

# *Song of Sorcery*



Songs from the  
**Seashell 1 Archives**

*Elizabeth Ann Scarborough*



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*Songs from the Seashell Archives: Book 1*

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## ONE THING AFTER ANOTHER

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A passing log swept the boat out from under Maggie, and she dropped with a shocking splash into the river, the rope slipping agonizingly in her hands. Suddenly her body was tossing and turning with the torrent.

Then she felt Colin's arm about her waist. "Got you!" he yelled above the river, nearly breaking his own hold on the rope with the shock of her added weight. "Grab on now!" Flinging her arm wildly in his direction, she hooked her elbow about his neck, nearly throttling him.

When at last they reached shore, and Maggie had clambered out of the water onto the bank, she looked up to see a large green-and-turquoise dragon that murmured to herself: "Aha! Dinner is served."

"The word for SONG OF SORCERY is delicious!"

-ISAAC ASIMOV'S SF MAGAZINE

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## DEDICATION

*For Betty, Don, Monte, and Gladys Scarborough and Richard Gridley Kacsur and the pets who are m family. And for Dr. Martha Kowalski, who checked her own laboratory work while her office nurse was fighting dragons. Also for Jeannie Jett, Marion Watts, Allen Damron and Dr. Jeff Trilling, who not only believe in fantastic beasties and awesome enchantments, but believe in me as well.*

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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The “song of sorcery” quoted by Colin (and added to by him) is a compilation of several different versions of “The Gypsie Laddie,” “Whistling Gypsy O” or “Gypsy Davey,” a popular folk ballad believed to date from the 1600’s. I am deeply grateful to Dover Books for reprinting *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* collection, edited by Francis James Child, from whom the lyrics I’ve used in *Song of Sorcery* have been gleaned, and also to the many wonderful performers of folk music whose artistic stewardship of these old songs has been a continuing source of inspiration. I owe particular thanks in this respect to my good friend Allen Damron.

If it hadn't been for Maggie's magic, the eggs would have tumbled from the basket and shattered when the panting barmaid careened into her. The automatic gathering spell barely had time, as it was to snatch the eggs into the container before they were spilled back out again as the distraught young woman began tugging at Maggie's sleeve.

"Come! Be quick now! Your old Granny's at it again!"

"Be careful!" Maggie scrambled to keep her eggs from breaking, trying at the same time to snatch her sleeve from the girl's grasp. "What do you mean?"

"Some poor young minstrel was singing a song, and just like that she starts ravin' and rantin' and changes him into a wee birdie, and commenced chasin' him and callin' on her great cat to come eat him up! Ooooooh, I hears the cat now—do be quick!" This time she had no occasion to do further snatching at the sleeve, but slipped instead on the forgotten trail of egg mess left in Maggie's wake as she galloped across the barnyard and through the tavern's back door.

Wood clattered on stone and fist on flesh as the patrons of the tavern rudely competed for the front exit, tripping on overturned chairs and trampling table linens underfoot in their haste to be gone. Only three of the most dedicated customers remained at their table, placidly sipping their brew, watching the commotion with far less interest than they watched the level in their flagons.

Granny's braid was switching faster than the tail of a cow swatting blowflies as she ran back and forth. She showed surprising agility for one of her age, and for all her leaping about was not too out of breath to utter a constant stream of hearty and imaginative curses. With the grace of a girl she bounded over an upturned bench and then to the top of a table, whacking the rafter above it with furious blows of her broom.

"Come down from there this instant, you squawking horror, and take what's coming to you!" Granny demanded, black eyes snapping, and body rocking with the fury of her attack. "Ching!" she hollered back over her shoulder. "Ching! Here, kitty. Come to breakfast!"

It was fortunate for the mockingbird that Maggie saw him dive under the table to escape the broom before the cat spotted him. Just as the cat gathered himself for a pounce on the low-flying bird, Maggie launched herself in a soaring leap and managed to catch the cat in mid-pounce, retaining her grip on him as they landed with a "whoof" just short of the table.

Struggling for the breath their abrupt landing knocked from her, Maggie clasped the cat tighter as he squirmed to escape. "Grandma, you stop that right now!" she panted with all the authority she could muster from her red-faced, spraddle-legged position on the floor.

"I will not!" the old lady snapped, taking another swing at the bird as it landed safely back in the rafter above the table. "No two-bit traveling tinhorn is going to gargle such filth in MY tavern about MY in-laws and get away with it." She jumped down from the table, looking for another vantage point from which to launch her attack.

"Whoever he is, Gran, change him back," Maggie insisted, setting the cat free now that the bird was out of reach on the rafter, quivering in its feathers at the slit-eyed looks it was receiving from both broom-wielding elderly matron and black-and-white-spotted cat.

The old lady glared at her granddaughter and primly adjusted her attire, tucking her braid back into its pin. "I most certainly will not."

"You most certainly will," Maggie insisted, noting with some consternation the set of her grandmother's chin and the anthracite glitter of her eyes. "Grandma, whatever he's done, it's for Dad"

to dispense justice—it just isn't the thing these days to go converting people into supper for one's ca just because they displease one. What will the neighbors think of us? It isn't respectable."

The old lady made a rude noise. "As if I cared about that. But alright, dear. Only wait until you hear what he did—wait till your father hears! That birdbrain will wish Ching *had* made a meal of him before Sir William's done with him!"

"But I didn't *write* the tune," protested the man who materialized in place of the mockingbird as Gran snapped the release ritual from her fingers. His arms and legs clung to the rafter for dear life. "Please, somebody get me a ladder."

"It isn't that high," snorted Grandma contemptuously. "Ching can jump it from this table."

"One of you men come help me with this thing," Maggie said, taking hold of one end of a long bench. A member of the stalwart society who'd remained at his station during the melee, being between pints, sauntered over and lifted the opposite end of the bench, and together they stood it on the table so that the former mockingbird could use it to descend.

"Now then, sir." Maggie stood with hands on hips as the stranger dusted himself off. "You have upset my grandmother terribly, and I want to know how and why. What did you say to her?"

"*I* upset *her*?" he stammered, the redness deepening in his already ruddy cheeks.

"What did he say to you?" Maggie whirled on the grandmother, who sat cross-legged on the floor trying to calm her cat. The cat was attempting to maintain a seriously threatening hissing crouch while being dragged flat-eared and whip-tailed into the old lady's lap.

"Nothing much, dearie," replied the grandmother, pouring over her descendant a gaze of the pure molasses. "He can explain to your father. Chingachgook is a trifle upset. I'll be at my cottage if you need me." She dimpled her dried-apple cheeks at the stranger. "Do sing Sir William that delightful song, young man. Ta, Granddaughter!" A wave of her arm and a final whip of the cat's tail from the crook of her other arm, and she was off.

When Maggie looked back for the stranger, she found him by the hearth, inspecting a fiddle for damage, setting it to his shoulder and lightly drawing a bow across the strings. He had slung a guitar across his back.

"You're a minstrel, then?"

He had to try out several notes before answering. "I'd hardly be making myself so popular with music and all if I were a stonemason, now would I?" He spoke flippantly and Maggie thought it was to conceal the tremble in his hands as, apparently satisfied that his instruments were undamaged, he slipped fiddle and bow into a soft skin bag. "Who are you?" he asked, "besides the relative of that witch?"

"You might do better with a sweeter lyric, minstrel. The one you've used so far today hardly seems to please, now does it? I am also Sir William's relative, as a matter of fact. He's my father."

The minstrel blinked twice, rapidly, as if expecting the medium-sized dusky-colored girl to be transformed into his idea of a fair and lithesome noblewoman. She continued to stare at him frankly and without noticeable approval, giving at best, in her bare feet, coarse brown tunic and skirt, and dirty white apron an impression of pleasant ordinariness dealing with momentary unpleasantness. Remembering his manners, the minstrel bowed, briefly. "Colin Songsmith, Journeyman Minstrel, at your service, lady."

She had followed his inspection with one of her own as far as her own dirty feet, and now looked up from them to meet his gaze with shrewd brown eyes. "You're looking no great treat yourself. Wait a bit."

Watching her disappear through the back door, Colin sank down onto a bench that had



miraculously remained upright and passed long, tired fingers over his eyes. Being changed from one thing to another, chased by witches and cats, and being changed back again was not the sort of thing his apprenticeship had prepared him for. He could make fair to middling instruments, write stirring epic sagas and set them to equally stirring and complimentary music, play lute, zither, harp, dulcimer, pipes, and drums competently, and fiddle and guitar splendidly, if he did say so. He was quite prepared to entertain at feasts and be feted, to immortalize adventures and be considered an adventurer by association, to record history, and to have all the ladies wooing him ever so prettily for songs immortalizing their own particular charms.

But no, he had decidedly not been prepared to be one moment singing the latest southern ballad to an appreciative audience, and the next to be regarding his fiddle from a bird's-eye view while the matronly sort who had served his cakes and ale batted at him with a broom, shrieking to her cat to come and eat him.

His training had not included lessons on maintaining his aplomb while hanging onto rafters and getting splinters in his fingers and knees, while some brown-haired young woman argued with her grey-and-brown-haired grandmother about the respectability of feeding him to the cat. The animal in question evidenced no concern whatsoever for their concerns as it lashed its wicked tail at him and licked its wicked chops.

His ruminations were interrupted by the return of the unlikely noblewoman, armed with a broom. Colin knocked over the bench he had been sitting on in his haste to escape.

“Don’t be a goose,” she said. “I’m only going to dust you off a bit. You’re all over feathers and dust, and if you’re going to see my dad you’ll have to be somewhat more hygienic. He’s been sick, and you reek of contamination.” He managed to stand still while she broomed him with brutal briskness.

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After five months in bed, no amount of twisting, turning or repositioning could make Sir William quite comfortable. It wasn’t just his legs, injured when an arrow inexplicably found its way into his horse while he was hunting, causing the poor beast to rear and roll on him. Granny Brown claimed sickbed fever had prolonged his recovery far past the usual convalescent period, and lack of active use had caused his legs to weaken and his wounds to mortify, conditions she continued to fight with her entire herbal arsenal.

What he wished was that Amberwine could come home—even for a short visit. Although she had no healing magic whatsoever, and cheerfully admitted incompetence at managing even the simplest aspects of household or estate affairs, her lighthearted faery gaiety and placid, accepting intelligence brought the dimples out from under Granny Brown’s traditional witch scowls, and even slowed the brusque and practical Maggie down to something close to gentleness.

Ah well, he sighed to himself, arranging his bedclothes in a position suitable for the company whose footsteps he heard climbing the long spiral staircase to his tower chamber. He’d made Amberwine the best possible marriage to that southern lord—the fellow might even get to be king, they said, and she seemed to like him in the bargain. Where he’d find such a match for thorny Maggie was more than a sick man should contemplate. It was complicated arranging marriages for not-quite-born-in-wedlock children one acknowledged belatedly. The village witch’s daughter who at the age of two years is declared to be the daughter of the Lord-High-Mayor-Knight-Protector-of-His-Majesty’s Northern-Territories (And Incorporated Villages) tends to remain the village witch’s daughter. No amount of equal education or advantage seemed to be able to make a witchchild as refined a lady as

her faery sister. For all of Amberwine's extra encouragement and coaching, Maggie remained neither fish nor fowl, her mother's line too base for nobles, her father's too noble for the base-born lads. Too bad she wasn't a son, so all he'd have to do would be to leave her the estate, which she managed most capably, and find her a wife. Worthy wives were bound to be more common commodities than worthy husbands, he felt sure.

To the poundings on his chamber door he called permission to enter, and a disheveled Maggie did so, followed by an only slightly less disheveled young man.

"Hullo, Dad." She dropped a kiss on his forehead.

"Lo, Magpie. Who's this?" He made an attempt at hearty cheerfulness in the direction of the young man.

"I caught Granny trying to feed him to Ching," she replied. "She was in a dreadful huff."

Sir William narrowed his eyes at the young man. "What did you do to cause my mother-in-law to wish to make cat food of you, sir?"

"Your pardon, noble sir." The young man made him a low bow. "Colin Songsmith, Journeyman Minstrel, at your service. Noble sir, I don't know why the lady was so vexed with me. I only sang the latest southern ditty for her, practicing it, y'know, before presenting it to you."

"Present it to me then, dammit, and let's get to the bottom of this. Maggie, dear, do scratch my shoulder—ah, right there—good girl."

Since his fiddle rendition of the tune had met with such avian results, Colin unslung his guitar from his back and tuned it. The tuning gave him time to compose himself. Finally he tapped his fingers on the soundboard of the guitar and told them, "Not being from this district, or the one where the song originates, I can't understand the fuss over it. I learned it from Minstrel Giles. He said he always comes north this time of year to avoid the first blossom of some of the southern plants. Gives him ill humors of the nose and throat, he says, and, as you well may imagine that's an unhandy affliction for a troubadour." He paused to allow this professional confidence to sink in. Maggie nodded briskly that she was perfectly capable of understanding occupational hazards and the old man impatiently waved him to continue. "Ahem—yes, as I was saying, folk down south at least, find this an entertaining tune. Giles says it's all the rage." He paused again for dramatic emphasis before striking the strings in a minor key. The guitar sent ripples of sobbing across the room once, twice, and once again.

The minstrel's features coarsened and his voice dropped to a lower register. The guitar was a storehouse he leaned upon as he confided ribald gossip to another peasant. The music galloped along in time to his voice.

"The gypsy Davey came riding along,  
Singing so loud and gaily.  
He sang so sweet and so complete,  
Down come our faery lady...down come the faery maid.

"She come trippin' down the stairs  
Her maids were all before her  
As soon's he saw her pretty face  
He cast some glamourie o'er her."

Sir William opened his eyes. A gypsy man had wreaked a great deal of havoc in the village two

festival seasons ago by absconding simultaneously with two of the estate's dairy maids, sisters whose soiled state Sir William had had to launder with generous donations to their dowries so they could be safely wed before they whelped. If the fella'd charmed a faery he must be quite the charmer indeed—the faeries were so enchanting themselves, they generally saw through the “glamourie” of others.

The minstrel dropped the peasant role and became the gypsy, insinuating himself into the lady's romantic imagination. Casting Maggie as the lady, his passionate glances totally confused the expression of polite attention she had maintained. Trying to stare down the minstrel's false gypsy as she would her grandmother's cat, she found herself annoyed that she was unable to look away when she wished.

“Will you forsake your husband dear,  
And all the wealth he gave ye?  
Will you leave your house and lands  
To follow Gypsy Davey—to ride with the Gypsy Dave?”

Maggie flushed, her dark skin burgundy with befuddlement as the minstrel released her eyes to become narrator again.

“She dressed herself in her gay green cloak  
And her boots of finest leather,  
Then mounted on her pony fine,  
And they rode off together.

“Late from huntin' came Lord Rowan,  
Asking for his lady.  
The one did cry and the other reply  
'She's gone with the Gypsy Davey—rode away with the Gypsy Dave.'”

Intricate minor patterns wove through the main theme, invoking hoofbeats fading away from the lady's fine home across the moors. The minstrel didn't look up from the guitar again until the last keening notes quivered off his strings to die in the stillness around him. Sir William's face was a most alarmingly unhealthy eggplant color, and the resemblance between Maggie and her grandmother was suddenly uncomfortably apparent.

“Well, Dad,” she smiled around sharp white teeth, “What d'you think? Boil him in oil, or flay him alive?”

What had Colin's masters taught him at the academy? In dealings with aristocrats, when in doubt grovel. He knelt so fast he banged his knee on the floor. “Your pardon, m'lady, Sir William. I only did as you asked. I meant no offense, and can't think why the tune has given it. I'll never play it again—ever.” In your vicinity, at least, he added to himself, searching for an exit as Sir William's skin regained its former pallor.

“Perhaps you should choose less exotic material in the future, lad,” the old knight advised drily, “or not mention names in your ditties. The Lord Rowan cuckolded in your song, unless of course there's another one, is my son-in-law, married to my younger daughter, the Lady Amberwine.”

Colin gulped, his eyes darting furtively to the leaded glass window and back to the long flight of stone steps they'd mounted coming to the tower room.

“Who *was* this fellow with the stuffy nose who taught you that song?” Maggie asked.

“Minstrel Giles, m’lady?”

“I was wondering if he’d like that nose removed?”

“Maggie!” snapped Sir William, “You’re scaring the lad to death, you little heathen. He said it wasn’t his song.” He turned more kindly to the minstrel, who by now was perspiring profusely. “Sorry son.” He jerked a thumb at his glowering daughter. “She’s a terrific girl, really, just awfully fond of her sister, as we all are around here.” He shook his head. “I don’t understand this at all. Winnie—Lady Amberwine—is not at all your average running-off sort of girl. She’s too considerate for that type of thing. To just leave without explanation! No letter to us! Even if she didn’t like her husband, which I could have sworn she did, she’d hardly have placed her family in such an awkward spot without giving us fair warning—”

“Fine lady, indeed, noble sir,” the minstrel agreed emphatically, “I’m sure she’s a fine, *fine* lady.”

“Too right, she is that.” Sir William’s hands tortured the bedclothes for a few moments before he turned his baffled and miserable face to Maggie.

She leaned down and hugged him. “Aw, Dad, of course she is. She wouldn’t just go gallivanting off with the first passing gypsy—you know very well she can hardly decide which gown to wear to breakfast in the morning without consulting every servant in the house, and me and Gran besides. She certainly wouldn’t be able to bolt altogether on the spur of the moment like that! It’d take her a week to pack!” She glared again at the cowering Colin. “Must have been one of His Lordship’s enemies paid that Giles fellow to make up that awful song.”

Colin gulped and waggled a tentative index finger for attention. “Begging your ladyship’s pardon he began, not really wishing to call notice to himself again but equally reluctant for Giles to suffer the consequences of his own silence. “Giles confessed that he only gave the tune a bit of a polish—it was actually a popular creation.”

“Common gossip music, then, eh?” Sir William looked even older and sicker than he had looked when Colin came into the room, and he had appeared twenty hard years older than Maggie’s grandmother then. “Maggie, what can be going on with the girl?”

Maggie looked down, shoving her fists deep into her apron pockets. “I don’t know, Dad.”

“You remember that nasty gypsy fella running off with Mullaly’s daughters and nearly emptying my wallet trying to save their foolish reputations?”

“Yes, Dad, I remember. Betsy and Beatrice Mullaly are as bovine as their charges, though. Everybody knows that. Winnie’s got more sense.”

“I think so. I don’t know. I wish I had my legs under me, so I could go see Rowan and talk to him myself.” He made an impatient attempt to rise. Maggie gently pushed him back onto the bed.

“That’s no good, and you know it. I’ll go talk to Rowan.”

The old man looked at her for a long time, then closed his eyes and sank back against his pillow. “Of course you will, lass. You’re the only one who can, I suppose.” Then opening one eye he looked at her again, more sharply. “You’re not thinking of going alone, of course?”

She shrugged. “Why not? We can’t have it all over the territories what I’m up to if there’s nothing in it. I’ll be all right. I’ve got my magic to protect me, after all.”

He snorted. “Hearthcraft, hmph. All very well for running the castle or tavern, but what are you going to do if you meet a bear, girl.”

“Very well, then,” she conceded, trying not to allow their disagreement to tire her father any further. “I’ll take the mockingbird, here, with me.”

The pronouncement came as a complete surprise to Colin.

Sir William peered closely at him. “Oh, then if a bear comes along HE sings the creature sweetly

to sleep with a bloody lullaby, and you turn it into a great bloody hearthrug?" He ran a hand through his thinning hair, grayer since the accident. "Ah, well, he's responsible to his guild for his conduct, and if he's with you I can at least be quite sure he won't be spreading that song about. I suppose it wouldn't be wise to have any of the local guard go. I doubt any of them would purposely slander your sister, but people don't seem to be able to forego telling everything they know, nonetheless." He sighed once more, deeply, and capitulated. "He'll have to do, I guess."

"Good." She kissed her father's cheek again and rose to her feet. "I'll just go put binding spells on the cleaning I've already done, and enlarge the larder a bit, before I talk to Gran about handling anything that comes up while I'm gone."

"That should be exciting," Sir William mumbled to her back as she swept through the door ahead of Colin.

Maggie was unalarmed to hear the Territorial troops marching in close order drill, accompanied by professional mourners keening for the dead and wounded, as she entered her grandmother's cottage. She recognized the tromping of the marchers as her gran's heavy-handed double beat on the loom batten, which always sounded like an advancing army, complete with fife and drum corps, and the keening sound as the old lady chanted a song in the ancient tongue to make the work less tedious.

"Maggie, darlin'!" Her grandmother exclaimed, raising her legs past the edge of the loom bench and twirling around on her behind to face her granddaughter. "I'm so glad you're here! Now you can do this nettlesome chore and I can stir up that batch for Betsy Baker."

"Funny, I was just talking about her." She picked up a shuttle, changed the shed with a tromp on the foot treadle, then clucked her tongue at her grandmother. "Really, Gran, look at all these broken warps you've left hanging. It'll never hold up this way!"

Gran regarded her through the measuring glass she held at eye-level, slowly pouring a smoking yellow fluid into it. "You, my dear, are the home economist. *I* am the alchemist. I'll stick to my own field any day. All those itty-bitty threads—bah!"

"Well, I've yet to see you turn tin into gold," Maggie replied, her thumb and forefinger lightly spinning the broken ends together again. With the mending spell she was projecting from beneath her conversation, the warps should be stronger when she had respun them than they were originally.

Gran added an iridescent blue powder to the yellow fluid, and curls of green smoke interlaced with the yellow wafting toward the string-tied bundles of herbs that hung so thickly from the ceiling that Maggie sometimes felt she was walking upside down in a meadow. "I have always considered that a very silly practice, Magdalene. Tin is much more useful." Gran always put on her most dignified air when practicing her craft. Maggie had received instructive lectures at these times, surrounded by noxious fumes and falling bits of materia medica from the ceiling, and was always addressed during these sermons as "Magdalene," her full name, which she particularly disliked.

Turning on the bench to face her grandmother's back, Maggie leaned against the front beam of the loom, her right foot swinging, rumpling the striped rug she'd woven for Gran's floor. She'd have to reweave another bald spot, she noted. Gran was always spilling something caustic and burning it, or the cat was kneading it bare. "I'm going down south, Gran."

"So Ching told me." She set the beaker of liquid down and faced her granddaughter. "Don't you think it's Amberwine's business who she chooses to go with?"

"I suppose so." Maggie frowned at her nails and tried to explain the uneasiness she had felt since hearing the minstrel's song. "But she's not like us, Gran. I mean, she was always having to remind me to stop and think how what I was doing was going to make other people feel—she never just DOES things."

"You think she was coerced?"

Maggie nodded. "Or something like that. Or Rowan's mistreated her—though I rather think she'd have been back home by now if that were the case. Anyhow, whatever she's doing, she won't mind a visit, will she? And I shall finally see somewhere besides this stupid village. Do you know, one of the guards who accompanied Rowan to the wedding told me the flowers are already out down there this time of year?"

"That's not all that's out, dearie." Gran regarded her severely. "Our climate may be inhospitable a great deal of the year, but it does serve to discourage a lot of the nonsense they put up with down

south. I had a message from your Aunt Sybil only a month or so ago, that she had seen bandits from across the Brazorian border destroy a mountain village right near Rowan's territory. And there's dragons and werewolves and ogres and pirates out there as well," she sat down, wearied by the length and import of her list, "and lions and tigers..."

"Don't forget the bears," Maggie said drily.

"And bears. And don't you laugh at me, my girl. Even a unicorn can be very dangerous, if startled. Worst of all, though, are the people. Witches and wizards can be very territorial, so you'd best be a bit more polite to strange magicians than you are to your old granny. And men, of course. Speaking of which, Magdalene, I do not think your father very wise to send you off with that scandal mongering Songsmith character."

"Don't be silly, Gran. He's just a musician—he doesn't have any magic at all."

"Don't be silly yourself. You don't know if he has any magic or not, and he's a man, isn't he? How do you suppose there got to be more of them than there are of us, and why do you suppose our powers are getting weaker every generation?"

"Surely this is not MY Grandmother Brown getting all moralistic with me?" Maggie grinned.

Granny looked embarrassed. "Of course not, you impudent wench. But pairing off, if done at all, should be done only after your powers are fully developed and tested. Your poor mother never did amount to anything, witchwise, getting involved so young and all..."

"Now don't go blaming Dad..."

"I'm not. I'm hardly the bigot some folks are, but..."

A playful rapping at the door interrupted her, and there was no waiting for her to grant entry before the door opened and a round face topped by a thatch of white hair peeped around the door at them. The face leered, and a matching set of rosy fingers waggled at them. "Good day to you, Goodwitch Brown. Mistress Maggie. May I come in?"

"Appears to me you're already in, Hugo," Granny said. "What can I do for you?"

The man seated himself in Granny's only other chair, a rocker. He grinned, showing a collection of teeth in every known metal. "Well, I'm only just up to the north, Goodwitch, and I thought I'd pop in and get a bit of my usual." His watery blue eyes strayed to Maggie and overstayed a welcome they'd never had to begin with.

"To be sure," said Granny, climbing onto her narrow bed to reach a row of handmade jugs on the shelf above it. She had to sniff several before selecting one.

Hugo followed her movements for a moment before licking his lips and addressing Maggie.

"Well, Mistress Maggie, I understand you're taking a nice trip."

"News certainly travels fast."

"I suppose you're going south to visit your lovely sister?"

"Toads! Does the whole village know already?" Maggie was annoyed. Not only had she hoped to keep her mission a secret, but she particularly did not want a gossipy old goat like Hugo the Peddler to know her business.

"No, no, no. Never fear, dear lady. I won't tell a soul. You know I'm quiet as Medusa's boyfriend when it comes to a lady's private secrets, eh? But I was taking a new hammer over to the smith, and he told me you were journeying tomorrow, so naturally I just assumed..."

"Here you are, Hugo." Granny poured a little of the powder from the earthenware jug into a paper, folded the paper with great ceremony, and presented it to the peddler. "Six coppers, please."

"Six!" Hugo protested while unclasping a neat brocade coin purse he carried at his belt. "It's gone up, has it? I remember when it was two."

“Inflation,” Granny said cheerfully, tucking the money in the pocket of her skirt. “The cost of practicing witchcraft these days! I couldn’t begin to tell you how that drought last summer cut into my profit margin. Some of my most valuable plants were scorched, and probably won’t even come up this year at all...”

Hugo was backing out the door, tipping an imaginary cap as he left. “Yes, well, goodbye, ladies.”

Maggie let out a whoop of laughter. “Oh, Gran, how COULD you? Six coppers for that rubbish!”

“It’s all part of the charm, dear. Good magic always is better if it costs something more than the client can comfortably afford.”

“What’s it for?”

“Impotence. You can come in now, darling.” She cooed the last in a tender voice never heard by anyone in the village, including Maggie. Chingachgook, her black and white cat, leaped into the room from the windowsill, and onto her lap.

“Well, I may have need for some of those powders myself.”

“I thought you might, so in my antique wisdom I have prepared a couple of things for you.”

“Such as?” Maggie sat down abruptly on the weaving bench as Ching launched himself from Gran’s lap to her shoulder. Gran pulled her own braid forward and carefully extracted seven long hairs from it. “Here, you’re the weaver, plait these into a chain, and wear it round your neck.”

“In order to do what?” Maggie’s fingers flew through the loops of hair, and she plaited the chain closed in an intricate invisible knot behind the curtain of her otter-brown hair.

“Make yourself more clearly understood, of course,” purred Ching, bumping her cheek with his head.

Maggie started, but, seeing her grandmother’s smirk of satisfaction, resigned herself. “I suppose having Ching along will help me talk with the larger non-human types. But I hope I won’t have to hear the horse complain about his sore feet and the bad grass?”

“Not unless you ask Ching, dear. I should think that with no one but that maudlin minstrel along, you’d be happy for intelligent company.”

“Yes, Gran.”

“Speaking of intelligent company, you’d better stop and see Sybil on your way, or there’ll be another rupture in the family tree.”

Maggie wriggled with impatience that caused Ching to abandon her shoulder. “Gran, it may be urgent that I reach Winnie!”

“All the more reason that you see Sybil.” She thrust a thonged leather bag at her. “Here’s your medicine pouch. Now run along. I’m sure the estate will take care of itself.”

“It’ll have to,” Ching muttered, settling his chin on his front paws and wrapping his tail around his nose.



Maggie was so anxious to get away from the village that she left Colin and the pack horse far behind in the first half hour on the road. After a long frozen winter at Fort Iceworm, it was a joy to splatter over the muddy tracks and splash through the pools left by melted snow from the last storm a month earlier. She scarcely noticed the nip at her ears as her mare's gallop created a wind for them. Her woolen cape tugging at her as it billowed out behind her back made her want to sing from exhilaration. The smell of the new, tender grasses, the smell of anything at all after a sub-zero winter of buried vegetation and frozen noses, was sweeter by far than any of the perfume worn by the ladies at Winnie's wedding. Even under a dull gray sky, the colors of spring were dazzling after the stark blacks and endless expanses of everlasting white. Mostly there was green, of course, but there were also redbirds and bluebirds and an occasional brave blossom of yellow or purple.

Her neighbors, whom she did spare a glance as they leaped into drainage ditches to escape being mowed down as she sped past, were also colorful. After nine months of black and deep indigo and brown that they wore against the cold, it was good to see the dark coats finally exchanged for the women's costumes of red and gold skirts, blue or yellow blouses, and white embroidered aprons and kerchiefs. Most of the men dressed more soberly even now, a plow being less kind to white aprons than a butter churn, but Maggie knew that soon on market days they would be slipping over their smocked homespun shirts felted vests embroidered in the most outlandish scenes and hues their womenfolk could devise. The more fantastic the embroidery, the more fantastic the man, folk said, for what woman would ruin her eyes doing such work for a nincompoop?

It wasn't until she had to wait for a flock of sheep to dawdle across the road that the minstrel, panting and red-faced, galloped up on his mud-flecked buckskin horse. Ching, being jounced unmercifully in the basket he occupied atop the pack horse, yowled filthy feline curses.

Colin struggled to contain his ire as he reached the witch and her sweating chestnut mare. "Your pardon, milady, but if you try to maintain this pace, you'll kill your beast before we reach the next village."

As the thorough tongue lashing she was receiving from her grandmother's cat began to sink in, Maggie bit back the angry retort she'd meant for the minstrel, and instead nodded meekly and gently urged her horse forward as the last sheep passed.

Encouraged by this apparent acceptance of his authority, Colin added generously, in the grand language he'd been schooled to use with the aristocracy, "We troubadours are well versed in the way of the road. Pray let me be your guide, milady."

"Oh, pray go soak your head," Maggie replied, unable to control her temper this time. "There's only this one bloody road south from here to the Troutroute River, according to Dad's map. What's there to know, anyway? Look," she pointed to a red bag tied in the fork of a tree. "The path is even protected with medicine bundles. Probably as exciting as a walk around the barnyard."

Colin didn't know what to say. How could *he* tell this pushy female, who even though she wasn't anywhere near being what he would call sweet and innocent, nonetheless seemed pretty naive, what the perils of the road were? Fresh from the Academy this spring, he truthfully hadn't experienced a great many of them himself. He was sure there were some, however, as his fellow students from parts of Argonia more exotic and sophisticated than East Headpenney, where he'd been raised, had told absolutely harrowing tales. And the history the masters gave in Lyric Appreciation classes, he felt sure, was not born of the sort of conflict, be it magical or unmagical, that could be warded away

merely by hanging a medicine bundle in a tree fork. But go tell that to Mistress Know-it-all.

So they jogged along in silence for a long while. The dull clop of the horses' hooves and the occasional jangle of the strings on Colin's instruments as he shifted weight in the saddle were the only sounds. They had quite passed all the farms that surrounded Fort Iceworm, and were negotiating the more rugged, unmaintained track that was the South Highway when Maggie, who had been sneaking an occasional guilty side-long glance at Colin's tight-lipped face, cleared her throat.

"Lovely day, isn't it?"

Colin's expression thawed just a bit. "Can't say as it is, really."

"No? Beastly I suppose, actually, from your point of view." Having made herself an opening, she had very little idea how to proceed. Diplomacy, as had been frequently pointed out to her by loved ones who had occasion to know, was not Maggie's long suit. "See here, minstrel, you really mustn't be so bloody touchy about every little remark I make. A person makes a simple topographical observation and you get all huffy." She noted with increasing exasperation that her humble apology wasn't exactly producing instant rapport, but nevertheless plunged ahead. "I only meant that any fool should be able to find their way down a road that's the only one there IS...don't you think?" she ended in a voice rather smaller than the one she'd begun in.

Colin blew an angry breath out over clenched teeth. "And *I* only meant, *milady*, that I have perhaps had occasion to learn things about traveling that might prove instructive to a girl who's never been on her father's estate, that is, if she chose to listen instead of biting people's heads off all the time."

"Biting people's heads off? Did I bite anyone's head off? What do you think I am, an ogress, that bite people's heads off?"

"Please stop snapping so loudly, witch," yawned Ching as he shifted to a more comfortable napping position in the basket. "Your dulcet tones are giving me a pain in the whiskers."

Maggie's shoulders drooped and finally she nodded. "Alright, maybe a little bite. But you met my Gran, and Dad, though he's a nice sort of fellow for one of the ruling class, cares more about hunting than managing things, and has a head to match those boar trophies on the walls at the tavern sometimes. Winnie, when she was home sort of kept things smoothed over and everyone peaceful. I'll be the first to admit those tactics can be very effective but, toads, minstrel," she looked directly into his eyes now, a plea for understanding, "sweetness and light just don't get the hearth laid or the sheep sheared. Someone has to see to it that things get done. And one can't forever be saying, Please, sir, I beg yer pardon, sir, would you kindly toss the slops out if it isn't too much trouble and you've nothing better to do?" He still didn't say anything. "It's all right, you know, if you want to turn back north. There's a little path that skirts round the village, so no one would know. I'll really be fine."

"I wouldn't be so fine, though, if something should happen to you while I'm supposed to be with you, and your father found me elsewhere. I'll accompany you, as arranged, *milady*."

"At least stop calling me 'milady', then. My sister is the lady in the family, whatever your songs say to the contrary. I was born into what you might call the unauthorized distaff branch of the family. Dad didn't marry my mother until I was two. Maggie Brown, apprentice witch, is my entire noble title. A simple 'Maggie' will suffice."

Colin grinned suddenly. Perhaps it wouldn't be such a long journey after all. He began to whistle softly and had gotten through four choruses before he caught Maggie's baleful eye and realized he was humming the very song that had caused him to sprout feathers. He offered a sheepish smile. "I know you don't like the words but it is a rather catchy tune, don't you think?"

"Definitely not," It was, though.

"Well, madam, I DO take requests."

Maggie stopped herself just in time from requesting silence. Instead she asked. "Do you know of place up ahead, oh guide, where we could stop to eat?"

"No, but hum a few bars and I'll improvise." He almost fell off his horse laughing at his own cleverness.

"Forget it," Maggie groaned. "I just lost my appetite."

Though Colin's laughter could hardly have disturbed Ching, who was able to sleep through the numerous explosions resulting from Gran's arcane experiments, the cat nevertheless chose to open an eye and extend a black paw up the side of his basket. "I have not lost *my* appetite," he informed Maggie, aborting the stretch as he recalled his precarious position. "One hardly expects, when traveling with a hearthcrafter, to grow lean in the process."

"Too right, cat," Maggie apologized, feeling irritably at the same time that all the apologizing she was doing was getting to be a nasty habit, "Sorry if I was inconsiderate."

"Oh, that's alright," Colin replied, thinking she was addressing him, "Just having a bit of fun. There's a little knoll ahead that ought to be fairly dry and not too muddy."

They found the knoll and tied their horses to a tree at its base. Extracting a light lunch of cheese and dried apples, which Maggie reconstituted to fresh, and bread from the horses' saddlebags, Maggie divided them between Colin and herself. She took out a packet of dried fish, expecting to find Ching at her heels, eager to devour it. Instead, she had to look all around the hill before she saw him, crouched at its base farthest from the road, switching his tail with concentration. "Chingachgook, here's your lunch."

"Not now, dammit," he hissed. "I'm trying to hear what he's saying."

"What who's saying?"

"Whoever's in there, of course."

Maggie started down the hill. "It's not polite to eavesdrop."

"Well, he sounds very upset about something and I only wanted to know what," Ching said, sitting up and giving her his best innocent-wide-eyed-kitten look, which was somewhat spoiled by his coloring, white chin and nose with eyes and ears a black, furry bandit's mask.

"What is it, Maggie?" Colin called through a bite of apple as he trotted down the hill to join them.

"Ching hears something in there. Look, there's a little doorway!" A semi-circular piece of sod quaked and cracked away from the rest of the knoll.

"Yes, and it's *opening*," Ching hissed, crouched and whisker twitching once more.

The wet-faced, red-eyed gnome who emerged was indignant. "Can't a fellow even mourn the fate of his best friend without you nosy mortals hollering on his rooftop?"

"I wonder what those taste like," Ching mused.

Maggie shoved him back. "Behave yourself, cat."

"We're sorry to intrude on your grief, sir," Colin said, removing his cap and leaning over a bit so the diminutive person would not have to look up so far to him. "It's obvious you're in some sort of trouble. We extend our condolences, and would do what we may to alleviate your pain and atone for our rudeness." It was always extremely unwise to be anything but courtly to Little Folk, leprechauns, gnomes, brownies, and the like. Every reference Colin had ever heard made to them advised caution and courtesy even beyond that ordinarily extended to human nobles, for the Little Folk were strange and touchy and alien. Being so very small, they had never, like merfolk, witches, faeries, or even ogres, intermarried with people of larger dimensions, and they remained shy and reclusive. Although this gnome was the first Colin had ever seen first-hand, close up, he had known a boy in East Headpenney, an unfortunate orphan whose parents had unwittingly destroyed the underground home

a gnome family.

~~“Ah, waly, waly, waly,” cried the little man as he sat down on a toadstool, wringing his red pointed cap in his hands, “Alas, poor rabbit!”~~

Judging by his behavior, it seemed as though he had decided to take them into his confidence. Colin ventured a question. “Rabbit is the name of your friend, then?”

“Rabbit he’s named, as rabbit he is!” nodded the gnome, sniffing and digging in the pockets of his green knickers. “He comes to my house to bowl with me every quarter moon and every half, without fail. When he didn’t come as usual, I went looking for him.”

“And you couldn’t find him?” Maggie asked sympathetically.

The gnome took out a coin-sized handkerchief, blew his nose hard, and glared at her. “I f-found him alright. Caught in one of your horrid iron traps, his back leg nearly sundered, a-perishing of pain and fright.”

Even Ching looked shocked and as compassionate as it was possible for him to look.

“I’ve tried all I know to free him,” the gnome said. “But the power over iron is beyond my skill, and I’ve not the brute strength to spring it.”

“You’d better show us where it is then,” Colin said, “before whoever set that trap comes to check it.”

If it hadn’t been for Ching’s hunting ability, they might have lost the gnome’s track as he ran through the green meadow and into the woods beyond. Not far from a deer path faintly etched through the undergrowth, the rabbit lay panting out his life, his soft white fur speckled red on both sides of a cruel trap that bit his leg like the disembodied dentures of an ogre.

When Colin had released the trap, he started to pick the rabbit up, but Maggie stopped him. “His life is too fragile within him for movement, minstrel. I’ve helped my Gran with a couple of cases like this, not on rabbits, of course, but I know that glassy-eyed look. Best thing to do would be to splint the leg and give him something for the pain first, then let him rest a bit.” She took off her kerchief and offered it to the gnome. “Spread this on him, sir, to keep him warm. I’ll see if I can find an ice poppy to ease his pain, though it will be hard to locate them without the flowers.”

“Failing that,” said Colin, pleased to have an alternative to doing exactly as the witch directed, “perhaps I ought to go fetch MY medicine.”

“YOUR medicine?” she asked. He was gratified to see how surprised she looked.

“You witches aren’t the only ones prepared for this sort of thing, you know. All minstrels are supposed to keep with them while traveling no less than two ounces of strong apple brandy in case of emergency.”

“I didn’t see him whipping any of that out while he was flying around in the rafters,” remarked Ching, licking a paw.

“Waly, waly, waly, waly,” sobbed the gnome, who had wrapped the kerchief close around the rabbit’s torso and had taken his friend’s head on his lap and was rocking back and forth, stroking the long, soft ears.

“Waly, waly, to be sure,” said Colin, sprinting back down the deer path, “Be back in a flash.”

Maggie turned back to the gnome, hunkering down, as Colin had, to face him on a civil level where she would not be talking down to him. “Is there a nearby creek, Master Gnome? Ice poppies like the banks of creeks, and we ought to have water to cleanse the wound.”

“Through yon trees, maid. But hasten, do. His life force dwindles...”

Maggie picked up a wad of the hems of her cape and skirt in one hand and used the other to push away the wet willow wands that slapped at her face and clothing. Willows in such profusion made her

uneasy with their sharp-tongued leaves and the way they had of making the path ahead or anything behind them hard to see. She was glad it was not later in the day, for Gran had told her that there were willows which actually uprooted themselves to follow travelers who stayed on the road past twilight. Of course, Gran had never said the trees did anything but follow, still—

She shivered. “Travel must not agree with me, cat. I’m jumpy as grease on a griddle. I have the oddest feeling we’re being watched.” When no teasing reply came from the cat, she looked around for him. He was crouched at her heels, fur glistening with dew from the grass and bristling, head turned to the left, ears ever so slightly rotating backwards and forwards, whiskers working. “Very reassuring, cat,” said Maggie.

“You’re the one with the big brown eyes, Witchy,” growled the cat. “Find the damn pool and the damn posies, and cure the damn bunny, and let’s get out of here.” His fur had continued to rise while he talked, and he now appeared twice his normal size. “I’ve been in dog kennels I liked better.”

“I know what you mean. I keep feeling there’s something besides the gnome and the rabbit at our backs.”

“Then *move*,” said Ching.

“All right, all right, only everything’s so gray I can’t really see very much either.” She parted the branches of two willows which had originally grown on either side of the path, but whose drooping branches now completely obscured it. Slogging through the wet grass and soggy branches, they were both damp and cold by the time they came to the banks of the stream.

There was a different feeling there by the stream than there had been in the willows. Something about the place, some unidentifiable quality, poured over Maggie, so that, emerging from the trees to the grassy banks that held the blue waters, she took one soft step at a time until she stood absolutely still beside the gentle flow. It was the chilling, active blue of the killing crevasses of the great glacier that was its mother, but beautiful too. Around it, all about them, the air was mist-muffled and quiet, though there was the tinkle of the water, and once the song of a bird reached them, distinct and perfect. But here the sky did not seem dismal gray as before, but shone with the pearly translucent silver-pink of the inside of a seashell. The leaves, rustling without sound, glimmered in green pale, dark, and pale again like a jeweled gown winking in the light as its owner danced.

“There’s enchantment here,” said Ching quietly. Though he himself was more or less impervious to most spells, he had defluffed and come out of his crouch to stand, ears up and tail waving a gentle behind him, at Maggie’s side.

“Yes,” she said.

“It’s across the stream, watching, in those trees.”

Maggie let her eyes drift to the area he indicated. The cat’s vision was not as precise as her own, but his sixth sense was far better developed.

Had it been a brighter day, she would, of course, have seen the unicorn immediately. As it was, his fog gray coat and opalescent horn blended so perfectly with the atmosphere in the woods that at first she mistook him for a bit of afternoon sky glowing through the boughs and branches. Only the amethyst eyes betrayed his presence, regarding her curiously across the icy blue water.

“He wants to know,” Ching told her, “if you are a virgin maiden.”

“That’s certainly a personal question when we haven’t even been properly introduced,” she mumbled, a little taken aback. Then she stared back into the jeweled eyes and nodded, “Not tall, blonde, lily-like, or in any particular distress, but I believe I meet all the essential requirements.”

Those requirements were apparently the unicorn’s only criteria for making the acquaintance of female persons, for he waded gracefully across the stream to stand before her, carefully dipping his

beautiful head, horn averted, for his forelock to be petted. As she touched him, she understood him to say that she could call him Moonshine.

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“I’m Maggie,” she responded while administering the solicited attentions, “And really, Moonshine, you ought to be a little more discriminating than **that**. I know any number of maidens whose virginity is the *only* thing they’re at all scrupulous about. They wouldn’t hesitate to sell you out to the constabulary for the price your horn would bring.”

“Will you stop lecturing that horny creature and find out if there are any ice poppies around here, before the rabbit croaks and his pal puts a curse on us that won’t quit?” asked Ching, impatient now that the unicorn’s spell was no longer binding him, the unicorn having little or no interest in cats.

“Oh, of course,” she replied dreamily, a large besotted smile warming her face as she stroked the unicorn’s mane and fed him the core of her apple, which she had jammed in her pocket when Ching found the gnome’s home. “Only with Moonshine here we don’t need ice poppies. As soon as we take the bunny some of this water, after you’ve dipped your horn in it,” she said, speaking to the unicorn, not the cat, “the little rabbit will be good as new.” She lay her face against the pale, sleek neck of the enchanted beast, her arms a copper garland encircling him. “I never met a unicorn before. He really likes me.”

“Will you get him to use his power so we can get back to that rabbit?” the cat demanded, switching his tail. “I thought we were out for sisters on this jaunt, not horseflesh.”

Reluctantly, Maggie released Moonshine, who nuzzled her hand again before performing the necessary magical service. There was no need to ask him aloud. Once her credentials were established, unspoken rapport had linked them instantly, with no need for the cat to interpret. Her early admonitions had been absolutely useless, Moonshine told her. Regardless of her character, race, creed, color, or place of national origin, the first virgin maiden a unicorn met was it, the love of his life. He was only fortunate that **his** maiden, Maggie, was so kind, so understanding, so intelligent, so beautiful, so lovely in every possible way, far beyond his foalish dreams.

“I’ll be back right away,” she promised, stumbling over a dead log as she pushed back through the willows, trying to look over her shoulder at the same time.

“Watch it,” Ching hissed, “you almost stepped on my tail!”

Maggie didn’t even apologize, and stumbled twice more, almost spilling the precious fluid out of the cup of birch bark she had fashioned to hold it.

Colin was there when they got back to the gnome and rabbit. He stopped his sentry’s march when he saw them, and knelt beside Maggie as she bathed the rabbit’s leg with the healing water. “We have a problem,” he told her, as she sluiced more water on the back of the injured leg; the front was already showing signs of improvement. The gnome wrung his hands, but had stopped saying “waly, waly” altogether. “Our horses and provisions are gone.”

“What?” she stopped bathing the wound, and the gnome took the bark container from her hand in both his arms, setting it awkwardly beside him, and continued to dribble water on the rapidly healing leg.

“The horses, food, my musical instruments, everything, is gone.”

“How can that be? The reins were tied well to that tree.”

“Eureka!” cried the gnome. “He stirs! Rabbit, Rabbit, old friend, can you hear me?”

“I don’t know, but they’re gone.”

With the aid of the gnome, the rabbit was soon sitting upright. At first he eyed Ching with distinct reservations, and regarded the humans warily as well. When the gnome who introduced himself as Po explained their role in his recovery, Rabbit declared himself boundlessly grateful and much in their

debt.

~~“And to your kind friend, the unicorn, as well, missus,” he added to Maggie, when she hastened to give most of the credit to Moonshine for the healing water his horn had procided.~~

Having communicated for so long with Pop, who spoke Argonian, even if some of his expressions were a little dated, the rabbit was perfectly able to make himself understood by Maggie and Colin without an interpreter. Ching was the one who needed a translator if he wished to address Rabbit. The cat was unable to speak to or understand the language of any animals who might normally provide him a meal. Although he could talk with any non-human animal of his own or greater stature, and certainly magically enabled humans as well, Ching’s particular familiar’s magic was mindful enough of his sensitivities to free him from the necessity of making dinner conversation with any creature who might normally be his prey.

Reassured about the rabbit’s recovery, the travelers fell to brooding on their horseless state, Colin resuming his pacing off the deer path, Maggie nibbling her knuckles, Ching attacking and retreating from various leaves and twigs. “It’s too bad unicorns don’t care for anyone but maidens,” Maggie said, “or Moonshine could take us to Rowan’s estates, I’m sure, or at least as far as Aunt Sybil’s cottage.”

“Even if he would,” Colin reminded her, “we could hardly embark on such a long journey with no provisions and only one mount. Besides, I’d like to get my hands on whoever’s made off with my fiddle and guitar!” He slammed one fist angrily into the palm of the other hand and looked very fierce for one of a normally cherubic appearance.

“Perhaps,” suggested Rabbit, “it was the trap-setter.”

“You *know* who set the trap, Rabbit?” Pop asked.

Rabbit twiddled his front paws somewhat diffidently before answering, “Well, I suspect it was the same bowman who shot the horse of the great knight after the first snowfall. He has been lurking about since; my cousins who dwell close to the castle have been made nervous by his lurkings and furtive movements hither and yon.”

“The Great Knight?” Colin asked, “Do you mean Maggie’s father, Sir William? He was crippled up for some reason or other...”

“Thanks, Colin,” Maggie said, wincing at what a rabbit’s opinion would be of her father, to whom hunting was an occupation done with more regularity than breathing, “I hadn’t really thought I’d mention the relationship at this point—”

“Do not fret yourself, maiden,” said Pop, “’tis well known the sins of the father are visited on the son, not the daughter.”

“With a little work, that could be a rhyme,” Colin said.

Rabbit thumped gently the paw which had been injured and was now soft and glossy as new. “The Great Knight is not the killer of our kind that this bowman is. My cousins warned me of snares, but I thought not to look for such an engine of destruction as this.” His eyes showed a little more white as he sniffed the trap, involuntarily taking a half a hop back.

“We don’t see iron used like this often,” Maggie agreed. “It’s too difficult to get, and expensive. Even wolves are usually killed with deadfall or arrow or lance. Except for horse’s shoes, and kettles and pokers the peddler brings, I hardly see an iron implement this far north from one season to the next.”

Colin snorted and said with some bitterness, for he was sorely injured by the loss of his instruments, the best of his efforts as a luthier, “I suppose there’s some satisfaction in knowing that we were probably all harmed by the same party.”

Pop interrupted him by leaping to his feet and pointing skyward with a thick index finger.

“What’s that?” asked Colin.

“Sounds like trumpeter swans,” Maggie replied, rising to her feet and scanning the skies. “But so much louder—oh, look up there! They’re enormous!”

“And black,” said Pop. The cacophonous calling died away long after the seven ebony giants had flown beyond the horizon lost among the treetops. Maggie watched the sky, however, till the last note faded, then looked back to her companions. Ching was again swelled to double his normal size.

Maggie chuckled and knelt to stroke the spiky fur of the familiar’s spine. “Don’t expect you’ll be hunting those birds, eh, old boy?”

For an answer he sat down and began to wash the area beneath his tail.

“I suppose we had better start back for your father’s place, Maggie, Colin said. “Too bad we’ll lose a whole day, not to mention my favorite instruments.”

“Wait a bit,” she said, rising slowly and walking towards the trees. It was not until she reached out and stroked the unicorn’s nose that Colin actually saw him. Knowing through legend and song of the magical creature’s exclusive preference for virgin maidens, the minstrel prudently refrained from making any sound or gesture that might cause Maggie’s new acquaintance to take flight.

After a brief exchange and one or two mutual nuzzlings, the unicorn melted back into the willows and Maggie returned to her companions. “Moonshine says he’ll check a favorite watering-hole of his. If the horses aren’t actually stolen, but have only wandered off, or been driven away, he says there’s a good chance they’ll be there. Of course, I could always go on alone on Moonshine.” From her tone, Colin knew that the last was not an afterthought, but a fond wish that the theft of their horses had given her an excuse to voice. Colin had only to bow out of the quest, to return to his own concerns, and fashion new instruments, and she would be free to go with her new friend through the magic trails in the forest as far as they extended, however far that was.

Pop the Gnome was apparently dubious about the last, for he looked disapproving.

“What’s the matter?” asked Maggie, for even her charmed distraction was not impervious to a gnome’s disapproval.

“How many mortals do you suppose would see you when you had been forced to take Moonshine onto the open road before they decided to slay you, unicorn, cat, maiden, and all, for the sake of the magic horn?” He was struggling, it was evident, to ask the question civilly but his voice emerged harsh and stern. Maggie opened her mouth to protest, looked at him, at Colin, and Rabbit, and cat, then closed her mouth and nodded. Her eyes, when she lowered them, were oddly bright.

“Come now, witch,” said Ching, rubbing at her ankles, “Don’t go clouding up. You’ve lived here near this wood nineteen years, and never knew till today there was a unicorn in two hundred miles of the place. Or a gnome, for that matter.”

Maggie made a face, but said nothing, for the horses trotted up to them then, supplies and instruments still strapped to their saddles. Maggie glimpsed the unicorn winking through the leaves of the woods behind them, silently urging the horses back to their riders.

Moonshine made no secret that he was as reluctant to part with Maggie as she was with him, and even allowed himself to come in full view of Colin as he followed them at the edge of the wood when it bordered the highway. He exerted no other spell to keep her near, however, and as the wood and road parted to make way for a stream, he left them with a last flourish of his tail, releasing her after an orchid-eyed good-bye to vanish into the forest.

That night, as they camped far from that section of the Northern Woods, Colin had to occupy himself with his music and Ching with his toilet. They had a cold supper, for there were no comment



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