

# the demon AND the witch



BOOK ONE OF THE SAGA OF THE WITCH  
ROHAN DAVIES

the demon

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OF THE WITCH

ROHAN DAVIES

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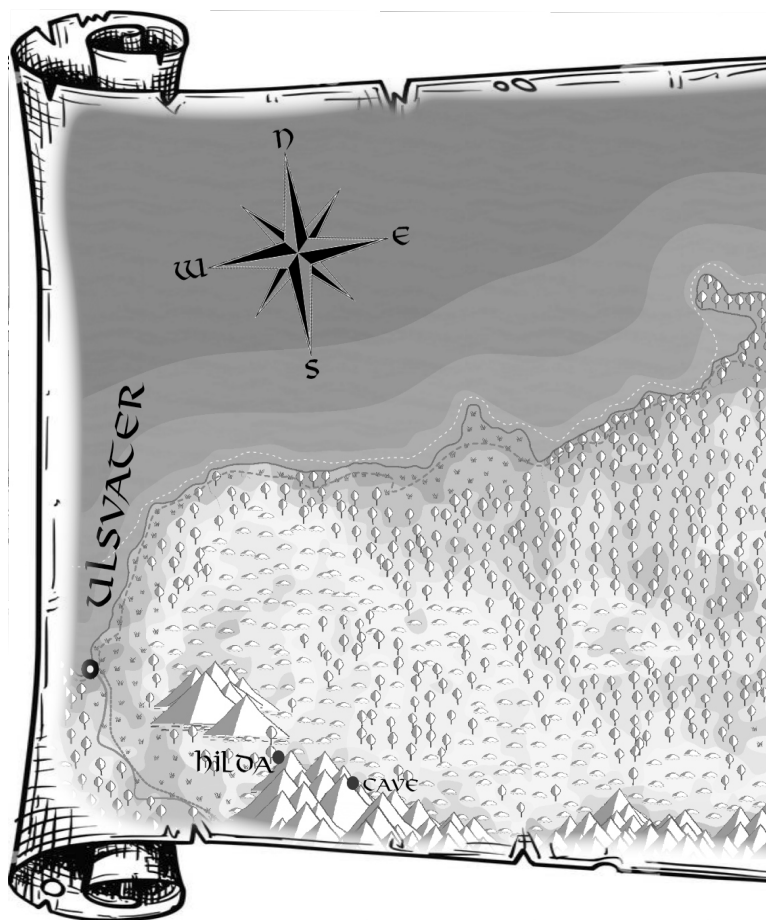
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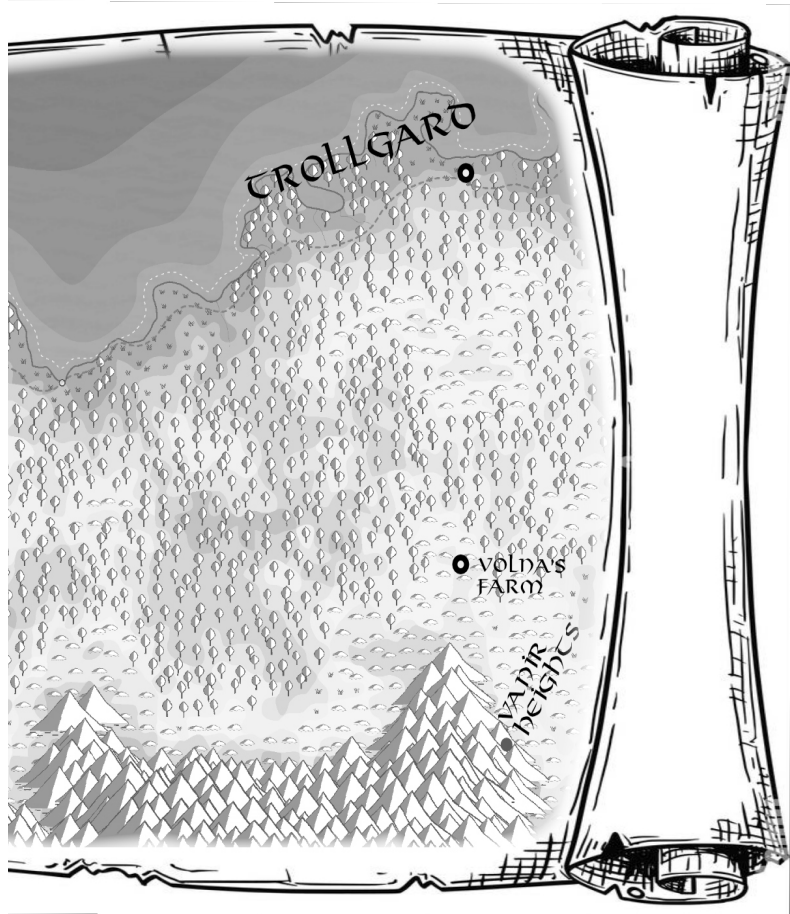
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TO DEVON









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## FROST in SUMMER

Anike froze in the act of picking a berry as the hairs on the back of her neck rose. She very slowly turned her head while her hand inched towards her dagger. A wolf nearly the size of a pony was standing in the centre of the sunlit clearing not ten paces away, its yellow eyes fixed on her and teeth bared.

She had not realised that any dire wolves still lived in the forest. She saw at once that her knife would be of little use against the beast and released her grip on it. Steadying her breathing, she weighed her options. If she ran, it would be on her in seconds, and picking up and hurling the bag containing the herbs she had gathered that morning would not be more than a slight distraction. Her best hope was that the creature was not really hungry, not hunting but had come upon her by accident. Even larger predators and the smaller monsters tended to avoid humans unless they were desperate, or if they sensed a threat or easy prey. Appearing to be either would get her killed.

Beads of sweat formed on the young woman's brow. Standing as still as she could, trying not to betray fear in her breathing or stance, she sought the balance between fear and aggression. She kept her eyes on the dire wolf, trying not to imagine how the teeth would feel closing on her flesh.

The creature regarded her from the centre of the clearing, sunlight glinting from its silver-grey fur. Behind it, another dire wolf, then a third, emerged silently from the dark green trees. Anike's heart skipped a beat as they came to stand beside the first and largest wolf, which stared at her before turning its head to look back the way it had come.

It gave a low growl, then its head came forward and it bounded across the clearing. Anike tensed but it was not attacking. The great beast loped past her and disappeared amongst the dark trees. The other two pack members followed their leader, also casting glances over their shoulders. Anike realised they were not hunting but fleeing. She shivered as she wondered what could have frightened three dire wolves.

She took the incident as a sign to abandon her herb gathering for the day and retrieved her satchel from the ground. As she looped it over her shoulder, she heard cries of alarm from the direction the dire wolves had run. Shouts but not screams, and no howls from the wolves themselves. The sounds were a couple of hundred paces away, much closer than the town, and in the face of an unknown threat that had scared such dangerous creatures, she very much wanted to be amongst people. There were often hunters or woodsmen in the forest so Anike headed towards where she thought the sounds had come from, forcing her way through the undergrowth.

As she pushed through the bushes trying to find the best path, she heard cracking behind her. Branches were snapping as something made its way through the trees, and it was coming in her direction. Her imagination painted a picture of a large creature with fangs and talons, even more dangerous than a pack of dire wolves. She broke into a run, battling her way through the thick undergrowth with branches lashing at her feet. She glanced back, hoping and fearing to catch a glimpse of what was following her but as she looked over her shoulder, her foot caught in a bramble and she fell straight into a thorny bush.

She panicked, started to thrash wildly and managed to pull herself onto her side, but the thorns tangled in her long dark hair and her tunic and she was unable to stand. The needle-sharp points held and her struggling only caught more. She forced herself to relax and hold still, then start the agonisingly slow process of removing one branch at a time. All the while, she could hear the sounds of snapping undergrowth coming closer.

The air around her abruptly became bitterly cold and she saw the green leaves beside her turn white with frost. The chill pierced

through her clothes to the bone. A branch cracked with a sharp report only a few paces away, and she raised her head to see what had been following her.

A man stepped forward from between the trees, his clothes, hair and beard silver with frost. Her eyes were drawn first to a large woodsman's axe held loosely in his right hand then Anike saw his face and, to her surprise, recognised him. Gern Haffordsson was a woodsman, always ready with a smile when he visited her master Olaf to buy elixirs, but now he stared down at her with eyes that belonged to a dead man, devoid of life or feeling as if the soul had frozen behind them. "Gern..." Anike started but was cut off before she had a chance to say more. Without emotion and without moving anything except his lips, the frost-covered man spoke a word she did not recognise in a voice as clear and dead as ice. At that word, Anike felt as if the life was being pulled from her body, her heart held without beating and her blood frozen in her veins. The sensation lasted only for an instant but it left her feeling weak and faded. Anike had never seen witchcraft before, but this could be nothing else.

Gern took a step closer. The cold surrounding him was so intense that it almost burned. He unhurriedly raised his axe to strike and fighting the numbing chill, she instinctively tried to raise an arm to ward off the impending blow. The brambles that had previously held her snapped as she moved. The lithe green tendrils, caught in Gern's unnatural attack on her, had turned grey and brittle and offered almost no resistance as her arm came up.

Feeling this, without time to think but only to act and hope, Anike rolled and the dead bramble shattered around her as she flung herself out of the way of the descending axe. She felt it strike the ground a hair's breadth behind her back as she completed her roll, leaving the patch of dead bush in her wake. Before Gern could raise the axe for another strike, she was up and running, strength from fear and desperation sustaining her as she tried to put some distance between her and the man who had drained life out of her. A few strides and she was out of the aura of deathly cold surrounding him. Her head was reeling – he had just tried to kill her with witchcraft. It was little

wonder that the dire wolves had run from this man, a witch with the power to control the elements.

She dared not risk another look behind her as she crashed through the thicket, seeking the source of the shouting she had heard earlier. The snapping of frozen branches told her that Gern was following her, unhurried and inexorable. Her only chance was to reach help before he caught her again and gasping for breath through the unnatural exhaustion, she fled.

After perhaps a hundred paces of this headlong plunge, she crashed out of the undergrowth into another clearing. Four young men stood there, all with drawn weapons. They had been peering into the trees on the far side of the clearing but turned towards Anike as she emerged into the sunlight.

“Bjord!” she gasped.

“Anike, what are you doing here?” the man asked in surprise. The Arl’s son was tall, his neatly-trimmed blonde hair falling to his broad shoulders and he held a sword ready in his hand. At the sight of Anike, he lowered it, and his companions relaxed as well.

“You should be careful today,” he continued as Anike came to a halt in front of him. “There are dire wolves in the forest and they might easily make a meal of a tasty morsel like you.”

Bjord’s companions chuckled as Anike caught her breath and tried to summon the energy to speak. “There is worse coming!” she gasped out. “It’s Gern Haffordsson. He is a witch, and he is chasing me.” She had to pause for breath – whatever Gern had done to her had left her too weak to speak for long.

“Gern? A witch?” said Bjord scornfully. “A woman’s fancy! But never fear, lovely Anike, I will protect you.” He flourished his sword in mock bravado. Anike stared at him in disbelief, but before she could say anything in response the air in the bright clearing went bitterly cold. Bjord’s mocking expression vanished and Loga, one of his companions, shivered.

Looking back in the direction she had come, Anike pointed at the figure emerging from between the trees. “There he is,” she gasped.

Gern came forward, the grass freezing around him, each footfall crushing icy stems beneath his boots. With his dark beard turned silver in the frost and his clothes stiff with ice, he looked like a man caught in a winter storm, save for his blank eyes which unhurriedly took in the people in the clearing.

“Gern, hold!” cried Bjord, levelling his sword and pulling Anike behind him.

Gern’s expression did not change, but he stopped. Anike could read nothing in his gaze as he stared at them all. He spoke a single word, different from the last one but another that she had never heard.

Before the sound of his voice had died away, the earth around Anike’s feet had surged upwards and gripped her ankles. Loga screamed in fear and Anike saw that the ground had entangled the men’s legs as well. The soil held Loga fast as he tried to flee, and he overbalanced and fell. Slad and Tavic, Bjord’s other companions, seemed frozen in fear of the living earth. Bjord alone stood firm, but Anike saw the colour drain from his cheeks. She drew her knife, wondering if it would be of any use against a witch.

In one smooth movement, Bjord swapped his sword to his left hand and scooped up a boar spear from the ground. He readied the missile, steel-tipped and nearly as long as Anike was tall, and cast it at Gern with all his strength. The spear arced over the ten paces separating the two men, striking a glancing blow to the witch’s right shoulder and cutting a deep furrow in the flesh. Gern staggered under the force of the strike and his axe tumbled onto the cold ground, but he showed no sign of pain and his face betrayed no recognition of the blow. He recovered his balance even as blood started to seep out from beneath his tunic.

Gern spoke a third unknown word. Ice formed around his body, encasing it in a translucent barrier like a suit of armour, leaving only his face uncovered.

“By Odin’s single eye!” Bjord cursed and snatched an axe from the trembling Tavic. He hurled it at Gern but it bounced off, leaving a white line in the ice where the blade had struck. Anike had been

considering throwing her knife but if the axe had not penetrated the ice, her knife never would and Gern was too far away for her to be sure to hit his face.

Without even a glance at the axe, Gern advanced. A few paces closer, he raised his left arm and pointed it at Bjord who was looking around for another weapon to throw. Gern spoke the third word again and ice dust formed in a path in the air between his hand and Bjord's chest. Bjord's torso went white, and he fell with a cry. His sword dropped from his hand and he lay gasping on the ground, his breath forming mist in the cold air. Gern came forward, as inevitable as a glacier. Anike changed her grip on the knife, preparing to throw. She had never killed a man but looking into Gern's eyes she doubted he was truly a man any more.

Gern came up to Bjord, but instead of speaking another strange word, he reached down and picked up the fallen sword in his left hand. Anike drew back her arm, knowing that she had only one chance and focusing on the target of Gern's face, but before she could release the blade she saw the light come back into Gern's eyes and he stopped, wincing in pain. He looked down at Bjord, his face a mask of anguish and grief. "My lord!" he said, his voice thick with emotion.

Anike halted her throw in surprise but Bjord was not so reticent. He reached up to grasp Gern's left arm and pulled him to the ground. As the man fell, Bjord somehow wrested the sword from him, despite his feet being locked in earth. Before Gern could start to rise, the young warrior slammed the hilt into his face, and he slumped, out like a light.

Shivering, partly in relief and partly in the intense cold that still radiated from the unconscious form, Anike looked down at Gern. For the moment, he was not a threat so she bent down and tried to scrape at the earth gripping her feet with her knife.

Bjord was also digging at his own earthen manacles, and he had more success. He freed one foot and looked at her. Their eyes met and Anike saw his jaw unclench. She realised that he had actually been frightened but had fought despite his fears and saved all their lives.



She had never doubted his bravery in the past but was still impressed by his actions in the face of real terror.

“Are you hurt?” she asked, breaking his gaze and looking away.

“I will live,” he replied.

Anike looked in her bag and pulled out some herbs. “Jarl’s narrowleaf. It will restore a little of your strength.” She handed a leaf to Bjord. “I wish I had time to make a potion from it, but the raw herb will have to do for now.” She put another leaf in her own mouth and bit into it. The sour taste seemed to flow through her body, restoring her energy. Bjord did the same, and the colour came back into his skin as he chewed. Suddenly, the earth sank back into the ground, freeing them all and the bitter cold faded, leaving only a memory of frost in the warmth of a summer day.

“This witch shall stand trial before my father,” Bjord said as he got to his feet, prodding the unconscious man with a booted foot.

“I knew Gern, at least I thought I did,” said Anike. “He has been coming to buy potions from Olaf for years. He was always friendly, and ordinary. Tough, like most woodsmen, but nothing odd or sinister about him.” She shivered, despite the heat of the day returning. “If I had not seen him using witchcraft myself, I would not have believed it.”

“He must have been concealing his dark nature, biding his time, waiting for the right moment to strike.”

“It was so unlike him. He seemed a good man. I wonder what made him choose today to reveal it?”

“A witch is like an earthquake, Anike. The ground can seem stable for many years, but you never know when one will strike. Perhaps he saw you alone and took his chance, or maybe men are just not supposed to understand the warped motivations of a witch. If Odin thought it suitable for humans, he would have given its power to the jarls.” Bjord saw power as the divine right of the jarl caste, the warriors and rulers.

“My father will hang this witch, after a fair trial,” he continued, “probably on the morrow. The people of Trollgard will see that we can protect them from unnatural threats as well as raiders.”

Witches were so rare that Anike had not really thought about how the laws applied to them before. As she understood matters, it was not unlawful to be a witch but if they did anything wrong the Arl would impose the severest of penalties. Gern had attempted to kill the Arl's son with witchcraft for no reason, so there was no doubt that his fate would be execution after the trial and Anike could see the need for harsh measures against witches, rare as they were. She could not forget his eyes, completely blank while he attacked.

The last moments before he fell troubled her in a different way though, for he had seemed to come back to his old self. Perhaps it made no difference. A man could be judged by his actions and they condemned Gern.

Anike looked at the unconscious man on the ground, trying to see something in his features to explain what he had done. As she did so, the ice armour around him melted away leaving no trace on the grass. Bjord turned to his companions. "Tie the witch up!" he ordered. Loga brought over a heavy boar spear, and Tavic and Slad bound Gern to it. "Bind his mouth as well – witches are supposed to be gagged." Loga wrapped some cloth around Gern's mouth, and Slad and Tavic hoisted him on the spear between them then started off towards the town.

Bjord turned to Anike. "Odin must have guided me into the forest today. I am glad I was here when you needed me. I would have been greatly saddened if any harm had befallen you, Anike Dareksdottir." Anike coloured slightly and looked at her feet. "I was relieved to find you and your companions in the forest," Anike told him, then suddenly uncomfortable with the personal tone in his words added, "I am glad your hunt brought you this way, my lord." She emphasised the honorific.

"You should come back to town with me, Anike," Bjord continued. "We have captured the witch, but the dire wolves may return."

"I saw them. You are right, my lord. I will come with you." She suspected that the wolves had kept running but she had most of the herbs Olaf had wanted her to gather, and the experiences of the morning had left her deeply unsettled.

She fell into step beside Bjord as the enormity of the past hour began to dawn on her. She had survived a battle with a witch. Realisation and relief flooded through her, then she thought of what her father was going to say and her heart sank once more.

# DAUGHTER AND APPRENTICE

Anike and Bjord walked down towards Trollgard from the forest, with Bjord's companions carrying Gern behind them. The town of nine hundred people lay on the north coast of Gotlund and the sea beyond it danced in the light of the summer sun. They walked into the town through the south gate, disrupting the rhythm of the afternoon as the townsfolk stopped to watch them pass. As they approached with Gern suspended on the spear, the flow of farmers, foresters and the occasional trader parted before them while those more distant stared and pointed. Once they had reached the marketplace, Anike touched Bjord's arm. "I must go to my father," she told him.

"I understand, Anike. I would see you home, but I must deliver the witch to my own father. I will come to see you later." He put a hand on her shoulder, then turned away.

Anike watched him go in the direction of the arlberg, the walled compound containing the Arl's hall and the surrounding buildings. He walked ahead of his companions who were taking it in turns to carry Gern between them. She had known him since they were children, but Bjord had recently been more open in his admiration of her, and she felt uncomfortable with the attention. He was handsome and strong but as they had grown up the difference in their status had become more apparent. The three castes had been ordained by the god Heimdall in the distant past and created boundaries that were not

lightly crossed, and Bjord was a jarl, the highest caste of warriors. Even though her father had been a close friend to the Arl, Anike was a karl, the middle caste of free craftsmen but at least she was not of the lowest caste of thralls, made up of servants and slaves. She sighed and headed towards the house she shared with her father, Darek Voludsson.

A light breeze carried the smells of the market to Anike as she walked through it. The scents of fish and game mixed with the sharp odour of metal from the forge. Now Bjord was no longer at her side, she allowed herself to relax and took a moment to enjoy still being alive. The marketplace in the town centre was busy with traders, smiths, dyers and other craftsmen going about their day or packing up empty stalls. As she crossed it, she nodded at Drakna, a hunter who had recently married her closest friend, Inge Gudrunsdottir. Her greeting was returned with a wave coupled with a curious stare and she realised her torn clothes and tangled hair were drawing attention. She pulled her hood up and walked a little faster.

Most of the buildings inside Trollgard had stone walls, a legacy from the time the dwarves had ruled Gotlund. They had been driven back underground some four centuries before but the stone buildings they had constructed for themselves and the humans they had enslaved still stood as witness to their extraordinary skills. Over the years, the town had expanded beyond the walls and buildings made of wood from the forest to the south had sprung up. The wood town was now nearly as large as the stone town within the walls.

She passed through the market and then between the buildings of the northern part of the town until she reached a small house close by the north wall. On the other side lay the sea shore, though Anike knew that by this hour her father's fishing boat would be pulled up on the sand along with a dozen others. She lifted the latch, pushed open the door and called out, "Father, I am home."

The inside of the house was dimly lit with only one of the shutters open to let in the daylight, and the low fire cast a red glow throughout the single large room. As Anike's eyes adjusted, the shapes within resolved themselves into familiar objects. A shelf held earthenware

plates and cups, and cooking pots hung beneath it. A large wooden table was set against one wall with two chairs next to it and a neatly folded fishing net occupied half of the tabletop. Against the other wall was a smaller workbench with boxes of herbs, small earthenware bottles for potions and salves, and three cauldrons of various sizes. A stool was tucked under the bench. The fire was in the centre of the room, straddled by an iron tripod to hang cauldrons and pots. A little over halfway up the walls and reached by short ladders, the two wooden sleeping platforms held numerous thick furs. Two barrels stood against one wall, one containing water and the other the strong ale that Darek favoured.

On a low bench in the middle of this tidy home, her father sat like a heap of hair and furs. His left sleeve hung empty from the elbow down. Ten years before he had been injured on a raid. Across the sea to the north lay another large island of the Archipelago, Lartenland. It was too far to see even on a clear day, but boats crossed and the people of both islands raided each other frequently. Darek had been a skilled warrior and high in Arl Svafnir's regard before a Larten axe had slipped past his shield. By the time they had returned to Trollgard, a rot had started in the wound which would have carried away his life if Olaf had not removed his arm. While he no longer took part in raids, Darek was still a powerful man who could cast fishing nets with one hand nearly as well as his mate Joran could do with both. But his injury ran deeper than his arm, and after the day's work was done he would come home and stare into the fire, nursing his ale until Anike returned to cook for him. He looked up at her now from between his unkempt beard and hair, the same raven-black as her own, and took in her torn clothing. "Thor's hammer, child! What happened to you?"

"Father, I am fine. Bjord saved me." Anike spoke soothingly, trying to reassure him before going on to explain. Rather quickly she added, "He captured the witch who was chasing me."

He blinked. "A witch? What are you talking about, child?"

"It was Gern Haffordsson, Father. You remember him? He came upon me in the forest. He had dead eyes." Anike shuddered and wondered why that was the first detail she thought of. She told her

father about the chase and battle. "Bjord was hurt, but he knocked Gern out. He says there will be a trial tomorrow," she concluded.

"I told you that the forest was dangerous, Anike. Olaf should not send you out there alone for his herbs."

"Be reasonable, Father. I do not go far and only a few of the herbs I need are on the shore or the cliffs. This is the first time I have been hurt." Anike did recall a time when she had climbed a tree to evade an angry boar, but she did not mention that. "It is not as if fishing is always safe either. Remember old Hulag going overboard in the spring?"

"That was his own fault, going out alone in that storm. Fishing is safe enough." Darek stood, flexing his arm, winced, and started pacing. "You know I promised your mother's shade that I would keep you safe. You are all that I have left of her."

He paused, and when he spoke again, his voice was hoarse and choked. "Isolde gave her life for you. She knew that the witch weather that night was a terrible omen, and she offered herself to Frigga so that you would be born alive. It would be a dishonour to her memory to let that sacrifice be in vain."

Anike had heard the story of her birth many times before. Witch weather, sudden violent storms from clear skies that usually only lasted minutes, were omens of death and destruction. According to her father and the midwife who had been present at the birth, her mother had cried out to Frigga, goddess of birth and motherhood, offering her own life when she had seen the storm gathering and Frigga had intervened, her answer marked by a flash of lightning. Anike had lived but Isolde died in childbirth in place of her daughter. Her father had brought her up alone.

Anike honoured her mother's sacrifice but she had never known Isolde and it was a shadow of what her father felt. He never had a bad word for her, always making her sound kind, brave and loving. She had been one of the fisher folk but she had also been a shield maiden, and her father said she could throw a spear as well as any man. Anike felt that if her mother was alive she would want her daughter to be strong, courageous and caring and to look after her father in her place.

She knew he would not be able to fish forever so at some point she would need to be the one that kept them. For that, she would need her own skills and profession, and the respect and acceptance of the townsfolk. She hoped it would be many years yet but she intended to be ready and that meant taking a few sensible risks to establish herself, including going to the forest to gather herbs. However, she suspected that her dishevelled appearance was reminding her father of the danger she had faced and upsetting him, so she changed clothes, brushed the dirt out of her hair and washed her face before turning to him again.

“Father, how many witches have we ever had in Trollgard?”

“Three in my lifetime, before today. Arl Svafnir hanged them whenever they appeared.”

Anike had some recollection of the previous witch who had burned down the market in broad daylight, killing half a dozen people, but she did not remember the ones before at all. She thought of Gern’s dead eyes suddenly animating again and wondered what had been going on in his mind. Perhaps the sight of Bjord lying there had brought him to his senses, aware that killing the Arl’s son might be going even further than he had intended. If so, the change of heart had come too late to save his own life.

Her father’s voice cut through her reverie. “It’s not just witches. There are monsters in the forest too.”

“Dangerous creatures hardly ever come close to the town, Father, and I am careful. I do not go too far.” She did sometimes, but not too often.

Darek took a long swallow from his ale. “See that you don’t, child. I worry about you, and more so every time you go out of town.” He settled himself down having said his piece and winced as the stump of his left arm brushed his side, but in a moment the expression of pain had gone. “It’s time you were married so that you don’t have to go wandering off into the forest and putting yourself at risk. You are nineteen and comely, and you can cook. You would make someone a good wife.”



Anike wondered how her father would manage without her but saying that aloud would hurt his pride. "It would be strange living somewhere else," she responded.

"I have heard it said that Bjord himself admires you."

Bjord would be a good husband for any woman, but Anike was troubled by the difference in their status. "Whatever Bjord might say, or even want, his father will marry him to a woman of the jarl caste, probably the daughter of another Arl," Anike told her father.

"Don't be too sure. Sometimes men will look beyond caste, and you would not be the first to rise to jarl by marriage."

"I have my herbs and potions, Father. I don't need a husband. Olaf says I will be ready for my masterwork soon and after that I will no longer be an apprentice and I can set up my own stall."

"It will not be easy to compete with Olaf, Anike."

"Trollgard is big enough for two herbalists. Even with my help, Olaf can barely keep up with the need for elixirs. Unfortunately, people get injured quite a lot."

"I don't want you getting hurt too, girl. You need to be careful when you are out of town."

"I have my herb lore even if that should happen. Speaking of which, I need to get these herbs to Olaf. I will be back as soon as I can, then I will cook and later I ought to take a look at your arm. I have not examined it in weeks."

"Don't trouble yourself, girl," Darek said. "I am fine." He scowled at her. "Don't fuss."

Anike smiled at him and picked up her bag. She left the house and closed the door behind her. Her father might have been right about marriage. Olaf had said she was skilled, but could she really make a living as a herbalist? Despite what she had told her father, she was worried that she would be unable to support them by herself once his strength waned. A husband could help look after them once her father's fishing days were over, she conceded to herself. Anike had spent little time considering men except as patients. She had never felt much attraction to any and had little interest in talking about weapons or raids. Now she was no longer a

child she preferred the company of her master or women her own age.

She smiled to herself, recalling running and swimming with the other children, Bjord amongst them. The encounter in the forest had shown her that things could change rapidly at any age. Gern had been full of good cheer when he had last come to see Olaf but today he was revealed as a witch, and tomorrow he would be dead. Nothing was certain in the long term and extra stability from a marriage was at least worth consideration. If she did need to marry, she hoped that she could find a man who respected her wits rather than merely admired her looks, though she doubted she would have that much luck. Olaf seemed to be the only person who had noticed that she had a mind.

Anike started to walk towards the market but after only a few paces she saw her friend Inge, a woman a year younger than herself, coming towards her. At the sight of Anike, Inge's pretty face broke into a smile and she ran up to hug her. Anike held her golden-haired friend close. She had been her playmate and companion since they were children, though Anike had seen less of her since she had married the previous year. Inge now worked on the animal pelts her husband Drakna brought home from the hunt.

Inge released Anike but kept her hands on her elbows, looking at her appraisingly. "You look terrible," she said.

"Thank you so much," Anike replied drily.

"Actually, you seem a lot better than I had expected," Inge told her. "Imagine, a real witch attacking you!"

Anike smiled ruefully. "I don't have to imagine it."

"Was it terribly frightening?"

"At some moments, yes," Anike told her, "and not just the witchcraft. I have never had someone try to kill me before. He tried really hard, Inge."

Inge took Anike's hands in hers. "Come back home with me and we can talk more."

Anike felt warm at her friend's concern for her and was tempted but she knew that if she went with Inge she would find it hard to leave

again. She found Inge's company very pleasant but she did not want to let Olaf down. Her master would also be worried about her. "Thank you, but I have to get these herbs to Olaf's. He has been waiting all day for this bloodmoss."

Inge looked disappointed, and Anike nearly changed her mind. After a moment's indecision, she shook her head. "Come over later, Inge. We can talk after I have cooked for my father, and then I can put the day behind me."

Inge hugged her again. "I will," she said.

They walked together to the market before parting, Inge heading back to the house she shared with Drakna, leaving Anike to cross between the stalls. It was good of her friend to have come so soon, though it surprised her how fast the news of her involvement with the witch had travelled. She had thought that Bjord would attract all the attention and she would have been more than happy with that.

Lost in thought over the events of the day, she nearly walked into Bjord as he came towards her across the market. He put out his hands to steady her. She recovered her balance and looked up into his blue eyes. "Thank you," she said.

"I was coming to see how you were, Anike."

"Inge says I look terrible," Anike replied, "but I feel a lot better now." While the witchcraft Gern had used had left her drained as if after an illness, the sunlight and seeing Inge had restored her somewhat.

"You could never look terrible, Anike," Bjord told her.

Anike shifted from foot to foot under his gaze. "And you, are you recovered, my lord?"

"Yes, Anike." Bjord smiled at her. "My father made me drink one of Olaf's invigorating potions, or it might have been one that you made." He paused. "You do not need to address me as 'my lord', you know."

Anike looked around at the market, where the stall holders were all now packing up their wares. "We are not children anymore, and there are eyes upon us," she said. "I do not think it is my place to call you by your name so openly."

“That need not always be true, Anike,” he replied softly.

Anike’s eyes widened, her mind running over the conclusions she might draw from that comment, ranging from Bjord wanting time in private with her, all the way to a hint of marriage. She had no idea which he had in mind, so opted for a general response. “I am honoured,” she managed.

“Do you have a kiss for the man who saved your life today, Anike?” Bjord asked, leaning towards her.

Instinctively, Anike pulled back and away before she had time to consider whether that was a sensible thing to do. While she had been half expecting something of the sort for months, Bjord had taken her by surprise by trying it in so public a place. Unfortunately, the suddenness of his advances meant that she had reacted with panic rather than offering him her cheek.

Bjord’s eyes flashed and his handsome face flushed. Her public refusal had wounded his pride.

She tried to recover. “Bjord, I am sorry. It is only that you caught me by surprise. And I have duties to my master.” She spoke rapidly.

“Go to him then!” Bjord snapped.

Anike took a pace back, heart racing. “Thank you for thinking of me,” she managed. “I have to see Olaf now.” She walked past him, glancing back to see his eyes following her.

“Take care, Anike,” he called after her. “I will be seeing you again soon.” His voice was hard.

Anike swallowed, nearly missing a step. She hoped his temper would pass and that the next meeting he promised would go better. She relaxed a little as she walked away, but chided herself. She certainly did not want Bjord angry with her, and if only she had caught herself in time the encounter would have gone much better. She didn’t particularly like the idea of kissing Bjord but if she had to have a man there was much to be said for the match provided he was looking for marriage rather than dalliance. True, he was opinionated, arrogant, and quick to anger, but he was fiercely loyal, brave, handsome and strong. He could make a good husband but his marriage would

probably be politically motivated, regardless of either of their desires. Nonetheless, she resolved not to panic like a startled fawn at their next meeting.

Olaf Karnaksson's home and store faced the southern edge of the market. At the front of the building, a large wooden hatch could be lowered and Olaf used it as a stall to sell cooking herbs. Inside, he prepared elixirs – salves, oils, and potions for the people of Trollgard – and customers had to come in to buy or barter for these more valuable items. Olaf was also of the karl caste, but skilled herbalists were rare and Olaf enjoyed status close to that of a jarl.

She pushed open the door to the familiar blend of smells. Steam from brewing potions mixed with a scent of crushed herbs filled the inside. The building was larger than the house Anike shared with her father. A wooden wall divided the shop at the front from Olaf's home at the back.

Anike had been apprenticed to her father's friend some five years before. She had learned to make potions and poultices from the herbs and roots of the plants that grew in the area. The skills for preparation and brewing had come to her easily but Olaf, whose legs were not what they were, tended to send her out into the countryside to gather herbs while he concentrated on brewing the potions and selling his wares.

There was a good market for elixirs. A herbalist could prepare salves that would close wounds in seconds or pull a man back from the brink of death, and potions that could make an exhausted man strong or bring sleep. Heroic warriors might be held in the highest regard but master herbalists were greatly valued for their skills, and Anike was glad to have had the chance to learn from one of the best.

Fenris, Olaf's dog, bounded through the doorway with an excited bark when he heard the front door open. Olaf lived alone save for his dog. His wife and son had been killed in a Larten raid fifteen years ago, a raid that had also claimed Bjord's mother. He had not remarried but some years later had adopted an abandoned puppy. Fenris was now a black wolfhound as tall as Anike's waist, but unlike his legendary namesake would wag his tail rather than bare his teeth.

Anike braced herself against his weight and stroked his head as he rubbed against her.

“Anike, it’s good to see you safe,” Olaf greeted her. A tall man, now running slightly to fat, Olaf had long limbs and fingers. His red hair and beard were cut short, and he wore a heavy leather smock stained with years of spills from the cauldrons. “How do you fare after your ordeal?”

“I am fine, Olaf. I was lucky Bjord was nearby hunting boar.” She laid her bag on one of the wooden tables that occupied much of the room and started to unpack and sort the herbs. “I had time to get a good selection before the dire wolves and Gern interrupted me.”

“But how are you feeling? It must have been a terrifying experience.”

This was the third time in less than an hour that someone had asked her how she was. Anike felt a flash of exasperation at being pressed but immediately regretted her reaction. Olaf genuinely cared, and it was natural he would probe a bit more deeply.

She unpacked the last of the plants. “I was frightened, yes, and Gern’s witchcraft left me a little weak, but nothing a good night’s sleep will not fix.” She turned to him. “I am troubled, though. Olaf, did you ever suspect Gern was a witch? Did you ever see anything in his face that gave you a hint?” Anike had tried to banish the memory of Gern’s cold eyes, but it kept returning. “How could he have been coming in here for years and we not know?”

Olaf frowned. “It is a strange and terrible thing to find out that someone had such a dark secret for so long. He practised a deception on us all.”

“I saw his eyes, Olaf. They were like a dead man’s, and he did not seem to feel any pain, at least not until the last moment.” She told him about the battle, and how Gern had ignored his wound until just before Bjord struck him down.

“He might have used witchcraft to make himself immune to pain. That could be the sort of thing a witch could do easily,” Olaf suggested. “There is even a potion for that, you remember?”

Anike nodded. “Gern was no herbalist, but you may be right about his witchcraft. Maybe it went wrong somehow and that made him want to kill us.”

“Or he could have been hunting for a sacrifice to whatever fell power he served. Odin gave up his eye in exchange for knowledge and if even the gods have to pay their dues, perhaps Gern had to sacrifice something for his black craft.” He stirred a potion thoughtfully. “I have heard tell of witches who live in the wilds without killing every traveller they meet, but that might be just myth. The few I have seen have just brought death.”

“Gern could have been like those hermit witches but something happened to him to push him over the edge,” Anike mused as she started to trim the roots she had brought.

“It’s possible, but equally he might have just been biding his time and took advantage of finding you alone. We will probably never know.”

Anike thought of the fleeing dire wolves and shook her head. “I doubt that he was after me particularly. But we shall hear him at his trial, and he may tell us what drove him to attempt murder.”

“You would have been too young to hear the last witch trial, I think,” Olaf said. “Gern may not even get the chance to speak, particularly since Bjord will be giving evidence against him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Arl Svafnir will not want any confusion or doubt. He will ensure that the evidence is clear, so he will give Gern little chance to contradict his son – or you, for that matter.”

Anike froze, her knife paused over a root, and her hand trembled. She had realised, deep down, that she might have to speak at the trial and she dreaded the idea of a crowd of gathered townsfolk looking at her.

Seeing her reaction, Olaf continued, “I doubt you will have to say much. I am sure that Bjord will do most of the talking and you will just have to agree with what he says. You can manage that, can’t you?”

“I suppose so. That does not sound too hard,” Anike said hesitantly. “It would be a good idea to agree publicly with Bjord at the moment.”

She told Olaf of her meeting with the Arl's son in the market, and how she regretted her reaction.

"You do need to plan for your future. Bjord admires you. He will get past his anger, and you are right that a public show of agreement will soothe his pride."

"And after that?"

"Obviously he is the Arl's son, but consider. People value what they have to work for but they become frustrated if they make no progress. You are beautiful and clever, learn quickly and have a respected trade. I know you are not a jarl but you could still make a good wife for him. You just need to be more confident in the woman you are becoming and show him someone who will support and stand with him. Give him some signs to show him his efforts are appreciated and keep his hopes up."

"But -" started Anike.

"You could think of it as giving your father security as he gets older."

"I know that my father will not be able to haul nets with Joran forever," said Anike.

"No, and that will sadden him as he wants to be useful. However, you must realise what really drives him?"

Anike hesitated. "Me," she said.

"Yes. After Isolde died, you are all he has left. He wants you to be secure and safe, and if that happens he will be content even if he can no longer work on a boat."

"I do not think Bjord sees me as a future wife and he is not someone who changes his mind about anything"

"He may not have decided yet, and you should find out. I have cautioned you about making assumptions before. It is lazy. You have a theory and then you test it. I know you understand this as you have devised several new elixir recipes. You predicted what the combination of herbs would do and you tested it. This is the same. If you consider something might be possible, then try it. And an Arl's son can marry a karl."

Anike smiled tentatively.



“It’s not as if you are a thrall. The jarl caste is small, with few women of Bjord’s age. Arl Oster of Ulsvater married the captain of a trading vessel.”

“I did not know that,” Anike admitted.

“Think on it. You and Bjord are going to be the centre of attention for a few days. You may well find yourselves thrust together. If you are open to it, perhaps you will see an opportunity to nudge things in the right direction.”

“You are right. Thank you,” Anike said. Olaf meant well and his advice made sense, but she was not sure that she could work up the courage to ask Bjord about his intentions. However, if he was as forward as he had been earlier, she might only need to steer things and she felt she could manage that.

Anike finished preparing the herbs and sorted them carefully into boxes for drying. “I told Granny Caryn I would look in on her today and try to get her back on her feet.”

“She just enjoys the attention she gets from being injured. Are you sure you feel up to a long visit today?”

“I promised her, Olaf, and it will make her happy.”

Olaf sighed. “She will stir herself when she needs something, but don’t let me stop you if you think it will do some good.”

Anike smiled. “Thank you.”

Granny Caryn, who was nearly sixty, had hurt her knee in a fall while trying to replace a roof shingle the previous week. The potion that Olaf had given her should have healed the injury but she still seemed unable to walk, despite all outward signs vanishing. ‘Granny’ was a term of respect rather than kinship. She was not related to Anike at all but was a great aunt of Tavic the Swift, one of Bjord’s companions. Anike packed some dried nettles into a small bag. They were of little medicinal value by themselves but made excellent tea, and were part of her plan to get Granny Caryn walking again.

She bade goodnight to Olaf and made her way through the town until she reached a large house by the south wall. She knocked on the door and called out “Granny Caryn, it is Anike. I have come to check on your knee.” It was opened by Tavic’s mother, Edi, who ushered

her in. Granny Caryn was propped up by furs in a large chair by the fire, a position which commanded a view of the entire room.

"You are looking well today, Granny." Anike smiled at the old woman.

"It's sweet of you to say so, Anike, but I'm afraid my knee is still weak."

"It is not painful though, is it?"

"No, no, just no strength in it. See here." Granny Caryn leaned forward and tried to rise. Her right leg buckled but Anike, who had been watching closely, saw it bend before it had even taken any real weight.

"Oh, that is a shame," Anike said. "No matter. I have brought some nettle tea for us. I can have a look at the knee while it brews."

"Nettle tea? That sounds good. Edi, can you boil some water?"

Edi raised her eyes to the roof and gave a long sigh as she went to the fire. Anike passed the dried nettles to her and she put them in a small pot to boil. As the fresh smell filled the room, Anike knelt to examine the old woman's knee. "Let me know if this hurts," she said, probing with practised fingers.

"No, just weak."

Anike found no sign of injury, and the muscles were no weaker on the right leg than the left. The potion had worked and whatever was stopping Granny Caryn from standing, it was not physical. The question was whether she was choosing not to. If she was pretending, as Olaf suspected, there was nothing Anike could do but she thought it might be more that Granny Caryn had lost confidence in herself. She believed the woman's fall had made her think of herself as old and fragile. Anike hoped that if Granny Caryn realised that she could stand then she would be able to.

She stood and poured the older woman a cup of tea. "Invigorating, is it not?"

Granny Caryn sipped it. "Very nice," she said.

"Can you taste any unusual flavours?" Anike asked her.

Granny Caryn lowered the cup. "Have you put anything else in? You said it was nettle."

"Now, Granny, would I do that?" Anike said in a tone of mock injury, smiling. She reached out, put Granny Caryn's cup down beside her and took her right hand. "I am going to support you and we will try a few steps. Put your weight on me."

Granny Caryn looked doubtful, but Anike's pull was insistent and she draped the old woman's arm over her shoulders. "Now let us try a step."

It was more of a hop, but Granny Caryn did manage a step forward. "Well done, Granny. How about another?" Anike braced herself as Granny Caryn tried another pace, favouring her left leg but putting some weight on her right.

The door opened to admit Tavic. Hoping she was right, Anike took a chance and allowed herself to stumble, taking care not to drag Granny Caryn down with her. She hit the floor and was rewarded by seeing Granny Caryn standing unsupported, the surprised look on her face giving way to a wide grin.

Smiling to herself, Anike came back to her feet. "I am sorry I tripped, Granny."

"Never mind," the old woman said happily. "No harm done. I can stand again." She took a cautious step forward. "I can walk. It must have been that tea."

"It must have been," Anike agreed, glad that she had trusted her judgment and relieved that she had been right that Granny Caryn's residual affliction had only been a lack of confidence. "I am glad to see you standing tall again, Granny." She leaned forward to give the old woman a gentle kiss on the cheek. "I have to be going now but I will see you soon. Do take care next time you are on the roof."

"I will try to," Granny Caryn said happily. "Visit soon, Anike."

Anike walked to the door but just as she got there Tavic gripped her arm, halting her. "If you had been wrong and you let her fall she would have been hurt," he whispered harshly in her ear. "You were reckless. I would have held you accountable if you had made her injury worse."

Anike removed his hand. Tavic was not Bjord and she had no trouble standing up to him. "It was worth it," she told him. "Look

how happy she is, and your mother too.” Tavic followed her gaze to Edi, who was also smiling, relief radiating from her. “I know what I am doing,” she told him.

He dropped his gaze. “Your little trick did work, I must give you that, I suppose,” he said. Anike looked at him carefully. He still seemed a little jumpy. “Do you want to talk about Gern?” she asked. Tavic still seemed unsettled and she doubted that her unorthodox treatment of Granny Caryn entirely accounted for it. He had been terrified by Gern’s witchcraft and it could take time to recover from such fear.

“No,” he said sharply, then “Thank you, I have talked about what happened enough for one day,” he added more gently and somewhat to Anike’s relief.

“I know what you mean,” she said. “Goodnight, then.”

A few minutes later she was at her own house. Darek looked up from his chair as she came in, not seeming to have moved since she left him. She went to the fire, sorted through the food and started to make a stew with fish, vegetables and some of the cooking herbs she had gathered that day. “The herring were plentiful this morning,” she commented as she dropped the fish into the pot.

Any reply Darek might have made was interrupted by a loud knock. Expecting Inge, Anike hung the pot over the fire, wiped her hands and turned towards the door.

“Anike Dareksdottir, are you within? I would speak with you,” came the deep resonant voice of Arl Svafnir Sigurdsson.



- 3 -



## THE TRIAL

Anike opened the door to Arl Svafnir. Around the same age as her father, the Arl was a powerfully built man with blonde hair like his son and a thick blonde beard. Despite the late hour, he still wore his ringmail and a sword hung at his side. The light from the doorway revealed Bjord standing a little way behind his father.

"I apologise for calling so late," the Arl said in his rich voice. "May we come in?"

Anike's mouth seemed to have fallen open of its own accord, so she shut it and re-focused. She had not expected to see the Arl, though thinking about it now she realised he would want to talk to her before the trial. Not yet trusting herself to speak, she opened the door wide and gestured for him to come in. Darek had stood. Svafnir acknowledged him with a nod then turned to Anike. Recalling her manners, she indicated chairs by the large table. "Will you sit, my lords?"

Svafnir took the indicated seat at the table, and Bjord, after testing the other chair to ensure it would hold his weight, joined him. "Please sit too," the Arl said to Anike, so she collected the stool from beneath the herb table and drew it over to opposite the Arl. Darek retreated to the bench beyond the fire.

When Anike was seated, Arl Svafnir started to speak. "At midday tomorrow I will be trying Gern Haffordsson for witchcraft and attempted murder. It will be in the market before the people of Trollgard as this is too important a matter to be heard in my hall. I will be judging Gern on what is said then, but I would like to hear your account now." He lowered his voice a fraction. "I do not wish to be surprised when you speak tomorrow."

Anike swallowed. “My lord, the first I knew something was wrong was when the dire wolves ran past me, fleeing Gern.” She went on to describe what had happened, hesitantly at first, then more confidently as the Arl nodded at her to continue.

She came to the point where Gern had raised Bjord’s sword. “He was about to strike Bjord but then he suddenly hesitated. It was almost as if he woke up and recognised Bjord. He called him ‘my lord’ and seemed to change his mind. Then Bjord pulled him down and knocked him out.”

She looked at the Arl, gauging his reaction. While the Arl considered her words, so did she. She had not framed Gern’s change in terms of waking up before but that did seem to fit. It was as if he had been acting in a dream, or a nightmare.

Svafnir looked at his son. “You didn’t tell me that Gern hesitated.”

“He didn’t, Father,” Bjord said. “It happened so quickly that it is not surprising Anike is mistaken. It was Tavic that called out. Gern was trying to kill me with my own sword when I brought him down.” Unconsciously perhaps, Bjord twisted a gold ring around one finger.

Anike stared at Bjord, wondering if he really remembered events that way, or if he just wanted the story to emphasise his own bravery. Striking down a man who was no longer attacking might not seem heroic, even if that man was a witch. She was sure Bjord was wrong, though. The light had come back into Gern’s eyes, and she had seen how he had suddenly registered the pain of his wound.

“Well?” the Arl asked her. She turned back to see him regarding her silently, and she trembled under the steady gaze. Svafnir obviously didn’t want her to undermine his son, but something in his tone when he had spoken to Bjord made her wonder if he had recognised something important in her account. Gern was going to be executed regardless of what she said. If she contradicted Bjord, the Arl would ignore it or perhaps even publicly dismiss her words, leaving her looking weak and scared. Worse, she would be insulting Bjord again. In contrast, supporting him could go some way to undo the damage she had done with her rejection in the market. Anike did not really know the significance of Gern’s hesitation. She felt it

could be important, but it did not alter the fact that he had tried to kill her.

"I must have been mistaken, my lord," Anike said, dropping her eyes. "Bjord is right."

"Thank you, Anike. I knew I could rely on you." A slight smile graced the Arl's face. Bjord was less restrained. He released the breath Anike had not realised he was holding and let his hand fall away from the ring. His smile was much broader than his father's.

"I will require you to repeat this account at the trial tomorrow," the Arl told her.

Anike shifted on her stool. "There will be a lot of people listening," she said.

"Do not concern yourself with them. Concentrate on me. I am the audience that matters." The Arl rose and turned to Anike's father, who hastily pushed himself to his feet, wincing slightly. "Thank you for allowing me into your home, Darek."

"Of course, my lord. You are always welcome," Darek replied.

"Come up and join me when I call on you tomorrow, Anike. If you hold to that tale, all will be well. I bid you both goodnight." The Arl went to the door and Anike hastened to open it for him. Bjord nodded to Darek and smiled at Anike before following his father out.

She closed the door behind him and felt some of the tension leave. The Arl's visit had unnerved her and she was glad to be out of his presence. She felt that she had managed to undo the harm caused by her rejection of Bjord in the afternoon, and that gave her a sense of relief. She was still unsure if she wanted to develop a relationship with Bjord but now she was on firmer ground.

She felt some disquiet about the implied instruction not to tell everything she had seen. Stories were enjoyable, but could also make points in a way that people could remember. History was recorded in tales passed from skald to skald but she knew that the world was a more complex place than the stories suggested. Anike did not know if Gern's change of mind was real, or might mean anything even if it was, but she was uneasy that it would be left out of the lore of witches.

Darek put his arm around her shoulders. "Don't worry, Anike. Everyone will be supporting you tomorrow and they will applaud your bravery." He gave her a squeeze.

Anike doubted that anyone would admire her bravery if they knew how she had given in to the Arl, though they might applaud her good sense. She had agreed to an expedient course of action, perhaps even a wise one, but the braver path would have been to insist on telling the complete truth.

Anike had just moved the stool back to its normal place when there was another knock on the door, this one much lighter. She opened it to admit Inge.

"I can't stay too long," she said. "Drakna wants to be up early. I think he is planning to hunt down a dire wolf for its pelt before the trial."

"Tell him to be careful," Anike held her hand at chest level. "They really do stand this high at the shoulder."

Inge looked a little taken aback. "Truly? I will warn him not to face one alone."

"That would be wise. I think the dire wolves have gone though," Anike added. "They actually seemed frightened of Gern."

"Bjord wasn't frightened, though? When he saw the witch?"

"I think he was a bit but that did not stop him. There is no doubt about his bravery. Sit, Inge, and have some ale."

They settled by the fire, and Darek retreated to his bed, leaving them alone. Orange light played across Anike's face. "I was lucky Bjord was hunting in the forest," she told Inge.

"Bjord," said Inge in a slightly dreamy voice. Anike raised an eyebrow at her married friend and Inge continued in a more normal tone. "If he could have saved anyone, I am sure he was glad it was you."

"Maybe, though I am not sure he is looking at me as a wife. I am not highly enough regarded for that and being on show tomorrow will not help. Standing in front of the whole town is not a prospect I am looking forward to. I do not enjoy people staring at me."

"People stare at you all the time, especially men. Men like Bjord," Inge added wistfully.



"That is not the sort of attention I want from men. I want to be respected and have people see something worthwhile in me."

"With your looks, it may be asking too much of a man to see much beyond the outside! Men can be pretty single-minded."

"Little wonder I prefer the company of women then. Except for Olaf, men are not interested in what I think."

"If you were married to Bjord, that would change. They would have to listen to the wife of the future Arl," said Inge.

"That's true, I suppose, but there is little chance of that happening." Anike paused, considering. "Though Bjord did seem better disposed towards me when he and the Arl came here just now."

"The Arl was here? Lucky you keep the place tidy."

"Yes, he was. He wanted me to tell him what I was going to say at the trial tomorrow."

"That shouldn't have been difficult."

"No, except for one part which seemed to trouble him." Anike told Inge about Gern's last-minute wavering, and how Bjord had portrayed those moments. "Perhaps Bjord really did not see it, but I know what happened. I am just not sure what it means. It was as if a cloud had lifted from Gern. He seemed to realise what he had done and was mortified by it."

"It must have been a trick."

"No. It was only Gern's hesitation that gave Bjord his chance." Anike thought of Gern's eyes again. "But before that, he really did try to kill us."

"You can't forgive that, Anike."

"It's not about forgiving but understanding. What made him reveal that he was a witch, and then why did he stop when he was winning? I like to understand, Inge, and the unknown troubles me. If Gern is executed, no one will be able to ask him."

"Of course he will be hanged. He tried to kill Bjord."

"I know. If he had just attacked me, Arl Svafnir might have allowed him to pay a bloodprice to me instead of execution."

"You wouldn't want a witch to serve you, surely?"

"Perhaps not, but the bloodprice could have been paid in silver."

“Even so, attacking anyone with witchcraft is really serious so I doubt the Arl would allow it,” Inge said. “And why would you want to learn more? We were not meant to understand witches and witchcraft. Fortunately, it will all be over once the trial is done.”

“I hope so,” said Anike, though the idea of more witches hidden in the town or countryside nearby nagged at her. While she could not be sure of the significance of Gern’s apparent return to normality, his ability to hide his witchcraft for long years meant that more witches could be concealed amongst ordinary people, perhaps waiting for a sign before revealing themselves. A star had fallen a few nights before, she recalled. While this was often considered a good omen, Gern might have taken it as a harbinger of a different sort. She wondered again whether the Arl knew more than he was saying. It was not her place to question him, but she had a sense that there was more to his reluctance to have her relate Gern’s apparent change of heart than a wish for his son to be seen as heroic.

Inge finished the ale and left for her own house, and Anike suddenly realised how tired she was. She kissed her father’s forehead and went to her own bed. Despite her exhaustion, sleep eluded her and she lay on her back, looking at the roof. Instinctively, she felt that people should have the chance to hear everything for themselves so that they could be alert to the possibility of witches among them and that meant her duty to the town was to put the whole story before the people. The Arl clearly believed otherwise and if she told the whole truth he, and no doubt Bjord, would be angry with her at first though deep down Bjord would surely admire her for her bravery. Ultimately, her duty was to the town rather than to the Arl, and she was entitled to make her own choice as to how to fulfil it. She hoped that the townsfolk would understand her decision too, and dreaming of a town where she was respected and honoured for her bravery and confidence, she drifted off to sleep.

The first rays of the dawn sun crept in through the shutters. The night’s sleep had restored her and Anike felt strong for the first time since Gern had worked his witchcraft on her. The rest had also shored

up her resolve to give her full account at the trial, despite what Arl Svafnir had told her.

She rose and started to prepare a meal of grain and vegetables for her father and herself. While the water boiled, she tidied the house and cleaned everything that had been used the night before. The events of the previous day had been too taxing for her to keep to her practice of doing the housework before she went to bed.

Her father had slept fitfully, and Anike recalled that she had intended to examine his arm the night before. Now it would have to wait until later as he would be out on the boat as soon as he had eaten. She watched him climb down from his sleeping platform, moving a little stiffly, and she frowned.

Darek caught her looking at him and smiled. "Don't worry, child. The Arl will not have you speaking long. Keep it simple, just as he said, and you will be fine."

Anike just nodded as she filled a bowl and handed it to him. Darek started on his meal, and Anike took some for herself. They ate in silence and once they had finished Anike spoke. "You will come to watch me, Father?" she asked.

"Of course I will. I doubt many of the town will miss it, and I won't let my little one stand before a crowd alone. I will make sure I am back home well before the sun is high." Anike smiled her relief as she cleaned the bowls.

"Get yourself off to Olaf's now, girl, and work hard. The morning will pass in no time," Darek told her. He laid a strong hand on her shoulder before leaving to catch the morning tide.

Anike walked to Olaf's house. As always, there were elixirs to prepare, and she focused on her work to distract herself from the coming trial. She could not forget it entirely as she could see a group of men constructing the platform and the scaffold in the centre of the market through Olaf's front window. Hanging was the least honourable form of execution, giving the criminal no chance of an afterlife in Valhalla, doomed to spend eternity in Niflheim as a powerless ghost in a grey land.

As far as Anike could tell from fragments of conversation drifting in on the breeze, no one seemed in any doubt about the outcome of the trial. More people than usual came into the shop to make small purchases from Olaf. They kept glancing at her as they bartered with him, which did little to settle her nerves. She concentrated on her work as best she could, trying to ignore the stares.

The morning wore on and the business of the market slowed as more people drew near the scaffold. It seemed that most of Trollgard had come to see Gern hang. When the sun was high enough, Anike and Olaf left the shop and the crowd parted to allow them through. A few called out praises to Thor and Freya that Anike had been saved but most just watched. She found the attention oppressive but, as with the dire wolves, she forced herself to be calm. With Olaf's reassuring presence beside her, she walked forward steadily until she reached the front of the crowd.

Darek pushed through the throng to join her, coming to stand on the other side. Anike could smell the ale on his breath. It was early in the day for him, but his work would have been finished and she could forgive him this indulgence as she could have used some ale herself. It occurred to her that he had been drinking more in the last couple of weeks and she decided to talk to him about it later. At that moment she was just glad to have him with her.

Clouds were gathering, drifting in from the sea to stand like sombre guards. Horns sounded, and the crowd looked to the east side of the marketplace to watch Arl Svafnir striding out from the gates of the arlberg towards the platform where the gallows had been raised. The townsfolk scattered out of his way like a flock of sparrows before a hawk.

Gern was dragged along in his wake. Bjord held one arm, and the other was held by a tall woman whom Anike knew slightly. Siv Blatandsdottir was a lean woman, as tall as Bjord. She had short hair, so pale as to be almost white, and she held herself like a drawn bow. Siv had fought alongside Arl Svafnir for many years and was his right arm in the governing of Trollgard. A small group of men including Loga, Slad and Tavic followed closely behind, and with them was a

white-haired but vigorous man with the bearing of a warrior whom Anike did not recognise at all.

Gern was gagged, his hands tied behind his back and as he looked around Anike saw fear, resignation and regret passed like clouds over his face. Shouts of anger and hatred from the crowd buffeted him like a raging sea.

Anike looked at the man who had tried to kill her hanging limply between Bjord and Siv and could not share the crowd's enthusiasm for his death. There was no fight left in him and what she mostly felt was pity. Gern surely now regretted meddling with powers that men should leave alone. Was death the only suitable punishment? It seemed that the people of Trollgard thought so, but Anike wondered if there was some alternative.

Gern climbed onto the platform unaided and stood there with his eyes lowered, flanked by Bjord and Siv. The roar of the crowd swelled. Cries of 'Witch!' and 'Death!' stood out from the general noise, and he seemed to shrink in on himself.

Arl Svafnir raised his hands. The crowd fell silent as his gaze swept over them.

"Good people of Trollgard," the Arl began. "Today we hold the trial of Gern Haffordsson, accused of using witchcraft to try and kill my son, Bjord Svafnirsson, and Anike Dareksdottir. He is further accused of using its dark power to bring harm to Loga Beodaksson, Slad Vursson, and Tavic the Swift."

"Death to the witch!" and similar angry cries rose from the crowd again, but under the Arl's steely gaze, dropped away quickly. Svafnir was not playing to the crowd, but controlling it.

"I will now hear from Anike Dareksdottir," Svafnir stated, and looked down at Anike. Heads turned towards her, and she quailed inside. She had assumed that Bjord would speak before her, but realised it made sense that she would be called on first as she was Gern's first victim. Olaf's hand on her arm steadied her and she squared her shoulders, stepped forward out of the crowd and climbed onto the platform. She looked out over the sea of faces, many of whom she knew and all waiting for her to speak. She let

them blur together and become anonymous then turned to the Arl.

“Tell me what happened yesterday, Anike,” he told her gently but firmly enough that his voice carried to the far edge of the now silent throng.

Anike took a deep breath and looked at his chest, not daring to meet his gaze. “I was in the woods gathering herbs -” she began.

“Speak up!” a woman called from the crowd.

Anike stopped, blushing. She took a deep breath, fixed her attention on the Arl and continued, keeping her voice as steady as she could and trying not to babble. “It went cold, and something came through the woods. I ran, but it caught up with me, and I saw it was Gern. He used some sort of witchcraft to take my strength away and tried to hit me with his axe, but I got away, and found Bjord and -”

“Thank you, Anike,” Arl Svafnir cut off her gabbling.

“But -” said Anike, blinking.

“You can go back to your father now.”

“I wanted to tell the rest,” Anike stammered, but her uncertain words went unheard as the Arl raised his voice to address the crowd again.

“I thank Anike for her evidence and commend her for her good sense in seeking out my son, who will take up the tale. Bjord Svafnirsson, step forward.”

Dismissed, Anike stood for a moment in shock. The Arl had ruthlessly denied her any opportunity to contradict his son and the crowd had already turned its attention from her to Bjord, who was striding forward to stand by his father.

Olaf was beckoning her to come back down. Darek managed a slight smile but quickly resumed a worried expression. Anike stepped down from the platform and she saw him relax. She joined him back in the anonymous crowd and took a deep breath. Darek put his hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

On the platform, Bjord was starting on his tale. The audience’s attention was now entirely fixed on him, and Anike felt some of the tension leave her. She had not managed to say what she wanted, but

at least she had avoided upsetting anyone or seriously embarrassing herself.

Bjord was enjoying himself, relishing the chance to tell a heroic story in which he played a leading role. He could not resist some embellishment, describing protecting Anike and Loga by deflecting shards of ice with his sword. It jarred when compared with the cold truth that Anike remembered, but so naturally did the words seem to come to him that she wondered if Bjord really had perceived everything the way he was telling it. She doubted it. This was his moment and he was not going to let accuracy get in his way.

Bjord reached the climax. "As Gern's blow descended towards my head, I caught his wrist. His strength was no match for mine so I wrenched my blade from him and pulled him to the ground. He started to mouth words of some yet darker witchcraft but I struck him with the hilt of my sword, and he fell senseless. And so I vanquished the witch." He nodded to his father and held one hand aloft to acknowledge the cheers of the crowd.

There were no shades of grey here, just a story of good triumphing over evil, and on hearing it Anike realised what had troubled her so much about leaving out Gern's last-minute reversal. It was not the concern that there might be other witches hidden but that the remorse and regret Gern had shown was ignored. At the last, he had turned from his dark path rather than finish off his victims and witnesses to his deeds. The trial paid no heed to that. A sense of injustice grew within her as the Arl perfunctorily called Loga, Tavic and Slad to confirm what Bjord had said. They did so readily, adding praises for his action.

Finally, Svafnir turned to Siv. "Ungag the prisoner," he commanded, and Siv took the gag from Gern's mouth.

"Gern Haffordsson, you have heard what has been said against you. Do you deny using witchcraft on my son and these others, and trying to commit murder?"

The crowd waited.

Gern straightened up and met Svafnir's gaze. His words when they came were calm. "My lord, I regret what I did and I wish I had never

done it. I acted during a moment of madness when I doubted the value of life, but it passed. I mean no harm to your son nor to any of the others. None were killed, so I offer to pay whatever bloodprice you set for them.”

The old man Anike had not recognised stirred at that, but Arl Svafnir gave no indication that he had even heard Gern’s offer. Gern looked at him a moment longer, then sighed. “If you will not let me pay the bloodprice, I ask that my death be swift.”

There was no leniency in the Arl’s expression. Gern nodded in resignation, but suddenly his eyes snapped shut and his face tensed in concentration. “No! I will not!” he shouted, then the set of his shoulders relaxed and he opened his eyes again. Anike saw tears in them and was struck by the contrast between his outburst and the manner in which he had put his plea for a quick death. Fear could show itself in many forms, she supposed.

Svafnir gestured to Siv who replaced the gag. He spoke, his voice carrying through the market, cold anger in each word. “There is no place in the world for one who harms another with witchcraft and no afterlife in Valhalla for a witch. Witchcraft does not earn a man a quick death. Gern, you will hang until you die.” Tears ran freely down Gern’s face now and his body crumpled.

“A coward as well as a witch,” Bjord sneered, dragging the condemned man upright.

At a nod from Svafnir, Siv fixed a rope around Gern’s neck and looped it over the scaffold. Anike heard his muffled screams as Siv and Bjord hauled him up by the neck. She turned away and buried her face in her father’s chest, feeling his arm holding her close. The roaring of the crowd, the cheers, and prayers to Odin seemed to be accompanied by a smell of death and decay. Gern’s cries were drowned out by the noise of the crowd, and she could bear no more. She pulled free of her father and ran from the execution of the man who had tried to kill her.

Anike walked slowly west along the sandy beach until she came to the rocks beneath the cliff to the west of the town. She could not share the crowd’s vilification – the knowledge of Gern’s remorse set



her apart. Unwilling to return until she was sure they had dispersed, she sat and listened to the gulls until a shower driven by a harsh north wind encouraged her to climb the cliff and go a short distance inland so she could sit beneath the trees next to the coast road.

She had been there about an hour, lost in her thoughts, when she noticed someone coming along the road from Trollgard. It was the old man who had been on the platform with Arl Svafnir. His white hair was long and his face lined but he walked swiftly. At his side hung a sword and on his back was a bow, both very expensive weapons and together they marked him as a person of some importance. She assumed he was a visiting jarl and bowed her head as he came past but to her surprise, he stopped and beckoned to her. Puzzled, she got up and approached him.

"Anike, is it not?" he asked, and when she nodded, he continued. "I am Masig Valisson."

She did recognise that name. He was a hero, a renowned warrior, hunter and archer with a long history of deeds told by skalds, now in service to the Arl of Ulsvater. Up close, she could see that he was very old indeed with perhaps a few years more than Granny Caryn, remarkable when most warriors were killed in battle in their youth.

"My lord," she said. "Forgive me for not recognising you. How may I serve you?"

He smiled at her. "Do not trouble yourself, Anike. I only desired to tell you that I recognised your bravery today, and to wish you well."

"Bravery?" Anike asked.

"You were not comfortable before a crowd, and yet you spoke anyway and you even tried to contradict Svafnir."

"I apologise if I gave offence."

"Not at all. I admire spirit, but Svafnir was never going to be turned from his course. That may prove to be unfortunate, but it is the way of things."

"I do not understand, my lord."

The old man shrugged. "I ramble. Sometimes it is better to serve the future than the present, but that is a hard thing to do. But do not let me detain you further. I wish you well, Anike. I

hope you can nurture that courage.” He turned back to the road to Ulsvater.

“I wish you a fair journey, my lord,” Anike called after him. Unexpectedly, the conversation had cheered her and it was time to return to Trollgard.

Olaf looked up from his work as she came in. “It’s over, Anike,” he told her.

Anike wiped her eyes. “I know,” she said. “I saw that the body has been taken down. I should be happy that justice has been done and that the town is safe but I feel there could have been another way. This is not as simple as the Arl thinks. It was Gern’s moment of hesitation that troubled me. Arl Svafnir did not want me to mention it today, and I thought it might be because witches could hide among us.”

Olaf frowned. “Do you think it would be a good thing if everyone suspected their neighbour or accused them of witchcraft whenever there was a quarrel or there was an unusual run of luck?”

Anike thought about it. “No, I had not considered that, and perhaps you are right. Paranoia could take over, and I can see that the Arl would want to prevent that. But I realised I was actually more concerned that Gern stopped attacking even though he had the advantage, and that he regretted his actions. He did not take a life and he chose not to, in the end. That ought to mean something.”

“Even though he would have killed you had you not kept your wits about you?”

“Yes, I think so. Maybe not enough to spare his life, but his repentance should be worth something, don’t you think? By chance, I met Masig Valisson on the road just now, and he hinted that he disagreed with Svafnir’s judgment.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think he thought Gern might still be able to serve somehow. If it had been him giving judgment he might have set a bloodprice.”

“I would place less weight on his words than I would on Svafnir’s judgment. Masig is a great hero, but not a ruler. You want to save everyone, Anike. For a herbalist, that is not a bad thing, but

sometimes sacrifices have to be made. Witchcraft is like a festering wound and it needs to be cut out for the good of everyone else.”

“Wounds do not regret what they have done.” She frowned. Olaf’s words had struck a chord, not about witches but something else. She tried to grasp the memory, but Olaf was speaking again.

“If they were remorseful, would it matter? The flesh will still need to be cut out.”

“That analogy only works so far,” Anike replied. “Wounds cannot make choices.”

She stopped and cursed softly. “Wounds. By Freya, I am a poor herbalist and a worse daughter. I am sorry, Olaf, I have to go home. Thank you for everything today, but I have to check on my father’s old wound.”

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# THE DEMON AND THE WITCH



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