

The Witch Sisters
By Alma Katsu

Copyright 2013 Alma Katsu

A cairn stood at the crossroads, three feet of stones stacked by an unknown hand. In this stretch of the wild fens wood, a cairn could mean only one thing. It was a warning to travelers, a sign of bad luck. To those who knew to look, it said that something unfortunate happened once at this very spot. It was not a place to tarry. Best to rush by.

That advice suited Adair just fine. Night had fallen an hour ago but he stubbornly pushed his horse on, eager to be clear of the fens wood. The forest here was not like forests elsewhere. The salty soil had turned it into a nightmarish landscape. It made trees into stunted hunchbacks, gnarled and twisting in on themselves. The wildwood that marked the fens' edge was dense with nettle and briar, thorn and thistle. Hard to believe this forest was once a royal preserve where princes hunted stag and hare. Today it did all it could to repel travelers, bristling like an enchanted forest in a child's bedtime story. *Go back*, it seemed to say. *You are not welcome here*.

Adair had thought the full moon was bright enough to see by, but the moonlight was caught in the wild forest's branches, and what little bit eked through was insufficient to illuminate the trail. Also, he'd thought he could trust his horse, a huge bay stallion whose previous owner swore it had been ridden in battle. Once the sun went down, however, the horse snorted and shied at every crackle in the underbrush, every hoot of an owl. Adair had tied a brandy-soaked rag round a stick to make a crude torch but the charger didn't seem to care much for fire, either, and Adair soon found he was sitting astride three-quarters of a ton of nervous horseflesh, ready to explode. He made a mental note to sell the beast at the first chance.

Exhausted and cross, he was about to bash the beast on the head when he noticed a strange light in an empty glade ahead. Low in the brush, at the height of a man's knee, the tiny light gamboled and cavorted among the trees like a drunken firefly. Only this light shone with a strange intensity: it was not the puny, intermittent glow from a bug's ass. This part of England was rife with stories of fairy folk, and the locals were reputed to be as superstitious as the Irish. Adair was no stranger to the unnatural world, but he'd never felt fairies to be much of a threat. One good stomp and it would be over for any fairyling unlucky enough to cross his path. No, his cavalier attitude was all bluster; he wasn't as reckless as that. He knew better than to treat an honest-to-god magical being lightly, should he ever come face-to-face with one.

There would be no sneaking up on a fairy while on this great lumbering beast, but he couldn't tether the idiotic horse to a tree and leave it unattended. Besides, whoever was in the grass ahead was sure to have seen his torch. He was sitting on the quivering beast, pondering his next move, when a figure popped up beside him, sending the horse sideways in fright.

It was a woman. She could be mistaken for a child at first glance, but Adair looked long enough to tell that there was a woman's shape under her midnight blue cloak. The cloak had made her invisible in the darkness, but up close he saw that she had golden blonde hair, so luminous that it glowed under the velvet hood. He found her attractive but sensed there was something strange about her, that she was damaged in a way that wasn't immediately apparent. She held a twig with a tip that glowed orange—the source of the pinpoint of light. Perhaps the flame had gone out and she was using the ember to light her way, but it looked for all the world like a fairy wand.

“Good evening, traveler. What brings you to the fens wood at this hour of the night?” She spoke with a sweet, child-like tone but her blue-grey eyes watched his face with naked cunning.

“I am, as you say, only a traveler, out at a later hour than would be prudent, nothing more,” he says, hoping to deflect any curiosity she might have about him. “I could ask the same of you. It can't be safe for a young woman to be out alone in the woods at night.”

She drew herself up haughtily. “Make no mistake, the fens wood is plenty dangerous for the likes of you, stranger, but I have nothing to fear, for I live here. I know the forest and it knows me.”

“You live here?” He didn't think anyone could live in these woods, with soil too inhospitable to farm and trees too tough to cut down. Besides, the fens were widely believed to be a portal to the spirit world. Not only fairies but witches and ghosts, too, were believed to call the fens wood home and such stories had been passed down from generation to generation. “I thought only dark beings lived here. Perhaps you are a ghost or a wee fairy? If that is the case, I hope you'll forgive my trespass,” he said with a derisive snort.

She smiled at his teasing. “It's a good thing that you came across me and not my sister, stranger, for she doesn't abide trespassers nearly as well as I.” She reached for her basket and tossed him a saucy look over her shoulder. “You might as well come home with me and be our guest, for you'll not clear the woods tonight, as dark as it is this evening. More likely, you'll get lost and stumble into a bog, horse and all, and never be heard from again.”

“Is that so?” he asked skeptically. “I doubt there's a bog deep enough to swallow up this horse, though he may indeed be stupid enough to fall into one.”

She hooked her basket over her arm. “You can do as you please, of course. Wander through the woods till dawn finds you hopelessly tangled in briar, if that's your

desire, but you're welcome to spend the night with my sister and I. We have a cozy little home not far from here."

Did she give him a licentious wink just now, he wondered, or was he imagining things? He decided to be bold. "Just you and your sister, then? No husband or kin to protect you out here in the wilderness?"

She gave him a coy look over her shoulder. "Just me and my sister living by ourselves in the wood. So helpless, we are. A wicked wolf could come along and have his way with us if he had a mind to, don't you think?" she asked, and there was no mistaking her meaning now. He felt the first inkling of desire flare inside his gut, urging him to follow her.

"How do you know I'm not a wolf that's learned to walk on two feet?" he asked, his voice thick with lust.

She gave him a wink. "Indeed, sir, I do not—but I'm counting on it being the case."

Adair followed, leading his horse by the reins. He had a terrible time keeping up as, hidden in her cloak, she blended into the dark forest. He could only figure out where she was when she turned to check on him, her white face suddenly visible to him like the moon in the sky.

She stopped in front of a very large tree, its heavy branches hanging all the way to the ground so that it appeared stooped like an old grandmother. Adair couldn't see a door but when the young woman walked up to the tree trunk, a knob appeared under her hand. She pushed the door back to reveal orange candlelight inside. Another man might've bolted in terror at this unexpected sight but not Adair, who has seen many impossible things in his time. So it was a tree that had been made into a cottage, what of it? It wasn't the queerest thing he had known. And there was no reason fear it for it had no teeth to bite him, no claws to tear him apart. Without a second thought, he stripped the saddle and his bags from the horse's back, tethered the beast, and followed his guide inside.

Even though the tree was large, he figured it would be no wider than a coffin inside, but once he stepped over the threshold, the space grew and turned into a regularly sized room before his eyes. There was a fireplace at the back wall, flanked on either side by shelves. In front of the fire stood a big, solid slab of a worktable. Bundles of drying herbs hung from a rack over the mantle and a bucket of water stood to the side. To the left of the worktable were two small stools and to the right, a bed, partly obscured by a linen bed curtain. The whole cottage was tidy and neat as a doll's house.

"I thought you said you lived here with your sister," Adair said, turning back to the fairy girl but instead coming face-to-face with a second woman. Her hair was as dark as her sister's was light, and fell in cascading waves to the small of her back. Where the first woman was thin as a boy, the second was as voluptuous as a belly dancer. She sported curves everywhere—her lips, her bosom, her hips—and seemed to undulate before his eyes.

They introduced themselves. Penthy was the blond. She seemed to shimmer like liquid gold from head to foot, and had wild eyes and a child's smile. Bronwyn was the dark and she clearly had a touch of the demonic about her. Penthy, Adair intuited, was no more harmful than an ember spat out by a crackling fire. Bronwyn merited caution, however; she was capable of much worse than her sister if given the right incentive. Beauty and dangerous were two of his favorite things: he found each sister tempting by herself, but as a pair they were irresistible.

They lay out a meal for him of wormwood tea and nasturtium salad with poppy seed dressing, a heavy red wine dressed with poppy syrup for a nightcap. They didn't join him, informing him that they had eaten earlier. He pretended not to notice that they'd laced every course with narcotics, but he wasn't sure if they meant to knock him out or to kill him. They wanted to rob him, that much he could see: they meant to steal his gold, the saddle, the horse, everything he had with him. And because they were witches—all signs pointed to it—they would be extra delighted to find the two books of spells tucked inside his saddlebag.

The joke would be on them, he knew, because their poisons wouldn't kill him. They'd make him sleep, and he might succumb to wonderfully outrageous hallucinations, but he would not die, for he was protected. He drank the true elixir of life once, and it had extended his life for many hundreds of years, though the witch sisters didn't know that, of course. He wondered how they would react when they saw he was still alive in the morning.

So he ate and drank without concern. Penthy smeared butter thickly on slices of bread for him, Bronwyn shaved fine, ripe cheese onto his salad. After two cups of tea, he was relaxed enough to eat nasturtium petals from the dark sister's fingers, as though he were a pet ram. When he had his fill, he pushed away from the table, and Penthy took one of his hands and pulled him to his feet, saying, "Let me show you where you shall sleep."

She was already easing his boots off when he looked around the swirling cottage and noticed there is only one bed. "You mean to put me up in your place, sisters? Where will you sleep?" he asked, wanting to be sure of their intentions.

Bronwyn put a hand to his chest and pushed him backwards onto the mattress. "Have no worry. There is room enough for all."

The sisters' behavior didn't surprise him. Women had always found him attractive. They were drawn to his sturdy body, the body of warriors and blacksmiths: broad-shouldered, tight-waisted and well-muscled through the flanks, promising endurance in bed. His experience as a lover showed on his manly face. There was nothing weak or timorous about him, especially not the parts that couldn't be seen while he was clothed.

He fought the undertow of the narcotics as the two women undressed him. Four hands undid the buttons on his doublet and slid the garment over his shoulders, then tugged his shirt over his head. One hand teased tufts of hair on his chest and lower belly

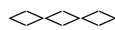
while two more hands untied the laces at the back of his breeches. Off came the trousers, pulled over his hips and down his legs, his linen right after it. Freed, his member lolled to one side. His eyes closed as the hands amused themselves with his manhood, jollying it until it stood fat and stiff. Squeals of delight escaped from the sisters, one sitting at his feet, the other at his head.

He cracked his eyelids in time to catch the sisters undressing, hurriedly peeling off bodices and skirts and petticoats. Bronwyn remained in her stays and stockings and garters, but Penthy stripped to nothing but a silver amulet dangling around her neck on a leather thong. They started with their amorous play without a word of by-your-leave, as one mouth fastened over his and pulled hungrily on his lips, while another mouth fixed itself to his chest, and a hand groped his cock and balls.

“I hope you do not mind if we do not wait in turns,” Penthy said breathily in his ears. She broke off kissing him to feed her breasts to him, one at a time. “It’s just that it’s been a while since we’ve had a man come to call.”

“Not at all,” Adair replied. Such an answer might appear overly confident, but he was experienced at pleasuring more than one woman at a time. Still, he swatted at the hand pulling urgently on his equipment. “Only—gently, kind ladies. Gently, lest the festivities come to an abruptly premature end.”

In all, they spent a playful hour together, tumbling over and over each other in an endless twining of positions, though Adair found it took all his concentration to make it last that long. Just as he surrendered to the demands of pleasure—tendons standing on his neck and a sound halfway between a sigh and a roar bursting forth at the end—he opened his eyes a slit and, to his surprise, saw that the dark sister was not catching his seed in one of the usual manners but was milking it into a bowl, the way a shaman might gather a snake’s venom. Startled, he meant to demand an explanation, for as blithely as a man dispensed with his seed under normal conditions, having it saved like this (and without his prior permission) was another thing entirely. But he couldn’t speak, suffering a type of lockjaw—brought on by the strange combination of narcotics, perhaps—and, having dispensed with his goods, as it were, he tumbled into a sleep that would not be denied.



Adair expected to find himself in chains on awakening (at the very least) or taken for dead and buried underground (at the very most), but as it turned out, neither was the case. He woke in bed, still naked but unfettered, and the sisters moved about on the other side of the curtain, muttering to each other in low voices.

“You’re up early!” Penthy yelped when Adair stepped fully clothed from behind the linen drapery. After being unpleasantly surprised last night, he was ready to leave the enchanted hut and the sister witches as quickly as possible, but not before confronting

them about the strange act he witnessed, for the thought of leaving a part of himself behind with these two strange women unnerved him.

“My seed! I saw you gather it from me last night. I intend to have it back,” he bellowed, standing before them with his arms crossed.

He expected them to wilt under his accusation and surrender immediately, and was flabbergasted when the women were not cowed at all. The dark one refused to back down a whit and glared at him defiantly. “Why do you want it back? What possible use could you have for it now? Besides, you gave it to us free and clear last night, did you not? At no point before the proceedings did you make any stipulation as to what could or could not be done with your seed.”

Adair was taken aback. It was true that a man’s seed was the strangest of commodities in that it was given freely in the knowledge that it would only be wiped off or washed away, leaked and left to dry, spit out or swallowed. Dispose of it and you would meet with no objections, only a polite smile and a “thank you”. But if you raised the idea of *keeping* it, and that was another matter entirely.

“I would’ve objected at the time if I’d known your intention,” Adair said. “In any case, your potions were quite effective in knocking me out before I could stop you.”

“Not as effective as you might think,” the blond piped up. “With the amounts we’d given you, we thought you’d sleep right through the day and another evening besides, to *tomorrow* morning, but here you are on your feet and it’s not even midday.”

Bronwyn regarded him with suspicion, too. “I hardly know whether to attribute that to your size, or a natural resistance to such medicines or—to something else.”

Adair had no desire to explain why he was not still passed out in their bed. They would be gone from his life soon enough and had no need to know about his extraordinary condition; why make his immortality more widely known than was necessary? “There’s nothing unusual about it. Medicine and herbs have always had little effect on me,” he assured them.

“I’ll remember that in future,” Bronwyn said ominously as she dusted her hands, ready to return to her mischief at the worktable.

Adair took a threatening step toward them. “See here, I’ll not be ignored—what do you plan to do with the, um, *goods* that you took from my person?”

“Goods!” Penthy laughed. “It’s no good to you now, no good for procreation, if that’s your concern. We’ve tried, in case you’re wondering, tried giving such ‘goods’ to them wives desperate to have a baby but having no luck with their husband’s seed.”

“So you’re midwives, too.” Rather ambitious ones, to judge from the experiment Penthy just described.

“We help the women hereabouts with *all* their needs, yes,” Bronwyn replied brusquely, unhappy to be made to explain her business. “Healing, preventatives, and helping nature along when circumstances call for it.”

“You’ve still not told me what you plan to do with my seed.”

Bronwyn threw her hands up and glared at him. “If you must know, we use it in a poultice. It is effective in dressing wounds, and better than egg white for tightening skin.”

“It binds a face masque up good,” Penthy added. “We make a beautifying masque that the elder ladies in the village swear by.”

They wouldn’t if they knew what was in it, Adair thought. So, old women would be smearing his frothy leavings on their faces. This was what the sisters wanted from him, not his wallet or his horse. It wasn’t the worst bargain in the world.

It was Bronwyn’s turn to cock an eyebrow now, staring at the cloak and saddlebags in his hands. “You look as though you’ve decided to take your leave.”

“And here we were just saying how nice it is to have a man around the house.” Penthy looked up at him, fluttering her sparse brown lashes. “We can offer you food and drink, a comfortable bed and all the diversions a man could wish for. Will you get an offer as good wherever you’re headed?”

Not likely, Adair admitted.

“Then surely you cannot be in as much of a rush as all that,” Bronwyn said, gently taking the saddlebags from his hands.

They gave him tasks: chop wood, haul water from the well, lug stones from the forest to build a new path through the garden. They treated him like a husband and it reminded him of earlier, happier times in other villages with other women. It wasn’t unpleasant work, and it was a nice change of pace to be useful in a utilitarian way, using his muscles and not his head. His reward on the second evening was to be scrubbed crown to toe. The sisters soaped and rinsed him, and combed out his long black curls. Then they made love leisurely, the women taking turns this time. And that night, at the moment of truth, neither woman reached for the little earthenware pot.

Every morning, he meant to be on his way but the days slid by pleasantly and evenings more pleasantly still. It was a homey existence, one that he hadn’t had in a long time: meat pies and ale for supper, splitting firewood in the afternoon, trapping the hares that bedeviled the kitchen garden. He had forgotten what it was like to be waited on by a woman. The three become comfortable with each other quickly, and he supposed it was because the sisters’ routines were already well-established and he merely fell into their lives. They were like two heavenly bodies that had been orbiting each other for a great long while and he was a comet briefly transiting their paths.

One day, he came in from the woodpile behind the cottage for a cool drink and found Penthy going through his saddle bags. His books of ancient occult knowledge, wrapped in a deerskin for protection, sat innocently in her lap. “I’m about to do a wash down at the creek and thought I’d see if you had anything needing cleaning,” she said apologetically. “I didn’t mean to snoop.” He held his breath as he waited for her to question him about the books—*Are you a magician sir, or a wizard, for otherwise why would you carry books such as these?*—but she said nothing. Obviously, the words had meant nothing to her. She could not read.

His fifth day. His chores finished, he lazed around the cottage like a fat old tom, waiting for his belly to be rubbed and his whiskers stroked. He was napping behind the bed curtain one afternoon when he overheard the arrival of a visitor. At first he assumed a woman had come for a tincture or powder but no, the speaker had a deeper voice. Adair peeked out to see Bronwyn at the worktable with a well-dressed man, a gentleman. Adair didn't like the wily look on the man's face, though he supposed it was no wiler than Bronwyn's. Their heads were close, their voices a whisper.

Bronwyn stepped out with the man when he rose to leave, and a minute later Penthly entered into the cottage with a basket of herbs and eggs. Adair slipped out of bed to catch the light sister by the waist. She was the easier of the two by far, less complicated, prone to honesty, and likely to grow uncomfortable when things got unpleasant. He wondered for the hundredth time why he didn't prefer girls like Penthly over ones like Bronwyn, but he did not.

"Who was the man visiting with Bronwyn just now?" he asked, burying his nose in Penthly's hair. She squirmed like a delighted child in Adair's arms.

"That is Gawain, the sheriff's man in the village."

"What was he doing here? He wasn't serving her with a writ, by the looks of it."

"Indeed, he was not," she giggled, though Adair could tell that she only pretended to be amused.

"Sheriffs generally are not friends to midwives," Adair observed, leaving a graceful space for Penthly to step in and take up the tale. She sighed.

"We've managed a truce—or Bron's managed it, I should say, for Gawain, though married, fancies my sister. They're out now in the poplar grove," she said, rocking her body in such a way to suggest that the pair were swiving.

Fire swept through Adair. He had no right to be jealous—as he reminded himself every day, he was only a visitor in the sisters' lives—but he couldn't help it, for he has been the man of the household this past week, the lion with his pride of lionesses. Or was that only what they would have him imagine? Their attentions may have been pretense, they might have secretly scorned him for a vagabond or a wastrel. Did they think he couldn't take care of them, he wondered, his cheeks growing hot. If that were the case, then they were mistaken, dreadfully mistaken. But he caught himself thinking angrily that they didn't know him, nor did they know what he was capable of, and he had to stop himself. Of course they didn't; he had yet to reveal that he was one of their kind, a magic handler. He hadn't shown them his true nature. But, he resolved, he would.

Later that afternoon, he found the sisters were at the worktable surrounded by the tools of their profession: mortar and pestle, pots and bottles of ingredients, clumps of herbs. There was no written recipe, he noticed: no notes, not a scrap of paper to be seen. Bronwyn, hands on hips, frowned into a mixing bowl while Penthly leaned on the worktable on her forearms, mimicking her sister's pensive look.

"What are you to up, ladies?" Adair asked, feigning a pleasant air.

“A bit of business. Nothing that would interest you,” Bronwyn said as though she were shooing away a curious child.

“Oh, you might be surprised. Try me,” he replied, rocking back on his heels, arms crossed over his chest.

Before the dark sister could cut him off, the light one answered him. “We are making a love potion for one of the ladies in town.”

“Ah, a love potion.” It was hard to keep from taking on a mocking tone. “And it has worked in the past, this love potion you are about to make?”

“Some times better than others,” Bronwyn said warily. “But that is the way it is with love potions; they can hardly come with a guarantee. What would you know about them, anyway?”

“More than you might think.” He quickly sized up the ingredients: thorns from a rose bush, peppermint, a moonstone, raven’s feathers. In other words, a mishmash, with some ingredients you might use in one kind of potion, some ingredients for another. He rubbed a dried rose petal between his fingers as he thought of what to say. He felt a childish urge to show off. “Is this meant to rekindle an old flame or to start a new one?” he finally said in a slightly pompous tone. “Is it for a young woman or an old maid? A widow or a virgin? Is this a love match or is it for financial gain?”

The sisters shot surprised looks at each other, then turned on him like hens in the barnyard. “What do you mean, asking these questions? Are you trying to confound us? There cannot possibly be so many spells for love,” Bronwyn snapped.

“And besides—we have only the one!” Penthy wailed before her sister hushed her. “What shall we do?”

Adair pulled his two precious books from his saddlebags. He opened one, a pretty volume bound in peacock blue linen and written in a precise calligrapher’s hand, and put it on the table. The sisters’ eyes widened, as he knew they would. He flipped to a page, full of writing and illustrations but having nothing to do with love potions, and stabbed a finger at it.

“See here! A dozen potions and spells for love. You only have to take your pick.”

The sisters passed a look between them, anxious and secretive, before Bronwyn narrowed her eyes on him. “Do you mean to tell us that you are a magician of some kind?”

“Of *one* kind,” he said, not wishing to be drawn into definitions and explanations of alchemy, not with her. She was prickly enough, and the more she learned about him—well, she was bound to get pricklier.

“And you’ve been hiding this fact from us until now—why, exactly?”

He explained that he needed a few days in their company to decide that he was safe with them, that they wouldn’t betray him to the authorities. It was prudent to figure out how the local liege and church felt toward the old ways before giving away too much about oneself. As she listened to him, Penthy ran her hands over the open book, as though

touching it might confer knowledge. “And I suppose you must be a powerful and learned magician indeed, if you are in possession of books such as these.”

“Have you never seen a book of secrets before?” he asked.

Penthy laughed nervously. “I’ve never seen a book of any kind before.”

“Don’t tell me that you cannot read.” But his observation didn’t come out as a question; it sounded mocking and condescending, he realized too late. Of course they couldn’t read, he reminded himself. They were peasants. They were women.

The light one didn’t pick up on his insult, however, and clutched his arm excitedly. “You mean to say that the whole book is nothing but *spells*? A book of entirely of magic? I never knew such things existed. Ooh—teach me to read it.”

“You don’t need that,” her sister reprimanded her. Hers was an old hurt, Adair could tell. “We have our ways. We keep our knowledge locked in our heads. We don’t need a piece of paper to tell us what to do.”

But Penthy continued to turn pages, oohing and ahing over the illustrations as though it were a child’s picture book. Adair suddenly felt the urge to rebuke her, afraid that she’ll overhandle the pages, tear them, damage them. There was an irrational fear that by exposing the books to the two women—primitive, needy—that somehow the magic would be drained from them.

Bronwyn kept her gaze on her sister but addressed Adair. “You presume to show us your book and tell us what we should aspire to, just as the clerics would have us believe. They, too, say that books are superior to what we have been taught, but book knowledge always has been beyond our reach. We were trained by our mother, as she was taught by her mother, and her mother before her.”

“Kitchen magic.” The words slipped from his mouth before he could stop himself. It was a pejorative term used by Adepts, the old practitioners of occult philosophy. These men—and the group *was* exclusively male; Adair hadn’t met one female Adept, not in all centuries he had spent tracking them down—used this term for the type of magic taught by parents to their children. Kitchen magic was widely perceived as crude, barely effective at best, more wishful thinking and common sense than science, art, or philosophy. It was prejudice, not unlike that of physicians against herbalists and midwives, but nevertheless one that Adair didn’t believe was completely unfounded.

His slip did not go unnoticed and an icy veil descended between him and the two sisters. He pressed a hand to his chest as he tried to backpedal. “I didn’t mean any disrespect,” he pleaded, but they plainly saw that for a lie. For learned men have disrespected peasants for generations and believed them incapable of discourse, never mind treating them as an equal. And clearly Bronwyn held herself as Adair’s equal, though he couldn’t imagine why she would persist in such wrong-headedness, not when the evidence lay on the table between them.

“If you meant no disrespect, then teach us to read,” Bronwyn said, her dark eyes flashing. She knew she had given him a challenge he could not accept. His blood froze in

his veins at the thought of what others would say if he did as they asked. Besides, if he taught them to read, they would only plunder his books of spells and secrets. Oh, why didn't he walk away and let them go about their potion-making, he asked himself? Why did he give in to vanity?

"Never mind," he answered, snatching up the book.

The rage in her eyes was so fierce that, for a moment, Adair was afraid she would set him and his things ablaze with a glance. "We're not as ineffectual as you may think," she said, her voice thick with hurt. "We managed to trick *you* into staying with us, didn't we?"

Penthy sucked in her breath at what her sister had said, and even Bronwyn seemed to be struck dumb. *Was this what they thought*, he railed to himself. Did the two sisters believe they had snared *him*, the unwary traveler, tempted *him* with their charms and wormwood tea? Did they really believe they kept him here with their magic, to chop wood for them and perform tricks in bed?

"So you think it's by your magic that I stay? Then you deal in a very weak magic, ladies, for I can walk out that door anytime I wish." Bronwyn drew back from Adair's display of temper like a spooked horse, but Penthy threw herself at him and hung off his arm as he reached for his saddlebags.

"Stay, please! Don't leave us! Do not listen to my sister; she only says those things because you have stung her. You must believe that we did not charm you. It is your own desire that keeps you here. We need you, Adair, do not leave. Who will warm our bed at night and keep away the bad dreams?" she begged in her little girl's voice.

The truth was that he didn't wish to leave yet. He was comfortable with these sisters and they showered him with attention, though in completely different ways. Penthy was sweet and doting, eager to please if a bit simpering. Bronwyn's astringency provoked him but usually to good effect, particularly in bed. He enjoyed this combination of attention, by turns indulgent and bracing—and nothing like it waited for him where he was headed, where his servants cooled their heels, none too anxious for his return.

Once Bronwyn's temper receded, she stood so close that her bodice, stuffed to bursting with her full breasts, brushed against his arm. "My sister is right. Stay, please. I apologize for my outburst. I didn't mean to imply that we were keeping you here. And of course you are free to leave anytime you wish—there is naught we could do to stop you—but we hope you will stay a little longer. Pray sir, stay and let me show you how grievously sorry I truly am."

After a tangle under the sheets, all feelings were soothed and Adair said nothing more about leaving. But over the course of the next few days, the atmosphere in the cottage changed. For one thing, he noticed that Penthy hung back from him now, as though she were a child that suddenly realized the toy she'd been playing was not hers to keep. She was afraid to want too much or to presume to own things, because owning was the domain of her sister. Bronwyn, the strong one, demanded—and got—attention,

assumed she had first choice of everything. But that has always been the way between the sisters. Adair knew his presence only sharpened this divide.

The atmosphere soured, he decided he wouldn't stay much longer. He would leave the sisters to their kitchen magic and their cottage in the wild fens wood since this was what they wanted. He wouldn't tell them tales of magical feats performed by sage Adepts, manipulations of the natural world that would put their work to shame, because that would only anger them and leave them feeling belittled. Nor would he tell them of his estate and his riches, for he had decided not to ask them to join him. They wouldn't fit in with the ones waiting for him, the ones he's already gathered to serve him. His companions were like pretty dolls he'd collected to keep him company. They were content to benefit from his practice of the dark arts but did not wish to be practitioners themselves. The sisters would want to continue to handling magic, however, and might even try to get him to share his secrets with them, and this idea sat poorly with him. Why have a source of eternal friction?

The next morning—after an evening of intense pleasuring, the girls taking turns drinking from him as though he were an endless fountain—Adair woke to find that he couldn't move. His bare wrists and ankles were fastened with cold circlets of iron that held him spread-eagled to the heavy bed. The quilt had been removed, leaving him naked and exposed. Penthy, standing at the side of the bed, stared down at him tensely.

He jerked hard against the chains, lifting the bed off the floor with his force and causing Penthy to jump back in alarm. “What is the meaning of this? Have you and your sister lost your minds? Unchain me,” he bellowed, trying to frighten the timid sister into doing as he demanded.

Penthy's eyes widened and her hands fluttered to cover her mouth, but instead of apologizing and rushing to free him, she turned to the center of the room, looking to her sister for guidance. Ah, Bronwyn hadn't left them alone. She stood at the worktable like an industrious wife about to make the evening meal—only it wasn't a chicken and turnips and potatoes she had laid on the table before her, but both of Adair's books. She was laboriously copying out a page onto rough brown paper. Even if she could neither read nor write, she could copy, and she appeared to be meticulously recording each arc, line, and jot just as though she were duplicating an image. She paused, pursing her lips as she compared her page against the original in the book. She looked like a big black spider sitting in the center of her web, spinning busily.

“Why are you bothering to reproduce those pages? You can't read them,” he barked at her.

Bronwyn waved the page to dry it, a smudge of ink on her cheek. “We'll find someone to teach us. You were about to leave—I saw it in your eyes. I couldn't let this opportunity get away, Adair. We'll never see the likes of these books again.”

“I'd have taught you to read, if you'd asked.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” She shrugged. “I don’t think you’d have shared all your magic with us, though. You would let us have the trivial things, the harmless parts. Not real magic.”

He lifted his head so she could see look into his eyes and judge whether he was telling the truth. “Those pages are all in Italian, Romanian and Hungarian. No one here speaks these languages. You’ll never get them translated. Never.”

The dark sister put down her pen and bustled to the side of the bed. “We could’ve killed you, you know. We still can. But we don’t want to. We’re going to wait until you are very, very weak and then we’ll tie you to your horse and send you on your way. With your books—we weren’t going to steal them from you. We only wanted chance to learn your kind of magic, the stuff *your kind* would never teach us. We only wanted to learn for ourselves what you already know.” She tried hard to conceal her anger for having been forced to confess her weakness and her jealousy to him.

“I didn’t want to give such knowledge to you for this very reason. Look at what you’ve done, how you’ve behaved toward me. Women can’t be trusted. You are too wily, always plotting and conniving when there are more straightforward means.”

He thought this would make her furious, but instead she just laughed at him. “As though the same can’t be said of men. How did you come to possess these books, I wonder. That’s not your handwriting in that book, after all. You might have bought it, or you could’ve stolen it. In any case, I doubt that your dealings have *all* been aboveboard.”

He flinched inwardly because her assumptions were correct. He had been on a quest to gather all knowledge he could about the practice of magic and the occult arts, and he’d done untoward things, things he wasn’t proud of. If he were honest, he would have to say that at times he’d done far worse than Bronwyn.

He decided to try reasoning with them again. “Let me go. You can’t mean to let me waste away on your bed. You are not that cruel.”

“We don’t mean to kill you. We’ll give you food and drink,” Penthy cried.

Her sister gave her a withering glance. “No, we will *not*. We need to diminish him, so that when we do release him, he’ll be too weak to hurt us.”

Except that day will not come, Adair thought. They could starve him for sixty days and he would look the same on the last as he did on the first. What’s more, there was nothing he could do to help himself in this regard: he couldn’t appear haggard and worn no matter what he did. His unchanging condition would only make them more suspicious and distrustful.

That night they approached the bed and stripped for him as they always did, but he turned his head from the sight of their firm, beckoning bodies. “You can’t possibly mean to use me against my will. I won’t accommodate your desires, ladies. You’ll not push me that far,” he warned.

Bronwyn smiled wickedly and squeezed his waxing member. “I don’t think your little man is listening to you,” she said lightly, and for the next hour, the sisters took turns riding him until, helpless to stop, he thrashed against the restraints in climax.

As the days passed, he tried to make it seem as though the two women were draining him and feigned exhaustion, especially when Penthly was in the vicinity. She snuck him a cup of ale or a crust of bread when Bronwyn wasn’t looking. “To keep up your strength,” she whispered as she nursed ale over his lips. “Don’t tell Bron or she will put me in chains besides you.”

“Penthly, you shouldn’t let her force you to do something you know is wrong,” he said, and she gave him a pained, confused look before running out of the cottage.

The second time he tried this tactic, the fair sister turned on him in anger. “This could’ve all been avoided if you’d just agreed to teach us to read and not ridiculed us,” she said reproachfully.

“I’m sorry that I underestimated you. I truly am. But by the same token, you bear some of the responsibility for what has happened. I *trusted* you, Penthly. You assured me that I was a welcome guest under your roof. Did you mean to harm me all along?”

She stuck out her lower lip and turned away, her shame emanating from her like heat from a fire. “I’m so sorry, too, Adair. I didn’t know Bron would do something like this. I didn’t want this to happen.”

“It’s not too late. You could release me,” he suggested softly.

She spun back to him, eyes wide. “I can’t do that yet. You’ll take your revenge on us. You’re still strong, strong enough to kill us.”

“I won’t. You have my word on it.” He needed her help, but this promise grated on him nonetheless. While he couldn’t imagine hurting Penthly—she was a gentle soul and was obviously coerced to act against her will—but someone should pay for the indignity of being chained to the bed, starved and threatened. What came to mind at the moment was to break Bronwyn’s neck.

“You must *promise* not to hurt us,” Penthly said, breathless and worried, fiddling with a tattered hem on a sleeve. “Only then will I let you go. You seem the sort of man who honors his word.”

Damn, if she hadn’t made a fair assessment of him. He was a man of honor in his own twisted way. But he’d run out of choices and could see no way to get out of his current predicament. He needed Penthly’s help. “I promise,” he said as sincerely as he could.

“Okay,” she said resolutely, pushing her hair out of her eyes. She went to the shelves and dug behind a cluster of glass bottles to find what she was looking for: a ring of keys. With a look of great trepidation, she sat on the edge of the bed and worked the locks, starting with the manacles around his ankles. When she had unlocked one of them and he didn’t kick out at her, she undid the second one. Then, holding her breath, she unlocked the manacle on one wrist and then the other. She leapt back from the bed,

clutching the ring of keys to her chest, keeping her distance in case he decided not to honor his word.

He didn't *want* to keep his promise, naturally, but having given it, had no choice but to obey. He rubbed at his wrists but mostly to hide the fact that his wounds were healing instantaneously. As he dressed, he kept an ear out for Bronwyn's return, while turning over in his mind how he might defend his honor without breaking his word. These witches needed to be taught a lesson, so they wouldn't try their tricks on the next man unlucky enough to stumble down their path.

He turned swiftly to scan the room, surprising Penthy, who thought him weak from hunger, and his eye fell on a sheaf of papers on the table, pages and pages of Bronwyn's handiwork. He snatched them up and threw them on the fire.

Penthy stamped her foot in anger. "No! You can't do that—you promised!"

He narrowed his eyes on her. "I promised not to harm you, but I didn't say anything about your property." But once he'd given rein to his anger, he couldn't stop: he knocked everything on the worktable to the floor, smashing jars and bottles into a thousand shards of pottery and glass. Chips of dried petal and leaf fluttered to the ground. Penthy clamped her hands over her mouth to stifle a scream, seeing too late that it was a mistake to let him go.

He cleared the room in a maelstrom of fury, pitching everything into the fire: drying herbs, baskets of nettles and roots, feathers, mice ears, rats' tails, roosters' wattles. There was so much detritus that the fire nearly smothered and went out. A great roar of anger exploded from his chest as he destroyed every piece of furniture he could find, smashing them against the hearth. He plunged his dagger into the feather mattress and gutted it like a fish. At seeing the dagger, Penthy snapped out of her stupor and started for the door, but Adair caught her in two strides. He had to stifle the urge to beat her for tricking him, for stupidly following her more devious sister, and instead cut the linen curtain into strips to tie her hands and feet. He gagged her, too, then sat behind the door to wait for Bronwyn's return, quaking with anger and trying not to notice the great, hot tears rolling down Penthy's face.

Two hours passed and Bronwyn still hadn't returned. Adair spent the time deciding what he would do to her when she came home, knowing it would take every ounce of restraint he possessed not to kill her. Adair took out Penthy's gag to let her drink some water and the young woman coughed spastically before sobbing, "She's not going to come! She can feel what you've done. She can feel your evil intentions and she won't come back as long as you're here." Adair knew she was right: a witch would sense that someone had done violence to her home, and stay away.

There was no reason to remain. Before he left, he took pity on terrified Penthy and adjusted the bindings so that she would be more comfortable until her sister returned. He even considered leaving a bit of coin to pay for the damages he'd wrought but decided there was such a thing as showing too *much* mercy. Satisfied, he dug his saddle and bags

out from the wreckage. He'd spent out his anger during the long wait and was now only left with embarrassment at having been fooled. Imprisoned by two women armed with nothing more than kitchen magic. The only thing he wanted was to put as many miles as possible between himself and the sisters.

"She'll hex you, you know," Penthy whimpered to him as he picked through the rubble on his way to the door. "She won't let this go."

"Perhaps it would be best if you talked her out of it." He stopped to light a candle so Penthy the fair wouldn't have to wait in darkness.

"We'll meet again one day," she warned him. "You'd best be on your guard."

He couldn't take her threat seriously, knowing he would outlive the witches' anger. "Until that day then," he said with a hint of a mocking smile and, with a final bow, he swooped out of the cottage-tree, thinking he had seen the last of the sisters.

THE END