and sleep in his own back garden. He didn't want to chase you for revenge. He just wanted to go home. See his family again. Even if it was just with dead eyes, even if just for a moment, just once more."

"And the others--they all just gave up chasing me?"

"It has been a thousand years or more, has it not? Some of them got tired and forgot who they were; some drifted away and were reborn anew, clean of their memories; some of them turned into skulking spirits, mindless and petty. But they are all gone. The parade of ghosts is somewhat reduced in number now. It is just me."

"And what revenge will you have? Whatever it is, I will not stop you." She looked at the snow. "I have no right to even try."

The sister-ghost smiled, more kindly than might be expected. "None. No revenge. You were afraid I was plotting against you. Your court magicians lied to you. Your warrior-poets lied to you. And you trusted them, and not me. So you murdered me. But all the while, I loved you as my sister, and I love you still. I forgive you, sister mine. Oh, once upon a time you were a dark queen of the shadows. But I forgive you."

A ghost cannot cry, but the ghost who had called herself Tamsin would have, if she could. "I've been using your name."

"I know."

"I have felt nothing but guilt for so long."

"I know."

"Now what?"

Another slight shrug. "I don't know. I've been caught between the worlds of the living and the dead for all these years, following you about, just a little distance behind you. I don't know what happens next. But now that we are together, whatever comes next: it is for the both of us to find out. Together."

The two ghosts came closer to each other. It surprised the child-sorceress to discover that when she reached out for her sister, they were able to clasp hands. The ghostly fingers touched ghostly fingers.

"Come now," said the sister-ghost. "I think we still have some way to walk."

And so they walked away together, away from the frozen corpse in the snow, away from the living world.

-oOo-

As they rode out of the village, as they threaded among the pines and the dim-glimpsed houses, Dapplegrim asked, "What about Tamsin?"

"Tamsin's dead."

"You're certain?" he snorted.

"Yes. I ate the appleseed. I fell into the pit of sorcery that is inside Jack. I saw and felt everything. I saw everything he has ever done. Vespertine was in a rage. He ordered Jack to find her, and kill her. And though Jack knew she had nothing to do with Varrel's death, he could not disobey. Jack found her struggling in deep snow, off that way..." she waved a hand at the expanse of whiteness. "Away out there. Out somewhere beyond the village. She fought--she put up quite a fight--but she was tired, exhausted, and without anything to draw power from. Tamsin's last death found her." She shrugged her shoulders up, hunching them against the cold. "But she lived such a long time. She had ten spans of lives. I don't know if I can feel sad. A little, I guess. But she lived so long. And she did some bad things to try and live longer still."

Dapplegrim twisted his head, so that one red-lit eye caught the snowy glare. "I've lived a long time. I suppose you won't feel sad if some ugly spirit leaves me all slaughtered in the snow? Hur."

"Oh, Dapple," said Caewen, teasing, "of course I would feel sad. How would I get about without you? I'd have to walk everywhere."

"I ought to buck and throw you into the snow."

She smiled, leaned forward, and laid a hand on his neck, beneath the mane where it was warm. They rode on like this, in companionable silence. The pines and low rolling hills fell away behind them as the landscape grew rockier, sharper and more bare of plants. Hard, angry outcroppings shot

up from the earth, and though the fog was now wisping away into thin ribbons, a low cloud had descended from the sky instead, hanging like white, cold river-foam in the air. This low cloudbank concealed the top of even the meanest cliffs and spurs, whilst leaving the under-air strangely clear and vibrantly hued.

The cool air in Caewen's face stung her eyes and even brought some tears, as the two of them galloped. Dapplegrim was tireless, but Caewen was not--and she was feeling the effects of sleepless nights, the trance of the old magic, and in a more general sense, the weariness that comes from being guarded and alert for too many hours strung together.

And everything looked so strange now too. She saw patterns where she had never seen them before. There were secrets in the way snowflakes fell to earth. She saw how the pine-needles did not form random messes on the ground--but rather, they were arranged into letters, drawn in hard, straight needle-gashes on the snow. Words were written there, on the earth. Words dropped by the pines. She read the words, and they made her shiver. Small spirits drifted by. Vast wandering, peaceful, unseen things rolled above them in the air, inhabiting the fog and clouds.

"It's all so strange," she said to herself. "There are so many secret things in the world."

"What was that?" said Dapple.

"Oh. Nothing. Talking to myself."

"Hur."

At last, they came to a crevice in the over-towering cliffs, and found a path there. Caewen recognised it from the trance-dreams. This is where the wise of the village had brought the girl so long ago. Caewen said, "Here. This will do. I'll go alone from here. I have to go alone."

"Are you sure?" said Dapplegrim.

"No," she confessed. She climbed down from the saddle they had scavenged from Gare's stable before leaving. "But I don't think we should go up there looking as if we might have violence in our intentions." And thinking about this, she drew her sword and laid it on a rock beside Dapplegrim. The bronze shone like golden fire in the thin and cloud-filtered light. "I'll go alone." She gave Dapplegrim a scratch behind an ear. "After all, you can always avenge me if this goes badly."

"Don't make such jokes," he said. "Hur. And I don't even know where you are going? Or why?"

"I'm going to talk to a goddess," said Caewen. "Not a big, grand goddess. Not a spirit from the dawn of time. A small goddess." With a slight frown she added. "Small and alone."

"Alright then," said Dapplegrim. He didn't seem to have anything more to add, so Caewen turned and took a step into the narrow rift in the cliff.

The way had old carvings cut into the living stone. Wolf-shapes mostly, but also the strange old marks of a people who lived by hunting and wandering. There were circles and rings. Caewen, with her newfound sorcerous sight, saw the patterns in them at once and realised they were very old maps of the stars, so old that the stars had changed since they were carved. Other patterns, knot-shapes and twisting root-shapes had been protective spells once, intended to keep the uninvited away from this path. But their magic was long dead. The shamans who had carved those, with old pieces of sharp copper and stone adzes, they were dead a long age now. Their magic was dead too.

Up through the crevice, Caewen went, until she had to climb instead of walk. As she clambered up the rough shapes of steep stairs, she started to hear the noise of water flowing above her and around her. She looked into cracks in the rock and realised that water was trickling down through caves in the stone, presumably disappearing into some subterranean system deep below: there was no river at the foot of the cliff, after all. Small hints of steam curled out of the cracks. The water that flowed behind the curtains of stone was hot.

After half-an-hour or more of climbing and creeping, Caewen reached a place where she could see bright, cloudy light above her. She moved up through a final passage in the rock and found herself in a wide bowl in the rocky crags. Moonlight was aglow here. Everything was lit brightly. Cliffs hung in weird shapes all around, hemming in the space. They were cut with old symbols too, just as the path had been.

In the midst of the encircling rock was a crystal pool, bright and steaming. The smell was somewhere between earthy and off-putting. Hints of rotten egg lay behind the more clayey and hot-water smells.

At the heart of the pool arose a single great rock. Just as Caewen had seen in her dream-vision, the rock was carved into the rough shape of a she-wolf, with teats and teeth and glaring eyes.

As Caewen walked up to the water's edge she could feel an oppressive presence close on her. She looked down at the thin crust that trimmed the pool. It was red, purple, yellow and the water was deathly clear. No living thing stirred in these waters. Without needing to test, Caewen knew that the water was searing hot. Anything foolish enough to dip in this pool would be reduced to a boiled corpse in short measure.

On the floor of the pool, the white shapes of carved antlers and much older bones were still visible. She did not look too closely at them. She did not want to see human shapes there.

"Hello," she said, and felt rather weak and stupid for trying to start a conversation with a goddess that way. "I mean to say, I want to talk with you. I know you are still here. I know that your family has mostly forgotten about you. I also know what they did to you. The wise ones."

If a silence could properly be described as howling, that was the silence that answered her. No voices or magic words came seeping out of the water, but everything, the stone, the water, the rising steam, the thin crust of soil under Caewen's feet--it all felt suddenly attentive. The presence that was here, dwelling inside everything here, was bent entirely on Caewen now.

"I know that they made you kill your own sister. I know you loved her. And they made you kill her. And then they told you it was your fault, not theirs. And then they put spells on you and worshipped you and turned you into a goddess of rage, of vengeance, of fury... but you don't have to be those things. You don't have to keep being what they tried to make you into. I saw that too--in the tumbling dreams--I saw that their grasp on you is weak now. All the wise ones, they are all dead. Their magic is all crumbled. There is nothing binding you but your own guilt, your own memories."

A groan of wind in the canyon spaces above. Steam twisting into strange, angry shapes.

"I'm only telling you the truth. And here is some more truth. Your plan did not wholly work, but your people have reclaimed the home on the rocky hill. They are there now. The sorcerer is dead. His son is dead. The line is ended. Soon, the snow-demon will be freed too, and he will go off to some other place I expect. Somewhere wilder. I think he's had quite enough of people. But what of you?" She steadied herself, tried to make her voice level, tried not to let the fear in. "You cannot keep your people safe the way you used to. It isn't enough to hide them from the world, and make them vicious, and scare away everyone else. Eventually--just like before--someone more powerful will come along, and that person will only see monsters that can be made into servants. You have to protect them in other ways." A calmer silence. Less of a sense of the winds heaving. Was she making progress? Was the goddess in this place listening? "There will be a new town founded, not so far away. Don't go into the dreams of your family and tell them to raid it, or destroy it. Tell them to reach out, to form an alliance. The world is a bigger, harsher place than when you last remember it. Great kingdoms stride the vales. Empires straddle whole lands. You cannot fight armies of ten thousand, twenty, a hundred-thousand spears. But alliances might stand together. Friendships might last." She was trembling. The strain of talking to a thing that was so vast, and had been dead so long that hardly any part of it was human any longer... it was telling on Caewen. "And remember, please, if this is all you remember of me today: remember what it was to be alive, and hopeful, and full of joy, sadness, anger, pain, laughter... remember *yourself*. They made you into a thing of power. But at your core, you are still that little girl, afraid. Don't slip further from your humanity. Come back to it." Finally, she added, as resolutely as she could. "You are not a wolf. You are the ghost of a little girl. Remember that. Please."

There was a stirring of the hot steam on the air, and a feeling of agitation. The shadows cast into the pool, the reflection of the wolf-carved rock, it all moved and rippled, giving just the barest sense of a mind in thought.

"Will you let me leave?" said Caewen. "I know I have intruded, and you could probably stop me, maybe even just strike me dead if you wanted to. But, may I go now? I've said my piece. That is all I came here to say. I just couldn't... I don't know. I don't know what I was hoping."

But the troubling on the water subsided, and the shadows seemed to grow less dark and less lengthy, and a stillness grew in the air.

"Thank you," said Caewen to the air and the water and the rocks. "It's all I ask. Just that you think on what I've said."

Slowly, and with extreme care, for she was now extremely tired, Caewen retraced her path from the ledge of the sacred pool, down through the divide in the rocks where the old carvings of wolves ran hunting over the cliff-sides, and then she was out into the open. By the time she reached the foot of the climb, dawn was growing the air and the red glare of a new sun was painted across the eastern sky. Had just the one day passed since the death of Vespertine? It felt so much longer.

Dapplegrim looked up, alert. "So you did it? Did your goddess listen to you?"

"She listened, but if she heard I do not know. I said some things that needed to be said. That's all."

"Hur. Can we go now? Can we finally leave this ill-festered land?"

"Yes--" but as Caewen spoke, she stumbled sideways, fell to one knee and felt her ribs freeze up on her. She could not breath. She could not take a single breath.

Dappelgrim shot to his hooves, and paced angrily in a tight circle around her, snarling upwards. "Is she doing this? Is she? I'll climb up there and destroy her! You hear me! Goddess or not, I'll eat your liver!"

"Not her," managed Caewen.

"What?"

"Not the goddess." She tried to draw in breath, but it was hard. She felt suddenly weak, threaded with cold, hollowed out with weariness. A large part of her just wanted to lie down and sleep forever. To simply lie down and just die felt like the only easy way. Pain and an awful, weak murkiness were playing inside her bones, inside her skull.

"Then what?" said Dapplegrim.

"Jack. He must have finished leading the townsfolk away, and building them a new town. His tasks are done. All his power is gone from me. He has withdrawn it, as we agreed. Jack is free."

"Oh. I see. Are you alright then? I mean, what can I do? Anything?" He snorted, worried.

"I confess that I feel not very well." She curled up on herself and lay against a rock. "Do we have a blanket? I need to rest for a while."

Dapplegrim used his teeth on the saddlebag until he was able to pull a woollen blanket out. Inelegantly, he managed to drape it over Caewen. She pulled at the corners until it covered her from chin to toe. "I need to rest." Her eyes fluttered shut. "Dapple?"

"Yes."

"I still know the magics. The spells and the secrets. They haven't gone away. They're all still in me. It's just that I've no power to draw on. I think I can still work magic if I really tried--but--well--but it would kill me I think. I'd have to use my own blood to give life to a spell. That wouldn't be good for me, would it?"

"No," said Dapplegrim. "No, it wouldn't. But rest now. Tomorrow we can ride south? Find somewhere warmer. Less troubled than this awful, half-frozen place."

"The wizard-moot. We have to go to the wizard-moot."

"Why?" said Dapplegrim. "Why would we ever want to do that? Bunch of prats, wizards."

"Because I promised Tamsin. If something happened to her. And something *has* happened to her. She is dead, after all. Dead. Tamsin. The Winter King. I promised her I'd tell them. The wizards. About him. The Winter King."

"Hush," said Dapplegrim. "I don't know what you promised, but it can wait. Don't exhaust yourself. Rest."

She shut her eyes and slept.

In the smoky interior of the house's grand hall, they were laughing and yelling and feasting. The fire was lit in the hearths again. No cold airs reigned here any longer. There was a stink of warmth, of hot bodies, of old, feral magic and wolfish scents.

Once the fog of the sorcerer's demon lifted, they discovered that all the cowering little villager-folk were gone, snuck away in the mist. The demon was gone too. They had all run off, tails tucked behind legs. It was unlikely any of them would be coming back. So this was a night for celebration--even if the mastery of the snow demon had slipped away from them, well, what did that matter? The People of the Wolf had at last reclaimed their ancestral home atop the crag in the woods. They were home.

The dead guardsmen, and what remained of Vespertine too, had all been dragged out into the snow for the crows, but the corpse of Varrel, who deserved special humiliation to Issie's mind, was strung up, hands and feet, from one of the roof beams so that it looked as if he was dancing as the fire shadows flickered and shifted.

"He so loved his songs and his dancing," said Issie with a hard sneer when it was done.

She was now sitting beside Vaire at the head of the table, where they had pulled up two of the smaller chairs to sit in, next to each other. The larger, throne-backed chair that Vespertine favoured was already split down to kindling and on the fire.

Vaire leaned over to her and offered her a piece of the salt-beef they'd brought up from the cellars. She took it in her mouth and chewed with a smile. "My lord," she said.

"My lady," he replied, a smooth resonance behind his voice.

But as he was about to pick up another piece of the meat, something stirred in the air. It was as if smoke in the ceiling space suddenly gathered a life into itself, congealing, merging smoke-into-shadow, and then forming a shape.

It was a small, featureless, black thing that dropped down onto the table in front of them. It stretched and it made a low, hissing noise. Turning around once, its shape resolved, until it looked a little like a mink, a little like a ferret and something like a cat made of shadows. Blinking lazy, shadow-black eyes it said, "Tssssch, tssssch tsssss. I have been following her in the dreams of peasants and tinkers and merchants. Tsssss. And so I follow her to this place?" The creature looked around. "Where is this place? What a strange place it is. Tssssch."

Vaire and Isthinae both stood, knocking their chairs backwards. Both of them drew knives of dark, natural river-copper and held the blades warily before them. Others in the hall did the same. The people of the wolf had never mastered the art of ironwork, but their copper blades were sharp enough to cut shadows.

If the little darkness-thing was concerned, it did not show it. Nonchalantly, it sat, and fixed its eyes first on Issie, then Vaire, then the others in the room. "Tsssch. She has been here. But she is gone. Her and that awful horse-creature, too. Nasty, ugly brute."

"Wait," said Issie. "You mean Caewen? You're looking for Caewen?"

"Yes! Yes! Tssssch. Tsss. Where is she? Where?"

"What business have you with her?" asked Vaire, perhaps a touch too delicately.

Did the creature sense that Caewen was not much loved here? Perhaps he could smell a change in the air at her name? Perhaps he just knew, the way demons of the shadows sometimes do. "She overthrew and destroyed my master. My business with her is my own. If you are impolite, tssssch, tsss, if you do not wish to help me, then I will go on my way. Tssssch. It is no account to me. But I must find that one, Caewen, and mete out to her what she deserves."

"Is that so?" said Vaire.

Issie came more to the point. "If you are seeking revenge, you have our good wishes. She cheated us out of a great magic that would have been a boon to all our family and house. But the magic is gone now. And she is gone."

"Where? Tsss."

She shrugged. "I know not. Into the wilderness. To that road, off to the west, I suppose. She seemed to have an interest in the wizard-moot. Her and the child-enchanted spoke of it at the dinner. You might try there."

"Wizard-moot?" whispered the cat-mink-ferret creature. "No. That is too dangerous. Too many sorcerers and the such. Tssss. Too many magical eyes seeing. Too many magical snares set and waiting. No. Tsssssch. Tsch. A newly free and wild spirit like me? I'd be bound up in a bottle in a blink of an eye. No. I will hunt, yes, yes. I will lurk, yes. And then I will watch. Tsssch. Tsss. Tssss. And wait."

And with that he jumped from the table, into a patch of shadows on the floor. Whether he passed right through the darkness, as if it were a doorway into another world, or simply merged into it, none could afterwards say for certain. But the little shadow-demon was never again seen in the House of Snow and Apples.