

A n t h o n y T i a t o r i o

Heilewif's Tale

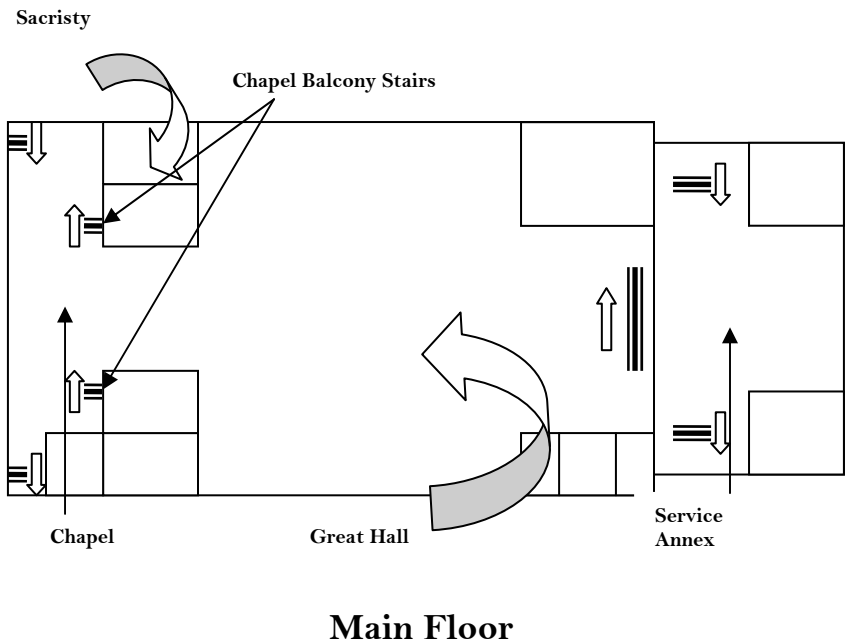
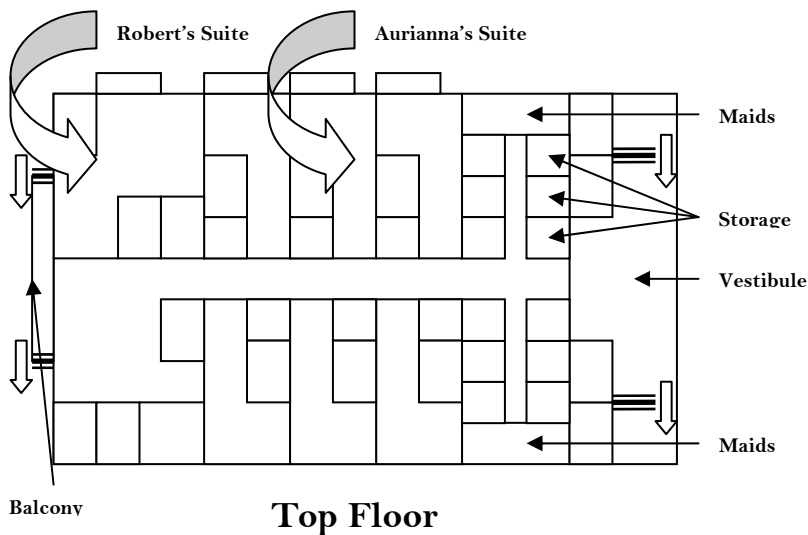
a Novel

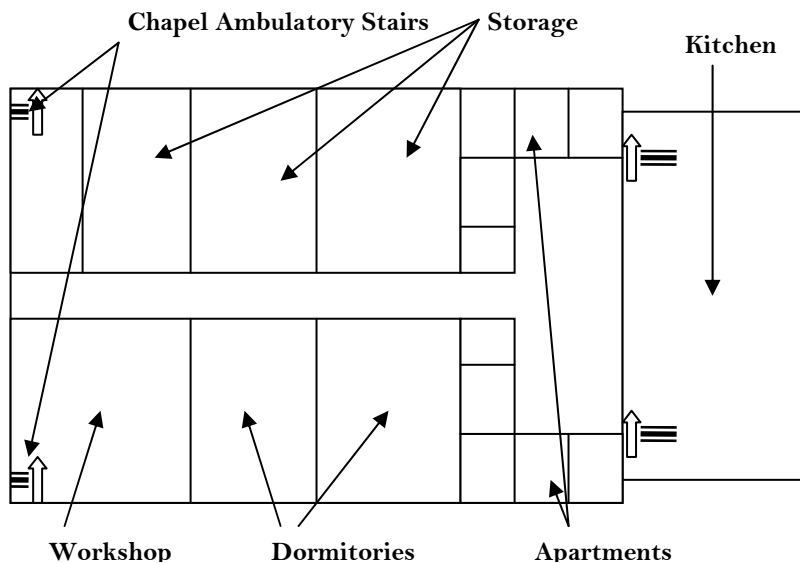
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For my wife, Judy

The Heidelberg Manor House





Ground Floor

The Characters

Count Robert von Wittelsbach

is Count Palatine of the Rhine. He is an elector of the Holy Roman Empire and his castle is at Heidelberg.

Countess Ava von Wittelsbach

Is the wife of Count Robert. She is the first cousin of the Holy Roman Emperor and a high noble in her own right.

Aurianna von Wittelsbach

is Robert's seventeen year old daughter.

Ludwig von Wittelsbach

is Robert's fourteen year old son and his heir.

Sir Shilgen Sturmere

is Robert's most trusted knight.

William von Luxembourg

is King of Bohemia and the Holy Roman Emperor.

Oskar Vriunt

is the Archbishop of Mainz and an Elector of the Holy Roman Empire.

Bodenolph von Vulpes

is one of Robert's vassals. He holds fiefs from Robert in the Neckar valley.

Trapsta Scardo

is Vulpes' chancellor and closest advisor.

Rodolfo Eselin

is the Papal Inquisitor sent to hunt heretics and witches in the Rhineland.

Heilewif

is a wise old woman, renowned for her great knowledge of plants, herbs and natural remedies.

Heinrich Zumwald

is Heilewif's grandson.

Maria Zumwald

is Heinrich's wife.

Otto Obulus

is steward of the Heidelberg estate. He oversees all work and is the most influential and powerful of the lord's supervisory personnel.

Adelbrech Crapho

is the chaplain and chancellor at Heidelberg. He is a trusted advisor in religious matters and is consulted routinely.

Ulrich Steinmutter

is the chamberlain. He is in charge of all the household service personnel other than the kitchen staff.

Rapto Ungesmach

is the butler. He is in charge of the butts or barrels of wine and all other beverages.

Ucco Frass

is the cook and is in charge of the kitchen staff and all food preparation.

Hugo Bulstrich

is the marshall and oversees the stables as well as all outside grounds keepers. He is also responsible for the receipt and delivery of the mail.

Berwich Mann

is the usher and is in charge of the doors. He supervises all the guards and watchmen.

Sir Albert Engle

is the forester of the woodlands and manages Robert's timber resources.

Athelbert Asinus

is the household physician at Heidelberg.

Gisela

is a chambermaid. The chambermaids clean the bedroom area as well as serve as personal servants to the family. Gisela is Aurianna's maid.

Roger Maybach

is a currier who delivers letters and packages.

Prolog

LONG AGO, during what many believe to have been the dark ages, there lived among the peoples of the German Nation a just and gracious prince. He was as beloved by his subjects as he was respected, for it was everywhere known that no man was more honest, nor was there a more faithful friend. His name was Robert of Wittelsbach, Count Palatine of the Rhine, and his realm swept erratically along both banks of that great and historic river, reaching from the Black Forest in the south to his capital at Heidelberg on its Neckar tributary to the north and east. Count Robert lived in a world much different from ours. In some ways this is his story; it is a long and complicated one though and it is the story of many others as well, especially of an old woman named Heilewif; it will take some time telling.

Throughout the course of this dangerous era of toil and trouble, people tied themselves together for protection into a network of private contracts and agreements. Men called vassals paid allegiance to higher men, in a massive, shapeless, mix of insecure alliances, based upon loyalty and trust. Robert's vassals solemnly swore to support him and to help him secure his loosely organized domain along the Rhine. To reward these retainers, Robert granted each of them certain estates and benefices from which to obtain income. This land, or right, was called a fief. In theory, the vassal never owned the fief, but only used it at the pleasure of his overlord. Robert, too, held the Palatinate itself in fief

from his overlord, William, King of the Germans and Holy Roman Emperor.

William was a weak and incompetent ruler. During his unfortunate reign, the German nation was restless and in turmoil. People were afraid. Many vassals saw in this an opportunity to increase their wealth and power by striking new deals with other like-minded nobles, even plotting wars of expansion by betraying their own sovereign overlords. One such vassal was Bodenolf von Vulpes, who held, in fief from Robert, rich vineyard land along the Rhine and Neckar. Vulpes was ambitious and unscrupulous, but was not, as our story begins, as yet, a threat to Count Robert, since he was not invested with sovereignty. Without sovereignty a noble could not himself grant fiefs and with them create new vassals to enhance his power. Only the emperor could bestow sovereignty on a vassal. Bodenolf von Vulpes desperately wanted to be a sovereign lord; but the Emperor William, who's Cousin Ava was Robert's wife, would not allow it.

Marriage, you see, was the key that cemented alliances between families. Robert's only daughter, Aurianna von Wittelsbach, worried about this because she knew that her own future was hostage to the dynastic politics of her family. She was seventeen and much renowned for her beauty, talent and wit. Robert had already received six official inquiries, from some of the most powerful men in Europe, concerning her eligibility for marriage. He told her nothing of this, of course, but she knew that she was expected to be loyal to the political needs of her family and she was ready. She also knew that the Holy Church would not sanction any marriage without the free consent of the bride.

The entire system, called feudalism, was held together by personal loyalty and honor. Everyone had to be trusted to keep his or her word. It lasted for centuries because fear drove common people to the local landlord vassal for protection. In an age of insecurity and constant warfare, common people, surrounded by superstition and disease, and without the stability of public law and order, turned to the local castle and its chapel for private protection. Individuals took on the

duties and functions of governments. The local lord administered his own law. Public duty was in the hands of private persons in a society where everyone was woven together into a jumble of oaths and allegiances. It was an age of personal integrity, where lying, cheating and reneging on your word were the greatest of crimes.

The reality of human nature, and the likelihood that some men could not be trusted, resulted in the making of vassals that lived in person on the estates of their master and were ever present and ready to fight on his behalf. These vassals were called knights. Robert had seventy such knights, the bravest and truest of whom was, the most virtuous and worthy, Sir Shilgen Sturmere. So esteemed in fact was he that Robert had entrusted his own son Ludwig to be his apprentice and squire. The boy was now fourteen and had served as a page for six years, in Prague at the court of his cousin William. Now, elevated to the level of squire, he was at last home again, although he hardly knew his own parents.

Even the emperors themselves distrusted and feared their own great vassals and took steps to counter their collective power. One of these strategies was to sell charters granting sovereignty directly to certain important and wealthy cities. In this way, the emperor circumvented the usual feudal bonds and created a source of income, and manpower, entirely loyal to him, thus loosening his dependence upon his vassals. There were several of these, so-called, Free Imperial Cities within the boundaries of Robert's Palatinate. The great Rhineland towns of Speyer and Mainz were the most prominent. They were surrounded by stout walls, ruled by councils of citizens and protected by professional soldiers. These towns lived by trade and were dominated by the craft and commercial guilds.

Robert was respectful of the rights of the towns, whose wealth and power were rapidly rising around him. He knew that his own predominant authority in the Rhineland was filtered, and diluted, through the agency of his vassals, vassals whose interests often conflicted with his own, vassals who could not to be trusted in time of need. And the rich towns, dominating the river trade, with Imperial charters, often looked past him, to the world down stream, to the North Sea and even

beyond. Despite his splendid palace and the pomp of ceremony, Robert, Count Palatine of the Rhine, was nearly powerless beyond his own courtyard. This was why the marriages that tied families together were the highest of politics. Robert understood this quite well.

Yet another layer of power and prerogative weighed on Robert and further diminished his rule. This was the most august Catholic Church, which divided all of Christendom into administrative units called diocese and placed a bishop in each, to oversee the worldly operations of God. These bishops administered their own laws through ecclesiastical courts that sometimes conflicted with Robert's authority. The bishops owed no allegiance to the lay lords, the city over which their cathedrals towered, or even to the emperor himself. They answered only to the Pope in Rome. The Archbishop of Mainz, Oskar Vriunt, was a very powerful ecclesiastical prince whose holy throne sat astride Robert's Rhine and whose presence could not be ignored. Particularly since Vriunt was the pivotal player in the election of the emperor himself.

According to tradition and law, within a month of the death of the emperor, the seven most powerful lords of the German nation, called the Electors, would be summoned by him to the city of Frankfort on the Main for the purpose of choosing the new imperial overlord. The world was too dangerous to be left long without the protection of an emperor. Among the electors were three high lords of the Church, the Archbishops of Mainz, Cologne and Trier and three, most eminent, feudal lords of the land, the Margrave of Brandenburg, the King of Bohemia and the Elector of Saxony. The seventh, and potentially tie breaking, vote belonged to Robert, Count Palatine of the Rhine. In this matter, the cities had no direct say.

The power to invest nobles with sovereignty and to issue sovereign charters to towns made the election of the emperor a most delicate undertaking, wrought with the potential for corruption. To resist this, the Electors were required to swear a solemn oath before God on pain of perdition. I swear, they would say, on the holy gospels here before me, and by the faith which I owe to God and to the Holy Roman Empire, that with the aid of God, and according to my best

judgment and knowledge, I will cast my vote, in this election for a person fitted to rule the Christian people. I will give my voice and vote freely, uninfluenced by any agreement, price, bribe, promise, or any thing of the sort, by whatever name it may be called. So help me God and all the saints. But this alone was rarely enough when so much money and power were at stake.

Now, as our story begins, an unusual crisis was gripping the lands of the German nation. The Emperor William was widely judged to be unfit to rule and many lords openly began to discuss his deposition. This was a most serious business, only rarely resorted to, but William's corrupt favoritism angered the lay lords and his refusal to act against a rising anti-Catholic heresy in the east brought him simultaneously into disfavor with the princes of the church. A plan was slowly hatching to remove him. Only the Archbishop of Mainz could call for a new election and the pressure was building for him to do so. Many powerful men were secretly scheming.

Robert, however, at that very moment, had greater, more personal concerns, concerns that overshadowed even the call of dynastic politics. His castle had, in recent days, been mysteriously afflicted by some manner of demonic spell. A kind of bewitchment overcame many of his household staff and his beloved daughter, Aurianna, was most seriously afflicted. For days she suffered in a trancelike stupor, hardly able to speak or walk. It was hoped that constant prayers would end the ordeal and for a time it seemed so. But the spell returned and once again Aurianna fell victim, wandering and hallucinating for several days. Knowledge of her illness was kept carefully guarded, lest it undermine her marriage prospects. Frantic efforts were made by men of science and God alike to quiet the spell. In the weeks that passed she slowly recovered, but Robert continued to fear a return of the curse. He began to believe that his daughter had been attacked by witches in league with Satan, but had no idea why or how he might combat it. All of his vassals and knights with their swords and armor seemed useless to him and he felt helpless and alone. He knew he needed to unravel the mystery of the spell before it unraveled his rule.

There was a woman, Robert remembered, a woman from his childhood that his father called a wise woman. Her name was Heilewif and she had great knowledge of plants and herbs and had faithfully served his father's household for many years as a physician and midwife. Like many such women, Heilewif was repeatedly accused of witchcraft and when she was ordered to stand trial Robert's father had helped her to escape, secretly sending her south into the Black Forest, to a village at the furthest tip of his domain. Count Robert now sent Sir Shilgen to find her and to bring her home, certain that only she could vanquish Satan's trance. This is where our story begins.

Chapter One

THE HORSE'S HOOVES moved softly and almost silently over the primeval mat of pine needles, left by centuries of changing seasons. The majestic virgin trees that blanketed the hills for hundreds of miles stood straight and tall, like the pillars of a great cathedral. Upward from the ground they were bare of branches for over one hundred feet, before the canopy reached out to fill the void between them and create a cover so thick it blocked out even the midsummer sun. Nothing, save a few ferns, grew between the massive trunks. Sir Shilgen Sturmere and his young squire, Ludwig von Wittelsbach, were on a mission, a mission of extreme urgency. They hadn't spoken for hours, hardly spoken for days in fact, during the long and dreary descent down the east bank of the Rhine, from their home at Heidelberg, and now into the Black Forest, in search of the woman called Heilewif; a wise woman she was and Shilgen's master, Robert, Count Palatine of the Rhine, needed her desperately.

The silence was interrupted, only occasionally, by the rhythmic staccato sound of steel slamming into bark and wood. Sometimes to the left, sometimes to the right, or straight ahead, the sounds came. They wondered, separately, when they would reach the woodcutters and finally, after hours had passed, if they would see them at all. It was early spring and the felling of the monster pines was the first step in a lively timber trade that was filling the small tributaries of the mighty Rhine with logs that would traffic their winding way down to the sea. Hundreds of trees were daily dropping along the rivers and streams of

the Black Forest, where visibility was limited to a few feet and where a dozen men could disappear in an instant. Only the creeks and brooks, cutting through the ancient wildwood, provided trails and the tiny villages and settlements, increasingly dependant on this timber trade, clung to these watercourses like fruits on a twisting vine. And the people themselves naturally bunched together for safety, surrounded as they were by a frightening unknown. It seemed odd to journey for hours, deeper and deeper into this vastness of timber, and to continuously hear axes, and trees falling, without ever coming upon the axe-men. But, in the hushed serenity of the wood, this wasn't strange at all. The breaking breezes, wafting between the solid trees, could play tricks with the sound, so it was impossible to tell from which direction it came or if it were really the true sound at all or only an echo, or even the trick of some witch or wizard seeking to lure them away to their doom.

Shilgen knew it would be best to find the woodcutters soon, before sundown, and before darkness came and loosed the devil's demons. Ghosts, werewolves and witches were the evil agents of the darkness and he had no appetite for the night. The boy was worried too and he noticed their pace quicken as the first rays of the setting sun, slanting beneath the branches, fell flush on their faces. "Remember, Ludwig, the words of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," The knight said, strengthening his voice and resolve: "Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you: for he that walketh in darkness knoweth not whither he goeth."

"John Twelve," the boy answered, confident that he was right.

"Brilliant, Ludwig," Shilgen responded, happy to defuse the rising tension, as much for himself as for the boy, and if for only a moment or two. The education of a squire was more than mere military training and etiquette, especially for this particular squire, since he was the eldest son, and heir, of his master, Count Robert, and had been entrusted most earnestly to his care and judgment. Teach him about life Shilgen, not only about weapons, he remembered the count saying.

"Are you frightened of the forest, Ludwig?"

"Yes, well not the forest sir, I mean, I am afraid we are lost and will never come out."

"We are lost my boy, but that doesn't mean that we cannot come out. In life we are always lost, not only here in the boundless wood, but everywhere." After a brief pause he continued. "Do you understand that boy?"

"I think so, sir."

"Tell me then; what do I mean?"

"You mean that the future is unknown and that life is like this forest."

"And what must we do then?"

"Keep going, sir?"

"That's right, Ludwig, and who will guide us?"

"Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

"Yes, my boy, and also remember Ephesians: For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world."

Once again tapping tones broke their concentration. But this time it was curiously lighter and quicker in its cadence, and closer, much closer. "Wait," Shilgen commanded. "Listen, what's that, ahead, there on the path?" They peered into the dusky thicket and perceived a gaunt figure, low to the ground, rapping a kind of rhythmic rattle as he slowly approached. Shilgen's hand instinctively found the hilt of his sword; he tightened his knees against the horse and forced his feet into the stirrups until he was half-standing in the saddle.

The shadowy figure stumbled quickly around them in the narrow clearing, being careful not to brush against the horses. The two travelers, backing away, turned completely around to face him. "Forgive me sire for I am forbidden from speaking until I am down wind, so my infectious vapors will not enter your nostrils."

They had come upon a bent and broken soul, completely wrapped in a grey cloak of tattered cloth and wearing a gaudy bright red hat, giving him the appearance of some sort of sad clown or jester. His gloved hands held castanets that he clicked constantly as he shuffled, face down, along the forest path. His mouth and chin could be seen in the dim light and they were covered with sores, ulcers and scabs.

Shilgen suddenly pulled back on his reins. "Stay back boy, this is a leper, make a wide birth."

The horses, sensing their masters' fear, instinctively neighed, lifting and pawing with their fore hooves in defense against the invisible threat.

"You say you are forbidden to speak, forbidden by whom, sir? What crime have you committed?"

"No crime, sir. I am dead sire, having been solemnly separated from both church and village. I wander here, as you see me, and humbly ask your alms and indulgences." The leper then held his begging bowl out toward them and both men instinctively shrunk back again in fear of the unknown and deadly scourge that the man carried.

"We are pilgrims, sir and in a great hurry. Stand aside we cannot help you," Shilgen commanded.

But, then the boy spoke. "But God tells us, Sir Shilgen, according to Matthew, when he says: Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give."

Shilgen looked slowly down at the man. "He is clearly a blameless victim of Satan's evil scheme, but there is little we can do to help him."

"But, surely we can offer him some wine and a bit of bread."

"That would be most kind, sire," the man opportunely responded, bowing stiffly. "I have not tasted wine in two years. I am forbidden to enter any town or tavern."

"Who forbids you?" Shilgen once again demanded.

"Why the Holy Mother Church, sire."

"Have you been separated then?"

"Yes, the Mass was said."

Shilgen nodded and Ludwig took some bread from his rucksack, while the knight dismounted and loosened the small wine keg from his saddle.

"Please drop it on the ground where I can pick it up, and the wine, I cannot touch your keg. It must be poured into my bowl."

The two did as the leper asked and left saddened, despite their charity. They rode on for a time, not talking, before Ludwig asked, "what is it then, what possessed that poor man, Sir Shilgen?"

"It's a curse that eats the living flesh, Ludwig, a scourge of Satan called leprosy. It is ravenously contagious and is intended to spread among the people and sow fear and doubt in the minds of the faithful. That man was Satan's proxy, an unwitting agent of the devil's determination to destroy the work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He deserves our pity, but we must be ever mindful of Satan my boy and keep our guard high."

"What did you mean when you asked if he had been separated?"

"The Funeral Mass of Separation is performed over the leper by a priest and he is declared dead by the Church, forbidden any further contact with the living."

"What is the meaning of Christian charity then when the Church abandons the needy?" Ludwig challenged. "Did not Saint Francis embrace the leper and give him his tunic as well?"

"The Church does not abandon them, Ludwig," Shilgen answered, somewhat annoyed, "only separates them from the rest. It's for everyone's safety, including the lepers. People are rightly afraid and many will kill lepers on sight."

This answer only partly satisfied the boy, who was at a restless age and, naturally, sought answers to the most vexing of life's questions. But, he knew well enough not to continue pressing at that moment. The sun was nearly set and Sir Shilgen was now aggressively seeking the camp of the woodcutters. For the next hour, they stopped every few feet to listen for the sound, but could hear nothing more. As the breezes died with the last light of day it became certain that they must stop and make camp. A full moon was already rising and Shilgen was gratified that its cold light would diminish the darkness. But, this boon also brought the vicious threat of wolves, aroused by the magnetic and magical lunar attraction and their howling call to their bloodthirsty werewolf kin.

"We shall camp here along the stream where the horses can drink and forage for some green grass," Shilgen said, thinking also that the stream's path, which cut a course through the thicket, left some bare sky above and with it an opening for the moonlight to enter. Also, they could rest more securely with their backs to the stream, and the horses,

quick to spook at the slightest sound, tied between them and the dark and desolate forest. "Unsaddle them and give them a bit of grain, not too much, and the salt lick, while I build a fire. Remember, always take care of the horses..." Shilgen went on, but the boy wasn't listening, having heard the discourse on horses many times before. Besides, he loved horses and had already given each of them a small carrot, before leaving them to stand in the cool water of the stream to relax their tired legs. "...and don't give them any carrots..." Ludwig smiled and went busily about his tasks, while Sir Shilgen gathered some dead wood and tinder to build the campfire. It was very unwise to linger long at night without a fire. A few quick strikes with the flint, against the steel of his blade, sent a wash of sparks into the dry tinder and in a few seconds more the flames burst to life. Shilgen was careful to dig his fire pit well into the moist bank of the stream and to line it with stones, piled so as to balance the small cook pot. "We eat the carrots, the horses eat grass," he admonished and Ludwig grimaced at the thought of one more meal of boiled carrots and salted beef, but then, the only alternative was fried onions and salted beef and he hated onions. "We will reach a village soon and get a proper meal, I promise," Shilgen said, stirring the boiling brew.

As the two travelers ate their evening meal, the almost fluid, inky, darkness began to flow into the cracks and crevices between the branches, until the pitiful little fire only held for a few feet around them. The comforting presence of the horses, their sighing and nickering, that said all is well, was the first line of alert.

"I will sleep first Ludwig. You sit with your back to this tree. Wake me when the moon crosses the zenith. Watch the horses. If they snort, or neigh, or lift their tails, wake me at once." This was not the normal routine and Ludwig was worried. He had never seen Shilgen so cautious.

"But first, let us pray. Kneel beside me, Ludwig: In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit I beseech and bewitch you wolves. I adjure you in the name of the very Holy Mother of God, who was pregnant, that you shall not take any lambs from my herd." And with that Shilgen laid down to sleep. Ludwig wondered what the prayer meant and if he were the lamb.

The boy sat erect as he was instructed and gazed up into the heavens, where only a few of the brightest stars could overcome the lustrous moon. All he could think about was the wolf. No animal was more feared. They came out of the deep forest in time of trouble, driven by famine, pestilence and war, he had been taught. They were the unmistakable sign of Satan, born out of hell, he was taught. They came out of the deep forest he repeated, but they were now in the deep forest and that meant that the wolves were near them. His heart pounded and he peered into the darkness, hoping not to see the flinty red eyes of the beast watching him. Every sound was now suspect, every twitch of the horse's tail studied, every inch of the moon's rise slowed by the urge to wake Sir Shilgen.

Keep the fire burning and the wolves at bay he said to himself, but the little store of fire wood was rapidly disappearing. He dared not disturb his master and show his fear, for cowardice was the most despicable of weaknesses in a knight and he was to become a knight. Gathering wood meant wandering outside the glow of the fire and going into the darkness. But he didn't dare. "Sir Shilgen, I need to ask you something," he whispered pushing against the knight's shoulder with his foot. "Sir Shilgen, please wake, I don't know what to do."

"Yes boy what is it?" Shilgen answered in a clear voice, not having slept for a second.

"You told me to stay with my back against the tree and I have done as you ordered. But the wood is low and I fear the fire will go out. Am I permitted to fetch more wood or will you do it?"

Sir Shilgen smiled and said: "good my boy, your wits will serve you well. You may leave your post and gather wood."

It was not the answer he had hoped for, but at least Shilgen was awake and he was not alone. As he stood and inched closer to the perimeter of light, the knight rose too and said, "wait, I'll come with you; I want to check the horses anyway."

As the two gathered wood on the edge of their campsite, the boy began to feel closer to the steely and distant knight. Somehow he didn't seem so unapproachable and intimidating and he grew in his confidence enough to ask about things that disturbed him.

"Sir Shilgen, I am frightened of the dark and the forest and the wolves and I am ashamed."

"There is no shame in fear boy. I'm afraid too."

"You are? But you don't seem afraid."

"It's only experience and training son. You will learn it too. The world is dangerous and evil lurks everywhere, without fear, we would be foolhardy and rush to our destruction. Fear brings caution and prudence. It's not how you feel, it's what you do that counts. No matter how frightened you are, you must always do your duty and never run from evil. Remember Psalms: Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night... nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness... Now it's time for you to sleep, Ludwig."

"I cannot sleep, sir. Will you answer for me one more question?"

Shilgen nodded assent and the boy asked, "have you ever seen a werewolf?"

"No, my boy, I have never seen one, but I know of several encounters and have hunted werewolves many times. But first sit down here by the fire."

The dancing red glow of the flames sharpened the lines in Shilgen's rugged face and reflected starkly from his eyes, which seemed sunken in the shadow of his brow and made him appear older than his twenty-two years. Ludwig, who had no desire to sleep, listened intently as the knight began in a low reassuring voice.

"The Devil uses many arts my boy and deceitful ruses to affect his evil intent and is ever ready to assist low and miserable men in achieving their vile ends. The thirst for revenge for some earlier wrong is a deep and sometimes unquenchable human weakness that Satan readily exploits. When a wicked and worthless man craves revenge, out of hatred for some person, Satan smells him and comes to him and offers him a way to carry out his loathsome deeds, undetected. By wearing a magic belt, which Satan gives him, on a night when the moon is full, the Satan's henchman will be transformed into a bloodthirsty wolf whose strength, speed, and leaping prowess will make him unstoppable and unrecognizable. In this way, the man becomes an instrument of the devil's despicable plan, because he unwittingly takes on the character of

the wolf, a ferocious and remorseless killer, and he cannot control his insatiable urge to drink the blood of his victims. When the moon is full and he hears the howl of his brother wolves, the man is driven to put on the belt and rampage among the people, pitilessly targeting and devouring children and pregnant women, as is the want of the arch fiend Beelzebub, for whom the most helpless and innocent sacrifice is all the sweetest.”

Shilgen paused briefly to stoke the fire and, as Ludwig almost instinctively looked upward at the rising red embers swirling in the warm up draft, they heard the night’s first whining howl. Fear rolled through the boy’s body, causing a shiver he had never experienced before.

“Was that a wolf?” he asked quickly.

“Yes, that was the first, more will answer. Satan is calling his minions.”

“What will happen now, Sir Shilgen?”

“The moon is full and the wolves are beckoning; the werewolves will hear them and be driven to their villainy.”

“Is there no way to stop them then, Sir Shilgen?”

“Oh, they can be killed, like any wolf, but to catch one, that’s the trick. The wolf is a powerful and relentless beast and the devil’s own favorite. He will not fall easily. People dare not go out at night, especially on such a night as this when the moon is full and cold. And, if you are caught abroad on a full moon, it’s best to stay close to the fire. Like all evil creatures, wolves are accomplices of the darkness and are fearful of the light. Remember, Judas worked his treachery under the cover of night.”

Ludwig added more wood to the fire and pulled his sword from its scabbard. “Would I be a prime target for a werewolf then?” he asked softly.

“Yes, my boy.”

Chapter Two

AS THE MOON CRESTED and began its descent, Shilgen watched while the boy slept, or at least he thought the boy was asleep. The wolves wailed their, almost moaning, regretful yowl that belied their a savage reputation. Everything else was still, save for an occasional rustle from the horses and the gurgling flow of the nearby brook. The winter snow, melting in the high mountains, had swollen the streams and rivers all across the forest, spawning countless tiny creeks that would soon dry up and disappear; but now, in the early spring, the land was alive with running water. They had made their fire on the edge of one of these rivulets and Shilgen was planning to follow it downstream to its junction with a larger stream and to continue this until they reached a main tributary of the Rhine and with it he hoped, the wood cutting party they had heard the previous day.

The forest was a valuable resource and it was managed carefully. Count Robert had commissioned a forester to oversee the trees and to issue licenses for cutting. Shilgen had seen the Wittelsbach Lion branded into several trees. These had been selected by the forester for cutting and so as to thin the stand and break the continuous canopy above to allow light to enter. This also encouraged a soft undergrowth that provided forage for animals, especially deer. Hunting was the privilege of nobility, forbidden to commoners, and managing the forest to produce income from timber while preserving the habitat needed to support wild game was the forester's charge. For his efforts, he

collected a duty on every tree cut. Robert leased the timber rights to other vassals who assigned local peasants to cut and haul the trees. Teams of oxen dragged the logs to nearby streams where they floated with the current to the Rhine. There, each spring, thousands of logs were gathered and made into massive log rafts for the downstream descent to the Low Countries.

Wood was critical, not only for building, but as a fuel for heat. Survival without it in northern climes was impossible. For centuries its seemingly inexhaustible supply had been exploited. But now the lowlands were cut flat and the highland timber, already in second growth, was in great demand. It was Count Robert's only dependable source of cash money and he required settlement in gold from the middleman traders in Mainz who managed his trade. The urge to maximize profits, by ruthlessly cutting as many trees as possible, was tempting, but Robert knew that to be a foolhardy course and he had instructed Shilgen to assess the care with which his forester was adhering to his orders to conserve the valuable resource. For this purpose, Sir Shilgen had been issued letters patent from his sovereign lord, Count Robert, granting him full power of authority over the forest and ordering every man under Robert's dominion to assist him. As the sun slowly rose, the knight thought about all of these things.

Some wine, thinned with water from the stream, served to start the day and setting out early would improve the chances of reaching their goal, but the boy was sleeping so soundly and the horses were lying down, giving good evidence that all was well around them. So Shilgen decided to sleep a bit more himself. The sun was well into the sky before Ludwig woke him.

"Sir ... Sir Shilgen. I think it's getting late. We'd best be moving, I think.

"Yes, you're right Ludwig, it must be nearly noon," the startled knight responded. "Saddle the horses, there's no time to waste. We can eat some cheese as we ride."

Sometimes they walked in the stream and sometimes, when the bank was flat, along its edge. For a long while neither spoke. Then the boy began, "Sir."

"Yes, my boy."

"May I ask a question?"

"Is it about werewolves, Ludwig?"

"No, sir, not exactly. Last night I had a dream. I dreamt I was visited by a ghost who told me not to be afraid because he was a good ghost and that I should not fear him. I did not know how to answer him. Are there such things as good ghosts Sir Shilgen?"

"Yes, my boy, there are," the knight answered knowing that that would not be the end of it.

"Well then, how are we to know which ghosts are good and which are not?"

"We ask them."

"And they will tell us?"

"Sometimes they will. All ghosts are seeking something. That is why they appear to the living and they will often speak." Sir Shilgen rode on for a time without continuing, but he could see that the boy was dissatisfied and he remembered his duty to educate as well as demonstrate. "There are two kinds of ghosts, Ludwig. Some of them are souls in Purgatory. They are caught in a nightmare of torment, not having reached paradise, and are fearful of cascading down into the netherworld of Hades. God allows these souls to return to seek redemption for past sins by doing some good deed or by undoing some evil one they had previously done. They will visit the old places and try to help the people from their past life."

"These are the good ghosts then."

"Yes, and if you encounter one ask where it has come from and what its quest is. These are poor souls to be pitied."

"And the bad ghosts?"

"The bad ghosts have returned from hell and have no hope of ever seeing our lord God in paradise. Satan sends them to cause fear among the people and to cast doubt on the sovereignty of almighty God. They have no reason to try to redeem themselves, because they are already forever damned. Their purpose is to cause mischief and mayhem. God allows this to test us my boy, to test our faith in Him."

"Do any ghosts return from heaven?"

"No my boy. Souls in paradise have no desire to return to this world. Why would they? No, there are no ghosts from heaven."

"Could the ghost in my dream have been a real ghost or was it only my imagination?"

"Well that's hard to say. It could have been either. Ghosts can only communicate through the spirit world and often choose dreams to make contact with the living. But the devil can enter our dreams as well and will do so as a specter. Satan cannot attack us directly because he is only spirit and not flesh. That's why he needs witches to do his dirty work for him. He works through illusion and hallucination. He tricks us into believing his lies. A ghost can either be real or a phantom of Satan. Did your ghost speak?"

"Yes, he told me not to be afraid. But, I was afraid and I woke up."

"If it were a ghost Ludwig, it will visit you again in your sleep. If it does, ask it what it wants of you." Shilgen suddenly stood up in the saddle and cocked his ear to the wind. "Enough of this, boy; I can hear them, ahead maybe a quarter mile; let's make haste."

They urged their horses to a trot and made pace until they overcame two peasants driving a pair of unyoked oxen, slowly along the streamside trail. One man was walking along side the lead ox while the second walked behind. Both animals had small woven baskets tied around their muzzles.

"Wait you men and answer my charge. I am Sir Shilgen Sturmere, emissary and bearer of letters patent from your liege lord, count Robert of Wittelsbach.

"Aye sire, we yield to your authority," the older man responded, removing his hat and yelling "yee" to the oxen, while pulling back stoutly on the big horns of the massive, but docile, beast. The animals calmly obeyed and the man walked around them to where Shilgen had dismounted. Ludwig jumped down quickly to hold the horses and saw that the boy behind the animals was a lad no bigger than he. The two looked intently at each other, but neither uttered a sound while their elders spoke.

"We are seeking your forester, Sir Albert Engle. Can you guide us?"

"No, sire. We are simple villeins, free men it is true, but bound by contract to our manor lord to join the cutting party at Scolbach and drag logs for seven days. I am George Gerold and this is my eldest son, Ludwig."

The two boys looked at each other again, smiling at the coincidence and wanting more than ever to talk, but knowing the time was still not right.

"Is that party cutting in the domain of Lord Robert of Wittelsbach and under the authority of Sir Albert?"

"Yes sir, it is."

"Perhaps we will find him there then. Can you direct us?"

"This stream is called the Rehbach and it empties into the Scol. You will find the cutters along the banks of the Scol."

As the squire brought Sir Shilgen's horse around for him to mount, he asked the peasant boy, "how old are you?"

"Sixteen, sir. How old are you?"

"I am sixteen too," the Ludwig answered impulsively, then quickly asked, as though to cover his lie, "why then are the animals muzzled that way, with those baskets?"

"Why without them sire the brutes would stop for every piece of green grass and we would never make our marks. As it is we set out at sunrise and will not reach our destination until near dark."

"Well, God's speed then to you. Perhaps we shall meet again."

As they splashed through the stream to skirt the big bovine roadblock, Ludwig could see by the expression on Sir Shilgen's face that he was in for another lecture.

"The knight, my young friend, is a just and true servant of our Lord. What does that mean to you?"

"That a knight should not lie, sir."

"Yes, boy, and why does the knight not lie?"

"I don't know, sir, for it seems that there are times when lying is the most noble course. Would a knight not lie to the devil to serve God?"

"Yes, but this is not a schoolboy syllogism; we have little use for Aristotle here. Our world is built on truth, straightaway, and the strength of a man's word. And that depends on the presumption of honesty. Your word is your solemn bond my boy."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I just didn't want to be younger than him. Besides, what harm did it do?"

"Most importantly, Ludwig, the knight does not lie to himself. When what we wish to be true seeps into our speech it is an insidious sneaking self-deception that can be wrought by the guiles of human reason into the illusion of truth and this is the devil's domain. And if you live by these wishful lies your life will become a fraud and you will finally perish in the fires of hell. Which is where you will belong. Think about that and don't speak again until you are told."

The boy slumped in the saddle and rode with his head down, not paying any attention to the trail, confident that his horse would stay tight to the knight's tail. Lying was a most irksome problem he thought, knowing that lies were almost a way of life around him, not only the little lies of personal life, but the complicated evasions and fabrications of high court politics. He was old enough to have overheard his own father lie many times to his own wife about his comings and goings. He also heard his mother pretend to believe him. He knew that to falsify or mislead before a magistrate was a most vile crime punished by death. But, it seemed strange that so much care should be taken to deter a behavior that everyone openly abhorred and swore not to practice but seemed to live by anyway.

The horse's sudden stop jarred him to his senses and he looked up to see Shilgen beginning to dismount. The significance of the fact intuitively occurred to him that he had been led like a blind man safely through danger to his destination by the faithful horse he trusted. "You're a good horse; you're a good big boy horse," he whispered as he quickly slid to the ground and rushed to take his master's reins.

They had paused just above a steep slope beyond which they could hear a huge log sliding into the river down a rough hewn ramp. The huge splash showered them with spray, although they were still

some distance away. As yet they could see no workers and both waited for the next hulking timber to roar down the chute and slam into the water's surface.

"Those trunks must be one-hundred and twenty feet long and over three feet through at the stump," Shilgen marveled, "and straight as an arrow. Careful now boy, that they don't spook the horses. We'll back track a bit and climb that slope so as to approach them from the rear." The two remounted and circled around and up the bank. The incline was at times severe, but proved more a jarring challenge for the riders than for the spirited steeds who managed it aggressively. Moving quickly between the stately pines, they stopped once again at the edge of the work site, still unseen, to quietly observe. Trees were here and there marked with a branded lion, the heraldic seal of the Wittelsbach family and the official authorization for the crew to take that particular tree. Forging the mark was punishable by death.

The men worked in two-man teams, wielding heavy iron felling axes, equipped with steel blades inserted in grooves along the cutting edges. Steel was hard and would hold its edge, but too expensive to use on the entire axe head. The felling axes ripped into the tree in rhythmic cadence, sending chips flying for several feet. Huge iron cauls were then wedged into the gap to steady the work and direct the tree's fall. Finally, a slow cracking sound, rising in pitch and amplitude, signaled a thunderous crash. Once on the ground, a second team of men, this time swinging shorter handled axes with broader blades, loped off the canopy and limbed it clean. The branches were bunched and tied in bundles to be dragged home for fire wood, once the work was done. When the single stick was ready, an ox team was harnessed with chains at the butt end and the huge log dragged relentlessly to the ramp where it was coaxed out carefully over a fulcrum like balancing point. The chains were carefully removed and two more men tipped it over the brink.

Seizing the opportunity between felling, Sir Shilgen quickly approached the cutters. "Hear me, you men. I am Sir Shilgen Sturmere, bearer of letters patent from your liege Lord, Count Robert of Wittelsbach. I am ordered to inspect your work and I am seeking your forester, Sir Albert Engle. Who speaks for this crew?"

"I do," offered a big powerfully built man carrying a small keg of water. "I am the task-master here. My name is Heinrich Zumwald and I am at your service."

As Shilgen reached into his pack for the letters patent the man said, "sire, no one here can read, but I can clearly see the seal of the House of Wittelsbach. What are your orders?"

"Where might I find Sir Albert?"

"Sir Albert is at this moment in Flusseck at the confluence of the Scol and the Rhine. He will remain there, through the month, to supervise the building of the raft."

This was not the answer that Shilgen had hoped to hear since to return to the Rhine would mean back-tracking for at least two days and he decided to postpone that part of his charge and proceed directly to the second more urgent need. "Where then is the village of Fichtestamm? Is there any man here from that place?"

"Yes, sir, there are several men here from Fichtestamm."

"Bring them to me," Shilgen ordered and watched a shifting and scurrying among the crew that had all gathered around the strangers, until two young peasants stepped forward. "These brothers are from Fichtestamm," the overseer said, pushing the reluctant pair forward.

"I am seeking a woman who lived in Fichtestamm many years ago. Her name is Heilewif. Do you know this woman?" The two men exchanged fleeting glances and shook their heads, while looking down at the ground. Shilgen sensed his dilemma and added, "do not fear us men; we mean her no harm."

"There was a woman named Heilewif, but that was a long time ago," the overseer interrupted. "I'm not sure she could be found today."

"We come to beg her assistance in the name of Count Robert, who has asked for her in a time of dire need. She is much loved and respected by the count, who has charged me to bring her to the palace at Heidelberg. She is a wise woman with secret knowledge and she alone can comfort him. I give you my solemn word that we can be trusted."

"You are a man of honor, sir and I can tell you truly that Heilewif is also much loved here in the forest and there are many men who would gladly die to defend her." These were bold words for a commoner to utter in the face of a noble knight, but this was not a

tournament joust, it was deadly real and Shilgen could count at least twenty sharpened axes around him.

The Knight dismounted to face the man at his level and said, "you too are a brave and honest man, Heinrich Zumwald and I beg for your assistance. Help me to find the most honored Heilewif."

"Heilewif is my grandmother, the man said, and I will bring you to her only if you agree that it shall be her decision alone to go or not to go with you."

"I agree," Shilgen said shaking the man's hand and knowing all the while that he would bring the woman back even against her will.

Chapter Three

THE LAST COLD OF EARLY SPRING had not yet left the castle at Heidelberg and a chilly draft, strong enough to disturb the heavy tapestries hanging on the stark stone walls of the great chamber, swirled into a whistling wind as it forced its way into the narrow corridor to the family sleeping quarters. Robert and his wife, the Countess Ava von Wittelsbach, defended the cold and damp, huddled between their feather mattress and thick quilts and coverlets of mink and ermine. The massive oak bed frame supported an ingenious network of interlaced leather straps attached to flexible poles on which the mattress was suspended. A structure of spires, almost in imitation of a gothic façade, surrounded the bed, on which a linen curtain hung, creating an island of privacy within, secure from the currents of cold air and the curiosity of the chamber maids, who at times were required to sleep on pallets at the foot of the bed.

It was dawn and the household was waking. Robert had been up for at least an hour and he welcomed the rumble of activity that signaled the start of a new day.

“Are you sleeping Ava?” he half-whispered to his wife, his mouth muffled by the mountain of heavy fur between them.

“No, Robert, I have been awake as well. I’m so very worried about Aurianna. Do you think, God willing, she’s doing well?”

“She is barely seventeen and I must believe that our Lord Jesus Christ will protect her from this curse,” he said, honestly seeking sincerity, while fearing that God was secretly allowing all of this to

happen. “We must pray to Benedict, the admirable saint and doctor of humility as father Crapho has wisely advised us.” And with those words Robert turned toward his wife and took both of her hands saying, “Saint Benedict hear our prayer for our beautiful and innocent daughter Aurianna, who is now afflicted with an evil curse. Guard her against poisoning of the body as well as of mind and soul. Amen.”

It had been ordered that, upon arising, the count was to be immediately informed of the condition of his daughter and a chambermaid waiting outside the linen surround was given a signal to speak. “She sleeps peacefully, my lord.”

“Thank God,” he said softly, turning toward his wife and pulling her into his arms. She didn’t speak, but he felt her weeping and the tears were wet against his cheek. “Don’t cry Ava, please,” he said. “It will be over soon.”

“I’m worried, Robert... about you as well; I can’t help thinking that this is not really about Aurianna, but in the end it will be about you and that it has only just begun.”

The count said nothing, but he sensed it too, and felt the strength of their bond, knowing that she truly cared for him. Their marriage, like all dynastic marriages for the ruling class, had been carefully arranged to create and to strengthen family and clan alliances. He was eighteen and she fourteen. He did not see her, except in a painting delivered by ambassadorial currier, until nearly a year after the wedding, which was celebrated with proxies at the court of his bride’s father. Yet, as time passed, they gradually fell deeply in love. Of their six children, only two survived and they too were deeply loved. Thus the day began for Count Robert of Wittelsbach. He kissed his wife warmly and left the bedroom to her and her chambermaids. They would reunite shortly in the main chapel for morning mass and immediately after that for breakfast, as was the custom, but first came duty and the daily meeting with the castle steward and manager of his estates.

Otto Obulus was a man of great talent and ambition. He had risen from humble origins to great wealth and power through Robert’s generosity and patronage. He was the only member of

the household to possess his own manor house and he personally held several lucrative contracts for Robert's commerce in connection with hanseatic traders in Mainz and Cologne. He understood money and accounting; his ledgers, inventories and records were impeccable and Robert relied on him implicitly.

Otto Obulus was the watch dog of Count Robert's domains. His duty was to know the law and to administer it with impunity. To fulfill the obligations of his office, he routinely visited all of the vassal manors under fief from Count Robert and took independent inventories to corroborate the statements made by the manor lord. His duty was to make inquiries about every field, meadow and wood and to cause these to be measured to verify the agreed upon amounts of demesne land reserved to his lord and in this way to prevent cheating. He was to count the horses, oxen, sheep and swine as well as all other assets subject to tax, rent and fee and to verify the statements of all bailiffs to ensure that each operation was profitable in its own right and of benefit to his lord, Robert. In this duty he often encountered resistance as well as opportunity.

"Good morning, my lord," Obulus began, affecting a bow of the head that was somewhat hindered by the lavish fur mantel around his shoulders. "I have inventories of several of your houses sire, done by true and sworn men, and a report of some difficulties."

"Yes, good morning, Otto. I see you have returned in good health, apparently none of my loyal vassals saw fit to boil you in oil."

"No sire, but..."

"I know this is important Otto, but I am most concerned today for the health of my daughter."

"Your daughter, sire?"

"Since you've been gone a terrible curse has entered the castle, most grievously afflicting our own Aurianna. She is intermittently stricken with a spell, a stupor that renders her helpless, half asleep, but with gaping eyes. She suffers for days, then mysteriously recovers without memory of her ordeal."

Obulus was silent, not knowing how much to dare inquire about personal family affairs. "I will pray for her speedy recovery, sire and I stand as always at your service."

"Thank you, Otto. We shall talk later."

The steward had no reticence however when it came to matters of duty. "I must speak now, sir; it is a subject of some urgency."

"Speak then," Robert responded.

"There is difficulty with your high vassal, Lord Bodenolf von Vulpes. He disputes my findings concerning his just fees and refuses to allow his steward to comply with my ruling. I have a statement here, sworn to me under oath, concerning the delivery of eighty barrels of ordinary wine made at Cologne on the..."

"It's not important, Otto, we can deal with this later," the count interrupted.

"There is more, sire," Obulus pressed and seeing a slight assent from his master went on. "He accuses me of seeking a bribe for my silence and maintains that I am implicated in this illegal trafficking. I assure you, my lord, that there is no truth to this villainous..."

Once more Robert prevented him. "Of course there isn't. Vulpes has lately begun to stretch his wings, but the higher the monkey climbs, Otto, the more his ass shows."

"There is still more, sire."

"Yes?"

"He told me to announce to you that he is coming here today to address you on this and other matters of concern to him."

"He comes today?"

"Yes, sire, he will arrive before noon."

Although this added considerably to the burden already weighing heavily on him, it failed to significantly alter his fixed focus. Count Robert was anxious to meet with his chancellor, Father Adelbrech Crapho, who was now charged with combating the curse. The main chapel was at the opposite end of the great hall from the staircase that led directly up to the second floor family quarters. The chapel was a two story vaulted space that could be accessed directly from the top floor private chambers that opened into a long balcony from which spiral staircases descended directly to the side alters. The main floor could accommodate several hundred people, if needs be, and

everyone in the immediate household staff was expected to attend morning mass, especially now.

“Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Christ have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy.” And so it began with Robert’s mind miles away, wondering if Shilgen had found her, if she were even alive and if she would come. “We praise You, we bless You, we adore You, we glorify You, we give thanks to You for Your great glory, Lord God, Heavenly King, God Almighty Father. Lord Only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father...”

He could not escape his cresting emotions and his restless questioning mind. Was it a witch’s curse he asked himself and if so why his blameless daughter.

“...You Who take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. You Who take away the sins of the world, hear our prayer. You Who sit at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us. For You alone are holy, You alone are the Lord, You alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ...”

The mass, its epistles and gospels, droned on, echoing into the vaulted ceiling, but hardly penetrating Robert’s concentration on the curse and his determination to defeat it. His obsession was only briefly broken by the supplication. “...deliver us from evil.”

The priest, in whom he had placed his trust, was a small man of slight build who had risen to the office of chancellor quite unexpectedly, having been the illegitimate son of one of Robert’s mother’s chambermaids. He was the same age as the count, but Robert did not remember him as a child. “You will join us today for breakfast Adelbrech,” the count said quietly, as the Holy Eucharist was offered, “...take this, this is my body...”

Crapho was frightened by Robert’s invitation to join the family at the high table, an honor usually reserved only for esteemed guests and other nobility. Even the steward Obulus was rarely so honored. Would he be praised and perhaps rewarded for his efforts to protect the beloved daughter, or scolded, perhaps even punished, for his failure to arrest the scourge? Crapho preferred to be unnoticed, to blend with the

background, but circumstance had thrust him forward and he had no choice but to accept his new prominence.

Breakfast at Heidelberg Castle was, when Robert was in attendance, a fast-paced affair of administration, where reports from various staff might be heard and petitions from manor lords and villages presented. Although, at that moment, he had little interest in these things, Robert was attentive to his charge as Count Palatine of the Rhine. "Call the chamberlain," he ordered and then turned to the priest. "Tell me, Crapho, what do you think now?"

"Since she doesn't speak, she is a complicated case. The demon is cunning. But, her possession is intermittent and during the periods of rest she should pray, alone, in her private chapel and beg Saint Benedict to help her."

"Is there not something more we can do?" Robert asked, clearly bewildered by the priest's passivity. "Is that all you can tell me, to wait and pray. I feel like a leper sprinkled with holy water."

"Someone is placing the curse on her; it is witchcraft my lord. Without an exorcism there is no way to find out who it is."

Robert had heard the recommendation for exorcism from his chancellor before and knew that to do this required permission from the archbishop and he was reluctant, knowing that this would invite the prying eyes of the Church into the most intimate affairs of his family. "So that continues to be your advice then, exorcism?"

"Yes, my lord."

Robert paused for a few seconds and then turned to the castle physician, a visibly frightened man named Athelbert Asinus, totally incapable of coping with the pressures of the present crises, and said, "good doctor do you agree that this is not a physical malady within your competence?"

"Well sire, it seems, or should seem at least, that some form of purgative action should..."

Robert, clearly frustrated with the continued failures and constant efforts to deflect responsibility, interrupted angrily. "Have I not endowed a faculty in medicine at the university?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And do these learned doctors have no answers for me?"

"I have sent them ..."

"Bring them here to me... immediately, all of them."

"Yes, my lord," the relieved doctor replied with a polite bow before backing away.

"Where is Steinmutter?"

"Here my lord." Ulrich Steinmutter was the chamberlain and he supervised the household staff. He was a hard worker and ambitious, but was resentful of the position and prestige accorded to Obulus, the steward. He tried to make as much use as he could of the few seconds' audience he occasionally had directly with the count.

"I see you have brought your people as well. Good. Prepare for guests today at noon. We are expecting Lord Vulpes and perhaps twenty retainers. Do you have any problems?"

"None, my lord," Steinmutter answered, eager to appear resourceful and undaunted, even though Robert knew, it being April, that the castle stores were badly depleted and that preparing a lavish dinner at so short notice would be difficult. The count turned toward the cook, Ucco Frass who answered, "no, my lord." Followed by Rapto Ungeschmach, the butler, "no, my lord."

"Yes, my lord," the strong voice belonged to the marshall, standing behind and to the left. Hugo Bulstrich supervised the stables and had several grooms and carters under his charge. He was a simple and honest man. "Our hay is nearly gone, my lord, as is our grain. Feeding twenty more horses, for perhaps two or three days, will be difficult."

"What do you suggest, Hugo?"

"We must bring hay to the horses or horses to the hay, sir." Relocating a large number of animals to neighboring manors was faster and easier than appropriating and moving the feed overland. But, for every two steeds sent, a mounted knight was down and in time of trouble this could be dangerous. The alternative, however, also presented problems.

"Between the spoon and the lips much soup is lost. Bring the horses to the hay," the Count decided. "But no more than forty," he

added. And so the morning went in a seemingly hectic but purposeful, progression of decisions.

Formal dinners were to be a display of wealth and power, intended to impress as well as intimidate important guests. Even on such short notice, Heidelberg castle was expected to produce a sumptuous feast and preparations for it began immediately. Five courses were prepared, including meat, fish and fowl, followed by dried fruits, sweets and cheeses, all to be enjoyed with the count's best wine. Vulpes' arrival was treated with ceremonial courtesy and he was accorded the place of honor at the table beside the count. Toasts and comments were cordial and Robert wondered throughout the seemingly endless meal what his troublesome vassal wanted. Finally came the fruits and cheeses and the appearance of the priest, who as almoner claimed the table scraps for the poor.

"Come, Vulpes, let us retire to private chambers and have our little talk. I know something of your purpose."

Bodenolph von Vulpes was a tall man of slender build, somewhat disguised by the heavy cloak and chains he carried. He wore a closely cropped chin beard, sharply angled to a point, and his black hair was short and straight, slicked to a matching point in the middle of his forehead. His closely set eyes were small and as black as his beard and hair. "Your permission, my lord, for my chancellor and counsel to join us."

"Of course," the count responded, sensing the gravity of the issue at hand.

Trapsta Scardo was unknown to Count Robert, having only recently appeared at the court of Bodenolph von Vulpes. He had heard of a man of the same name widely known in the Low Countries to have been a sorcerer and wizard and he wondered if this could be the same man. As Scardo bowed courteously, the count's eye was caught by the sight of several small pock-like scars on the man's cheek. Neither spoke.

"Now, this business with my steward," Robert began, but Vulpes presumptively interrupted. "There are more pressing matters, my lord."

"And they are?" Robert replied.

"Matters concerning our present king and emperor, matters of which I am sure you are aware."

"Enlighten me, Vulpes," Robert replied tersely.

"You know of the heresies currently rampant in the east, especially in Prague and elsewhere, of these so-called teachers and reformers, inspired by Wycliffe and others. This intolerable affront to our Lord Jesus Christ and his sacred Church cannot be tolerated, yet this is precisely what our drunkard king does daily."

"Let me caution you, Vulpes, it is treason to speak of our sovereign king and emperor in this way."

"This drunken dog will soon be emperor no more, for I come to inform you that his Excellency and Elector, Oskar Vriunt, Archbishop of Mainz, will call the electors together to depose and replace him with an honorable and competent defender of the faith."

The effort to depose the emperor had been an ongoing objective of papal high politics for several years. To do so required unanimous approval of the electors, of which there were seven. Three were princes of the Church, the archbishops of Trier, Cologne and Mainz and were certain to vote in the affirmative. The maligned emperor, who was also an elector, was disqualified, leaving three lay votes. Of the three, at least two were ambitious and themselves campaigning to succeed to that august throne. Only Robert was likely to vote no, especially since the emperor was Ava's cousin.

"And what do you want from me, Vulpes?"

"The archbishop requests to know how you will vote and if you will stand against God and Church."

The strange presence of Scardo, whose shadowy demeanor and aspect, as well as the seeming alliance between Vulpes and the archbishop, puzzled and worried Robert, who, as was his custom, immediately resumed the offensive. "And what's in this for you, Vulpes?"

"Nothing, sire, beyond the glory of God and the good of the German nation."

"Tell the archbishop I have nothing to say."

"That's not acceptable, my lord."

The hint of insubordination was unmistakable, but before Robert could respond, Vulpes added menacingly, "the archbishop

informs you that he is aware of the present... shall we say... difficulties you are experiencing here at Heidelberg, particularly concerning your daughter, and that he is prepared to seek your disqualification as elector due to demonic influence over your judgment.”

Count Robert was furious, but composed. “So you say if I don’t vote your way I am in league with the devil?”

“It would seem so, sire.”

“Summon the sergeant at arms, Lord Vulpes is leaving.”

Chapter Four

THEIR JOURNEY SOUTH led them across the Scol and over a gently descending terrain that saw the conifer stands slowly give way to broadleaf deciduous hardwoods, dominated by occasional majestic specimens of oak, beech and walnut. As they crossed the valley floor, it was clear that this was a wholly different world, a world far more shaped and molded by man. The vast majority of trees were third and fourth growth stands off coppiced trunks that told the story of the valley for the past two centuries or more. This hardwood was managed by the forester in a totally different way and so as to take advantage of the ability of deciduous trees to spring new growth from old stumps. Because of this, the practice was to cut off the trees about three feet up from the ground, to allow new growth to sprout off the old wood. The entire forest was treated as a constantly renewing resource, producing steady income for the manor lord, as well as for Sir Robert, while sustaining the peasant villages of the valley. Hardwood was the mainstay for fuel and provided building material for furniture and tools. Large timbers were not necessary for this and coppicing the trees was an ancient woodland management method.

Sir Shilgen commented on all of this to his young charge and the boy was well accustomed to enduring a droning lecture during the long and tedious ride. When Shilgen finally paused in his discourse on the changing forest scene, the boy asked, “why are some of the trees left uncut?”

There were indeed many huge first growth specimens towering above the rest and Shilgen was not sure of the answer. "Can you answer the boy?" he said to Heinrich Zumwald, who had agreed to guide them to his village and was walking beside the horses.

"It's for the pigs, sir," he answered.

"Indeed, yes. It's for the pigs my boy," Shilgen repeated, poking Zumwald with his foot so as to encourage him to continue.

"It's for the pigs," he said again, "to feed the pigs. The acorns and beech nuts make fodder for the pigs." There were indeed many free ranging domestic pigs, raised for meat and fat. Hunger would drive these animals to rooting and destruction without the abundance of acorns and beech mast that fell from mature trees. To support the pig population and protect the crops, many old trees were left untouched.

"It's a dilemma, sire; hungry pigs will tear up the ground so bad you hardly have to plow. They will eat anything if we don't eat them first."

Shilgen also noticed many stately sweet cherry trees just coming into blossom and asked in jest, "do the pigs eat cherry pie as well?"

"Aye, sire, they do indeed, when they can get it, as do we all; but, I'm afraid there are very few cherries left for pies. His lordship demands the fruit; and that he sells to the Abby at Kreuzfeld, to be made into wine and brandy. We pick and gather it all, but enjoy precious little I'm afraid."

"Now, I heard that some of the best cherry snaps was to be found in the peasant villages of this valley," Shilgen bantered. "Where could that brandy come from without cherries?"

"Well, sir, I don't mean to say that we don't have our ways of acquiring at least a few cherries, and, I might add, it does yield a rather pleasant spirit. Not like the fancy stillied kirsch that the monks make mind you. We don't have copper kettles and such. But we have our ways."

The hours passed unnoticed, masked by this kind of small talk between the noble and the commoner. The boy said little, but listened intently, this being the first time he had encountered country peasants and this was far more interesting than what he was used to.

His impressions seemed to belie his preconceptions. He marveled at how organized and industrious the people seemed, and even noble in the way they bent their backs to menial tasks. He wondered if he could endure being a peasant and what it would take to live a lifetime in a rural village, working from dawn to dark on the land. The life he saw ahead was one of adventure as a mounted knight; fighting would be his primary skill. He had learned to ride, joust and hunt, and his father had promised him a falcon when he returned from this his first mission away from home. What kind of a life could it be, he wondered, to just work, with little hope for excitement and fun?

"Tell me something about the village of Fichtestamm and the people there," he heard Shilgen say, and he began again to listen.

"Fichtestamm lies in the dominion of its manor lord, Sir Matthias Rotbart, who is himself a landed vassal of Count Robert, our sovereign lord. Sir Rotbart counts three villages such as ours, as well as the Abby at Kreuzfeld, in his domain. His castle is small, but stout, and overlooks the valley from the promontory of Krachfels to the east. Fichtestamm has no walls, although the distance and difficult climb make retreat to the castle in time of invasion all but impossible."

"What would you do then?"

"Well, we could get there, with ample warning, but otherwise we would abandon the village and retreat into the piney wood with the animals."

"Does Rotbart hold the piney wood in fief as well?"

"No, that is managed directly by Sir Albert. Our service is required every spring for the cutting, as you saw us, under contracts between our manor lord and his own liege lord, Sir Robert."

"And you, Heinrich Zumwald, what is your position in the village?"

"I work my own land sire. I am the Woodward of the village as well and I supervise the woodcutting owed our manor lord by the villagers. I select the work details and am responsible to his lordship for timely completion of the work. For this I am paid with a manumission of my obligations. I pay no tax, nor do I owe fees on the use of mill and press."

"Are you paid no cash money then?"

"In the village we have no need for money sire. But, I do earn a bit from the river trade."

It was true. The whole feudal world seemed to run on good faith and barter in kind. But this was a dying world. Commerce along the rivers was blossoming and with it came the birth of an economy fueled by liquid wealth in the form of cash money and credit. Big towns were beginning to arise and assert a kind of independence, unheard of only a generation or two earlier, and the riches they created were tipping the balance of power all over Europe. Sir Robert could sense this from his palace at Heidelberg, as he found himself ever more dependent on the timber trade and the merchants and bankers in Mainz and further down the Rhine at Cologne. But these towns, organized as they were into a multinational Hanseatic League, plying a world trade, paid less and less attention to the interests of the landed lords under whose charters they claimed sovereignty. The farmer, Zumwald, saw this too and in fact better than his noble companion. Tenured peasants all along the Rhine were benefiting from a general rise in the price of food and found ready markets for their surplus in the growing urban areas. And, as their manor lords raised rents and dues to offset the general inflationary rise in prices, these peasants, who were the bulk of the population, and the backbone of the agricultural labor force, increasingly resented traditional authority and allowed their allegiance to insidiously shift away from the local landlord.

"The village presently counts one hundred and twenty-three souls in its register, a drastic drop from the nearly three hundred that lived here before the pest."

"You were ravaged by it then?"

"Indeed, sire. The scourge of Satan it was, every year it came, swept away whole families it did."

Shilgen said nothing. Fear of the Plague ran deep. It was a relentless unstoppable killer that took noble and commoner alike. Almost everyone struck by it died. Once infected, there was no hope. Only God could condone such a horror and only Satan would carry it out.

"So you've seen it then, Zumwald?" Shilgen finally asked.

"Yes, sire, and it's not a pretty picture I can tell you. They bleed, sire; they bleed everywhere, like Our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross; it's a sign, I tell you, of God's wrath. Then the devil's mark appears as black boils covering the body. Nothing can be done until the agony is carried through. And the torment visits us again they say, just over the mountains to the south. It's the Jews I tell you, the Jews who come in the night to poison our wells. Drink from the river and watch carefully for the Jews. That's my advice."

"What about the doctors, didn't you have doctors?"

"Oh yes, there were doctors at the manor and at the abbey. The pest breeds doctors; before long we had a dozen, like ducks, quacking every kind of cure, but there was no use. The curse was on us."

"What did you do then? You were spared."

"We shut ourselves up in the cottage and dared not even breathe when the carts carried bodies by our door. Others did the same. Today I would be bound to carry those bodies, but I was only a boy then."

Ludwig was too young to remember the plague years but the fear that lingered from it was everywhere and had worked a strong hold on his mind, especially the mistrust of Jews. He really didn't know much about Jews except that they were evil because they crucified the Lord Jesus Christ and that many were burned for this in the Rhineland, and for other atrocities. This was all very confusing for Ludwig because he also knew that Jesus was himself a Jew and that his father depended upon a Jew to handle his business in Mainz and elsewhere. He knew he was frightened of Jews, as a small child having been told by his mother that Jews killed Christian children to get their blood, which was baked into their bread in some secret rite, and so to run from any strangers, since the stranger might be a Jew. But he was not a child now and was not afraid any more; he would kill a Jew if he could.

They entered the village of Fichtestamm at dusk and both strangers noticed the wolf's skull, warning the werewolves to stay away, displayed on a post at the edge of the village. They went immediately to the peasant's cottage where his family and animals were

already gathered inside for the night. Zumwald was a prosperous tenured peasant who held title to his small piece of land by both long time tradition and legal contract with the manor lord. He had inherited it from his father and expected to bequeath it to his eldest son. His house was among the largest in the village, but otherwise quite typical. It consisted of a single story narrow space nearly one hundred feet long, but only about twelve feet wide. The walls were of a kind of grass woven between upright rods that filled the expanse between a series of A-frame timbers, so as to create a line of bays. This grass was plastered with a dense mixture of clay and hardened manure, leaving a solid wall. There were two heavily shuttered windows. The roof was of thatch.

As they entered, the smoke, which hung heavy in the air, made it almost impossible to breathe freely. Both Shilgen and his squire struggled to adjust to the damp, unfamiliar smell. An open fire in the center of the long room, poorly vented through a hole in the roof, divided the living space of people from that of the animals. And all of Zumwald's animals, two cows, two pregnant sows and several chickens, were safely inside for the night. Ludwig watched the smoke from the fire as it flooded around the big iron pot that no doubt held the day's supper and rose slowly into the roughly vaulted ceiling. Hanging from the crudely hewn collar ties that stiffened the frame of the house were several hams and some other meats, being bathed in the steady stream of acrid smoke. Perhaps there is a big juicy ham floating in that pot Shilgen thought, the sting of the smoke irritating his watering eyes.

Zumwald closed the heavy door and lowered the timber that barred it. "These gentlemen are our guests for the night," he said to no one in particular, and then turned to point out his wife to the knight and his squire. "That is my wife Maria." There were two small children as well, but they were not mentioned. The woman went on with her work and said nothing. Shilgen wondered why she had no questions for her husband, since he suddenly appeared unexpectedly, and why he didn't tell her the reason they had come or what their purpose was.

"We'll eat some meat and cheese tonight, Maria," he said, ushering his guests to the point furthest from the animals, where the family's sleeping quarters were. No wall divided it, but the floor was raised by a wooden pallet. The rest of the floor was packed clay and

covered with straw. "Get clean straw, Maria," he went on without looking at her. "I can offer you gentlemen my bed for the night, my wife and I will sleep below, near the fire, with the children."

"That is most kind of you, Zumwald. We are much honored," Shilgen said, nodding his head briefly.

The meal was a thick pottage, primarily of peas, as they suspected, and several other boiled vegetables with black rye bread and some generous pieces of ham. They drank a cloudy home brewed beer that was unusually sweet, not having been spiked with hops as had lately become the custom. Shilgen, who was ravenously hungry, enjoyed the meal more than he thought he would and Ludwig, too, ate heartily. "Get the brandy Maria," Zumwald said to his wife, pushing the wooden bowls to the center of the heavy plank table to make room for the earthenware crock. "I'm afraid we have no fine drinking glass here, only these clay cups, but I'm sure you'll find the kirsch in them quite to your liking."

"So this is the cherry brandy you told me about, Zumwald," Shilgen responded as the peasant poured three cups, full to the brim.

"Yes sir, it is."

"To your health then," Shilgen toasted and raised his cup. The knight filled his mouth with the potent spirit to wholly experience its nature. Ludwig sipped cautiously, only allowing the tiniest drop to pass his blocking tongue. It was very strong and laden with the bitter essence of cherries, far more so than any other cherry brandy the knight had ever tasted. "This is unusual snaps, Zumwald, very raw. I can almost taste the tree."

"Yes sir, it is more natural than you'll get from the monks, but it kicks as well, I'll assure you."

"Drink up my boy," Shilgen said refilling his cup. "You need to learn more about drinking. Now down that draught and have another."

Ludwig wasn't sure how to respond. The liquor was, for him, almost undrinkable, but he didn't want to appear childish. Down it went in a shudder, the first cup, and then the second. His eyes were already blurred as he watched Shilgen pouring a third.

Shilgen knew that a monopoly on brandy had been given by Count Robert, in fief, to the Abby at Kreuzfeld and that owning a still

was prohibited by law. "Tell me truthfully now, Zumwald, how do you make this without a still?" he asked with a wink.

"Well, sir, as you know, we are not allowed to own a still and are forced to buy brandy from the monks at their prices, which means we would have none. So we have devised another way. The wine's alcohol is concentrated in winter by freezing out the water. I lay out the cherry wine in large shallow trays and set them out on the coldest nights. We all do this. The next morning I pick out the ice crystals that have formed. In this way the water is removed leaving behind the alcohol that doesn't freeze."

"That's not all that's left behind," the knight quipped.

"True, it does concentrate the flavors a bit as well. Another draught, my lord?"

"Well, perhaps a mouthful more, Zumwald," Shilgen said laughing and leaning back on his stool so far that Ludwig feared he would fall on his head. The evening went on in this way, the two men with starkly uncommon backgrounds and outlooks somehow finding fellowship through the hospitality of the peasant's simple table, until a scratching sound in the animal bay caught Zumwald's attention.

"**T**hat sow is about to bear young; she's rooting around in the corner trying to make a nest behind the cows," Zumwald cautioned, pushing aggressively away from the table. "Maria wake up, there's a sow ready, push her into the pen." As was their habit, sows about to deliver seek out a cool secluded spot usually in the furthest corner of the stall. The farmer prefers to have the sow nearer the fire, where sufficient warmth for the piglets will ensure better survival. To accomplish this, Zumwald had constructed a small farrowing pen beside the fire and he wanted the litter to be born there. Zumwald's two sows would produce about 10 piglets a season and this provided the bulk of the family's meat. Only the productive sows were kept over the winter, when they had to be fed. All the other pigs had been slaughtered and were hanging in the rafters being smoked. Even the boar, who had serviced the two pregnant sows, was slaughtered as soon as the pregnancy was certain.

"Is this the normal time for sows to farrow?" Shilgen asked struggling to counteract the effects of the brandy.

"Yes, my lord; it is the preferred time. They are mated at the start of the year and will deliver the litter after three months, three weeks and three days, making that now sir, as you can plainly see. We could get a second litter in late summer, but those pigs would have to be fed over the winter and we couldn't manage that."

Maria and her husband carefully coaxed and pushed the sow into the farrowing pen only seconds before the first piglet was born. Ludwig said nothing, but took great interest in this and the next four tiny births, never having experienced anything of the sort before. "Little piglets like the warmth of the fire, but the mother pig wants to cool down, so we need to keep her in the pen, and after, for suckling as well," Zumwald instructed, sensing a kind of innocent fascination in the boy.

"So the other sow is about ready too?" Shilgen asked.

"I hope so, the time is good. She will drive them out in a few weeks when her milk is gone. At the end of the winter we have nothing left to feed them, so if they are born too soon, before spring sprouts enough forage, they will die."

Ludwig listened without speaking, beginning to realize how close everyone in this precarious world was to the edge of starvation.

Chapter Five

“NO POINT IN SLEEPING NOW,” Zumwald grunted, as he sensed the sun peeking over the horizon, although little of it entered the tightly shuttered lodge. There was always work to be done and during April, when his labor was demanded by the manor lord, much of it fell on his wife and small children. Plowing and the spring planting of barley, oats and peas had already been done. This was a communal operation with heavy plows and eight animal teams of oxen that turned the earth into deep ridged furrows. Zumwald had no oxen, but other tenured peasants in the village did. The plow was commonly owned and shared. But the big ground breaker itself was difficult to turn, so the fields were trenched in long meandering rows. Each family owned the produce from different rows, at different places in the field, to ensure that no one person benefited from all the good land and another suffered all the poor. The village teamed its ox and man power to complete the work and then shared the harvest. This was true of life generally in the village, which was supportive and hospitable.

Winter wheat was already growing on the second field, while the third was fallow, planted in legumes, to be turned under, to replenish the fertility of the soil. It was during this lull, between spring planting and the haying season, which began in June, that the village was beholden to the manor lord for most of their labor service. Nearly all of the men and all of the oxen were along the Scol cutting and hauling

timber. Zumwald's serendipitous return offered him the opportunity to catch up on some of his own work.

"Wake up, Maria; I want to get at the stalls before the gentlemen arise. They've come for Heilewif and I promised to take them to her early today."

"They've come for Heilewif?" the woman repeated in a rising tone, betraying a sense of concern and puzzlement.

"Exactly why I'm still not entirely sure of, but they told of some trouble at the palace in Heidelberg and that Count Robert has sent for her."

"What kind of trouble could it be that such a lord would need an old woman?"

"Crowns don't help headaches, Maria," Zumwald quipped, reaching for the manure fork.

"Are you sure it's not a trick? She'll be burned alive you know if she is caught."

"It was Robert's father, remember, that saved her then and his son needs her now; that seemed hard to deny. But, the gentleman agreed that it should be her choice alone and if she should refuse to go, he gave me his word of honor he would respect that."

"And you are fool enough to believe him!" she said firmly.

"I drank with him last night and I sense him to be of his word."

"Don't trust blue skies or laughing men, Heinrich. He is not from here; you can't trust him."

"I don't trust him, Maria, but it's got to be her decision; now that's enough of this; there's work to do. Get the pail."

The peasants in Fichtestamm couldn't pasture their animals overnight because of the threat of wolves, so about half of the dung was dropped at home. Every morning it was shoveled out, mixed with marl, and piled outside the walls of the cottage. There it began to decay, causing some heat that helped warm the house during the winter. The mixture was then turned under in the vegetable garden that each peasant planted adjacent to his house. This planting was beginning in April and would be the bulk of the work for May. Onion

sets were already in, but the sensitive plants would have to wait until after the last frost.

Zumwald also had another use for the dung and its ability to generate heat. He had been granted, by the manor lord, the right to keep five beehives. The Abby had a cherry orchard and kept bees for fertilization, honey, and wax for candles. Ordinarily, private hives would be forbidden to villagers and the monks would object to his, but, since the Abby's primary concern was for the wax with which to make church candles, which they supplied to the entire region, the honey production was secondary to them and more than ample to satisfy the local demand, with much left to make mead. So, Zumwald received permission to keep bees, provided he shipped his produce out of the local area. This was a particularly important boon to him since from it he was able to produce a sizable quantity of honey, which he packed in earthenware jugs and sold in autumn to traffickers, who plied a trade between the villages and the river town of Flusseck on the Rhine. Over the winter Maria made many beeswax candles that were also in great demand by the wealthier sort in the Rhineland. The dung was critical to keep the hives from freezing solid in the coldest part of the winter and killing all the bees. His practice was to pile manure beneath and beside each of his five hives. Four were in the village and one was at the edge of the forest behind the small cottage of his grandmother.

Zumwald and his wife swept out the cow stalls and Maria took one cow to milking at the other side of the space. The second cow was close to calving and was dry. She was given a ration of grain. This was an extravagance for so late in the winter when it was the practice to conserve as much as possible, to avoid the hunger that yearly hit the village just before harvest in late summer. But, Zumwald was a prudent farmer and knew that the unborn calf needed to be fed. Most of the peasants liked to calve their cows in the spring to maximize the growing season before the following winter, but this meant that most of the animals were coming to market at the same time, thus depressing prices. Zumwald did not try to breed his cows continuously preferring to stagger the dates so that he always had one cow milking. Maria made cheese with most of the milk, which varied his family's diet and provided another modest source of income.

As Zumwald dropped the last of the manure behind the house and was about to gather a bit of good hay for his guest's horses, he listened quietly through the wall to Shilgen and his squire talking.

"Make haste, Ludwig, the sun is already up and I want to find the woman today."

"Who is this woman, Sir Shilgen; do you remember her?" Ludwig asked, as he shook his head violently, like a dog, to knock out the straw.

"She's no doubt a witch with some spells or curses. She was accused you know, but I was only a boy then and I don't remember any of it directly. From what I have been told it was the archbishop who ordered her arrest and ruled that her accuser could remain secret. Then she disappeared and was never brought to trial. She remains a fugitive in the Archdiocese of Mainz and surely will be arrested if she is found out."

"What will we do then; how will we get her back safely?"

"We'll have to fashion some story or a disguise, but that can wait, right now we need to find her."

"And what if she refuses to come?"

"She won't; it's true when they say there's no chicken more costly than the gift chicken." Shilgen liked to leave the boy with a puzzling proverb and then quiz him later on what he meant by it and Ludwig immediately began to scratch his brain trying to be ready. Zumwald understood his meaning and smiled.

They took the horses to Heilewif's small cottage, which was nearly a mile away, in the direction of the manor house. Zumwald rode the pack horse and, having had little riding experience, was hard pressed to stay on the animal through the uneven terrain beyond the meadows.

"Relax your legs man; you're swaying like a willow in the wind," Shilgen warned as they walked the horses through some thickets. "Just follow the horse's head with your hands and let him do the rest." Ludwig having been born to the saddle saw some humor in watching this grown man struggle to master a walking horse. Owning a riding horse was well beyond the reach of peasant farmers and although some horses were used for plowing there were none in Fichtestamm. Walking beside oxen was not much training and the man was nervous. Zumwald's tense and erratic leg grip confused the animal and suddenly coaxed it into a

trot. The helpless yeoman found himself bouncing along utterly out of control until Shilgen caught them, reached for his reins and brought the horse to a halt.

The peasant nervously slid down off the horse saying, "it's best I walk, sire."

"Get back up, Zumwald; I'll just lead him. He's good that way; he's used mostly as a pack horse. You'll be fine, get back up."

"I'd best not, if you can't lift the stone alone its best to let it lie," the peasant answered, leaving Ludwig to wonder if he had heard Zumwald's or his master's voice.

Leading their horses across the common meadow and entering the forest on foot, the three travelers hardly spoke again until the cottage was in sight. The single room lodge was nestled in a small glade at the edge of an extensive marsh that was counted as manor wasteland and open to free use. Heilewif lived there alone and was supported by her grandson and some others in the village in return for her services as midwife and physician. She kept a vegetable and herb garden, as well as one of her grandson's beehives from which she harvested honey for use in various salves and ointments used to treat the rashes and other skin afflictions that were so common in that age. She was small, almost frail in physical appearance, but strong and robust in will and temperament. She stayed surrounded by the forest and the suspicions of all those who delight in living everyone else's lives. But, confident in her thoughts and dreams, she was sure of what she had been taught and what had been passed down to her through the centuries. And among those ancient female wisdoms were a profound respect for nature and an abiding compassion for the weak and helpless creatures of creation. She had a consciousness of her responsibility to the earth and to a god that had been long banished to the forest and had no church; she felt its spiritual presence and listened to it.

She was also widely seen as a wise woman and one who possessed secret knowledge about the natural world, enough knowledge to make her suspect in the eyes of many; many even in Fichtestamm thought she was a witch, but most didn't care and many came to her, forsaken and frightened when the holy water made no difference. The

natural world was the devil's domain and anyone who knew so much about it must be in league with the little green man, or so it was commonly believed. Outwardly they cared, inwardly, if she could help, it mattered little how.

And Heilewif, herself often thought that Satan, so feared for his cunning and artful ruses, sometimes worked in unsuspected ways. Perhaps it was not by schemes and lies but by science and truth he sprang, for it was the terror of the unknown that shackled men to a church that taught that happiness cannot be had in this world of the flesh and only through suffering can one reach salvation. She had suffered; she had long suffered, and in her solitude began to finally see the joy of life, this life. She wondered if indeed she was a witch, unknowingly doing the devil's deeds, and if she were, what of it, for the priest was the messenger of death beckoning all to hurry and quietly die, and if Satan were the prince of life, saying live now and be happy, so be it.

"Grandmother, I have brought two gentlemen to see you. They are Sir Shilgen Sturmere and his squire Ludwig von Wittelsbach."

"Wittelsbach?" the old woman repeated in a scratchy voice, "the boy is a Wittelsbach?"

"Yes, grandmother and they have traveled many miles to speak with you."

"Please come in, my lords," she said, nodding briefly and backing into the dark interior space. A small fire was burning and the strange smell of some liquid reducing in a pot over the open flame filled the room. Everywhere Shilgen could see containers filled with every sort of dried and crushed flower and herb. There were baskets of barks and roots as well as vessels filled with unidentifiable fluids. "What might I do for you gentlemen?"

"I have come from your liege lord, Count Robert of Wittelsbach, to beg your assistance in a matter of the highest urgency," Shilgen began in his most ambassadorial manner.

"Little Rob is now Count Palatine of the Rhine," she mused and turning to Ludwig, said, "and you my boy are his son without question, the resemblance is indeed striking. But, please sit and tell me what need you have of me."

Both strangers noticed a cultured and literate tone to her utterances and recognized right away that this woman was not of that place. "The palace is afflicted with a strange curse, madam. People fall into a trancelike stupor, without warning, and linger that way for many days. It only seems to attack members of the household and in particular the lady, Aurianna, Count Robert's daughter."

"And what am I to do?"

"Count Robert believes that you may be able to solve the mystery and overcome the curse."

"Has there been talk of witchcraft?"

"Yes, but none have been found. Priests and physicians have so far all failed and the House of Wittelsbach has fallen into dire straights."

"It's not surprising. Priests and courtly physicians preach for their own glory and not for the benefit of others," the old woman said solemnly.

"Will you willingly return with us, madam?"

"I must," she answered softly and with conviction, "but, I need to first finish my work here in the village. There is to be a wedding, foolishly set during the waning moon. This was a most grievous error in judgment that puts the unhappy pair at great risk. I promised to protect them if I could."

It was widely believed that witches could place a spell on newlyweds, rendering them impotent and unable to procreate. This was a favorite satanic scheme, since God seemed to allow this kind of devilish undertaking more readily than any other. Satan was determined to prevent, by any possible means, the multiplication of faithful souls that would add to the glory of God. Stopping pregnancies and killing babies was an integral part of the archfiend's strategy. To do this, he employed witches, particularly midwives. Now, since midwives were also needed to guard against the evil one and his devious design, the people were bewildered. Which of the midwives were the witches? This kind of trap, suspended between a God that seemed to allow evil and a devil who seemed to run rampant at times, and with God's blessing, presented a perplexing dilemma to the people who often didn't care who protected them.

"And what is it you must do, good woman, and can we assist?" Shilgen asked seeking to quicken their departure.

"The witch's curse strikes the male organ, rendering it invisible and unable to consummate the act. On the night before the wedding ceremony, at midnight, the groom must tap a new barrel of wine on the steps of the church and allow the first wine to pour through the wedding rings. This will stop the curse."

"And when will this be done?" Shilgen asked.

"In three nights, and until then I cannot leave."

"Well then we have ample time to make our plans and pack your things for the trip."

Shilgen knew it would be a long and arduous overland journey for an old woman; he also knew that she couldn't ride a horse and that a cart would be impossible over so much rough ground. She would need a sling or a sledge. For the next two days Shilgen and Ludwig camped outside the old woman's door and set about building and packing the sledge for the trip. Their plan was to reach Flusseck at the confluence of the Scol and the Rhine before the departure of the big log raft being constructed there to carry Count Robert's timber to Mainz. They planned to meet the forester there and secure from him a passage on the raft to the mouth of the Neckar, where a road would connect them to Heidelberg and a carriage was to be waiting, with several of Count Robert's retainers. What Shilgen didn't anticipate was the extent of Heilewif's baggage, which included dozens of pots, utensils and strange tools, as well as over one hundred bottles, jars and pouches, filled with every sort of wort and bane, some dried and ground, some dissolved and distilled, everything neatly stored and labeled.

Ludwig was most curious about the powders and potions about which he knew nothing. His streaming questions to his master were repeatedly rebuffed or deflected with comments about it all being evil work or witch's brews. Particularly intriguing was a small sheep's skin bag tied tight at the top that obviously contained some particularly important items. The boy was determined to get a look inside the bag. He was startled and scared when the old woman said, "so you want to

know what's inside, don't you boy?" He wondered how she knew and thought surely she must be a witch; but his interest was very obvious.

"Open it and look, but remember, the man that chops over his head gets wood chips in his eyes," she said and laughed a barely audible cackle.

Ludwig was afraid to look in the bag, but didn't want to be taken for a coward. He faced a predicament for which there seemed no escape until Shilgen interrupted. "Leave the bag alone, boy; it's full of poisons too dangerous to touch."

"Poisons are they," Heilewif responded.

"Christmas Rose, Pheasant's Eye, Cowbane, yes poisons all. I know the names. What would you call them?"

"I would call them medicines, sir."

"Medicines are good, these are evil concoctions from which no good can come."

"Evil can only come from good. Everything bad is born of good, the world is filled with angelic devils and virgin whores," the old woman said, in a whispered tone that startled even the intrepid knight.

Chapter Six

A VA VON WITTELSBACH WAS A LUXEMBOURG, the daughter of the sister of Charles IV, King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor and the cousin of his eldest son, William, the present embattled king and emperor. She was a woman of grace and style, characteristics which she passed on to her own daughter, Aurianna, where they blended with a new modernity and a yearning for freedom. The impatience and impetuosity of youth was well tempered in Aurianna by a keen mind and a cautious respect for tradition, yet she was determined to decide for herself the important matters of her own life, choices which had been denied to her mother.

“Your father has resolved to send you to the convent at Mulhausen.”

“To a convent, but why mother?” she reacted with more than a small hint of horror.

“For your safety child; he thinks it best to remove you from these surroundings.”

“But I have lately been freed from this affliction and if it is a demon that attacks me it will only follow. He has said so himself. No mother, I will not go.”

“You must obey your father Aurianna if he so decides; he loves you and seeks only to shelter you.”

“My happiness, mother, is to be here and to fight; he will not force me to go.”

"Fighting is not in the nature of women. We do not possess great physical strength or a combative nature; we are not naturally brave creatures, Aurianna."

"Courage is measured by capability mother. How much more courage does a weak woman need when facing danger than a mighty man. No, I will not go."

Ava saw so much of her own youth in her daughter and was fiercely proud of her mettle, yet she knew it would only carry as far as her father allowed it to. Without allies she would have little hope, allies she herself once longed for but could never find. "I will speak to him. The convent would be a mistake."

Aurianna was much relieved and ran to her mother; the two, locked in a tight embrace, laughed and cried. Aurianna was the oldest child and the only daughter; the bond between them was strong and their relationship was trusting. "Mother, why are parents so upset when they have daughters? Are not daughters as loved as sons?"

"Yes, Anna, of course they are. They value boys more because boys carry the family name and enter the world to seek their fortune. Fame comes to them while women are left to toil in anonymity."

"But isn't that a foolish endeavor for a parent, to raise sons to leave home, only to be left alone and uncared for in the end. How many of these sons protect their parents in old age or even visit them when they are ill and in need? Which then is of more worth?"

"But it's not a contest my child. God fashioned men and women to be complimentary; they have different natures."

"Emotionally and physically perhaps, but certainly not intellectually, for it is plain to see that women are undoubtedly as intelligent as men."

"Quite so, Anna."

"Why then don't women know as much as men?"

"They do not need to know as much."

"Or they are forbidden from knowing, or not allowed to learn, it seems to me."

"Perhaps, and if so this is the fault of the mothers, a mistake you must not make. Mothers want their daughters to be safe and happy. Tradition and family are the bulwarks of feminine security and a barrier

most difficult to surmount. Women know their role and fear risking it. And when women exceed men in certain skills and knowledges, this frightens them and so they call the women witches and seek to destroy them. This is particularly true of church men, who cannot suffer wise women."

"And they malign us mother; they all do it, men of learning, and men of the church, scholars and authorities all. Why do they do this mother, so many honored and erudite doctors of science and theology spew forth such malice against women? Are we evil?"

"Trust your own instincts, Aurianna. Examine your own heart and you will know the truth. Do not listen to the voice of false authority. Men are terrified of women because they are deeply attracted to them. God has made love a cornerstone of his divine plan and men, for all their bravado, cannot resist it. This being so, men fall easy prey to evil women, women who in league with Satan are pledged to lead honest men astray. This is the weak link in the chain mail of men and the devil knows it. Men feel the power God has given women over them and they work tirelessly to overcome it. This is especially true of old men and impotent empty men."

"Do you feel the power of love mother?"

"Yes dear, and I am sure you will as well."

"Why then are so many women unfaithful to their husbands?"

"Love inspires powerful urges, Aurianna, and they can severely test any marriage."

"And if I were to fall in love mother what would I do when my marriage will be negotiated and contracted like the transfer of milk cows?"

"I never saw your father until months after our wedding and yet I now love him and have never been unfaithful. God provides for us, Aurianna."

"God fashioned woman from Adam's rib mother, not from his toe."

"It was no different for your father, Aurianna. Men are not clots of clay. We had our duty, as do you."

"But then is it wrong for me to love someone else? As you said, God instills us with irresistible urges. Why then should I be faithful to one when God himself drives me to another?"

Ava was not sure if this was merely adolescent parental badgering or if it were more. "There is a danger, Aurianna, especially acute for beautiful young women such as you. You must be ever vigilant, for many men will seek to seduce you; and many men falsely believe that women want to be raped and that their protests are just mock modesty."

"Don't worry mother, I have not found him yet."

At that moment they were interrupted by a soft knock and a message that the learned medical faculty from the University of Heidelberg had arrived and was prepared to conduct their examination.

"You must, Aurianna, and with dignity."

Ava knew that her daughter's protests were blustering fumes from feelings of inequality. She knew it quite well and the need to vent it.

Count Robert worried ceaselessly about the condition of his daughter, and although her recent recovery raised his spirits, the thought of a recurrence would not leave his mind. He was determined to bring to bear every resource at his command. It was as though his castle were under siege and he were at war with an invisible enemy. His intensity intimidated his elderly court physician, who was unable to cope and had consistently deferred to the priest in his insistence that only an exorcism could save the girl. He welcomed the delegation of learned doctors from the university.

Fourteen men, the entire faculty in medicine, walked into the great hall where Robert was waiting. The doctors were led by the much renowned Hugobert Duis, a big balding man in his middle years. Duis was dean of the medical faculty and his authority was clearly evident by his deportment as well as by the obvious deference paid to him by his colleagues. Robert saw it too and welcomed the feeling of confidence that came from the expectation of competence; and he did demand competence from these men. They were, after all, his faculty, from his university. He had endowed it, at great personal expense, to rival the great medical minds at the University of Paris. Now we would see.

The sergeant at arms announced the audience. "Learned doctors, your liege lord, Robert of Wittelsbach, Count Palatine of the Rhine, Arch-Steward and Esteemed Elector of the Holy Roman Empire."

Everyone bowed politely and Robert, who was seated at the high table flanked by his steward and chancellor, spoke. "Lettered and erudite doctors, you have been informed of the strange illness that has befallen our own daughter. Tell me how you wish to proceed."

The big man spoke. "I am Hugobert Duis, dean of the medical faculty; and if it pleases my lord I will speak for the delegation."

Robert nodded his assent and Duis continued. "Doctor Asinus has given us a description, in great detail, concerning the condition of the unfortunate young woman. However, there is little we can conclude without examining her ourselves. Medicine is a science my lord. Our interventions, remedies and antidotes must be precisely applied."

Robert's failure to respond drew the doctor on. "There are four fluids within the body my lord and these fluids must be in parity to maintain good health. When an imbalance occurs it is the result of a profusion of one or more of these humors. The four are blood, black bile, yellow bile and phlegm. Each of these is mined from food in the stomach and intestines. Illness results from disproportion."

"And how do these disproportions occur?" Robert asked.

"There are many factors that can contribute to an imbalance, not the least of which is mental stress caused by certain immoral acts or the natural result of gluttony or intemperate behavior of any sort. I will not inquire about this further except to say that you must take it into account as a recurrence of the affliction will be rendered inevitable if it is not corrected."

"You wish to see her then?"

"Yes, my lord."

The entire entourage, led by the count, then filed silently up the main staircase to the sleeping chambers. Aurianna was dressed in a loose linen chemise. She was asked to remove it and to lie down. The doctors circled the bed studying every detail of her outward aspect, feeling her forehead and the palms of her hands, looking into her mouth and under her tongue, studying her eyes, listening to her breath, all

while exchanging knowing nods punctuated by hmm's and aah's. Round and round the bed they crawled like a slow carousel. Robert left the doctors to their examination and deliberation. Ava and the chambermaids remained. Aurianna endured with dignity as her mother had demanded.

“Come with me,” Robert said to the priest as he left his daughter's side. Crapho had difficulty keeping up with the powerful strides of the much taller man as he swept through the corridor to a wall where a door led to a small balcony, which opened out over the courtyard. It was one of the few private places in the castle and he often went there when he needed solitude or secrecy. The priest was almost running when they reached the destination. “Adelbrech, tell me more about this exorcism you advocate.”

“I advocate it sire because our beloved Aurianna shows the signs of demonic possession, before which man's pitiful science trembles.”

“If she is possessed by an unclean spirit Crapho, why doesn't she speak, for it is taught that those possessed speak in strange tongues and delight in confounding us with words?”

“The demon is hiding, hoping we will not detect it, fearing Christ as the only power that can command and bind it and drive it back to hell from whence it came. These doctors will fail, only our Lord Jesus Christ can save her. Remember Matthew: “Then he summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits to drive them out and to cure every disease and every illness.”

“And would you do this exorcism?”

“No sire, exorcism is very dangerous and beyond my competence. There are, I am told, Dominican monks presently in the Rhineland in pursuit of witches. Perhaps they could be contacted in this matter.”

“And what of the bishop, what is his role in this affair?”

“His permission will be needed.”

“And his meddling as well I am sure.”

The booming voice of the sergeant at arms, from somewhere in the main hall, broke Robert's concentration. “Find his lordship at once, the doctors are ready.”

“**T**he unfortunate young woman is suffering from an excess of phlegm, this is clear from the text of her body and from reports of her appearance and demeanor when stricken. She is pale and cold and by your account when afflicted is in a pallid stupor. These anemic and ashen signs indicate an imbalance between phlegm and yellow bile. Phlegm is cold and wet, its opposite, yellow bile, is hot and dry. Our advice is to reduce the presence of phlegm and increase the quantity of yellow bile in her body.”

“And how do you propose to do this, doctor?”

“The dried root of the Black Hellebore will be used as a powder snuff that will cause a rapid running of the nose and reduce the phlegm. This will be accompanied by sweating the patient to drain phlegm and drinking red wine will augment the yellow bile. All of this will work to restore her humorous balance. As a further intervention we will apply leeches to the back and chest of the patient, and perhaps in the nose to bleed the lungs, which is the principle repository of the phlegm. In this way we will bring her back into good health.”

Robert gave his permission for the intervention to begin immediately. The Hellebore was a violent irritant that produced copious amounts of nasal discharge, which pleased the doctors, who smelled and tasted it and pointed out to the parents that this reduction of phlegm could only help their child. Although the accompanying sneezing and coughing did seem worrying, they said nothing. After this, the fire in the bed chamber was brought to a roar and Aurianna, wrapped in blankets, began her purgative sweating. Repeated goblets of red wine finally allowed her to fall sleep and the treatment was suspended, only to begin again several hours later.

“Bring the worms here,” Duis ordered and a large bowl containing several dozen leeches was carried to the bedside. “Are you familiar with this treatment child?” he asked.

“No, doctor.”

“We are going to reduce your blood because it contains a false mixture of humors. To do this we will place leeches on your body at appropriate places. Now, since we are after excess phlegm, which resides in the lungs, we will place the worms over your chest and back and one in each nostril. In this way the blood they suck will come

primarily from your lungs. You must lay still child and be patient; there will be no pain.”

And so the worms did their nasty work while the parents nervously paced and the clearly worried doctors converged in a circle.

Chapter Seven

THE SIMPLE SLEDGE was made from two long and slender saplings tied together to form a limber X-shaped frame. Between two of the spreading arms, several cross pieces were attached and a hammock of woven leather straps was suspended. The other V was hung on leather strapping tied to the saddle of Ludwig's horse. The carrier was dragged on the two trailing points. Traversing the thickly carpeted forest floor was impossible for wheeled carts, which quickly rutted themselves into immobility. The sledge was effective and remarkably durable in this endeavor, sliding softly and quietly over the bulky matting of pine needles. Sir Shilgen, mounted, led the procession, followed by his squire, walking with the sledge horse; the pack horse was tied behind. Heilewif sat half-reclining in the hammock, facing the rear. It was a configuration that precluded conversation and encouraged reflection.

Sir Shilgen had lately been having doubts about his life thus far and about his future. He was not accustomed to this, since certainty in his station and duty were fixed in him from childhood, from the moment he was selected. His father had been the castle marshall at Heidelberg, before Bulstrich, and even as a boy Shilgen was unexcelled at horsemanship and lance. But, to be chosen to train for the knighthood was a dream beyond normal expectation. He was the first in his family, a family that had served the Wittelsbachs for over a century, to be so honored, and his father died a very contented man. Shilgen remembered the look of pride on the old man's face and his last words

cautioning his son to be mindful of his duty. "Be ever faithful to God son and to your lord, Count Robert."

He was knighted at eighteen, the youngest in the realm, and quickly distinguished himself in both peace and war, becoming the count's most reliable retainer. He was never told this, but he knew it because he alone was trusted to protect the count's daughter and greatest treasure, the beautiful, Lady Aurianna. He had vowed to die if needs be in her defense and he stood ready to keep that pledge. She was then fourteen and from that moment on, he was always at her side. Such intimacy was in the end impossible to resist. Yet, he was honor bound to keep his word and never betray the confidence of his lord. These then were the conflicts that raged in his soul.

He watched her grow into a young woman of unparalleled grace and symmetry. He walked with her; talked with her, every day, at every hour; saw every glance, every smile. She was stunningly beautiful and incredibly quick witted. And now that they were apart he was obsessed with thoughts of her. For months, perhaps even years, he had fought the belief that he was in love with her, but now he knew he could no longer deny it; her image haunted his dreams and deprived him of sleep. Everything he did, everything he saw reminded him of her, he was becoming so captive to her hold on him that he hardly ate and had difficulty thinking of anything but her.

This cannot go on, he thought to himself; I must come to grips with it; I have my duty, my mission. He dropped back and for a time walked his horse beside the squire: "Ludwig tell me, do you remember the virtues of a true knight?"

"Yes sir." The boy was accustomed to the challenge of lessons at any moment and remembered the admonition to be ever able to cope in any circumstance. Alertness of the mind was more critical than was agility of the body, he was taught, and he prepared himself for the business ahead. What he did not realize was how important it had become to his mentor and that the knight was really talking about himself.

"What is the first virtue of a true knight then?" Shilgen asked.

"To be just."

"Yes, and what does that mean?"

"A true knight is merciful."

"Yes, and..."

"...And has... self-control."

"Yes, that is the key my boy, self-control, self-discipline... yes.

And the next?"

"A true knight is valorous, which means he is brave."

"And..."

"And he defends the weak..."

Sir Shilgen paused for a moment and added, "and most importantly he never abandons his noble cause. Remember that Ludwig, the true knight never falters in his duty. And what about honor, how does the knight exhibit honor?"

"He keeps his word and never betrays a friend or a confidence."

"And he is loyal; to whom is he loyal my boy?"

"He is loyal to God and to the holy mother Church."

"Yes and to," Shilgen answered himself, "...and to his overlord, don't forget that Ludwig, your responsibility to your lord."

For a few seconds there was silence and then a soft voice from behind them said, "and he is faithful to his beloved. Is that not also true noble knight?"

Shilgen was not prepared for this intrusion into his artfully contrived emotional bastion and said nothing, startled though he was that the old woman had been listening and seemed to be inside his mind as well. "Be assured gentle knight that moral integrity makes one worthy of true love," she added. Once again Shilgen said nothing, while urging his horse to a trot and separating from the others.

Several hours passed in silence, until nightfall forced them to make camp. They were less than a half-day's journey from the village of Flusseck, where they hoped to meet Sir Albert and secure passage down stream on the massive log raft being constructed there. They had thus far encountered no other travelers and the weather had been fair. But now a dark cloud threatened to the south and a cool wind was rising and rustling through the stately pines. It would likely rain before morning and Shilgen decided to fashion a lean-to shelter from the sledge, propped sideways on short stakes and covered with a thick layer

of green branches. The soft pine floor was swept smooth and the three were remarkably comfortable and warm under fur covers and behind a glowing fire.

"Tell us something about yourself, Heilewif. Who were your parents and where do you come from?" Ludwig asked.

"My story began many years ago, seventy-five years ago, in the manor house at Agathe where I was born. My mother served, and her mother did before her, as nurse and midwife there. It was from them that I learned my craft. I soon found myself in the employ of your grandfather, the count, at Heidelberg, and served there for over twenty years."

"Why were you never spoken of then and why haven't I ever heard your name?" the boy asked.

"My presence was never hidden, but my purpose was quietly concealed for safety sake, my own and through me that of the family itself."

"But I don't understand," Ludwig protested.

"She's a witch," Shilgen interrupted, "kept handy to cast spells and concoct magic potions and such."

Heilewif ignored his comment and continued. "Suspicion and intolerance are powerful enemies of truth Ludwig. Fear drives them, but truth cannot be fully quieted by bigotry. This is why we survived the hatred of the powers that be and the certainty of their sententious pronouncements, swollen though they were with pompous morality. The truth cannot be extinguished by the ravings of petty men, no matter how lavish their robes or high their hats. Old houses have dark windows, remember that my boy."

"And what is the truth then and where do we find it?" Ludwig asked.

"It is everywhere around you; it is inside of you. You only need to look. Close your eyes and look."

A light rain was falling and a peaceful quiet fell over the deep forest. A new calm seemed to accompany the old woman and her story; it drew even Sir Shilgen away from his preoccupations. "You, brave knight, have a tradition and code to uphold as do I. Mine is older through and transcends yours and all others. It is the tradition of human

life and its roots run back to the beginning of time. I hold the knowledges of all women past, the keepers of life itself and this I must pass on to my daughters; it is my duty."

"Why not teach your sons then, are they not able to learn?"

"They are not yet ready to learn this," she said without elaboration.

The knight spoke again, asking where she kept her traditions and were they written down in books.

"In my memory," she answered, "in songs, myths and fables of the past."

"You're a story teller then as well?" Ludwig asked. "Will you tell us a story, Heilewif?"

The old woman pulled the fur cover down from around her face and said wryly, "perhaps the noble knight will object to any more prattle from an old woman, thinking how we do gossip and talk too much."

"Not at all, good woman, please tell us your story."

"Alright then," Heilewif began, leaning closer to the fire and stoking the dying coals with a short stick. As she began to speak a puff of smoke burst forth carrying a shower of sparks upward as if to signal the import of her words. Ludwig watched them swirling into the night, each flashing brilliant for a few seconds only to die and fall, a cold ash, fluttering back to the earth.

"There once was a rich and powerful lord who had a beautiful daughter. Near his castle there lived, in a rented cottage, a poor woodcutter with his son. The youth was a happy hardworking and honest young man and the handsomest in the entire kingdom. When he saw the lord's bewitching daughter for the first time, her beauty so overwhelmed him that his countenance lost its carefree look. She too fell in love at first glance, but the woodcutter's son was so poor that surely her father would not allow her to marry him. She was, however, a brave and daring maiden and begged her father to allow her to wed the handsome youth."

"The father laughingly answered that if the poor village boy wanted to marry his daughter he must pull three feathers from the tail of the terrible dragon that lived in the great forest near the village. The

young man was satisfied with these conditions even though he knew how ferocious the fiendish beast was. He hoped to somehow trick the monster and so began his quest.”

“On his travels he came to a small house and a man sitting on the doorstep crying. ‘Why are you crying?’ the young man asked. ‘My daughter is very ill and will die soon, only the dragon knows how to save her, but...’ The young man interrupted him saying: ‘I am on my way to the dragon and I will ask him how to cure your daughter. I will stop and tell you on my return.’ ”

“The woodcutter’s son went on for a distance and came upon a group of people standing around an apple tree. ‘Is the tree so beautiful that you all must gaze at it?’ commented the passerby. ‘Yes it was a beautiful tree,’ one of the people said, ‘before, when it gave golden apples, but now it only grows withered leaves. But, if you would go to the dragon and ask him why this is so, and how we can correct it, you would do us a great service.’ ”

“ ‘Yes, I will surely do that,’ the young man answered and walked on. Soon he reached a river and a ferryman who brought him across in his boat. The man complained to the youth that he was weary of ferrying people back and forth across the river, but only the dragon could tell him how to stop. The man told the woodcutter’s son how to find the castle of the dragon and the youth promised to ask the beast how to release the man from his burden and charge. The ferryman feared for the young man’s life, but rejoiced in the hope that he might be freed.”

“Soon the woodcutter’s son arrived at the castle of the dragon and knocked on the door. The dragon had a wife who never did anyone harm and could only do good deeds. The woman told the young man that the dragon was away hunting. He told her why he had come and about the sad man, the apple tree and the man with the boat. The woman promised to help him and told him to hide under the bed. Late that night the dragon came home. Tired and irritable, he sniffed suspiciously around the room and said, ‘I smell a priest.’ ”

“ ‘Oh, no,’ said the woman stroking the dragon’s shoulders and neck, ‘there’s no one here.’ The dragon believed her and relaxed while she massaged his back and soon he was in a deep sleep and snoring

loudly. Quickly the woman plucked a golden feather out of his tail and handed it to the youth under the bed. 'Who dares to pull my feathers?' the dragon said angrily, still half asleep."

" 'Don't be angry,' the wife answered, 'it was only me, and I did it in my sleep. I was dreaming about a poor man whose daughter was deathly ill. What should he do?' "

" 'He should find the Host that's hidden under her pillow and get rid of it,' the dragon mumbled and fell back to sleep."

"The woman then quickly pulled out another golden feather and slipped it under the bed. 'Who dares pull my feathers?' the dragon roared."

" 'Be still dear,' the dragon's wife responded softly, 'it was only me. I was troubled in my sleep by a dream that an apple tree that had once given golden apples was suddenly barren. How can it be made fruitful again?' "

" 'The wall that shades the leaves must be removed,' murmured the half sleeping monster."

"And now came the third feather, which the woman plucked out in the same way, but this time the dragon was enraged and tried to jump out of the bed. 'Who dares pull my feathers?' he roared. His wife threw her arms around his neck and begged. 'Please don't be angry. I dreamed about an old ferryman whose pledge is to constantly take travelers across the river and cannot get free of it.' "

" 'He should just give the boat to the next one he meets and walk away,' the dragon snorted. 'Now leave me alone.' "

"The young man took the feathers, thanked the wife, and slipped unseen out of the castle. On his return he gave the dragon's advice to the strangers he had met and they were all happy. When he reached the castle, the lord's daughter couldn't take her eyes off of him and walked with him, hand in hand, to her father, who accepted the three feathers and gave his consent for their marriage. The young couple invited all of their relatives and friends, everyone in the castle and in the village, to their wedding. Everyone was happy, but the young lovers were the happiest of all."

When she had finished no one spoke. The fire had nearly gone cold and Shilgen stood up to gather more wood. Ludwig pulled his

blankets tight around him and curled up to sleep next to the old woman, who somehow had taken on the bearing of a protector, even for the intrepid knight. The rain, washing over the horses, caused them to glisten and gleam in the moonlight. Their relaxed breathing and soft sighs signaled that all was well; and Sir Shilgen stood staring into the darkness.

Chapter Eight

THEY WALKED ALL DAY. Finally a distant hum could be heard, the first faint sign that they were approaching the Rhine. The sound grew gradually more distinct, until a kind of cadence could be heard, a thumping, screeching, relentless cadence. It was a foreboding sound that they had never heard before.

“Do you know what it is?” Ludwig asked, feeling tension in the horses.

“No, I don’t,” Shilgen answered cautiously. “But we shall soon see.”

There was a tree line ahead and a clearing below that. The sound was now loud and close. Shilgen was, as usual, very careful, and not wanting to expose them to any unseen danger until he was sure it was safe, dismounted. “Stay here with the horses and the woman,” he ordered and then crept slowly toward the crest of the small rise. Ludwig, holding the restless horses, lost sight of him in the thicket and as the minutes passed became increasingly concerned about his duty. Apprehension rose with each screech and thump and he felt tormented by the incessant sound. In his imagination he could see the dragon raging through the village and his master trying to slay it, only to be overwhelmed. He drove the dream away, scolding himself for his childishness, but it didn’t help. Should he obey his orders to wait or should he meet his obligation to support his lord in what could be a dire time of need? Minutes more dragged by with no sign of the knight; his

dilemma deepened, his mind spinning in circles trying to extricate itself from this double bind of duty. He knew his obligation was to stand beside his master, who might be in deadly danger, and yet he hung back doing nothing. But he had been ordered to wait and his duty was to obey his orders without question. Now his charges conflicted; and what about the old woman? He couldn't just leave her unprotected. He began to pace and visibly fret until Heilewif interrupted: "What's wrong my boy?"

"I am taught to know my duty and to do it without question, yet here I am frozen in a quandary and unable to act," he answered.

"Your duty is to decide for yourself what's right and what's wrong," the woman said. "You know what to do; the difficulty you face is in shedding the shackles that prevent you."

Ludwig looked into the old woman's eyes and felt a sense of freedom he had not known before.

"You know what to do," she said. "You just lack the will to do it. If you had no duties and no orders, what would you do then? What would...you...do?"

"I would bring us forward until I could see my master."

"Even though you were ordered to stay?"

"Yes."

"Do it then."

But, just as the boy reached his resolve, he heard the knight's voice. "Ludwig, bring the horses up here and look at this!"

From the edge of the ridge line they could see the clearing below and the village of Flusseck on the far bank of the Scol as it joined with the Rhine. The tributary was jammed with logs and they could see a long boom extending across its mouth preventing them from flowing freely downstream. A number of men, working with poles on which iron hooks were attached, pulled the largest trunks, one hundred feet long and more, through a break in the boom and into a slack water staging area in the lee of a breakwater that extended out into the wide Rhine. It was there that the timber raft was being built.

Immediately below them the smaller logs were diverted into a narrow side-water canal that led to an artificial pond that collected behind a wooden dam. The spillway over the dam drove a big

waterwheel that powered a massive up and down saw blade, being used to slice the logs into cants, timbers and boards.

First the log was dragged onto a twin rail ramp and sawed by hand into shorter lengths. The twelve or fifteen foot pieces were then pulled up to the mill, where the rails leveled off and carried them into the blade that was centered between them. The waterwheel turned a shaft, perpendicular to the rails, on which a drum was mounted. This drum was beneath the log and armored with short iron cleats. As the drum slowly turned, these cleats raked into the log, pushing it forward into the blade. At the end of the drive shaft, two arms extended outward in a T and, acting like hammers, pushed the saw blade down. A counter weight attached with rope and pulley to the top of the blade was also lifted by the force of the hammer. When the hammer released, the weight dropped, pulling the blade back up, just as the second hammer swung into position.

They watched for a time, marveling at the technology of the sliding and slamming action of the mill and the thousands of boards and timbers that had been cut thus far in the spring logging season, not fully realizing that this was only one of many such sites producing wood and other forest products that were now in great demand in the tree starved north. The entire manorial economy was becoming increasingly tied to the river trade, including the peasants who, like Heinrich Zumwald, brought their extra product to market at these busy river towns, where middleman merchants were prepared to pay cash for it.

The wood was traded in a different way. Major hanseatic merchants in Mainz and Cologne contracted with brokers who bought timber contracts from the great feudal lords like Count Robert. These investors advanced the lord a discounted price, took possession of the logs upstream, and assumed the risk of transporting them to the big Rhine port of Cologne and beyond. The biggest trunks would end in the shipyards of Amsterdam or Rotterdam.

"Let's go, boy, there is little time to waste. We must find your father's forester and secure passage north."

The three descended the gentle slope, skirting the village and circling behind the screaming saw mill to reach the slack water lee where the raft was nearing completion. Their obscured view from the

hillside gave no indication of what they would find. It was huge. Like a connected caravan made of fifteen enormous individual rafts, strung out end to end and loosely tied together by leather strapping so as to allow it to curve like a snake. Twenty-five, one-hundred foot logs, three and more feet through at the butt were alternated tail and tip and fastened together to make each square raft, one-hundred feet long and one-hundred feet wide. The raft train together was over one quarter of a mile long. How it could ever be controlled and navigated was a mystery partly, answered by the line of long oar-like rudders facing forward on the lead end and a similar line facing back on the last raft. Between them there lay three acres of deck, rapidly assuming the look of a small village.

Ludwig was fascinated by the scene and stayed with Heilewif while Sir Shilgen searched for the forester. They watched in almost disbelief at the mobile world laid out before them. The flat boards being transported were temporarily laid down for floors, on which goods were stacked for shipment. Small cabins were built on these floors to house some of the hundreds of people who would ride the Rhine on its back. Fences were set up to corral live animals making the trip to market at some town along the way and stores of hay and grain for them and for the several horses already on the raft were being loaded.

Many barrels, holding some unknown but heavy substance that Heilewif thought might be pitch or tar or possibly pine resin for torches, weighed down several of the sections and seemed to be a main item of trade. A heavily braced wooden crane was being used to swing the barrels out over the raft and dozens were still waiting, backed up against the river bank. Easily identifiable were the piles of tanned hides that, except for one small cabin, covered an entire raft. Considerable activity seemed to mark that spot as a purchasing point for a leather merchant buying the product of area tanners. The tanning of hides was an unpleasant, but worthwhile, side occupation for some peasants, who bought the skins of animals from their neighbors and manned the tanning pits that dotted the forest. There was a ready market for leather all along the river and few if any of these hides would reach Mainz.

This could not be said for the furs collecting on another section of the almost endless raft. The forest was a source of fine skins and fur

was a luxury item that brought high prices. It was the emblem of wealth and privilege, adorning the ceremonial dress of great lords and much of it would be delivered directly to the castles. Count Robert reserved many pelts for himself. Some, however, would reach the big towns to surround the bodies of wealthy bourgeois businessmen and their wives. A new commoner was emerging, one who could afford to pay for the trappings of privilege. Except for the squirrel skin blankets sewn by peasant women, fur production was a monopoly of the lord, but tellingly, fur was increasingly being sold in a free market.

An hour passed before Sir Shilgen returned. "We have arrived none too soon. We must board the raft immediately. We embark tonight at midnight."

"At midnight," it seemed odd, "why at midnight?" Ludwig asked.

"The raft is authorized to leave tomorrow and that is the earliest moment in the new day," the knight answered. "Sir Albert has arranged for our passage with the horses and belongings. We will camp on deck two. All traffic and trade on the Rhine is highly regulated and controlled by numerous treaties and contracts. There are several toll stations and jurisdictions through which we will pass and it will be best if Heilewif's identity is not discovered." With that they unpacked the sledge and walked the horses to the gangway leading to the second raft. Ludwig returned three times to retrieve all of Heilewif's goods and gear.

Gaps had already been made in the breakwater to allow the strong current to flood the lee and the massive vessel was already straining hard against its mooring lines. There was an excitement to the bustle of people busily preparing for the imminent departure and Ludwig was eager to explore the whole raft and see it all first hand. He worked impatiently at his chore to load their belongings and to settle and feed the horses, while Heilewif arranged comfortable bedding beside the temporary hearth they found fashioned from flat stones, laid in two layers so as to block all the cracks and prevent hot coals from dropping onto the wooden substructure. A cheerful fire was already burning and a sufficient supply of split wood was already neatly stacked beside it.

Heilewif wondered who their companions would be and where they were at that moment.

"I've finished with the horses, sir. May I go about and see all that's here?"

"You may, boy, but be careful not to approach strangers too closely. Keep your distance and be mindful of the pest," Shilgen answered without elaboration.

After the boy had gone, Heilewif asked, "why do you fear the pest sire, is there cause?"

"Sir Albert has told me that a comet was seen last night. Apparently the bright moon has been obscuring its image, but as the moon is waning now it was possible to clearly make it out."

"There is no mistake then, it is a comet?"

"We shall see tonight. The sky is clear again. This will cause concern everywhere and heighten suspicion of every traveler and deepen your danger if it becomes known that you are a witch."

Heilewif looked at him in silent resignation and asked, "why do you fear the comet so?"

"My dear woman, you must know that it is clear and accepted fact that a comet announces the coming of the pest. It carries the scourge. That is well known."

"And how then is it so well known?"

"Why it has been so attested to by the Pope, after careful consultation with all the proper authorities."

"And who were these authorities?"

"The learned doctors at the University of Paris, in conjunction with the Church fathers and historic authorities, among them Saint Thomas and others, have shown the undeniable connection between the comet and the plague. The comet arose after a misalignment of the planets Jupiter and Saturn, while Mars was in the constellation of Aquarius."

"And this caused the plague?" she said cynically.

"Indeed, madam, it is not a joke, although it may not be so simple as to succumb easily to feminine understanding. The misalignment of planets was a very serious and catastrophic matter that caused the earth to become warmer and to give forth from its poisonous

core a putrid gas that is the comet. Wherever the comet goes it brings the plague with it." He finished in an almost imperious tone.

Heilewif said no more and began busying herself with the cook pot. Her verbal clashes with the knight began to concern her and she determined to pay closer attention to his moods and attitudes. Something was bothering him and it went beyond his chauvinistic assumptions about women. He was a good and honest young man. That much she did believe and she trusted him. But there was more to him that was not so evident; a kind of instability, and this intrigued her.

As night came on, the raft overflowed with people from the village and a festive almost carnival-like atmosphere arose. After weeks of work, the end had come and the send-off would be vigorously celebrated. Barrels of wine and beer were tapped for the occasion and the sweet smell of roasting beef and pork filled the air. Each campfire was surrounded by strangers satisfied with a job well done and eager to be together. This was a time when everything seemed right in the world, when outsiders were assumed to be friends and were welcomed and where everyone felt the urge to sing. "Why is that?" someone asked. "Why do people sing when they are happy?"

Heilewif responded. "When people feel the power of togetherness they want to express it and while a group cannot talk at the same time, it can sing." If only it would last, she added, as a thought to herself.

And so it was that night that even Shilgen relaxed and reclined against his saddle to listen to a group of troubadours serenade them with their songs of love. The minstrel's lute wove an intricate pattern of counterpoint accompaniment as the minnesinger sang his verse.

Under the linden
And the starry sky
That's where our bed did lie.
There you'd see
Beneath the tree
How flowers flat did die.
Down in the valley, down in the dale,
We heard the nightingale!
I came down,

Down to the wood
Where my lover stood.
And he called to me,
Does my lady see,
How happy I will be.
We did kiss a thousand fold,
If I may be so bold!
And there he made a bed of flowers.
Now any one would smile,
To walk a while.
Where you can see,
The spot where he made love to me.
There beneath the starry sky
Amid the bird and bee,
There under the linden tree.
If we be found on that ground
And he be ever named,
Then would I be shamed!
But what we did
Will be ever hid,
Known only to us well,
And to the long-winged nightingale
But birds don't ever tell!

Perhaps it was the wine, or the smoke that clouded her vision, but Heilewif thought she saw a tear run down Shilgen's cheek as he stood and walked away from the fire.

“**A**lright it's time to clear the decks. We are about to embark,” a big man bellowed, his voice shattering the song, “ruddermen get to your stations.”

The raft had a captain and a crew of nearly one-hundred men, mostly exchanging their labor for passage, but some were professional river-hands, skilled in navigating the tricky shoals and currents of the great Rhine. And this was no child's play, to steer a fifteen-hundred foot long floating island, driven by an unyielding current, and to stop it when necessary.

Forty men went to the bow and forty more went aft, each to manipulate one of the huge rudders that were mounted so as to angle down into the water about twenty feet out from the raft. Those not making the voyage clambered quickly over the gang planks to the shore, knowing there would be no escaping once the monster began moving. The captain barked his orders. "Cut the moorings. All forward rudders hard left."

With that order the forty rudder men in the bow pulled their blades out to a steep angle intended to entice the big craft away from the shore. The current coming through the cuts in the breakwater was more than enough to start the huge hulk moving. "Rudders aft, steady as you go." Slowly and silently the raft slid forward and like a giant snake began to curve steadily into the stream. "Forward, half back," came the next command and the forty men in front strained to wrench the rudders back against the weight of the water. The raft began to straighten. "Aft rudders, quarter left," slowly swung the tail into line and the big seemingly unyielding behemoth responded gracefully, gently gliding out into the river. "All rudders center and steady as she goes," the captain commanded, satisfied that his craft was on course. "Our first turn will be to the left in about an hour. Lock all rudders and set the first watch." The captain's commands came at irregular intervals after that and while others slept, Shilgen walked slowly back and forth in front of the fire.

Chapter Nine

AS THE DAYS PASSED, the moon waned and the comet became increasingly visible along the horizon. No one spoke much of it, but its specter was on their minds, living as they were in such close proximity to one another and unable to escape the scourge, should it come. People kept increasingly to themselves, staying near to the campfires, talking only to those they knew and trusted.

Unlike boats and barges, the big timber rafts were exempted from the myriad of toll stations set up by feudal fief-holders along the river, to exact a kind of ransom-like payment from the merchants plying its waters. The timber rafts were too cumbersome to make frequent stops and could only be brought to port safely in suitable places, of which there were few. Count Robert paid a set fee to some of these lords for the privilege of unencumbered passage. But, staple rights were a different matter. The several free imperial cities along the raft's route were outside the jurisdiction of any feudal lord and they claimed these entitlements, which meant that all passing merchants were obliged to stop and sell their wares at discounted prices. The artisans and crafts people of these towns depended upon this privilege to provide them with many of the specialty goods and raw materials they needed. Boards were a particularly sought after commodity being carried on Robert's raft, as was leather. The leather merchant had been preparing for the coming market for several hours before the city came into view. "Speyer

ahead on the right bank, four miles," the watch warned, and again a few seconds later, "Speyer, four miles."

"Forward rudders half left," came the order and the raft began a slow subtle change in direction, nosing ever so slightly toward the bank. Stopping this huge raft was difficult and bringing it in to port began miles upstream from the town's pier. Gradually the raft moved from the channel center, and its steady even current, to the shallower flats where the water was slacker and the raft visibly slowed. Once satisfied that his vessel was properly aligned, the captain ordered, "all ruddermen forward," and with that the aft men began the long trot across the several sections to the bow.

It was crucial not to run the raft aground since this could necessitate unloading whole sections to lighten and lift them, or even dismantling and reassembling. The mooring point had to allow for sufficient draft and stopping the raft without ramming and destroying the pier required a skilled pilot. As they very gradually approached, the captain yelled, "all ruddermen hard row. In tempo now... one ...pull, two, three, one... push, two three..." and the crew, now all in the bow, and in teams of two, worked the big rudders like oars, back and forth, to brake the behemoth's remaining momentum. Gradually the gaps between the sections narrowed as they tightened against the slowing lead raft. The bow slowly slid past the pier. Then, in what took several minutes, the ruddermen, working hard against an almost imperceptible current, finally stopped the raft. "Drop anchors," the captain commanded. "Make all mooring lines."

So fascinated were they by the display of navigational skill that few noticed the frantic commotion underway at that same moment in the town. A line of pike-men, quickly assembled and standing shoulder to shoulder, stopped anyone from leaving the raft and an apparent city official announced from the pier that precautions against the pest would require everyone to stay on board, on penalty of death. Only authorized officials would be allowed to cross the quarantine line and the raft would be detained there until it was inspected.

"What does that mean?" Ludwig asked, disappointed not to be free to explore the big cathedral town.

"It means we will be here for a few days," someone answered, and Shilgen added, "there's more to it than just the quarantine. They're looking for something... or someone."

Rumors spread quickly that the inquisitors had left Strasbourg and were expected at Speyer. This worried Shilgen who began to feel the weight of his responsibility to bring Heilewif safely to Heidelberg, especially when he could not control or even predict her behavior. Two days passed. A few shoemakers and other leather artisans crossed the pike-line to make purchases, but otherwise it was quiet.

The captain was allowed to enter the town and he did so several times in an effort to get his vessel released, but to no avail. On the third evening the town official returned and announced that the raft would be searched the following day and that everyone should be present with their belongings. This prompted Shilgen to suggest that Heilewif's paraphernalia, if discovered, would be incriminating and that they should sink it in the river that night.

"All these herbs and extracts, ointments and unguents, can't you see what that looks like," he argued. "Fear of the plague is high. Witches will be sought. Why do you think there was such a delay and without explanation? They were waiting for the inquisitors."

"I cannot do my work without them. Count Robert will not be pleased," Heilewif answered. "You may as well sink me in the river."

"Why don't we hide them?" Ludwig offered. "The space between the logs, under the floor boards, is a perfect place."

"I will not hide my things," Heilewif interrupted. "If they were to be discovered it's as good as admitting guilt and I am guilty of nothing and harm no one."

"So you say, but witchcraft is widely suspected in the spread of the pest. Many learned doctors of the church assert as much," Shilgen added.

"Beware of old monkeys and young priests, my boy," the woman said as an aside to the squire and then looked at the knight with disdain.

"What do you mean they are waiting for the inquisitor?" Ludwig asked, as much to defuse the confrontation as to satisfy his curiosity.

"Do you know what heretics are?" Shilgen began.

"People who disagree with the teachings of the One Holy Catholic Church."

"Yes, but not exactly. Anyone who denies the truths of the Church, as revealed in holy Scripture and illuminated by the Apostles and great doctors of theology, is a heretic and in league with Satan in his quest to prevent the salvation of mankind. It is not a matter of disagreeing. It is not a debate. The truths are known and are written down in the great books of the Church. Anyone who denies this is a heretic."

"Of course nothing need be proven; only reference made to the words of some so-called expert," Heilewif interrupted. "If the great Saint Thomas said so then it is heresy to disagree."

"But, are these not words which were inspired by God?" Shilgen responded.

"Who is to say?" she said.

"Why Saint Augustine teaches us that..." But before he could finish he realized the trap he had fallen into.

"It's all very neat isn't it? And irrefutable, if you follow the rules," Heilewif laughed.

"But doesn't it all lead back to holy Scripture?" Ludwig asked.

"No," she said tersely, "it leads nowhere."

"It will lead to you if you are not careful," the knight answered angrily and walked away.

When Shilgen seemed sufficiently distant Ludwig asked the woman, "if we cannot believe what the Church teaches, Heilewif, how can we know what is true?"

"God reveals the truth to us through His creation, which is the natural world. We need only look to see what is true. But, you must look for yourself Ludwig and not rely on the scholastic scholars to tell you, because they deny the divinity of nature and see in it only the playground of the devil. There are no devils in the world, Ludwig, only God."

"Why then does my master continue to call you a witch?"

"Because I will not yield to irrational authority, no matter its source."

Ludwig was becoming increasingly distressed by the friction that seemed to be growing between his master and Heilewif. He did not understand this feisty woman, who seemed to contradict the image of feminine modesty and piety that was fixed in his mind. Why didn't she defer to Sir Shilgen's decision? He knew this was insulting to the knight and he wanted to end the impasse. "It may be best to follow his advice and conceal your things. At least it may help to calm the conflict between you that I fear is threatening our safety."

Heilewif recognized the emergence of mature judgment in the young man's words and realized that her obstinacy was endangering them all and that, in this case, she had no right to be stubborn. "They are only flowers and seeds, roots and barks of certain trees that if used properly can soothe and relieve suffering and calm the torment of pain. God created them for us to use," she prefaced her response and then said, "but you are right, perhaps we shouldn't tempt fate. Put them under the floor boards there in the open area. Things are best hidden in plain sight."

Ludwig was much relieved and pleased that she had listened to him. The bottles, pouches and jars fit comfortably between the logs and were completely concealed under the floor boards. "There then, the secret knowledge is secretly stored," she quipped.

"Why are you called a witch?" he asked abruptly, not wanting to lose contact in this his first real adult conversation in which he was not just a boy listening to a lecture. She had made him feel like an equal whose opinion was valued and his question was an honest search for answers.

"Because many men don't believe that a simple woman can know how to do such things. It must therefore be a gift of Satan they prefer to believe, intended for evil."

"How did you learn it then? It seems so mysterious and magical?"

"Our craft is handed down from mother to daughter and has been for centuries. We were women, mothers, nurses and cooks. You don't ask how your master knight learned to make war, why do you doubt that my skill was self-made."

"I don't doubt it, madam; I just don't understand it. How can you uncover something so hidden? It seems that these things must have been revealed in some way."

"When we say that an ointment made from the leaves of the thorn apple will relieve aching muscles we know it because we have done it, not because Saint Thomas told us."

"And is that not dangerous, to learn by experimentation. Trial and error must cause much harm in many cases."

"Yes it can. Knowledge can only be had by looking to see what happens, but recklessness is unacceptable. Prudence is a requisite and the process is slow," Heilewif answered understanding his insight quite well and still saddened by the failures that inevitably came from overdoses and unexpected untoward side effects. But this could not be allowed to stop her. She knew that. There was too much to be gained.

The knight overheard her words and said nothing, but, his expression, only partly concealed, told them that he was pleased that Heilewif had relented and with her apology. "Sir Shilgen, forgive me for my bold and rash remarks. I know that I am fortunate to be traveling now under your able protection and mean no disrespect when I speak my mind. It is, I'm afraid, a fault I cannot always control."

The inquisitor was a small man, which belied his power and reputation for ferocity in pursuing his quarry. He was wrapped in a black cloak, only his piercing eyes were perceptible in the shadows beneath his black hood; he was surrounded by escorts and attendants. As he approached, the fear on the raft was palpable. A platform had been erected on the pier and he took the center seat, flanked on the right by his personal secretary and on the left by the mayor of Speyer. They sat motionless as the Papal Bull was read by one of the many deputies, all hooded and robed in black, with white tunics.

"It has indeed lately become clear that in the Rhineland and particularly in the dioceses of Mainz, Speyer, Würms and Cologne, many people, both men and women, have denied their Catholic faith and given themselves over to devils so that they might partake in every kind of unclean pleasure. And that they, by spells and poisons, do commit horrible offenses against our holy faith and do cause, through

incantations and conjurations, infants to die in their mother's womb, crops to fail, orchards and vineyards to wither and men and beast to suffer the torture of horrible diseases. We, therefore by letters Apostolic, delegate our son, Rodolfo Eselin, as inquisitor, to search the Rhineland for these witches and heretics and to use whatever penalties and punishments he thinks useful to eradicate these serpents of darkness from among us. We order the legitimate authorities in all towns, provinces, districts and territories lying within the dioceses of Mainz, Speyer, Wörms and Cologne to remove all hindrances to the work of our inquisitor and if any man dare ignore this he will know the wrath of Almighty God."

With that, several deputies moved forward from raft to raft examining every parcel and package and questioning every person. When the deputy reached Heilewif he asked, "what is your name woman?"

"I am called Heilewif."

"Why are you on this raft?"

"I am traveling to Heidelberg, to the court of Count Robert of Wittelsbach."

"And what business do you have with the count?"

"He has not yet told me, sir."

"Well, what is your competence then?"

"I am a midwife and nurse."

The deputy then turned to his assistant, "note that," then turned back to Heilewif and said, "follow me."

Sir Shilgen was, in one way, pleased that this would move the investigation away from the hidden evidence, but was otherwise concerned with what she would say to the inquisitor. "Wait," he said, stopping the deputy. "I am Sir Shilgen Sturmere, emissary of Robert of Wittelsbach, Count Palatine of the Rhine. This woman is under my protection and I have letters patent from his lordship, Count Robert, guaranteeing her safe passage through all authorities."

"There is no need yet for concern, sir knight," the deputy answered. "You may accompany her if you wish."

Ludwig remained at the campsite while Heilewif was escorted to the pier and to the inquisitor. "This woman is named Heilewif," the deputy began, "and she is by her own admission a midwife."

"Have you seen the comet, my good woman?" the inquisitor began.

"Yes."

"And are you aware of the import of this celestial phenomenon and its correlation with the plague?"

"I have heard it said that the comet causes the plague, but this cannot be so."

"Are you not aware that his Holiness the Pope has confirmed this connection after consultation with all of the proper authorities?"

"The comet is a celestial body is it not?" Heilewif responded, unable to avoid her penchant for dispute.

"Yes it is." The inquisitor responded.

"Since only God can affect the movement of stars and other celestial bodies, are you saying that God causes the plague?"

"Devils, it is true, can affect no changes in the physical world. For this they need agents, human agents, who, through the manipulation of secret knowledge, provided by the prince of darkness, bring the pest."

"You mean witches?"

"Yes, witches. For it is so stated in Holy Scripture that devils have power over men's minds and they use this power. It is plain in the scriptures. What do you know about witches?"

"Nothing."

"Do you deny that witches exist?"

"I don't know."

"The belief in witches is so fundamental to our Catholic faith that to deny it smacks of heresy woman. How can you say you don't know when Christ himself tells us it is so?"

"Hear how she mocks our holy faith and denies even the words of our savior Jesus Christ," another cleric to the left commented and Shilgen struggled to stay silent.

"You will remain here in Speyer for further questioning," the inquisitor directed and the knight was forced to step forward.

"I must protest my lord inquisitor. It is beyond your competence to detain this woman. She is under the protection of letters patent from his lordship, Count Robert of Wittelsbach."

"Who is this man?" the inquisitor demanded.

"I am Sir Shilgen Sturmere, emissary of count Robert, under orders to bring this woman to Heidelberg without delay. I will not allow you to interfere with my mission."

"You won't allow me? You heard the Papal Bull. That gives me full authority to do as I please in this matter."

But, Shilgen knew that the inquisitors, for all their regalia and ceremony, had no enforcement arm and relied on the authorities in the local districts to provide them with police power. The issue would, in the end, be decided by the mayor of the city and Shilgen was betting that he had no stomach for crossing the count.

The inquisitor turned to the man seated on his left and said, "I demand that this woman be detained for further questioning."

"Why don't you question her now?" the mayor answered, hoping to find a compromise to free him from the dilemma of deciding between these two political powers, each of whom being positioned to punish the city in its own way. "I don't believe we need detain her when she can answer now."

"Yes," Shilgen added, "she stands before you now and is prepared to answer now; there is no need to wait." The knight knew that this detention was a ploy, not simply for more questions, but for persuasion. Persuasion brought about by torture, an inquisitorial tactic, well practiced and effective. Without pain, to bring about a confession, it would be useless to continue the questioning, or so the inquisitor believed, because the witch was cunning and would hide behind artful words and reasons. She was surely a witch, he thought, but she had slipped away... for now.

Chapter Ten

IT WAS AN UNUSUALLY WARM NIGHT for April and an early promise of summer. As was her custom, Heilewif was awake and about before dawn, savoring the stillness of a world without human interference. The raft slid silently and effortlessly, carried by a current flowing as it had since the dawn of human time, relentlessly winding its way to the sea. Nearly everyone was asleep, confident that they were safe, separated from the insecurities of the shore. They didn't know why the river and sky, the croaking of tree frogs and the silhouettes of migrating cranes worked that way to calm their frenzied fears and superstitions. She relied on this time of quiet to reflect and to reorient her thoughts. She knew so little about the mystery awaiting her that any effort to start seemed premature and even foolish, yet she wanted to at least begin to ponder it. Sadly, she thought, her escorts mistrusted her and would not likely be very helpful.

As the early morning light began to glow faintly above the trees that reached down to the water's edge, a flock of geese, flying low above the water, swept past them, their honking chatter rising almost to a roar and then slowly fading into the distance. This was Heilewif's time, and her place, in the quiet majesty of nature, unencumbered by the complications of human conflict. It was eternal and sure, she thought, the true expression of God's creation. She had become protective of these private hours and was at first annoyed by the appearance of Sir Shilgen, whose restless tossing and turning had finally driven him out from under his covers. She feared that the confrontational nature of

their relationship had made him mistrust her and she preferred to avoid any deepening of his hostility. She was wholly unprepared for what was to follow.

The knight, dressed only in his tunic, seemed stripped of pretensions as well his cloak and he addressed the woman earnestly and politely. "Madam, may I sit a while with you as I believe you are a wise woman and I am desirous of your counsel?"

"Counsel?" she said not sure of his sincerity, yet sensing truth in his tone. "I am much flattered, for I am only a simple woman."

"A woman indeed you are, madam, but hardly simple. I fear your experience and intellect far exceed my own, yet it is I who is charged with leading and you with following and I confess that I don't know if this is the proper alignment."

Heilewif sensed a soft side in this young but hardened man who had been so thoroughly trained not to think, been wholly indoctrinated, his reason replaced with rules and protocols, sufficient it was hoped to serve in any situation, and drilled to act decisively, even if blindly. Whatever is done, no matter; might will make it right. This was the way it was.

"Know gentle knight that to face this weakness and to admit to it is really a remarkable strength."

"The story you told affected me deeply," the knight began, "because I saw myself in the woodcutter's son, but no matter how many dragons I slay, I will never be worthy of the princess."

Heilewif was surprised at the insecurity and vulnerability she saw at that moment in the knight, who seemed like a little boy on whom the stiffening of experience and education hadn't succeeded, a boy who still needed a mother. "But you are worthy dear knight; you are only prevented by unfortunate circumstance from ever aspiring to the level of the princess. You are caught tight in a scheme of hierarchy and will never be willingly allowed to upset the status quo. The same was true for the woodcutter's son, yet he prevailed and he did so without needing to slay the dragon. So can you."

"But, that was a fairy tale."

"Fairy tales can come true dear knight. Answer me this then, how did the woodcutter's son earn the hand of the princess?" The

question seemed schoolish at first and she wasn't sure how he would respond. She didn't want to be patronizing, but she was pushed by her own maternal instinct and felt a need to protect him.

But, being himself needy, he answered eagerly. "He brought his lord three feathers from the dragon's tail."

"Did he accomplish this by brute force?"

"No, he was helped by the dragon's wife and she did it by trickery?"

"And why did she help him?"

"Because she knew that he needed her and that he was also helping others and this unselfishness impressed her."

"But, should she not have been loyal to her husband? Was she right in betraying him on behalf of a stranger?"

This was a difficult question for a man so in tune with the tenor of his time and the rigid structure of a society that was held together by nothing but loyalty. Family and narrow clan alliances were everything; disloyalty was the most heinous of human offenses. Yet he was driven by an unquenchable need to see the woodcutter's son win and in this quest, the loyalty he was so conditioned to admire was a most deadly obstacle. "She must have believed it was a worthy cause; and she didn't injure anyone," he offered as justification for an action he innately approved of, even though it was wrong in every way according to the aggressive moralism of his world.

"Who told her what to do?"

"She decided for herself what to do."

"Yes, and in the story, what prevented the poor people that the woodcutter met from solving their own problems?"

"They didn't seem to believe that they could decide what to do for themselves. They were incapable." The knight paused for a moment to assess what he had said and asked himself if he were not the same.

"And so they turned to an authority to tell them. And that authority ironically was the dragon himself," Heilewif said, "and what was his advice?"

The knight answered, somewhat mindlessly, while dwelling on thoughts of free will and missing entirely the significance of her words.

"Remove the Host from under the pillow... take down the wall that shades the tree," he said absently.

"And what did he mean by that?" she asked already astonished at his openness.

"Stop listening to the Church and get out of the shadow of the castle tower," he answered, and sensing how these words, if heeded, could shatter the security of all he knew and valued added, "but that would be both heresy and treason, madam."

"Yes, it would, and punishable by death. Isn't that interesting? And lastly, what did he tell the ferryboat man?"

"He told him to just walk away," the knight responded and then continued, "but people can't just do whatever they want, there would be no order, life would be chaos."

"Yes, that is the dilemma isn't it?" Heilewif said, sensing that he was at least beginning to think for himself. "It isn't always possible to be free. But freedom is deeply cherished and inextinguishable in the human soul and it is the drive that causes your anguish," she told him truly. "Begin to come to grips with that." Then, realizing that there was much more to it she asked, "but I fear this story is more than an abstract hypothetical, Sir Shilgen. Are you in love?"

She had an uncanny way of knowing everything it seemed and the knight saw little hope of concealing it, and since they had long past the point of embarrassment he said frankly, "I'm afraid I am, madam."

"And dare I ask... is it the daughter, Robert's daughter?"

"Yes."

"Aurianna, the one afflicted?" He nodded and she thought how uncanny the woodcutter's tale now seemed and she understood why it affected him the way it did. "And does she love you?" she went on.

The sadness of his answer, delayed by the memory of flirtatious smiles and glances, uncountable comments and secret stolen moments unknown to any other, "I don't know," signaled to her that a relief from this torment would be prudent and she said, "I would like to learn more about the problems at Heidelberg. Will you tell me all you can?"

"Yes, madam."

"Begin then," she said and the knight recounted the nature of the mysterious rapture that enveloped the young woman. "And you say

that it is intermittent and seems to move in cycles. How long does the trance last and how long are the periods of rest?"

"I am not allowed in the family quarters so I only report what I am told by the chambermaids, but it is said that she goes for days in a half-sleep, able to walk, but rarely eats or drinks and says little or nothing. The remissions are also brief, a few days or a week."

"Have you seen her in this distressed state and looked into her eyes?"

"No, madam."

Heilewif knew that there was little she could deduce from this and would have to wait to examine the woman herself, but felt it necessary to encourage the troubled man to talk out his doubts and misgivings. "What is your role in this, Sir Shilgen?"

"I am her bodyguard," the knight answered.

"And you love her?"

"Yes."

"I fear you are more than that noble knight," Heilewif challenged, "I fear you are obsessed with her."

"I am obsessed; I dream of her night and day," the knight confessed as though releasing an unbearable burden.

Once again Heilewif thought it wise to move on. "And tell me sir, what is your view of the ordeal she endures?"

The knight was silent for a few seconds and then became even more open in his remarks and Heilewif sensed a seething resentment of all those allowed to get close to her and yet could not help. Especially for the physician, who was so patently incompetent and yet seemed to deceive the count with complicated pronouncements and arcane phrases. "They combat the curse with words," he said, "nothing but words, they have no answers, but they hide in their words and no one knows what to do and so they use more words that promise help but never bring it. And the priest tells her to pray, pray in her chapel night and day and beg God to intervene and so then there are more words and she continues to suffer. Help her Heilewif. Call upon Satan if you must, but save her. Promise me you will save her."

The old woman had faced this before; it was in fact the greatest perplexity of her life. So bottomless was the pit of irrationality and

unfounded fear that she had to become a witch to achieve standing and the opportunity to act. She could easily have told him she was indeed in league with Satan and could fly that night to a witch's Sabbath and conjure a spell and save Aurianna and at that moment he would not have cared a wit for his own salvation and would have begged her to do it. She, as always however, chose a wiser course. "I am not a witch, or if I am I am not an evil witch. I can only promise to use all I know about the things of this world to try to help. It may not be enough, but I will try. I do not believe she is under a supernatural spell. I believe she is suffering from a real physical ailment, which can be discovered and possibly reversed."

Her words were somehow different from the others and were reassuring to the knight who trusted the unassuming, but confident, woman and believed that she could help, even though, unlike the others, she promised nothing and had no plan. "But how will you proceed madam?" he asked, skeptical but supportive.

"We will try to duplicate her symptoms with preparations known to me. When we discover the cause we will apply an antidote. One thing is clear, however; it is likely being ingested in food or drink."

"These thoughts were expressed by the chancellor who believes it is a demonic possession brought about by a witch's brew. All of her food and drink is tasted, but to no avail."

"The culprit is cunning and would know this. It would be possible to immunize the tasters with the antidote and mask the effect. Has this been considered?"

"I do not believe so, madam. Her chambermaids routinely eat the same food and drink the same wine as a matter of precaution. But, to my knowledge little has been done to monitor them otherwise."

Heilewif determined that this was the time to enlist the knight into her plan to solve the mystery and now having a clear understanding of his passionate love for the girl, she was confident of his help. "Sir Shilgen, are you prepared to risk your life to save the lady Aurianna?"

"I am ready to take any course and face any danger to protect her. It is both my duty and my fervent desire," he answered.

"To determine the cause of her sickness, I must administer certain drugs in undetermined doses to a human subject to discover their

effect and from these experiments I plan to find the agent of her affliction. Will you be the subject of these tests?"

Sir Shilgen was a man of action, tormented by his frustration at being unable to attack an enemy straight away, and was exhilarated. "Let us begin immediately and thereby gain time rather than losing it while riding this infernal raft," the knight answered, eager to begin to do something and to know that he was aggressively defending his beloved lady.

The early morning light was adequate for Heilewif to retrieve some of her jars from their hiding place and only the forward watch was awake. It was a perfect time to begin.

"This powder is called the Devil's Cherry," Heilewif said, opening a small pigskin pouch. "It is a powerful sedative, widely suspected of being used by witches for diabolical and magical purposes. It can cause violent convulsions and agonizing death if given in overdose. I suspect it might be Satan's proxy in this evil endeavor and I would like to begin with it."

Heilewif had only used the weed in very mild teas made from the leaves the plant. She had only administered these to frightened woman to allay their fears and to combat nervousness. She now planned to use the seeds, which had been dried in an oven and then crushed into a powder. She had never used this preparation before and how much to give was the dilemma. A big man could absorb a greater dose, with equal effect, when compared to a smaller woman, but how much more, and her calculations were complicated further by the knowledge that the seed was far more potent than the leaves. But how much more potent was equally unknown to her. She was pushing the envelope of her experience and it disturbed her greatly.

"We shall begin with one small spoonful diluted in this cup of wine." Oh God, she thought, if this is too much he could die. "No, better one half-spoonful."

The knight drank the potion and walked about as Heilewif suggested. The woman watched. "Are you feeling any effect?" she asked after noticing a slight stagger in his stride. The knight didn't immediately

answer, but sensing a loss of balance, suddenly sat down on the flat deck. "I'm feeling dizzy, but very relaxed," he said.

"Can you concentrate and clearly understand my words?" she asked.

"I cannot keep my eyes focused and I feel like I am floating freely somewhere above the ground."

She waited several minutes and watched as he sat motionless cradling his forehead between his hands. His breathing slowed and became shallower. Perspiration became visible on his face and forehead. "Can you stand up?" she asked, but got no response. She lifted his face from under his chin and said loudly, "open your eyes, Sir Shilgen," but got no response. "Can you hear me?" she asked, somewhat unnerved, again and again with no answer still. When she released her hold on his chin, however, he did not drop his head, but rather stayed upright and seemingly conscious, even though he was clearly suspended in a hypnotic lethargy and this caused her some relief.

Heilewif watched him for an hour and was pleased with the result of this first experiment as she had suspected that a powerful dose of the drug would induce a waking trance of the kind described to her. How long the stupor would last was also unknown to her and she determined to get him back to his bed before anyone woke and saw them. "Can you stand now, Sir Shilgen?" she asked, pulling him up by the arms, hoping that her pitiable strength would be enough to encourage him to move. Remarkably, he comprehended her words and stood almost effortlessly remaining well balanced, but mute. She guided him slowly back to his bed and asked, "do you know who I am Sir Shilgen?" He opened his eyes and said nothing; she saw his fully dilated pupils and his stark empty stare.

Chapter Eleven

THE COMET ALSO HUNG OVER HEIDELBERG, casting its eerie light on the castle below. The doctors had failed to cure the curse and the lady Aurianna was once again stricken. Her sickness, however, seemed less severe and Robert and Ava von Wittelsbach were hopeful.

“But what choice do we have now, Robert?” she almost pleaded, “nothing seems to succeed; maybe Crapho is right; she is possessed and only an exorcism can save her.”

“You know how that will delight our enemies, Ava, and add credence to Vulpes’ insinuations,” he answered, sensing too late how she would view his balancing of politics with their child’s wellbeing.

“How can you think of that now? She is our daughter. Vulpes be damned and the emperor too for that matter,” Ava answered angrily, and with a mother’s protective aggression that startled even the count. The couple had grown closer in response to this personal crisis, which was intensified by the simultaneous absence of their only son, Ludwig. Losing both of her children was an unbearable thought for Ava and it made her increasingly assertive in her relationship with her husband.

“Be calm my dear,” he said, “of course Aurianna is our first concern, but not our only concern; we must find a way to do this discreetly. These are dangerous times. War is in the air.”

Robert saw the mixture of fear and exasperation that came over his wife’s face with the mere mention of war and thought it best to

address and allay those fears if he could. "You know of the movement presently afoot to remove your cousin William from the throne?"

"Is that the root of this war you anticipate?"

"I don't anticipate a war, Ava, but I fear there are those who would have one. There is much at stake, ambitions are high and are weighing together so as to make conflict very likely. Our vassal, Vulpes, is among the conspirators. You need to understand this to appreciate my caution about this exorcism."

"Statecraft is not my concern, Robert, but our family is and you need to remember that in your... ruminations of war."

"For God's sake, Ava, I am thinking about us; I'm thinking about us all. But I have my responsibilities. And I'm not ruminating about war. I'm trying to find a way to escape."

Ava saw his anguish and realized the gravity he saw in the threat surrounding them. She regretted her impatient criticism, but she was frustrated and afraid for her daughter and it was understandable. She knew he had no one to turn to and that he would remain adrift until she listened to him. "Tell me what the problems are, Robert; perhaps we can solve them together."

"They are deep and complicated, Ava, with an evil twist right under our noses," he began, relieved to have the opportunity once again to work out his troubles with his one constant companion, confident that she would always stand by him. "Your cousin is weak. He neglects his duty to the western parts of the empire and has become hopelessly embroiled in religious turmoil at home. Presently, in and around Prague, a group of religious fanatics are causing him severe difficulty."

Ava could easily see that her husband was keenly involved with this problem and genuinely encouraged him to continue. She knew that although her counsel was not supposed to count in the political calculus of the times, it was important to him because he could rely on no other voice not motivated by some measure of self-interest, even if it be only to uncover his inclinations and praise them. She alone dared to disagree with him when his mind was made and, while it angered him, he knew he needed her. "I have heard that these people are devout Christians who only seek to correct some of the abuses, which you yourself know are

rampant among the clergy," she challenged, "financial abuses and sexual perversions."

"Perhaps so, but these are petty matters when compared to the fundamental hurt they do to the foundations of authority. Your cousin's problem is that the reformers have captured the imagination of the masses with dreams of equality. This directly challenges the ascendancy and dominion of the Church and with it all the ruling classes," he answered.

"And if the people believe in equality, what then?" she prodded.

"Don't be a fool, Ava, equality is only for equals, as Aristotle has taught us. This uprising threatens the stability of all Christendom and your cousin relaxes with his goblet of wine and watches it happen, to the great consternation, and rightly so I might add, of the Church and of his peers. I have urged him to crush these rebels, but he says he is powerless to do so. They are numerous and growing daily. If this madness goes unchecked it may spread, even here to the Rhineland."

"And this is why they want to depose him?" she asked.

"Yes, the Pope has put this into motion and Vriunt will call us to Frankfort within weeks to vote. To depose an emperor requires a unanimous agreement among the electors and I alone stand in the way."

"Stop it then," she said, confident that the loyalty they both felt for William would require Robert to support his family.

"It's not so simple, Ava. There are complications as you well know involving our vassal, Vulpes, who has recently begun spreading his wings. I fear he is under the same blanket with the archbishops and has conspired with at least one of the lay electors aspiring to the throne. He wants to be granted sovereignty and to be released from his vassalage to me. If I don't stop him, my hold on every vassal in my domain will be threatened."

Ava saw the dilemma immediately since support for her cousin would encourage the continued spread of the heresy, while his overthrow would open the gate for Vulpes to be granted sovereignty. "Vulpes is the greater danger," she advised. "Loyalty will be rewarded and the betrayer's wings will be clipped."

"I don't think William can survive this; there are too many forces aligned against him," the count responded, having been around every corner a hundred times in the last days.

"Are you saying that you plan to betray him now in his hour of gravest need?" She reacted instinctively.

"No, I will stand by him and oppose the deposition, but that may not be enough," the count said quietly, walking a few steps away from her.

"What do you mean, Robert; the vote must be unanimous."

"They will get around that; there is too much at stake."

"Stop being coy, Robert, there's something you're not telling me," she insisted turning his shoulders and forcing him to face her.

"They will drag Aurianna into this and accuse her of being possessed by Satan. Then they will accuse me of demonic possession and the archbishop will ask for my vote to be disqualified. The outcome is certain. This is why I have resisted the exorcism. It will be controlled by Vriunt and it plays right into their scheme."

It was indeed a distressing dilemma, but there seemed to be no course left open with any hope of helping their stricken daughter. Weeks had passed since Shilgen and his squire had left to find Heilewif and with no word from them or any indication, much less assurance, that she was even alive, Robert reluctantly agreed to the exorcism.

Crapho was delegated to obtain the diocesan consent and to arrange the details as quickly as possible. The count demanded that the highest standards be adhered to and that the most respected exorcist available be contracted. The chancellor collected the necessary documents and depositions from priests and physicians and was escorted on horseback to Mainz where he presented the count's request before the archbishop. He knew that the Church was ordinarily skeptical of claims of demonic possession and he was determined to succeed.

The archbishop's decision read in part. "As it is clear from testimony of the physicians that she cannot be cured by any medical means and from the testimony of Father Crapho that the young woman shows at least some of the classic signs of demonic possession, we give

our permission for a Mass of Exorcism to be said in a consecrated place within the castle at Heidelberg by a person authorized to exorcize these Satanic enchantments.”

There was a hidden predicament in the plan, known to the priests, but concealed from Robert. Only God can exorcise a devil and the exorcist is only a humble conduit through which God acts. And, since God has initially allowed the possession to take place, for reasons only He can know, there is no guarantee that He will lift it. If the exorcism should fail and the affliction continue, under church doctrine, it would be proof that God has condoned the enchantment. This outcome would be a disaster for Robert and had he known this he would never have allowed the exorcism to take place.

The ritual was done daily for seven days in the Lady Aurianna's private chapel. It began on the first day with a rebaptism to ensure that she had been properly exorcised as an infant, since it was known that a failure to initially exorcise an infant would make that soul more vulnerable to later possessions.

“I exorcise thee, Aurianna of Wittelsbach, being weak but reborn in Holy Baptism, by the living God, by the true God, by God Who redeemed thee with His Precious Blood, that thou mayest be exorcised, that all the illusions and wickedness of the devil's deceits may depart and flee from thee together with every unclean spirit, adjured by Him Who will come to judge both the quick and the dead, and Who will purge the earth with fire. Amen.”

A thorough search was made of her chambers and especially of her bed and bed clothes in an effort to uncover the instrument of the witchcraft, because it was known that some physical connection must be established to the victim. Then the young woman was brought to the altar where she knelt and prayed while the exorcist doused her with holy water to fortify her from external physical attack and began with words to combat the devil's internal psychological hold on her. He placed the end of his stole around her neck and made the Sign of the Cross. Everyone in attendance prayed fervently.

“I command you, unclean spirit, whoever you are, along with all your minions now attacking this servant of God, by the mysteries of the incarnation, passion, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus

Christ, by the descent of the Holy Spirit, by the coming of our Lord for judgment, that you tell me, by some sign, your name, and the day and hour of your departure. I command you, moreover, to obey me to the letter, I who am a minister of God, despite my unworthiness; nor shall you be emboldened to harm in any way this creature of God, or the bystanders, or any of their possessions. Tell me, filthy serpent, who you are and by what charm you do torment this servant of God. Tell me where it is. Vomit it up if it lies within so that it may be burned and you be driven back to hell from whence you came."

All of this was to no avail as Aurianna remained mute, sometimes requiring assistance to remain upright. The exorcist reminded the participants of scripture saying, "the demon's quiet cunning has not deceived our Lord, remember Luke: Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute. When the demon left, the man who had been mute spoke, and the crowd was amazed." The ceremony then resumed with signs of the cross and continued solemn commands.

"I cast you out, unclean spirit, along with every Satanic power of the enemy, every specter from hell, and all your fell companions; in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Be gone and stay far from this creature of God. For it is He who commands you, He who flung you headlong from the heights of heaven into the depths of hell. It is He who commands you, He who once stilled the sea and the wind and the storm. Harken, therefore, and tremble in fear, Satan, you enemy of the faith, you foe of the human race, you begetter of death, you robber of life, you corrupter of justice, you root of all evil and vice, seducer of men, betrayer of nations, instigator of envy, font of avarice, fomenter of discord, author of pain and sorrow. Why, then, do you stand and resist, knowing as you must that Christ the Lord brings your plans to nothing?"

Still she did not speak and a Crucifix was brought forward and a holy candle was lit and placed in her hand and once again all those present were signaled to pray aloud while the priest exorcised her yet again.

"Therefore accursed devil, hear thy doom, and give honor to the true and living God, give honor to the Lord Jesus Christ that thou depart with thy works from this servant whom our Lord Jesus Christ hath redeemed with His precious blood."

Robert and Ava watched intently and the chancellor commented on the ritual. "Breaking the demon's pretense and discovering its true identity is the main purpose of these adjurations, but the evil one is obstinate and hides effectively in her refusal to speak."

"If she speaks then are we to assume it is the demon speaking with her tongue?" Ava asked and Crapho answered. "The demon may speak or he may allow her to speak. The deamon is tricky and deceitful, but will ultimately be brought to heel by the power of our Lord Jesus Christ ...if He so wills it."

"But what does the demon want? What is to be had from entering an innocent person's body?" she asked.

"The serpent has escaped from hell and while he occupies her body and carries out the devil's plan he remains free. He knows that when he is caught he will be driven back to hell. He will fight for his freedom."

"But, since she says nothing Crapho," Robert interjected, "the exorcism has failed, has it not?"

"It would seem so, sire. But we must wait to render a judgment until some time has passed... But, since only God can force the demon to speak or to tell the truth it seems that..."

"What would cause the exorcism to fail?" Ava interrupted, rapidly reaching the end of their available alternatives and clearly upset. "I had such faith in this. Why isn't it working?"

"When the victim is not healed it may stem from several causes. A weakness in the exorcist is often suspected, but in this case he is a man of impeccable credentials, ordained to the Order of Exorcism and has succeeded several times prior. No. it's more likely the corrupting effect of unworthy participants and bystanders. Someone present during the exorcism is strengthening the demon and disappointing our Lord who refuses to intervene."

"Do you mean the witch is here among us?" Ava asked in a startled tone.

"Of course the witch is among us, that is the presumption from a failed exorcism," Crapho answered.

Chapter Twelve

THE BREEZE BLOWING ACROSS THE BALCONY carried the strong sweet scent of lilac. “The flowers are in full bloom, mother, and their perfume fills the air. I love the garden in spring,” Aurianna gushed, running out to the railing and lifting herself on it until her toes barely balanced her body, as though stretching higher would enhance the experience. It was a glorious April morning; the sun had already warmed the west wall and was spreading slowly eastward across the garden.

“Do be careful dear,” Ava warned. “Come, let’s go down to the courtyard.”

The lilacs at Heidelberg had grown more lush every year since Robert’s grandfather had them brought from the east; they were particularly spectacular that spring. Their fragrance was so powerful that it penetrated through the entire castle, even filling the great hall. Two long parallel lines of mature trees, perhaps twenty feet or more in height and stretching that far as well, swept in an elegant curve across the courtyard, creating a shaded arcade beneath which to stroll, with quiet spots to pause and talk. They were kept meticulously pruned of sucker growth, leaving only the irregularly curved and twisted main trunks beneath the canopy of flowers above and through which clear views of the garden wall, with its flowering vines and fountains, could be seen. Everything seemed hopeful that morning. Aurianna had recovered as though never having been afflicted and Ava truly believed that the exorcism had succeeded, even though no direct contact had been made

with the evil spirit. She had been warned that the demon was crafty and would hide for a time before reappearing, but she didn't want to believe that. This was a reason for happiness and celebration and as they walked beneath the blossoms, Ava thought it time to tell her daughter about her impending betrothal. She hoped for a happy response.

"Your father and I have been negotiating the terms of your marriage, Aurianna, and I would like to discuss this with you," she began, rather too formally, intending to communicate the seriousness of the subject.

"It's someone I've never met, I suppose," Aurianna answered sarcastically.

"Now don't be disrespectful or nasty Anna. We have discussed this before and you know what is expected of you."

This was a particularly vexing time for the Wittelsbachs of Heidelberg. There was trouble on every frontier, especially exacerbated by the recent decision of their cousin, Stephen of Lower Bavaria, to divide his estate between his three sons. This was seen as a dangerous weakening of his power and was sure to generate dissent that could lead to civil war, as other claimants were sure to emerge. Count Robert thought it imperative to strengthen his alliances to the south and east and was for that reason prepared to trade his daughter's hand for a secure southern frontier.

"Well, who is it then mother, if I'm allowed to know," she went on.

Ava answered with a rising tone of genuine enthusiasm, stemming from her assessment of the match as the best possible outcome for them all. "You'll be pleased to know that it is Frederick Hohenzollern of Nuremberg." Nuremberg was near and Frederick was German, neither fact by any means guaranteed in these matters; and he was young. "He's only twenty-eight, Aurianna. He's the Burgrave of Nuremberg and, according to your father, will in due time become the Elector and Margrave of Brandenburg as well." Aurianna said nothing and the two walked slowly to a small stone bench circling the trunk of a majestic spreading oak that dominated the south side of the courtyard and dwarfed the twisted lilacs. "Sit a while here with me daughter, we must talk this out before you speak to your father."

Still, Aurianna was silent. This was something she had expected for some time now. After all she was already seventeen and by the standards of her age should have been at least betrothed by the age of twelve. But, she was an unusual prize and Robert knew it. Beautiful and brilliant, highly refined and cultured, she had been fostered to her aunt Elizabeth at the royal court in Vienna until age fourteen, where she was on display for the crowned heads of Europe, shopping a match for their sons. At fifteen, multiple portraits were commissioned from the greatest artists of the time and sent as gifts to the right places. There were many inquiries and more than a few proposals, but Robert pursued only one, the Hohenzollern heir.

"Say something, Aurianna. Aren't you excited? He could have been fifty and fat you know," she quipped smiling.

The joke wasn't funny for Aurianna. She had never seen this man, never even seen his portrait. Why was she peddled around like meat on the hoof and not he? "I wouldn't care if he were fifty and fat mother, if I loved him."

Ava had difficulty with that response, remembering her own betrothal and wedding and how much she cried and how hard she fought, only to fail. "Your father has worked hard to make this match, which is the best you could ever hope for."

"It's not the best I could hope for mother, I could hope for much more," she said, and asked sadly, "is it settled then?"

Ava felt it important to reinforce the political importance of this union and added, "the Bavarian title is being divided and this might mean war. Linking our family with the Hohenzollerns could be pivotal."

"Is it settled then, mother?" Aurianna repeated in an annoyed tone.

"No, the dowry price has not been worked out," and then, "he wants all of our timber land in the Black Forest. We have offered cash only, which will mean selling some fiefs here in the Rhineland, but ... well we shall see." Ava stopped suddenly realizing that this was not what her daughter wanted to hear and regretted the pecuniary details.

"That's all it is, isn't it mother, bartering and merchandising? Well not with me, mother, I will not be bought or sold. You cannot force me."

"Careful, Aurianna! Don't be arrogant. You owe obedience to your father and you may not do anything he has forbidden you to do. This is your father's command and you cannot deny it."

"What if I were not chaste, mother? What if I were pregnant, mother, what then would your precious Hohenzollern prince think? How high would the dowry price be then?"

"Why do you talk this way child? You knew this day would come." She paused for a few seconds and then asked, "is there someone Aurianna, someone you haven't told me about?"

"Don't worry mother, there's no one," she answered with a mournful sigh. "Not yet. But, there will be, and soon, if I can manage it."

Ava was angry. "You are insolent, Aurianna and disrespectful and I will not have it. Go this instant to the chapel. I will send Father Crapho to hear your confession. Then retire to your chambers and wait for your father."

Aurianna turned and walked defiantly away, leaving her mother sitting beneath the spreading oak. Her thoughts raced and raged, but she feared it was hopeless. Her alternatives were few and they all led ultimately to the convent at Mulhausen. Her only chance was to convince her father and this was a slim chance indeed. Rather than repent, it was to vent her anger and prepare for the clash with her father that she entered the confessional of Chancellor Adalbrech Crapho.

"God bless you my child. Your mother has informed me of your wish to make a confession of your sins," Crapho began making a sign of the cross in the most ceremonious manner.

"Yes, Father, I am most grievously sorry for having offended my dear and loving mother, but I cannot condone or allow myself to be stripped of my dignity and my freedom," Aurianna began in a very argumentative tone that showed no hint of self-reproach.

"Of what do you speak child?" the chancellor asked, unaware of the matrimonial plans being negotiated and trying to conceal his intense interest.

"Of my impending marriage over which I have been given no influence, much less control. It is unconscionable of my father to force me to marry a man I do not even know, much less love."

The priest was careful not to appear to pry when he commented, "the alliances of state often force young brides to go far from home and to places with strange customs. Is this what you fear?"

"No, it's not that at all. He's young and handsome and he's even German, but that's not the point. I did not choose him and that is the point. This is my choice and no other's."

Crapho was tantalized by the bits of information about the identity of the suitor, but didn't dare push further. "You are guilty of the sin of pride, child; your duty is to obey your father. Your father is the head of the household as Jesus Christ is head of the Church. You must remain humble and obedient to him in all things."

"I will not obey blindly. It is immoral for him to force me."

"You are contemptuous of authority Lady Aurianna. It is immoral for you to disobey."

"Does the Church not teach us that we have free will and a responsibility to decide for ourselves? How can I do this when I know that what I'm told to do is wrong?"

"This is not to be debated with me my child. It is a matter between you and your father. For what precisely are you repentant?"

"I am truly sorry for having distressed my mother," she answered honestly, but with little outward sign of remorse.

"As you should be, my lady. Go to your oratory and pray for enlightenment in these matters. And remember tears betoken regret and are a mark of contrition."

Aurianna loved her parents. She knew well their circumspect traditions and she respected their judgment. But this matter drove to the very core of her instinct for freedom. She was being used for the benefit of some vague greater group good that she did not recognize and in fact even opposed to the degree that it threatened to smother her individuality.

Barefoot and dressed only in a loose linen chemise, she had been praying in the small chapel adjoining her bed chamber for several minutes when the priest arrived and lit two candles at the ends of the

short altar. "You may interrupt your penance now my lady, your father, the count, wishes to speak with you."

Robert adored his daughter and wanted desperately not to have to hurt her. He knew well the impetuosity and rebelliousness of youth and that she was indeed his blood, his eldest child; how much she embodied all that he hoped to someday see in his son. She was strong willed and determined and when threatened stood her ground tenaciously. How could he not be proud of her? But this was not a world of freedom, but a world of responsibility. Everyone was born to a fixed and unmoving place and to upset this delicate God-given balance would be to threaten the very foundations of civilization. He knew his duty and would do it. She must likewise know and do her's.

In what was an unusual sign of softening and reconciliation Robert came to his daughter's chambers. She sensed immediately that he recognized that she had been wronged and she hoped that this might signal a reversal of his intent. "Hello father," she began going quickly to him. Robert prevented her from bowing as was the formal custom by holding her face between his hands and kissing her on the forehead. "My most precious girl," he said. "I know these are difficult times for you." She put her arms around his waist and pulled him into a tight embrace. Neither spoke for a few seconds until she said, "father please allow me to tell you why I do not want to marry Frederick of Nuremberg."

Robert knew from long experience the danger of entering a debate with his keen witted and clever child and so as not to risk elevating her status to an equal in this process he answered, "these are not your decisions to make, Aurianna, but your advice and counsel is of course welcome. Please tell me why you so vehemently oppose this wedding."

"You have taught me to be independent and decisive yet in this, and indeed in any important matter of my life, you deny me the right to choose. Is this not casuistry of the most deceitful sort, which I know you abhor?"

Robert was determined not to be bated by her questions, but to remind her of her duty to obey. "My dear daughter, I will not engage in an argument, nor will I listen to a polemic from you. Your duty is to support your family. No one is safe or can succeed in this world without

the unequivocal loyalty of family. You belong to a family that coheres and holds together because everyone in it knows, and does, his or her duty. To think, much less to act, otherwise is to undermine the very fabric of our lives. Right now your family needs you. I need you."

"I don't mean to quarrel father, but you make it sound as though we are facing annihilation if I don't marry this strange man. That seems absurd to me."

She said it a bit too aggressively and her father responded firmly. "Don't be so dramatic daughter. Your marriage is an important aspect of our future and you know that. You have always known that. You should strive to be an asset to your family, Aurianna. Try not to become a liability."

She could sense her chances slipping and decided to try a slight change of tack. "I don't mean to torment you father, but why must I marry now. I feel weakened by my recent misfortunes and may not be able to bear it. I fear I may become an embarrassment to you."

"If you don't marry soon, Aurianna, it will be too late. You are already seventeen. Your prospects are diminishing. This match is ideal from every standpoint, and if word of your affliction becomes widespread, you may in the end lose every chance."

"But I don't love him," she pleaded in desperation, probing for any footing in the quick sand of relentless authority.

"You don't, yet, love him. That will come in time."

"And if I refuse to marry at all?"

"Marriage and bearing children is the way daughters are of service to their families, Aurianna. What else can you do?"

It was perhaps not the first, but certainly the most brutal, way she had been forced to face the reality of her inequality. What else could she do? The question echoed over and over in her mind. All of her feistiness and self-confidence could not quell the torrent of tears that suddenly flooded her face. Even as a small child she had never before cried so uncontrollably. What else could she do but dutifully obey and go to Nuremberg, marry the duke and give birth to sons and heirs. She fought her emotions, finally smothering herself into a sobbing whimper. Her father was bewildered and stood mute for what seemed like an eternity, not realizing how deeply his words had denigrated and belittled

her. He truly loved her and felt responsible for her pain, but remained a child of his age, utterly unable to cope, saying, "I'm so sorry my darling daughter. If I could change it I would, but you are a woman; I cannot make you a man."

She was angered and it renewed her determination; her impulse was to strike back, but her options were pathetically few and limited in scope to manipulative psychological warfare. "If I were to tell you father that there is someone I love and hope to marry would you then reconsider and give your consent?"

Robert was shocked and failed to answer for a full minute while he tried to sort it out. Was this only a hypothetical question or was there indeed a secret suitor, unknown to him? It was unlikely that she could, undetected, have gotten close to anyone suitable, since her circle of acquaintances was severely limited and she knew she could not marry below her rank, which was quite high. Men, it was true, could take brides below them in status, this was common, but daughters were expected to move the family up the social ladder, after all why else would the father pay a dowry price.

"Of whom do you speak, Aurianna?" he asked seriously.

"I cannot say father as he has not yet expressed his love for me, but I am hopeful," she parried studying his expression for clues of her impact.

"There is someone then?"

"Yes," she answered tersely.

The count felt it necessary to be stern and blunt. "I must caution you, Aurianna, to maintain your propriety and I forbid you to have any intimate association with anyone not of your class and rank. I shall ask you once again, who is this man? Is he a knight in my service?"

"It would not be fair, father, to give his name for he knows nothing of this. It is only my fancy."

"Be careful about your fancy, Aurianna. I trust it is not necessary for me to have you chaperoned, but if needs be, I will."

Aurianna was not certain if her bluff had done anything to derail, or even slow, the wedding plans and feared that it might have an opposite effect, adding some urgency to the need to bring the negotiations at Nuremberg to a successful conclusion. But, at least she

had somewhat leveled the playing field and was certain her mother would visit her very soon.

Chapter Thirteen

MANNHEIM WAS A VILLAGE at the point where the Rhine and the Neckar met. Despite its unimposing appearance, it was a most important river port for Count Robert, who relied on it for transshipping goods to and from his castle at Heidelberg. Robert also required most commercial river traffic to stop at Mannheim to pay tolls as well as to provide him with staple goods at just prices. The village had held a charter for more than a century and was governed directly under the count's sovereignty. Although it existed as an independent enclave it was almost completely surrounded by the vineyard lands of Bodenolph von Vulpes. Vulpes coveted this town for its strategic location and its toll rights and he unsuccessfully sought, on several occasions, to buy the fief from Robert.

It was late afternoon and the raft was at anchor. "This is our last stop Ludwig. Your father has sent a carriage to wait for us. From here we will travel over the road to Heidelberg," Shilgen said as they saddled and packed the horses. Heilewif was carefully retrieving her things from their hiding place and reviewing, in her mind, the plan she was formulating to overcome the scourge. She was pleased with the outcome of her first experiment. The Devil's Cherry had produced an effect similar to the one described to her, although apparently somewhat less severe. The knight had ingested a large spoonful of powder, ground from oven-dried seed and mixed with wine; he was stricken almost

immediately, sat stupefied for several hours and remembered almost nothing of the incident.

Since the powder did not dissolve in the wine, it made a pulpy liquid that was not suitable, in this crude form at least, for clandestine use, so Heilewif had begun experimenting with the preparation of an infusion, made by soaking the powder in brandy, so as to have the alcohol dissolve the active oils out of the plant fiber and yield a fluid preparation that could more easily be concealed in wine or food. For this she enlisted the aid of the young squire.

"Keep these jars in a dark place and shake them twice every day," she instructed. The second jar contained another fleshy root, dried, ground, and mixed with brandy in the same way, one that was known to have effects similar to the Devil's Cherry, but stronger. It was sometimes called Hog's Bean and was known to be an infamous weapon of witches. Satan himself, it was said, cultivated and nurtured these plants, here on earth, in order to give his cohorts powerful tools with which to torment the human race.

"What are they," the boy asked, always curious and wanting to be part of the intrigue he could sense building around him.

"They are important medicines, which I hope can help your sister," Heilewif answered and then added, "I think it would be best if you kept them well hidden and told no one about them."

"I agree," Shilgen said. "These are dangerous times. There are conspiracies afoot concerning the uncertainty surrounding the emperor. We must be wary and mistrustful of everyone. It would be best if we could slip unseen through the territory of Lord Vulpes."

Sir Shilgen's effort to avoid contact with Count Robert's rebellious vassal, however, was almost immediately undone by the sudden appearance of Vulpes' chancellor. The little man was flanked by two armed retainers and seemed to know exactly who they were. He walked purposefully across the gang plank from the pier and directly to them. "May I introduce myself? I am Trapsta Scardo, chancellor in the service of Lord Bodenolph von Vulpes. And you sire, I assume, are Sir Shilgen Sturmere." Both men bowed politely and Scardo continued, "I am ordered to arrange your safe passage through to my lord's ..."

But before he could finish, Sir Shilgen interrupted saying, "I am to meet an escort from my lord, Robert. Has it arrived?"

"Yes, the carriage and coachmen are here, but the escort has been ordered back to Heidelberg for defense of the castle. Considerable unrest has spread from the east as a result of the religious turmoil there and the emperor has ordered Count Robert urgently to Prague with as many of his feudal forces as he could muster."

"Lord Robert is not at Heidelberg then?" Shilgen asked, unsure of the magnitude of this unexpected complication. It was very unusual for the emperor to exert his feudal right to military service from his vassals in so urgent a manner and Shilgen hoped that the hastily assembled force was not headed for disaster. "Is it war?"

"I don't believe so. It appears to be a show of force and a warning to the heretic fanatics and other troublemakers around Prague."

"Is Lord Vulpes among them?"

"No, my Lord Vulpes was away when the order arrived and could not be reached, but he has since returned and awaits you at the manor house. It will be dark soon and the carriage is waiting."

Sir Shilgen wondered how Vulpes knew of their arrival and how much more he might know of their mission. There seemed to be little he could do to avoid this apparent gesture of hospitality and he couldn't refuse the offer of help, even though he knew that Count Robert would never have asked for Vulpes' assistance. "My Lord Vulpes' manor, Black Swan, is directly on the road to Heidelberg and will provide a convenient rest stop," the chancellor remarked, smiling and signaling the coachmen to see to the as yet unpacked baggage. The situation unfolded so suddenly that Shilgen had no opportunity to formulate a stratagem. The use of carts and carriages was unacceptable by the chivalric standards of medieval knights, for whom it was demeaning to ride in one, but Shilgen had no choice. "Squire, see to the horses and ride escort, I will accompany our guest in the carriage."

"You're going to ride in the carriage?" Ludwig questioned, as though in disbelief, especially embarrassing in the presence of Scardo and two of Vulpes' knights.

"Yes, I am going to ride in the carriage," Shilgen responded brusquely, escorting the old woman and her most problematic packages

along the pier and to Heilewif he added in a whisper, “and I think that you should not speak to anyone until we reach home. Keep yourself cloaked and your face hidden under your hood as best you can. I am ordered to bring you to the castle undetected, especially by Lord Vulpes, who is not to be trusted.” This, of course, was not going to be possible.

The very nature of feudal decentralization made the construction and maintenance of roads very difficult. Feudal contracts required villages and fief holders to look after the routes within their territories, but most roads were little more than rutted paths. Transport overland was more economical by pack mule and caravan than by wheeled vehicles, which often needed to detour well off the many impassable sections in order to make progress. The road from Mannheim to Heidelberg, however, was well maintained, under strict orders from Count Robert, and was regularly inspected by the steward, Obulus. It ran parallel to the river, along the ridge line, and connected the many vineyards that made up this rich wine producing hill country.

Upstream travel, against the river’s current, was slow and tedious, often making the road a preferred alternative. It was wide enough for a four wheeled carriage, of which Robert had three, gifts from his distant cousin Sigismund of Hungary. They were of the latest design, built with an enclosed body, suspended on flexible wooden slats attached to the frame with iron pins that allowed the coach to absorb much of the shock from a jarring terrain and they had a pivoting front axel that greatly improved maneuverability. Pulled by a two horse team, at a walk, the rig was tolerably comfortable, and most importantly, in Shilgen’s mind at this critical moment, it was private.

“I recognize that man. I know him from somewhere... from before,” Heilewif said, stricken by a feeling of foreboding as the carriage began its bumpy journey.

“His name is Scardo, Trapster Scardo. He is Vulpes’ chancellor, I believe,” Shilgen answered.

“His face is unknown to me, but I do recall the voice. The accent is hard, from the Low Countries. He’s not from here. Perhaps I

am wrong, but I have a feeling that I have heard that voice before... Scardo," she repeated, "...Scardo... there was a man by that name..."

"It's not important now," Shilgen cut her short with a sign of impatience in his voice. "We must be careful to conceal your identity. Remember you are still wanted here for heresy and until we are safely at Heidelberg you could be arrested at any time and delivered to the ecclesiastical authorities for trial. Stay covered for fear that someone might recognize you and speak as little as possible. We will say nothing of who you are unless asked directly by Lord Vulpes, then if needs be we will say you are brought to Heidelberg to teach the Lady Aurianna to sing and play musical instruments." Shilgen remembered having overheard the countess lament the lack of musical training in her daughter's education and was sure that this would ring true. "We will call you Binhildis and say you are from Strasbourg."

The sun was setting behind them and the view from the road, high along the hillside, revealed a long and curving valley floor below, framed by sometimes sharp and precipitous slopes, their bare early spring aspect offering no hint of the beautiful dense green sea of grape leaves that would cover them by midsummer. Darkness had already blanketed the river below and the shadows were slowly, but perceptibly, creeping up the hillsides toward them.

The road connected the broad countryside to the port of Mannheim and was capable of carrying heavy wagons. It was also the mail road and Robert's curriers used it almost daily. Horses were kept at three points along the route to provide relay stations for changing mounts or teams to keep the traffic moving steadily, if slowly. It took almost two hours for the carriage to cross the barely five miles of road between Mannheim and the manor of Bodenolph von Vulpes.

Black Swan was large and imposing, but not strictly speaking a castle since it was not fortified. Shilgen did notice some construction activity, which seemed to suggest that Vulpes was disregarding Robert's orders that no bulwarks or barricades be built around any village or manor house in his domain. A large collection of field stone was clearly evident, as were several huge piles of aggregate, ash and clay near the newly constructed foundation of what looked to become a tower of some sort. Shilgen could also see considerable activity in the dim

twilight below them along the bank where limestone was being burned into quick lime, which was in turn being slaked in the river. They're making cement, the knight thought to himself and in large quantities. It looked like Vulpes was building a wall around his residence and seemed to be preparing for war.

Bodenolph von Vulpes was a gracious host and his charm easily disarmed Shilgen who had not previously been treated with such obvious deference. Heilewif dutifully remained silent while Shilgen spun his story about her identity and traded hawking and hunting tales with his new acquaintance. She hoped that he could see, as she could, the devious design in Vulpes' words and compliments.

They dined lavishly, drank wine and brandy in copious amounts and the evening began to remind Ludwig more and more of an earlier one at the cottage of the peasant Heinrich Zumwald. "Perhaps we should retire Sir Shilgen," Heilewif offered, as darkness fully fell, threatening to overwhelm even the ample torches that lined the walls. "You yourself said we must make an early start tomorrow."

"Yes, perhaps you are right, Binhildis," Shilgen answered, swallowing the slight hint of a smile, called forth by a bit too much alcohol, at the thought of his artful ruse.

But, Vulpes objected and looking menacingly at Heilewif said, "please, not before our guest has honored us with a song, or perhaps an instrumental selection. We rarely get the opportunity to have a professional musician in our midst."

Heilewif said nothing and Shilgen, awakened by a wave of fear in the pit of his stomach, parried with, "it's very late and I'm sure the lady is exhausted. Besides, we have no instruments with us."

Vulpes evaded with, "what instrument do you prefer?" again smiling and looking at Scardo, who had suddenly appeared as though by magic. The little man added, "we have flutes madam and lutes," in a slightly mocking tone. "Why there's the start of a ballad my lords and ladies," he went on in a sing-song manner, looking at Vulpes, "we have flutes and we have lutes," and the two laughed loudly. "What is your pleasure madam?"

This was an unexpected predicament, occasioned by Shilgen's overly active imagination and he was now caught without a ready recourse. The thought of telling another outright lie was repugnant to him and he felt honor bound to face this problem in a forthright manner. It was true, he thought, to support the first lie takes another seven and just as he was resolved to confront the lord of the manor in his own house, a decision which could have had dire consequences, Heilewif asked, "do you have by chance a ten-course lute?"

The unexpected thrust caught even Vulpes off guard. He turned to his chancellor and asked somewhat bewildered, "do we have one of those, Scardo?"

The chancellor answered with more than a little uncertainty, "I'm not sure, sire; I believe we do... but I'll have to..."

"That won't be necessary," Vulpes responded angrily, suddenly standing and raising his hand. "I fear the lady is weary and wishes to retire."

Everyone stood simultaneously and the relieved knight said, "if that is your pleasure my lord. We look forward to the comfort of a soft bed and thank you for your hospitality."

"But first I would like a word with you before you go," Vulpes said, ushering the knight into a pitch black side chamber, while the others exited the hall. "I know who the woman is," he announced, his piercing eyes glinting in the flickering glow of the candle he held between them, "and I am aware of the difficulties at Heidelberg." He continued in a lecturing tone that gave no indication of any desire to engage in conversation. "I don't know what influence you might have with Sir Robert, but he must be made to see that if he persists in his obstinacy in the matter of the imperial election it will be disastrous for him... and I might add for you as well. The archbishop will soon call the Electors to Frankfort. This recent ploy of the emperor to assemble his feudal vassals at Prague is only a pathetic attempt to ascertain the level of his support, of which he has precious little, as he will soon see. Our lord, Robert, was the only one of the high nobles to respond. He stands alone in this. Make him understand that."

Sir Shilgen felt that honor required him to respond. "He stands alone only because you and others like you, who are bound by oaths of fealty to stand with him, have abandoned your duty."

"Measure your words, young knight. The stakes are high and opportunities are opening for able men of your rank to rise. My first duty is to protect myself, as is yours. The new emperor will look favorably upon those who help him. Think about what I say."

"That would be treason," Shilgen responded angrily and turned to go, but Vulpes restrained him.

"You misunderstand my intent loyal knight. I don't ask you to abandon your lord, only that you guide him in the proper direction. The winds of change are blowing very briskly. Your duty is to help him avoid a disaster for which he seems destined, and you can expect to be rewarded when you do. New fiefs will be created by a new emperor and you could be elevated."

Two men parted without speaking further, but Sir Shilgen spent a sleepless night wrestling with the implication, as well as the temptation, of Vulpes' suggestion. As a simple knight he was of the lowest rank of untitled Ritter, unworthy of even the most casual glance from his beloved Aurianna. But if he were to be raised to the level of the titled nobility, a Fürst perhaps, or a Herzog even, with his own lands and estates, then everything would be different. And, he would be doing his lord a good service as well, helping him to avoid the certain defeat that was threatening. He would surely be honored by Aurianna's father for this foresight and courage in recommending the unpopular, but correct, course of action. Robert would welcome his intentions toward his daughter and she would love him as he loved her. How easy it was to find logical justifications for what were emotionally driven desires and to allow reason to enter the equation as the eager servant of selfishness.

Chapter Fourteen

THEY TRAVELED FOR A FULL DAY, stopping only once for rest and to change horses and reached the castle at Heidelberg in late afternoon. With Robert away, the Countess von Wittelsbach was entrusted with complete responsibility for the administration of their domains. She was doubly concerned, first with the most recent attack on her daughter, which appeared to be particularly severe, and then with the unknown dangers threatening her husband in the east. But, the countess was a very competent woman for whom crises were commonplace and she was well practiced in prioritizing her time. She wasted no energy on events that were beyond her control, but concentrated tenaciously on those that were. “So you are the mysterious Heilewif,” she said smiling, and then turned to the knight. “And your journey, Sir Shilgen, was it eventful?”

“Yes, madam, very eventful,” he responded, bowing distinctly.

“Is there anything I need to know now?”

“No, madam...” he answered, preferring to withhold to a later time his suspicion that Vulpes was fortifying Black Swan.

“And you my brave son,” she said without further delay, throwing her arms around Ludwig, who appeared more than a little embarrassed. “Were you helpful to your master?”

“Yes, mother,” he said pulling back slightly and bowing in the way Sir Shilgen had taught him.

“Was he, Shilgen?”

"Indeed, madam," the knight answered and then quickly asked, "is my lady, Aurianna, well?"

"Sadly, no. I'm afraid she lies once again afflicted by the awful curse," the countess said, in a resigned way that seemed to show that hope was rapidly receding. "I truly pray that you can help us dear lady. Are you too tired to begin immediately?"

"No, madam," the old woman answered and Ava, excusing the knight and his squire, led her by the hand toward the staircase to the private chambers. As they passed the sentry at the top of the steps Heilewif asked, "is this passageway always posted?"

"Yes, day and night. All the gates and doors in the castle are guarded."

"And who is in charge of this?"

"The usher, Berwich Mann," Ava answered, and Heilewif nodded, already beginning to gather the data that she hoped, when pieced together, would unravel the scheme, for that's exactly what she believed it to be, a human plot. Witchcraft perhaps, but witchcraft requires a witch and for all of their occult secrecy witches were in fact human and had to work in the real physical world.

Aurianna was being bathed by her chamber maid when they arrived. The oval wooden tub had been filled with hot water, laboriously carried up from the kitchen, two stories below. She had been soaking for some time and Heilewif recognized the sweet scent of orris root that had been added to the bath water. The maid was scrubbing her back with a soft sponge and white olive oil soap, which she knew to be very scarce and expensive and this too was infused with a scent that Heilewif identified as lavender spike oil. Rose petals floated in the bath water. The maid paused as the two women approached and bowed her head and backed away a step, but Ava prevented her saying, "please Gisela go on as though we weren't here."

Heilewif watched Aurianna's movements carefully as she was helped from the tub and wrapped in a large linen robe. She was as though sleep walking, but her eyes were open and her pupils greatly dilated. The maid servant guided her to a short stool and she sat to have her hair washed and combed. "What is that you are washing her hair with?" Heilewif asked and the girl answered, "it is rosewater, my lady."

Heilewif nodded and went closer and with her lips only a few inches from the young woman's ear asked distinctly, "what is your name, my lady?" There was no response.

Heilewif turned to the countess and said, "I would like to question this girl further and I believe it best if you were not present."

Ava was pleased with the old woman's assertiveness and agreed to wait outside the bed chamber. As she turned to go she said, "Gisela, I expect you to answer all of Lady Heilewif's questions truthfully and without hesitation."

"Yes, my lady," the girl answered and as she began to once again comb Aurianna's hair Heilewif asked, "what is your name?"

"Gisela, madam."

"And have you been here at Heidelberg castle long?"

"Almost a year, madam. I am from the village and was brought here by Herr Steinmutter."

"Herr Steinmutter?"

"Herr Steinmutter is the chamberlain," the girl responded, in a way that hinted of disrespect. "He supervises all of the household staff."

"You are the personal servant for Lady Aurianna?"

"I am the chambermaid responsible for her rooms, madam"

"Are you here all day, Gisela?"

"Yes, madam."

"And you see everything that comes and goes don't you Gisela?"

"Oh yes madam, there is very little that escapes my eye."

"Do you have any idea what has caused this terrible illness that so debilitates your lady?"

"Why everyone believes it to be a curse madam, a curse of Satan. Father Crapho says so and everyone searches for signs of the witch's spell."

"Of what sort of searches do you speak?"

"Father Crapho comes nearly every day and looks through her clothes and linens; he checks the bed clothes and under the bed for instruments of the witch's curse he says, and I am to examine every inch of her skin for any marks."

"And what else do you do Gisela?"

"I clean the rooms, empty the chamber pots, make the bed, and help my lady with her bath as you see and to dress. I then bring the soiled laundry down to the washing woman and collect the clean things and bring them back. These are then put away with herbs and flowers, especially irises, to freshen and scent them. My lady so loves pretty things and sweet smells..."

"What do you do as it regards the curse, as you called it?"

"I taste all of my lady's food and drink."

"And have you ever been stricken?"

"No, madam."

"While she is here in the bed chamber, and in your presence, can you say that the lady never puts anything into her mouth that you have not first sampled?"

"Not food or drink madam, but she cleans her teeth with rolled leaves of mint and these are put into her mouth, as is her mouthwash."

Heilewif could see that the girl was young and trying to be helpful, but she was not beyond suspicion since her proximity to the unfortunate victim provided opportunity and the possibility of a conspiracy could not be dismissed.

"How many rooms are you responsible for?"

"There are three rooms and the main hallway. I sweep and wash the floors everyday, polish the plate things and pick and replace all of the cut flowers..."

"Does anyone help you with any of your work?"

"No, madam... except for the chapel. Lady Aurianna's private chapel is kept locked by father Crapho, who has forbidden anyone but the family from entering it. He tends to it himself, cleans it and replaces the candles and such."

"Did you clean the chapel before?"

"Yes, madam. But since the curse struck, Father Crapho has kept everyone out."

"Thank you, Gisela," Heilewif said, "that will be all for now." She then turned and walked around the suite gauging the rooms and distances. The bedroom was large and the big oak bed was stately and almost imposing for a young woman. A small balcony, overlooking the garden, prevented the exclusion of clandestine entry as a real possibility,

despite the presence of guards at all of the doors. A smaller side room, apparently used for reading and study, was comfortably furnished, but seemed little used. The heavy oak door to the chapel was locked. "There is one more thing Gisela. You told me you went down to retrieve the clean laundry and that you carried it up yourself. Do you carry up everything that enters the chambers?"

"Oh no, madam, the boys from the kitchen bring up the bath water every morning and there are often letters and packages delivered by the messengers."

"And who are these messengers?"

"They are part of the stable crew."

Heilewif knew that this girl was the closest servant to the person of the lady, Aurianna, and needed to test her for a sense of the likelihood that she could be an inside conspirator.

"Do you like your mistress, Gisela?"

"Oh yes, madam, very much."

"How did you come to be her chambermaid?"

"She chose me madam," she said almost beaming, "because I was of her age and because we could talk she said and even be friends."

"And do you talk to the lady and are you friends?"

"Oh yes we do talk, for hours sometimes."

About what do you talk?"

"Oh... about everything, madam."

"About personal things, do you know personal things about the lady?"

"Yes, madam... some things... but I cannot speak about that."

"Does she have visitors, at night perhaps? Does anyone enter over the balcony?"

"No, madam. You insult my lady. She has no visitors who come over the balcony."

Heilewif believed by the tone of voice and facial expression that Gisela could be trusted and might be useful later, but, nevertheless, her youth and a certain naïveté might make her vulnerable to a cunning conspirator.

“I will need to interview everyone with access to your daughter,” Heilewif said as she and Ava walked down the wide main staircase to the great hall. “I believe that the symptoms she displays are being caused by a drug or drugs that she is ingesting somehow. I don’t yet know how to create this effect, especially the amnesia that I am told follows the stupor, but I am convinced that it can be done.”

Ava responded. “But why would anyone be doing this?”

Heilewif knew that an answer to that question would lead them to the evildoer. “There has to be a connection between motive and opportunity and this is where you can be of great service, my lady. I will concentrate on everyone with opportunity, but only you and the Count Robert can uncover the possible motives.”

“You don’t believe she is possessed by a demon then?” Ava asked, already knowing the answer, but wanting to hear it strongly asserted, after weeks of following the advice of her chancellor.

“No, my lady, she is not possessed by a demon, but she could be under the spell of a witch; It is clear that she has been poisoned, plain and simple.”

“But we have been so careful to prevent that; it doesn’t seem possible.”

“This is why it is so easy to attribute it to something supernatural. We too often give up on what we don’t understand.”

Heilewif, when deeply enmeshed in the complexity of a puzzle, changed direction often. “Who is Steinmutter?”

“Ulrich Steinmutter is our chamberlain. He is in charge of all the household personnel.”

“And what is your assessment of him?”

“He is self-serving and boastful, but is competent and diligent,” Ava answered, already beginning to realize that everyone with access to Aurianna was a suspect, and the process of elimination was meant finally isolate the answer. The method was exciting and appealed to the part of her that wanted logical answers and a knowable world. At last they could do something active and aggressive to end this thing that tormented her daughter. They were not helpless any longer.

Ava ordered a sitting area arranged near one of the great side fireplaces, which were still kept continuously burning in the great hall, even this late in the spring, and summoned the chamberlain.

"Herr Steinmutter this woman is investigating the illness which has stricken our innocent daughter and which we all abhor. She has our fullest confidence and authority. Answer her questions as if they were from our own mouth."

"Yes, madam," the chamberlain said softly bowing as the countess stood and walked away.

"I will be brief, Herr Steinmutter, as I know you are duty bound," Heilewif began and then added. "How many chambermaids work directly in the private family quarters?"

"There are four, madam, two for the master suite and one each for the suites of the Lady Aurianna and Sir Ludwig."

"And do they help each other in any way?"

"No, madam. They are kept strictly separated for supervision's sake. They are not allowed to fraternize while working and have clearly delineated duties."

"So, is it safe to say that only Gisela enters the chambers of the Lady Aurianna?"

"Yes."

"And how would you characterize the girl? Is she a competent chambermaid?"

"Indeed, she is madam."

"And do you yourself go into Aurianna's rooms to observe her?"

"Yes, but only after the lady has departed of course; I sometimes go up, unannounced, to inspect her work."

"And do you always find it satisfactory?"

"Yes, madam."

"Do you ever go to the private chambers at any other time or for reasons other than to supervise your staff?"

"No, madam."

Thus the late afternoon passed with the old woman gradually expanded her investigation of the castle staff as one name led to another.

"You are Herr Mann, the usher, am I correct?"

"Yes, madam."

"What are your duties and areas of responsibility, Herr Mann?"

"I am in full charge of all the doormen and castle guards."

"And do you have records of which guards were on particular posts at certain times?"

"Yes, madam; there is a book."

"Bring this book to the countess tomorrow."

"Yes, madam."

"Who is authorized to pass the guard and enter the family chambers?"

"During the day, the family, the priest and the chambermaids routinely pass the guard unchallenged. All others would be stopped and required to state their business. No one enters at night."

"I understand that the chamberlain, Herr Steinmutter, goes up to the family quarters on occasion. Would he be challenged by the guard?"

"Probably not, madam, as he has legitimate business there."

"And the messengers that make deliveries would they be challenged?"

"Probably not, madam, as they are up and down often and are known to us."

"And the same would be true of the kitchen boys who carry up the bath water and in fact anyone else familiar to the guards. Is that true to say?"

The usher was uncomfortable, but honest, and answered, "yes, madam."

Heilewif thought it time to review her investigation with the countess and thanked the usher who left anticipating a reprimand and fearing for his position. Easy access to the victim was obviously a glaring problem and Heilewif reasoned that this should be addressed immediately. The countess waited impatiently for her to finish and the two women walked together in the garden at twilight.

"Do you have children, Heilewif?" Ava asked, and sensed a measure of sadness in the old woman's voice when she answered, "yes, my lady. Like you I have a daughter."

"That's wonderful Heilewif, and is she well and happy?"

"I hope so madam," the old woman answered in a way that told the countess not to continue.

"Please, Heilewif, I would like you to call me Ava," she said, stopping to emphasize the mother's bond that was building between them. "I know you understand the anguish I am going through."

"Yes... Ava, I do. We will overcome this," Heilewif answered and began to share her thoughts. "I would like to pursue the hypothesis that Aurianna is stricken by an illness brought on by some foreign agent, which she is either eating or drinking; tomorrow I will question all those involved in that service. But for now I must report that almost anyone in the castle could be introducing the poison after the food is prepared, since security for the private chambers is very lax. Anyone it seems can pass the guards at almost any time."

To which Ava responded thoughtfully, "well that can certainly be tightened, and now while she is stricken we could confine her and screen everything; but the curse is intermittent and while it rests she is fully recovered with not even a memory of its effect. She is a vibrant young woman, energetic and active and will not suffer being confined then. I fear we will not be able to fully protect her."

"She should be made to understand that until this ends she must agree to follow my instructions faithfully," Heilewif asserted. "There is little we can do now, but in the next cycle we may be able to isolate the cause."

"But doesn't that make her a kind of guinea pig?"

"She is already in danger, Ava, there is no other way. And there are other guinea pigs in this battle as well. Your brave knight, Sir Shilgen, has been risking his life by allowing me to feed him powerful poisons that I believe might be the cause of the curse."

Ava was heavily impacted by the thought of the knight's sacrifice and was stunned to silence. Heilewif explained the nature of the effects she could simulate and the absence of an agent that would induce amnesia. She believed that she was halfway to a diagnosis that might lead to the discovery of an antidote. "I don't dare to try an antidote on her now. A mistake could cost her life."

"What do we do then?"

“For now, in the time that she lays in the trance, we will allow the routine to go unchanged. I will question the remaining people and complete my experiments with Sir Shilgen. When she recovers we will document her every movement and contact. In that way, if she is stricken again, we will be able to identify the precise time, since these narcotic chemicals act quickly, and hopefully find the cause of the affliction.”

“I hope she will cooperate,” Ava answered, not at all sure what her daughter’s reaction would be. “She is a strong willed young woman who resists any attempts to restrict her freedom.”

“That is all the better since it will be beneficial if she continues to appear normal. She need only keep a continuous account of her activities and do it in some way that won’t arouse suspicion.”

“She keeps a diary and often carries it with her. It would not be unusual to see her sit and write in it.”

“That seems ideal,” Heilewif said, “we need now only to convince her to do it.”

Chapter Fifteen

HEILEWIF SLEPT IN ONE OF THE EMPTY FAMILY suites so as to be visibly accorded the respect and status she would need to effectively conduct her inquest. Ava also insisted on assigning her a chambermaid and augmenting her meager wardrobe with rich adornments previously unknown to her. This was necessary she said because all of her interactions would be with men who would only defer to a woman of rank.

Heilewif rose at sunrise the next day to observe the early morning household routine and before beginning her interviews. With Ludwig as her guide, she toured the estate. The manor house at Heidelberg was a large three story rectangular stone structure with a central clerestory running the length of the building. The main floor was almost entirely of a single great hall, at one end of which a raised dais supported a long banquet table. Behind the table a central staircase led up to the family quarters on the third floor. Flanking the staircase were doors leading to a two story annex and work area for staff, which had a service stairway and dumbwaiters down to the kitchen below, on the first floor.

At the opposite end of the building, the long rectangular expanse of the great room opened directly into the main chapel, at the far end of which stood an altar, raised on its own platform. Regularly spaced wooden pillars held heavy oak beams that ran transversely across the entire range of the great room and supported a paneled wooden

ceiling, set with so many square bays. Six huge fireplaces, three along each wall, heated the room and small clear glass windows, close to the ceiling, provided adequate light in the day. The wide chimneys, rising from the fireplaces, were entirely inside the walls of the house and in winter were the only source of heat for the rooms above. There were also small vents in the ceiling to allow warm air to rise naturally into the third floor living spaces.

The chapel end of the main floor was beautifully surrounded by elaborate stain glass windows, which rivaled even those of Mainz and Speyer. The top floor terminated with the end of the great room directly below it, thereby allowing the chapel to be built with a vaulted two story nave, creating considerable height for the magnificent windows and giving the impression of a great cathedral in miniature.

In addition to the large kitchen, the first floor, which was directly at ground level, housed all of the storage and work rooms and the entrances for heavy deliveries. The back half of the ground floor was divided by a long central hallway, lighted by only one small window at the far end, with staff sleeping in dormitories on either side. Several private rooms and apartments were also available for married couples and families. A little used service stairway led up to the ambulatory behind the chapel altar.

The overseers and administrators of Robert's affairs lived with their families, in separate cottages, elsewhere on the estate. There were several other buildings on the grounds as well, including storehouses, barns, stables and a barracks for the knights. Only the steward, Otto Obulus, owned his own manor house and lived outside the castle walls.

The broad decorative main staircase that led up from the great hall to the private chambers divided at a broad landing into two narrower perpendicular sets of steps that ran along the wall ending in a vestibule and waiting area. A single guarded door opened into the central hallway of the family quarters. The clerestory above the hallway extended its full length and provided ample light.

The first few rooms nearest the vestibule were used for storage and as sleeping quarters for the four chambermaids. Next came six identical three room suites for the family children. Only two were used. Each suite included a spacious bed chamber, a sitting room and a small

private oratory. There was also, in each of the three south facing suites, a balcony off the bedroom that overlooked the gardens. At the chapel end was the master suite, which included four rooms on each wall connected by a large audience room at the end of the corridor. There was a private mezzanine beyond this, directly overlooking the chapel, and two spiral staircases led down to the side altars. It was the count's practice to attend mass with his family on this mezzanine. Locked doors divided the balcony from the count's private chambers.

By mid morning Heilewif began her fact finding by visiting the cook.

"My name is Ucco Frass," the short, stocky, balding man said, visibly nervous after having been so closely watched since the start of the ordeal. "I am the head cook."

"I am sure you know that tainted food is suspect in the illness of the Lady Aurianna. How could this be possible?"

"It is not possible, madam. I inspect and taste everything that goes up. Now, what happens after it goes up I cannot say. Besides, it is far more likely to be the wine, if you're looking for doctoring, things can be dissolved in wine more easily than in food and wine will better mask the taste."

The cook seemed to be a bit too free with his comments and Heilewif wanted to encourage him to continue. "What sort of a taste would need to be masked?"

"Why, a bitter taste I presume madam, as poisons are bitter by nature."

"Of what sort of poisons are you referring?" she asked matter-of-factly, concealing her interest in him as best she could by seeming uninformed.

"There are many poisons, madam. Many plants, which when eaten can cause strange effects."

"Effects similar to the symptoms seen in the Lady Aurianna?"

"I believe so madam, although I have not examined her myself. I offered to, but was denied."

"By the count or countess?"

“Oh no, madam. I would never dare address them directly on a matter so sensitive. No, I asked Father Crapho if I could be of service, telling him I understood the secrets of plants and that if I could examine her I might guess what the cause was, but he refused and ordered me not to bring it up again.”

“And where did you learn so much about plants and poisons?”

“I am a cook, madam.”

The simple answer rang true to Heilewif who knew that this wisdom of the working of the natural world was largely the domain of women for very much the same reason. She decided to test him and said. “The lady falls into a stupor. She is not unconscious, but is very relaxed and calm. She can walk about, but only with assistance, and does so almost as if she were in a hypnotic trance, but she does not speak and cannot be roused. Her pupils are fully dilated and when she recovers she has no memory of the event. Do you know of any poison that could cause this effect?”

“The reaction, as you describe it, is unknown to me. There is a substance that would cause the look in the eyes and the amnesia, and it is tranquilizing to an extent, but the deep narcotic stupor you describe, no.”

“And what is that?”

“Black Henbane madam and it is sometimes also called Hog’s Bean.”

The answer astounded Heilewif who was herself driven in this precise direction. She didn’t know quite what to make of Ucco Frass. “Do you possess any of this poison, Herr Frass?”

“No, madam, that would be dangerous, as it is a diabolical tool of the devil and sure to bring the charge of witchcraft to anyone that does.”

“And will this poison dissolve in wine?”

“Yes, madam. But it is very dangerous, as even a slight overdose can cause violent convulsions and certain death.”

The cook seemed open and honest and she didn’t believe him to be a viable suspect since he could, of course, not know who would eat any particular piece of his food, while the affliction was specific only to Aurianna. He could, however, become a valuable ally, who might be

able to add significantly to the investigation. Heilewif was now even more eager to expand her experiments with Sir Shilgen to include the Hog's Bean, which she increasingly believed might be at least part of the evil agent. But, it would have to wait while she finished her meetings.

The butler, who was in charge of the wine, would be next. He too, for the same reasons as the cook, was not himself a likely suspect, but the wine was. His name was Rapto Ungeschmach. He told her that all the wine was kept in barrels, or butts, and was decanted nightly as needed. This would make it possible for any number of people to have slipped something into it, but no one could be sure who would ultimately drink it. There were no special carafes reserved for the lady. She drank very little wine at meals, but was accustomed to taking some wine with her from the dining table to her bed chambers at night. The possibility remained that someone spiked the wine after she brought it upstairs. The only people other than the family who were on the second floor at night were the exit guard in the vestibule at the end of the corridor and the four chambermaids.

And finally she saw the marshall, Hugo Bulstrich. He oversaw the stables and was responsible for the horses, carriages and wagons. Bulstrich was a big man, rough hewn and was rarely seen outside of the corrals and barns. He lived with his wife and four children in a small cottage near the apple orchard, which he also tended. The marshall supervised a crew of young men who did multiple duties as grooms, carters and curriers.

"Herr Bulstrich, you are responsible for the delivery and receipt of letters and packages are you not?"

"Yes, madam."

"How often do you have occasion to make deliveries directly to the family chambers?"

"Almost daily, madam, there is considerable correspondence to and from his lordship."

"Do all of your men make such deliveries or is there a particular messenger that goes to the family quarters?"

"Roger... Roger Maybach delivers to the manor house as he is kept properly dressed and is trained for it."

"Is it fair to say that only he makes routine deliveries to the family chambers?"

"Yes, madam."

"Tell me about this, Roger Maybach," Heilewif asked.

"He's a good boy," Bulstrich answered with his usual reticence, and then after a brief pause added, "he's my son, my stepson that is."

Heilewif thought that significant, since it gave Bulstrich a direct connection to the private residence through his son, but she was at that moment more intent upon speaking to the countess about continuing her experiments, and since both the steward and the chancellor were away from the castle, she ended her interviews for that day.

With count Robert and most of the armed force in Prague, and Aurianna now beginning to recover, the countess decided to dispense with the routine noontime state dinner in favor of a quiet meal in the private quarters.

"I must tell you, Heilewif, that Aurianna has made a marvelous improvement from the state you saw her in last night. Come, I want you to meet her."

The two walked briskly to the young woman's bedroom door, which had been left open to allow the breeze from the garden to more easily sweep through the suite. Aurianna was on the balcony. "I feel so alive today mother," she began and then noticing Heilewif, "oh you must be the wonderful woman. I am Aurianna."

"Yes, I know," Heilewif said smiling and walking to her. "May I ask you a few questions?"

"Of course," Aurianna answered taking both of the old woman's hands.

Heilewif looked carefully into her eyes, but saw no sign of her earlier illness. "And you remember nothing of the last few days?"

"No, nothing I'm afraid. What are we to do Heilewif?"

"We have a plan, which requires your help. Your mother will tell you about it." Heilewif was anxious to get on with her own request, but, before she could, Ava said, "tell us about your morning, Heilewif and what you have learned."

"There is really very little, Ava," she began, "as I have only begun and I had hoped you could help give me direction. Have you thought of any possible motive that might cause someone to do this?"

"Yes, I thought hard and long about this last night and, except for the recent turmoil concerning Sir Vulpes, I could think of nothing."

"Tell me about Vulpes."

"He certainly has motives for seeking my husband's decline since he sees it as an avenue for his own rise. But he is not here in the castle. It seems highly unlikely that he could..."

Heilewif interrupted. "He only needs an accomplice if he were to be behind these despicable deeds. Why do you suspect him?"

Ava recounted the political pressures presently plaguing her husband and told of the threat Vulpes had uttered to denounce Robert before the archbishop and accuse him of demonic possession in order to discredit and invalidate his electoral vote. This was indeed a potent motive and having herself been in the presence of the ambitious vassal and especially his suspicious and shadowy advisor, Heilewif was not ready to discount it. "Tell me what you know about this man, Trapsta Scardo."

"He came to Lord Vulpes manor... last year I believe. Robert thinks that he is an augurer or an astrologer of some kind. Vulpes has a long reputation for entertaining conjurers and enchanters."

"If he is a magician or a wizard it would explain how Vulpes might have hatched such a plot. But he would still need access to the castle," Heilewif said and, her mind moving rapidly, added, "does Bulstrich have any connection to Vulpes?"

"Hugo Bulstrich," the countess said, obviously astounded, "you suspect Bulstrich?"

"I suspect everyone, Ava... until they are eliminated."

"I don't see any connection, no," Ava answered, clearly protective of the marshall and looking at her daughter for corroboration.

"Herr Bulstrich is a very nice man, I love Herr Bulstrich, he's almost like an uncle to me. He taught me to ride when I was little."

Heilewif bridged the impasse by asking the question she had harbored all day. "Would it be possible to bring Sir Shilgen to my suite this evening to conduct another experiment?"

“More poisons?”

“Yes, I have one more and it’s very promising.”

This was the first time Aurianna had heard about the role of the heroic knight in the quest to unravel the curse and she asked intently, “what is this mother, what are you doing to Shilgen?”

“Heilewif is trying to determine what poisonous agent is being used to bring about your spells and she is experimenting on Shilgen.”

“And he does this willingly?”

“Yes, Aurianna, he is your bodyguard and you are his responsibility don’t forget,” she said, but she rightly suspected that it was much more than that. At first Aurianna had no response, but then said, “this frightens me mother. I don’t want him hurt.”

But, in the end, Ava allowed the highly unusual request. Never before had an ordinary knight, unrelated to the family, been allowed to sleep in the private quarters. And beyond that, two additional knights were posted with the guard in the vestibule, in the event that Sir Shilgen should hallucinate and become maniacal, as Heilewif knew could happen with an overdose of the Hog’s Bean.

Later that night Heilewif prepared the poison by mixing the Lpowered dried seeds of the plant with wine. Once again the powder did not dissolve completely and left an easily detectable residue requiring the liquid to be stirred immediately before it was administered. The knight drank the potion and was asked to sit and wait. Only Heilewif and the countess were present.

After several minutes Shilgen said, “I am beginning to feel as I did on the raft, the first time we did this, but more intensely.”

“What is more intense?” Heilewif asked, but the knight didn’t answer. As before, his eyes were open and his pupils dilated. He was not asleep and she thought he would remain unresponsive, but suddenly he spoke.

“I just feel very relaxed and as though I am floating.”

“Can you stand?” Heilewif asked and the two women steadied the tall man as he rose. The knight walked around the room without difficulty.

"His face, that blank gaping stare," Ava remarked, "it so reminds me of the look on Aurianna, but he speaks and seems much more awake."

"Do you know who I am young man?" Heilewif asked and the knight turned his head toward her and said, "no madam."

"And this lady?" she added directing the knight's attention to his countess. "Do you recognized her?"

"No, madam," he answered looking as though beyond her, making it difficult to ascertain if he could focus on her face. As part of the experiment Heilewif needed to determine if the knight would retain any memory of his trance and she needed to do something that he would be sure to remember if he could. She had earlier explained this to Ava who felt very protective of the young man who was risking his life for her daughter. As they led him to the bed, Aurianna appeared and helped him lie down. She slowly bent over the bed, kissed him gently on the cheek and whispered, "I am so proud and grateful my brave Shilgen."

The knight looked directly at her without even a hint of comprehension and then gradually closed his eyes and slept in Heilewif's bed for many hours; Heilewif never left his side. When he awoke she asked, "do you know where you are?"

"Yes, I am in the castle."

"And what are you doing here?"

"I came to take poison for my lady Aurianna."

"And did you do this?"

"Yes."

"Who gave you the poison?"

"You did."

"And what do you remember after that?"

The knight said nothing and Heilewif was more specific, "when you got into the bed, do you remember anything happening then?"

"I don't remember getting into the bed."

Chapter Sixteen

THE STEWARD, Otto Obulus, was in the east with the count. The fact that his duties kept him away from the manor most of the time seemed to eliminate him as a suspect, leaving only the chancellor, Adalbrecht Crapho, as a key member of the Heidelberg household staff yet to be interviewed. Heilewif was eager to meet him, but she decided first to pay the cook an additional visit. She had found him to be unusually well informed about poisons and wanted to find out how much more he might know.

The kitchen at Heidelberg castle filled the ground floor of the two story annex. The practice of separating the cookhouse from the main building was an astute precaution against the possibility of a fire consuming the entire structure. And this danger was very real since nearly all of the cooking was done over open flames. For this there were four well-designed fireplaces. One where various kettles and cauldrons for soups and stews hung from hooks suspended on pivoting iron arms so as to be adjustable for perfect positioning in relation to the heat. These vessels were constantly in use making the various pottages that were the staple of the castle cuisine. Soups and stews were always on the menu, particularly for the staff, which ate at two long tables set at the inside end of the room. It took two sittings to feed the knights alone and a third for the domestic servants. A fourth sitting was served to the stable crew, gardeners and other outside menials.

Another fireplace was equipped with grates and gridirons, where meats were grilled and a third had a spit, attached to the top of a

pair of specially designed andirons, strong enough to support a side of beef or where a whole pig could be roasted. A rack, that held several iron skewers on which pieces of meat or poultry could be impaled, fit snugly into a frame attached to the back wall of the fourth fireplace. There was also a very large and heavy wrought iron frying pan, mounted on a tripod of legs, that could be positioned to straddle the fire. An enormous amount of split wood was stacked along the outside south wall and a crew of woodcutters was kept constantly busy by the need to feed these insatiable fires that never went out.

Heilewif was particularly intrigued by a huge iron cauldron that had been artfully riveted and soldered together and was hung on a chain sling that attached to a winching device for raising and lowering it over the fire. A heavy oak, counterweighted dolly, with four small wheels, supported a stout wooden beam on a fulcrum, with an iron hook at the end. When this machine was rolled into position, only one man was needed, with the aid of its mechanical advantage, to lift this behemoth, while full, and then roll it away from the fire. "May I ask Herr Frass, what that kettle is used for?"

"It is used to boil the wort with the hops madam," he answered.

"It seems you make beer in considerable quantity then," she went on.

"Yes, madam, it is consumed in copious amounts, so much in fact that making it is most demanding. Although, since we have been using hops in the beer it is less apt to go stale. We can get two weeks out of a batch now," Frass commented and then quipped, "the pigs get less of it, but, the pork is not so tasty though."

The kitchen was always very warm, even in winter, and was used by Frass to ferment the castle beer, which was later transferred to the cooler main cellar for storage. The large fermenting half-barrels in the work area were somewhat annoying since they occupied so much space, but there were no good alternatives. Fortunately, the malting racks could be set up on the other side of the wall. The same yeast, which fermented in the beer, was also used to leaven the bread dough, making brewing and baking symbiotic activities. At Heidelberg both were made from wheat flour and the brewers and bakers were interchangeable.

There were two ovens along the west wall for baking bread. These were heated with charcoal and were constantly in use. Heilewif watched and listened as Frass instructed a young apprentice. "A bushel of flour, one gallon of warm water, a pint of beer yeast and a measure of salt will give you dough to divide out twenty-four, one pound manchets," he said walking quickly across the room to the sinks, and then turning, as an after thought, he added, "be sure to sift the flour twice."

The cook was particularly proud of his white bread, which was made very fine by the double sifting of the flour. The warmth of the kitchen encouraged a sizable rise and the beer yeast, which had been in continuous use for almost two centuries, was very refined. Heidelberg manchets had none of the wild yeast taste of the more common sour dough varieties. There was also the need to make considerable unleavened pastry for the meat or fish pies, which were also an almost daily item.

The entire east wall was set up for raw preparation. Several young scullions stood at a long work table laboring over all manner of vegetables, washing, peeling and cutting cart loads of carrots, parsnips and turnips, destined for the day's pottages. Frass insisted that all refuse and garbage be cleared continuously and this required its own small crew and cart. There were two enormous stone sinks that drained into a clay pipe, which carried waste water to a ditch leading to a culvert under the main fortifications and to the swill trench on the downwind side of the castle beyond that.

"What are you planning for today Herr Frass?" Heilewif asked, amazed by the coordinated effort she saw around her, as well as the number of workers under the cook's control.

"Today is a fish day, madam, another holy day of obligation, as though we don't have enough of those," he said with some measure of cynicism. "It may mean a holiday for some but not here. In addition to the pottages, we will do eels, as we have recently had an abundant catch. Some will be roasted and served upstairs and we will make several dozen spiced pies with garlic sauce for the knights and others," he answered, directing her attention to the long line of wicker baskets filled with the

slithering serpents and unknowingly refocusing Heilewif on her reason for going first to the kitchen that morning.

"Herr Frass," she redirected, squeezing between the vegetable carts and the fish baskets to get closer to the busy man. "I'm afraid I will need a bit more of your time as I have a most pressing matter to discuss with you."

"Of course, madam," he responded, before being drawn away once again by the requirements of his position. "The largest eels will be skinned, boned, cut up, then cooked in water," he remarked to an older man who seemed to be overseeing several boys. Frass then turned to Heilewif and said, "the cooked fish will be mixed with cheese and powdered spices and put into the pastry. We will make a hot garlic sauce for this as well."

Heilewif continued to try to command the man's attention and said loudly, "I believe you are correct that this condition that intermittently plagues the Lady Aurianna could not be induced by the Hog's Bean alone. I hoped you might tell me what could be augmenting the action and causing the deep narcotic stupor."

"There is only one poison I know of that will stupefy to this extent without causing unconsciousness, convulsions or even death," he said, moving quickly from station to station, sizing up the entire operation. "It is made from the sap of the white poppy flower. It was first known to the crusaders and brought from the east. Are you familiar with it?"

"I have heard of it, but I know nothing specific," Heilewif answered. "Can you tell me more?"

But, before the cook could answer, he was once again distracted. "No, no, not those eels, we are reserving those for the roasting. Cut up only the big ones." He then returned to the prepping table and began patiently instructing a young apprentice.

Heilewif patiently followed, fully understanding that she was the intruder and the cook was trying to be cooperative. "The smaller eels will be boned by splitting along the backbone here, do you see. Cut all the way to the tail. Then peel the meat away from the bone like this and remove the head and tail at the same time. There, do you see how to do it?" Frass watched the boy for a few minutes more and then resumed

his remarks to Heilewif, as though he had never been interrupted. "I have never seen it, but I understand that it is a rather crude and bulky substance, which is burned to create smoke that is breathed in through the nose, wholly unsuited I would say to your needs."

"Is it not possible to eat the poison and receive the same effect?" she asked.

"Yes, it is also chewed like a resin or gum and I understand is equally effective, but in that form it could not be hidden in food or drink," Frass answered and then said as an afterthought, "there is a man who knows this poison well... and he is nearby."

"Who is this man, Herr Frass?"

The cook suddenly stretched his neck to see something and seemed to be about to walk away when he turned toward her and said almost absently, "his name is Trapsta Scardo. He is presently at the manor of Sir Bodenolph von Vulpes."

The name fell like a hammer and Heilewif was careful not to reveal her excitement. The pieces seemed to be falling into place. "What do you know about this man, Scardo?" she asked calmly.

"Only what I have heard, madam, that he is a spellbinder who sells his entertainments to the upper classes. It is said that this smoke he creates greatly pleases his audiences and his fame has spread from the Low Countries here to the Rhineland."

"How will you finish the smaller eels, Herr Frass?" Heilewif asked, sensing that his attention was once again wandering and knowing that he was completely consumed by his charge.

"We will simmer them in red wine with ginger and cinnamon until they are almost done and finally they will be grilled skin side down and basted with verjuice and honey until a thick sweet and sour glaze has formed."

"It sounds wonderful," she said smiling; Frass smiled too and bowed.

Heilewif left the kitchen, already strongly inclined to believe that Vulpes was behind a plot to discredit his liege lord Robert, and had employed Trapsta Scardo to devise the means. There seemed to be no other plausible motive and her earlier encounter

with the two men did nothing to lessen this suspicion. A combination of the two poisons taken together could produce the effect and would fool the priest into believing that Satan had invaded Heidelberg castle. In the urgency to help their beloved daughter, the parents would fall easy prey to the scheme, which would then quickly expand to include the archbishop, who was himself most likely also implicated, considering Robert's opposition to the church's desire to oust the emperor. There was one as yet unsolved problem, however. How did the poison enter the castle; who administered it, and why?

Heilewif went immediately to find the chancellor, whom she hoped could help her tie together some of these loose ends. Adalbrecht Crapfo also served as the castle almoner and he daily distributed the useful leftover food from the castle table to the poor in the village. And, on feast days he also said Mass in the village, as well as at the castle. He had just returned from that morning's duty when Heilewif found him in the main chapel. "Father Crapfo," she began. "May I introduce myself?"

"Yes, I know who you are, madam," the priest interrupted. "Please wait until I have finished this," he added abruptly.

Heilewif immediately sensed his hostility, but said nothing and watched while the man opened what appeared to be a box of church candles safely packed in straw. They reminded her of her grandson's carefully crafted beeswax tapers, but it didn't occur to her how ironic it would have been if those candles had been the ones to illuminate the chapels at Heidelberg castle.

The priest was not particularly pleased with the old woman's presence and yet he could not avoid talking to her and after an inordinately long delay he finally turned and said, "please, madam, would you accompany me; I don't believe it is appropriate for you to be in the chapel."

The two walked a few steps into the great hall where she found it impossible not to confront him. "And why is that?"

"I know what your advice to my lady has been and it is an affront to our Lord Jesus Christ to suggest that by magic or witchcraft

you can exorcize a demonic possession. You lead my lady astray and I pray that when the count returns he will put this matter right."

"Why do you call what I recommend witchcraft? It is only common sense to examine the facts and to proceed logically. I do no more than that."

"You say that through spells and potions you can control these events, when only God can control the evil one. You are proud, madam. Soon the Antichrist will appear on earth to reverse the works of our Lord Jesus Christ and demons will once again be worshiped. Many, as we can plainly see, have already begun to pave the way for his coming; whosoever denies his true station in life and is not humble, but is proud, is a blasphemer and prepares the way for the Antichrist. Whosoever denies the teachings of the Holy Mother Church and the Holy Scriptures does the devil's work and welcomes the Antichrist."

"And who is this Antichrist and where does he come from?" Heilewif asked.

"The Antichrist will be born like any man, but the devil will enter his mother's womb and will possess him even as he is being formed and he will be fetid and filthy, completely contaminated with loathsome stink and will do the devil's bidding in all things."

Heilewif could see the fire of the apocalypse in the priest's eyes as he almost ranted his objections to the old woman's interference in the affairs of church and state and began to reenact his morning sermon at the village church. "He will appeal to pride and power and will first convert kings and lords to his cause and gradually growing in strength among men will sweep the earth reversing all of Christ's work. He will do many astonishing things to terrify the people who will believe that he is really a god and they will worship him and he will proclaim himself to be God and will mount a throne. Then he will call to the Jews saying he is their savior and has come to lead them to glory. And the Jews will rally to him and become his minions. He will bribe those who would be bribed and frighten those who are afraid and torture those who resist until all faithful Christians have been vanquished or killed."

"And what happens then?" good priest she parried. "Does evil triumph?"

"No, then after three and one half years of torture, Jesus Christ will appear and he will kill the Antichrist on his throne and the Day of Judgment will be at hand. And you, woman, had best be wary of his wrath."

For the first time Heilewif felt frightened and fought the urge to challenge the priest further in favor of redirecting the strange encounter. "Nevertheless, good chancellor, were you not commanded by the countess to answer my questions truthfully and completely?"

"I was, madam," he answered dutifully, happy with the thought that he had righteously chastised her.

"Well then, we shall begin. Why did you lock the oratory in the Lady Aurianna's private chambers?"

"To prevent it from being desecrated," the priest answered curtly and his deliberate brevity told the woman that she could expect only the minimum of cooperation for him.

"I'm sure that you do not mean to imply that the lady would in any way desecrate that holy place," she said.

"That is correct," the priest answered and Heilewif resigned herself to prying information out of him bit by bit.

"Good priest, you understand the thrust of my inquiry I am sure. Please do not force me to conduct this interview in the presence of the countess. Now, why did you lock the oratory?"

Crapho, who had sufficiently registered his disapproval and feared risking his influence, was more forthcoming. "I felt it was necessary after I discovered the chambermaid there one afternoon together with one of the stable boys."

"The chambermaid, Gisela?"

"Yes, and I sensed that it was not the first, but rather a routine, rendezvous for the two lovers, which could not be allowed in a consecrated chapel."

"Did you report this to my lady?"

"No, madam, as their confession convinced me of their contrition."

"And yet you locked the door."

"Yes, madam, since we all know that the power of animal passion can easily overcome even the most sincere of intentions."

“And who was the stable boy?”

“It was Maybach... Roger Maybach.”

Heilewif was encouraged by this, since here was a possible conduit directly from Vulpes to the bed chamber of the Lady Aurianna. Roger Maybach was the official castle courier charged with the delivery of the count's correspondence. He carried the mail pouch regularly to manors and towns along the Neckar and the Rhine and this took him directly past Black Swan on the road to Mannheim.

While the castle had many heavy war horses trained for armed conflict, and a number of riding palfreys suitable for leisure, the count also had a number of fast coursers kept ready by his vassals at strategically located points along the courier's routes. Maybach was a superb rider and by changing horses every few miles he could make the run to Mainz in only four hours. Black Swan was one of the way-stations and this meant that the courier stopped there routinely on nearly every trip to and from the castle. Uniformed and schooled in courtly protocols, he was also the single messenger allowed to make deliveries directly to the private chambers. But, this was a delicate matter to investigate, since both the countess and her daughter had shown a strong sense of loyalty to, even genuine affection for, the boy's step father, Hugo Bulstrich. It seemed unlikely that the marshal would be implicated. And, what might motivate the son to betray his lord was still a mystery that Heilewif was driven to discreetly pursue.

Chapter Seventeen

LATE THAT NIGHT Otto Obulus returned from the east with news of complications in Robert's mission to Prague. He had been waiting in the vestibule, sometimes pacing, sometimes dozing, for the countess to hear him, but she was momentarily engaged with her spirited daughter.

"Anna, be reasonable. How can we protect you?"

"I don't want you to protect me, mother. No one can protect me. You can see that. Why should I stay a prisoner in my chambers? I won't. I'm going out," she asserted, bustling past the bed and bumping into the chambermaid in her haste to find the right dress for riding. "What's the day like, Gisela?" she asked. The girl, not knowing whether to answer or to remain silent, looked at Ava, who implored her daughter once again. "Anni-lan be reasonable. Where will you go?"

"I'll go riding. Anyplace but here; this is torture and I won't have it any more. I need space and freedom."

It was true. It had been weeks since the first appearance of the curse and the strategy had consistently been to isolate Aurianna from all possible threats. That meant literal around the clock confinement and it didn't help. This added credence to Crapho's contention that the trance had been brought on by an evil curse from which no one could hide. For a time both the count and countess believed in the demonic possession and did everything that was asked of them in an effort to dispel it. Now they were doubtful and were placing greater trust in the wise woman. Unfortunately, this meant a continuation of the tight monitoring, which

Aurianna could no longer tolerate. The issue was well beyond debate; Aurianna von Wittelsbach was going riding.

“Who will accompany you Anna?”

“I’m going alone and thanks be to God for that,” she answered, kissing her mother on the cheek as she swept past.

Ava was exasperated. It wasn’t only that she couldn’t control her daughter, even Robert had difficulty once her mind was made, but also because she wanted to guard her and watch over her as she had done for so long and now she was grown would have none of it. This, of course, was all natural and good and Ava knew that, but it was still hard.

“Quick, Gisela, run and get Shilgen,” she said still unable to let go entirely.

Heilewif, who had heard the ruckus from her bed chamber, thought it an opportune moment to meet with Ava and appeared at the door to Aurianna’s room. “May I enter,” she asked and Ava nodded her approval. “I heard,” she said.

“And how could you not?” Ava reacted somewhat defensively, as though it were for her lack of authority that this had happened.

“She is an independent and sovereign person and you were right to respect that,” Heilewif said.

“But, what if something happens to her? I sent for Shilgen. Perhaps he can catch her.”

“Yes, perhaps,” Heilewif remarked from a deeper and double perspective. “I think it best that we talk about how to proceed, especially now.”

Heilewif outlined for the countess her interviews of the previous day and, with the chambermaid off to find the knight, especially her suspicions of Gisela and the currier, Roger Maybach. “I have checked the log book that records the watch and there is a continuous rotation, the only outside people consistently in these chambers on the dates of the attacks were Gisela and Maybach.” It would be best if we said nothing to alarm them or they will go to ground and we may never solve this. They are our only direct link between Vulpes and your daughter. It doesn’t mean they, or he for that matter, are guilty, but we must assume the worst.”

"What do you propose we do?" Ava asked. "Aurianna must have known that the two were lovers and let it go on. Do we tell her what we suspect?"

"No, I think not," Heilewif responded. "For the next few days we will bide our time and watch them, but just you and I. We cannot trust anyone else. I will try to sleep a bit in the afternoons and be awake at night. At this point it is probably all we can do."

The steward's wait was further prolonged when Heilewif continued to detain the countess to tell of her encounter with the priest.

"I have heard," Ava responded. "He came to me yesterday to register his disapproval of you and everything you are doing. You realize he believes you to be a witch."

"Yes, and that is unfortunate, but he must not be allowed to meddle in my investigation."

"He understands that, but to calm him, I gave assurances that Aurianna would continue to attend morning Mass as well as Vespers and to pray nightly in her private oratory before retiring."

Suddenly Sir Shilgen rushed past the bewildered steward without so much as a nod, intent as he was with the emergency at hand.

"She's gone riding, Shilgen, alone... only minutes ago. Go after her and see that she is safe." Ava almost pleaded, tightly gripping the knight's forearms.

"Where is she going?" the knight asked, not sure of how he might handle this dilemma and knowing how delicately she would need to be approached.

"I don't know. Hurry or you will never catch her."

The knight ran to the stables hoping to find her there, but she was already gone. The muscular whoosh of the bellows and the rhythmic ringing tap-tap of the blacksmith's hammer contrasted with the seemingly lazy indifference of the off-duty knights, relaxing and passing time. The stable, despite its smell of manure and ceaseless commotion, was the favorite place to congregate and no one seemed much interested in Shilgen's crisis. "Well, which way did she go, damn it?" he asked raising his voice in frustration.

"How the hell should I know? I didn't watch her. She took the horse and went."

"What horse did she take? Was it a palfrey?"

"No, she took the black courser, said she was in the mood for it."

The palfreys were favorite riding horses, especially for the ladies. They were gait horses, whose natural ambling stride resembled walking, with two or three hooves always on the ground and, unlike the jarring up and down bounce of trotting horses, their ride was smooth and gentle. They could travel for hours at a running walk, but were not very fast. The coursers, however, were very fast. Bred for racing they were used primarily by the curriers and were rarely ridden by women.

"Saddle the fastest courser in the stable," Shilgen ordered.

"The lady already has the fastest in the stable," was the chuckling reply, and it angered the knight, but he said nothing.

It was a beautiful, bright, spring morning and Shilgen rightly reasoned that she would opt to ride with the rising sun at her back and his conclusion was confirmed by several ditchers working along the west wall.

"Did the Lady Aurianna pass this way?"

"Yes sire, only minutes ago."

"And which way did she go?"

"Straight into the wood sire, there," the man said, pointing to a trail used mostly by the swineherd and one which Shilgen knew well. The knight entered the wood at a gallop hoping to run his quarry down quickly and knowing that, while fast, the courser was not known for endurance. About one mile ahead, on the same trail, Aurianna was moving at a walk.

Finally allowed his audience, the steward bowed politely and said, "my lady I have news from his lordship and this letter."

"Please, tell me is he alright. What is happening there in Prague?"

"He is well, my lady, and will return by month's end. Religious heresies seem to abound at the university there, mostly students, followers of the English heretic Wycliffe. There is fear that this could

escalate into a general war, as there is considerable peasant unrest in the area. It's just a show of force at this time; be assured there is no war there yet."

Eager to read the letter Ava thanked and dismissed the dutiful steward and returned to her bed chamber. "My dearest wife, know that I am well and that I love and miss you very much. I worry that all is not well with you and our precious daughter and I hope to return soon. I pray that Shilgen and Ludwig have arrived with the wise woman, Heilewif. She must be trusted as she is our last best hope. Should I be long delayed beware of Vulpes as we agreed. I suspect his schemes will soon materialize as William is certain efforts will be made to depose him. As he is resigned to this, he has released me from any obligation to support him and I have decided to abstain from voting. Expect a communication from the archbishop shortly. It will call me to Frankfort for the election. You may accept it. I will return soon. Your faithful and loving husband, Robert."

Ava was exhausted both physically and mentally and close to breaking down. She feared for the safety of both her daughter and her husband and recent events seemed to be spiraling out of her tenuous control. Inwardly she constantly questioned her own competence and doubted her ability to cope, but outwardly, when it counted, she always measured up. Then suddenly she thought of her son sleeping safely in his bed and went to his side to see him.

“**W**hy did you follow me Shilgen?” Aurianna said, clearly annoyed that he had been sent after her.

“It is my duty to see to your safety my lady,” he answered in his most professional manner.

“Well go back. I don’t want you here.”

“I’m afraid I cannot madam as I am ordered by the countess, your mother.”

“Well then catch me if you can,” she challenged defiantly urging her big black stallion to a gallop that quickly drove considerable distance between them.

With his horse exhausted from the long uphill push Shilgen knew there was no chance to catch her and resolved to follow at a walk,

thinking he would stay out of sight and be as near to her as possible in the event he were needed. But, suddenly and inexplicably she stopped and waited for him.

As he approached he asked somewhat puzzled, "may I ride with you, my lady?"

"Not if you continue to call me that," she said.

"Alright... may I ride with you, Aurianna?"

She smiled and the two rode for a time without speaking; then she said, "I have never been this far. Can you believe that? This is the first time I've been up here. Do you know these woods, Shilgen?"

"Yes, my lady," he said instinctively.

"Yes, what?" she responded playfully.

"Yes, Aurianna," he corrected smiling.

"You're so lucky, Shilgen. All men are lucky. You get to go where you want and do what you want; you are free. I am caged like a song bird and it torments me terribly."

This was the first time that Aurianna had shown any weakness in her conversations with the knight and he hesitated to respond, fearing that anything he might say would be the wrong thing. It was as though she had erected a defensive wall around herself to deflect any hint that she might be fearful of something or unsure of herself in any way, and this was the closest he had ever been to her. It was true that he was always there to protect her and had been for three years, but this was the first time she actually saw him. "There is a beautiful spot ahead overlooking the river," he said. "I came here often when I felt saddened by something. It's off the path though. Would you like to see it?"

Aurianna slowed her horse to allow Shilgen to come up beside her and said, "yes I would love to see it." He was nervous, and his eyes instinctively avoided contact, so he didn't notice the soft expression that flooded her face as she looked at him.

She dropped back behind him as they turned off the trail and watched him as he maneuvered his horse skillfully through the thickets and rugged terrain. Always urging, but in the end allowing the horse to find his own way and his own footing, all the while encouraging him with gentle pats on the neck or whispering praise in his ear. Occasionally he would turn partway around and ask if she were alright and she

answered that she was. She wondered why he so willingly risked his life for her and yet made nothing of it and expected no praise or reward. For the first time in weeks she felt safe and happy. In this way they climbed several hundred feet to a promontory on the ridge overlooking the river.

It was a spectacular view, a panorama she had never seen before. The curving stream cut in and out through a tableau of unsurpassed natural beauty, broken only by the manor house nested along its bank. Too distant to reveal any mundane detail, it at least for a time, seemed free from all the trouble that recently had entered it. They were high above the world and all of their cares and concerns were as distant and silent as the stone castle walls. "It's so spectacular here, and peaceful. How did you find it, Shilgen?"

"I came here often as a boy. It was where I went to be alone and dream," he said dismounting and turning to help her down.

"It's so beautiful," she said, again looking outward over his head as she bent to put her hands on his shoulders. She's so beautiful, he thought, as he grasped her tiny waist and slowed her descent, unable to escape the enchantment overcoming him. He felt flushed and weak and feared he might faint as her face slid so close passed his.

"And what do you dream of, Shilgen?" she asked, looking up at his face. She could feel his strong hands still tight around her waist and she let hers slip off his shoulders and slide across his chest. For a few seconds they both paused, but what could be would not be, at least not then.

It was Shilgen who broke first. "I guess I dreamed of becoming a knight," he said stepping back and offering a slight bow.

"And you are a knight," she responded. "Maybe this is a magic place where dreams come true."

How sad that sounded to him as he turned to look out over the precipice. He couldn't help thinking that it was really a place where dreams went to die. What did it matter that he was a knight. It meant nothing when he was caught tight in the web of a society that regulated his every action, his every aspiration and even his heartbeats. The one thing he really wanted was beyond his dreams. So far beyond that he dared not even tell her how he felt. Even if she loved him too, he knew it could never be revealed, never be proclaimed to the world and

celebrated; and if she spurned him he would be cast out and exiled forever.

"Yes, maybe it is a magic place," he said, with the slightest hint of sorrow and added, "what do you dream of and wish for now?"

Suddenly she became serious and reflective pulling the knight down by the hand to sit beside her. "You must think I'm spoiled and pampered with no right to feel at all cheated by my life. And that would be your right as I am rich and in all ways privileged. But all of that is so trivial when I cannot decide anything important for myself."

"You are only reacting to your recent ordeal Aurianna, but surely you were happy before."

"Happiness requires more than the immediate amusements of the moment and appearances are deceiving," she answered. "Happiness demands freedom and I am more of a slave than the poorest serf when even she can choose her own husband." Tears welled up in her eyes, but she refused to cry.

Shilgen had no idea how to respond. She had given him no indication of what, if any, role he might be playing in this, but she needed support and he offered. "Do you want to tell me any more about this?"

After a short pause she blurted out sharply, "I'm to be married to the Burgrave of Nuremberg. It's all been neatly arranged."

"And you object to this?" he asked, somewhat shocked and driven by this new urgency and her candor to reassess.

"I object most strenuously, Shilgen; and yet I know it will be to no avail."

Here was a new reality that changed everything and their relationship surely would change with it. It wouldn't be the same as losing her to someone she chose, someone she loved. He could be quiet for that. But to see her forced into a marriage against her will combined in him both his powerful love for her and his need to protect her. And now time was running out. If only he had some clue of how she felt about him then he would be bold and declare his love for her and face the count. But he had no idea; perhaps it was too soon.

"Have you told them of your feelings?" he asked, careful to hide his intense personal involvement.

“My mother knows, but I have not yet discussed it with my father,” she said with the signs of resignation that accompany lost causes. “It’s all politics. That’s all we are you know, noble women, pawns and payoffs to seal deals.”

Shilgen was silent, and the two sat for a long time looking out over the river and beyond. Both, in their own way, thinking the same thoughts about the grip life had on them and their inability to break free.

Chapter Eighteen

IT WAS A MOONLESS AND MURKY NIGHT. A sooty cloud seemed to fill every corner and crevice and Heilewif's candle created pitifully little light as she left her room to check the family chambers. She had no idea what she might find or, indeed, what she was even looking for. At one end of the central corridor was the locked door to the vestibule, behind which an armed guard was stationed. At the other end was the door to the private balcony, overlooking the main chapel; she went directly to it. The door was ajar, leaving a small crack that invited her to peer through. Candles were burning on the altar below and she could make out two shadowy figures moving and whispering quietly. She waited and strained to hear, but it was no use and finally the two disappeared into the shadows. With the balcony door open, anyone could climb the spiral staircase and enter the private apartments, she thought. But, how could this be? The door had been bolted from the inside; she had checked it herself earlier that evening and knew that it was. Only someone already inside the private quarters could have unlocked it.

Heilewif carefully leaned out on the mezzanine. A few flickering candles were still burning on the altar below and they seemed like distant stars in a sea of black. Suddenly there was an awareness of something moving there, she could feel it and it was moving toward her. It was as though she were blind, she thought, as she struggled to perceive without sight. Then she heard a creaking moan close to her on one of the spiral iron staircases that connected the balcony ends with the

side altars below. Someone, in total darkness, was slowly climbing up.

The old woman became frightened and quickly extinguished her candle; the night was an ally now and she slipped back quietly into the corridor standing motionless, flat against the wall, as the shadowy silhouette approached, paused only inches from her, turned and bolted the door, then slid past along the hallway. She wondered how anyone could move so effortlessly and flawlessly in the deathlike gloom, it was unnatural, and she repeated to herself the words of the Apostle John: "but if one walks at night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." Although she could see nothing, she heard the footsteps moving away in the eerie quiet and gauged the distance as they receded. Then one of the far away doors opened and closed and although she could not be sure precisely which one it was, she knew that it came from near the end of the corridor and near the rooms of the chambermaids.

As she pondered the possible significance of this, she struggled to relight her candle. Heilewif always carried her striking kit in a small leather pouch sewn to the inside of her nightdress, in anticipation of losing her light at some inopportune time, and she was unusually adept at using it in the dark. But, on this occasion, her shaky hands seriously challenged her. She fumbled for what seemed like minutes and scratched endless rapidly successive strikes of the flint before the small puff of rabbit fur tinder finally ignited.

It was then that she heard a distinct cry from one of the bedrooms near by. Moving deliberately back, feeling her way along the wall, and slowly, so as not to lose the candle again, she located the sounds coming from Ludwig's suite and she quietly opened the door. As she entered she said in a low voice, not wanting to startle him, "Ludwig, don't be frightened. It's only Heilewif."

Approaching the bed she could more sense than see him, but knew he was caught in a nightmare. The boy thrashed about, wrapped in the bed covers, uttering words clearly comprehensible. "Tell me your name ...why have you come again?" She didn't dare wake the boy and waited for the nightmare to pass. "What? ...What do you mean?" he pleaded over and over, almost in panic. Then the boy suddenly sat up in the bed, wide awake, and called out, "Shilgen...Shilgen, where are you?"

Heilewif sat on the bed beside him and, putting her arms around him, said, "don't be afraid, Ludwig. It's Heilewif. I am here with you. You are having a bad dream."

The boy was shaking and almost in shock and the old woman comforted him with her warm strong embrace. The two sat motionless for several seconds before he pulled back and said in a rapid torrent of words, "it was the ghost, Heilewif, the same ghost that came to me before and Shilgen told me he was a good ghost come to help me and to ask him his name and he would tell me and he would tell me why he came and I did and he told me he was Sostrates and he acted on behalf of all mariners and I didn't understand him and I tried to ask him what he meant and he just said it again the same way..."

"Now settle down, Ludwig," Heilewif said firmly, "and we will figure this all out together." The boy continued to vent his feelings and while she waited for him to calm himself she used her candle to light the two resin torches ensconced on the outside wall, breaking the almost opaque darkness. "Now, what is this about a ghost?" she asked lightly, deliberately trying to diminish the tension, at first making no connection in her own mind between the strange apparition and the affliction tormenting the Lady Aurianna.

"One night, while we were traveling in the forest, a ghost came to me in my dreams and tried to tell me something, but I was afraid and I woke up. Then Shilgen told me that some ghosts are good ghosts and that I shouldn't be afraid and that I should ask him who he is and why he has come to me."

"And this same ghost returned tonight?" Heilewif asked.

"Yes, and I asked him and he said his name was Sostrates," Ludwig answered, with a puzzled expression, "and then he told me that he acted on behalf of all mariners."

"You were just dreaming, Ludwig. It was only a nightmare and nothing more," Heilewif consoled, but the boy was persistent.

"No," he blurted out loudly. "He was trying to tell me something, something important; he was trying to help Aurianna."

"You shouldn't be afraid of bad dreams, Ludwig," she patronized, but he would not relent.

"No one ever listens to me. You all treat me like I'm a baby and I'm never trusted with anything."

His frustration was so clear and his intent so sincere that Heilewif felt the need to at least indulge him and said, "maybe you are right Ludwig. This may have been a good ghost trying to communicate something. You said he called himself Sostrates. Do you know who Sostrates was?"

"No," the boy answered shaking his head. "I have never heard that name before and that's what bothers me because Shilgen said that good ghosts come to people they know."

"Some ghosts must wander for centuries seeking redemption for themselves and so it's not unusual to find one from long, long ago," she said, soothing his frustration, while not contradicting the knight. "And what were his words?"

"He said he acted on behalf of all mariners."

Suddenly the implication in the boy's words penetrated the old woman's facade and she asked again incredulously, but with some urgency, "you never heard of Sostrates or the words he spoke?"

"No, Heilewif, never," he answered. "What do they mean?"

This was indeed strange, since Heilewif knew that Sostrates was the architect who had, in ancient times, built the Pharos of Alexandria and that those exact words were inscribed at its base. But how could Ludwig have known that? "Have you ever heard of the Lighthouse of Alexandria?" she asked.

"No."

"Sostrates was the man who built the lighthouse, outside the harbor of that port city in old Egypt, and the words were chiseled at its base. It is dedicated to helping seafarers find their way home."

"What was the lighthouse, Heilewif?"

"It was a tall structure, a kind of tower, with a fire at the top, which was constantly kept burning, day and night. During the night the bright flames could be seen by sailors out at sea and during the day the fire gave off a stream of sooty black smoke that was visible for miles."

"Is it important Heilewif?" the boy asked, hoping to be helpful and the woman, at first skeptical, was now not so sure.

"I don't know, Ludwig; we must think carefully about what it might mean. Did the ghost say anything more to you?"

"No, he only repeated those same words."

"Well, you might say that we are like the sailors and are lost in our search for a solution to your sister's torment..."

"...and Sostrates is trying to show us the way," he finished for her.

"Yes, but he gives us no easy clue," Heilewif mused, and then showed signs of self-doubt, "except to look for the light, and perhaps that is his way of cautioning us to put our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Remember the Apostle John who said: while ye have light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light, or Saint Paul when he said: the night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light." Heilewif surprised even herself with these thoughts and attributed them to the ceaseless conditioning from which even she was not free. "We will talk more about it later," she said fashioning an escape. "But, meanwhile, you can help me with a very important task," she continued, hoping to bolster the boy's self-esteem. "Can you watch your sister without her knowing, secretly I mean. Can you do that?"

Ludwig nodded, eager to be included in the responsibility and the fight.

"If you see any sign, any even slight indication by her actions or words that she is falling under the spell of the curse you will run to get your mother. She will know what to do and the two of you will take your sister away from that place quickly. You will have to dedicate yourself to this every minute of the day. Can you do it?" she asked intently.

"Yes."

Heilewif slept fitfully that night, and longer than was her custom. Before she could reach the great hall the countess was nearly through the usual morning audiences. The priest, Crapho, was the last.

"When you appeal to the devil to obtain your desires my lady, even if you don't worship the evil one, you are a sinner dangerously

approaching heresy. I say this most humbly and respectfully madam, but this is what I fear when you employ that witch and her brews and potions, as only Satan relies on powers such as these.”

The priest’s persistence in this matter was understandable, but becoming somewhat overbearing and Ava was increasingly more impatient in her search for results, toward which this seemed a needless hindrance. “Do you think I am a heretic, father?” she asked as a direct challenge to her castle chaplain and chancellor. “Do you think that I would deliberately endanger my daughter by employing witches or worshipping Satan?”

“No, madam. I do not; but you are in danger of being so accused by some other. I believe you do this out of error and not because of conviction, and for that you may be forgiven, but this must be manifest and attested to.”

“Father Crapho, I understand your concern and appreciate your candor, but the woman Heilewif is not a witch; she is a physician and a friend. I will have no more disparaging remarks about her. Do you understand?”

“Yes, madam.”

“And I am a devout Christian woman, as you well know, about whom even a hint of heresy is absurd.”

“But the devil deceives professed believers and even devout Catholics to better spread his lies within Christ’s flock. My lady must understand that if she is denounced as a heretic the archbishop will have no choice but to proceed with an inquiry and perhaps a proceeding,” the priest warned.

“Will that be all, chancellor?” Ava answered, ending the interview abruptly.

As Crapho turned to go, he came face to face with Heilewif, but said nothing. The old woman knew her presence was causing great friction between Ava and the priest and began her visit with an apologetic proposal. “If it pleases my lady, I will end my investigation.”

“Oh no you won’t!” Ava asserted. “This is the first time I’ve felt alive and useful. Now tell me, have you learned anything new?”

Heilewif told the countess about the unlocked door, the mysterious figure she had encountered in the night and about Ludwig’s

strange dream. She also stressed the need to involve the boy more centrally in the probe. She explained the importance of catching the early onset of the curse and her plan to induce Aurianna to vomit and expel the poison before it became fully absorbed. "I made a preparation, an infusion, from the bulbs of the daffodil that is a powerful emetic. Give her this, a spoonful at a time, until she throws up all of her stomach contents. But, you must act quickly, before she lapses into semi-consciousness."

Ava took the small bottle and seemed resolved to do whatever was necessary and then asked, "do you think it was Gisela?"

"It seems to have been one of the chambermaids, but which one and to what purpose I cannot even begin to guess. It does show that, with an accomplice, there would be little difficulty entering the private quarters during the night."

"And what is your opinion about the ghost?"

"I don't know. At first I was inclined to dismiss it, but how could Ludwig know those details so accurately? A lighthouse seems symbolic as a sign that the ghost is trying to guide us. But what is he telling us?"

"Perhaps the ghost will return to tell him more," Ava said, giving little credence to this avenue of investigation and then added abruptly, "Roger Maybach came here this morning with a letter for me that I want you to read."

The letter had been folded and sealed with wax, but there was no inscription. Before she opened it Heilewif asked, "who is the letter from?"

"I don't know; it is unsigned."

Heilewif opened it and read aloud. "Madam Countess, may it please my lady to know that I am privy to secret knowledge concerning the recent and dastardly curse afflicting the household at Heidelberg. As I am of humble birth and station and cannot easily defend myself, it behooves me to remain hidden, while endeavoring to be of assistance, as I can make all of these mysteries clear, but would do so only at great personal risk. And it is for this reason alone that I ask for your kind assistance in return. Send the woman, Heilewif, who knows these matters well and will best understand my words, with one-hundred gold

Ducats, to the village church, in gloom, at the hour before dawn, tomorrow. She is to come alone. She will enter the church and will stand facing the altar and is not to turn her head. She will be contacted."

Heilewif looked up and added, "did you question Maybach about this? Where did he get it?"

Ava nodded and said, "Yes, I did, and he told me that the letter was left at the gate last night. Of course I sent immediately for the gatekeeper who found it and he saw nothing, surmising that someone slipped quietly along the wall and left it clandestinely."

"This person wants us to believe he is from outside the castle, but, I'm not so sure since he claims to know my manner," Heilewif reasoned. "And he also writes well and is obviously educated. He must know that we can trace these things, learning, handwriting and whereabouts at certain times and discover who he is. No, the note had to have been written by someone outside the household, but it was inspired and probably delivered by an insider."

"Do you think it's a trick?" Ava asked.

"Perhaps, but a trick to what end?" Heilewif asked herself. "If he only wants to help, he could easily have told you what he knows in the letter. This rendezvous is only needed because he wants the money."

"But, that doesn't preclude the possibility that he has information that could help us," Ava added.

Heilewif could sense her deepening desperation and decided to ease it. "When he says I alone will understand his secret knowledge it tells me that we are getting close. It could be legitimate. We have no choice but to do it."

Ava was elated. "Yes I agree," she responded reaching down to the floor beside her. "I have placed the coins in this leather pouch. I will give it to you now. But you will not go alone, it's too dangerous and I forbid it. I have assigned Shilgen to follow and to protect you. He will quietly leave the castle later today and not return, hiding overnight in a place near the village church where he can watch and be near should needs be."

Chapter Nineteen

SHILGEN WATCHED as the old woman walked down the winding path from the castle road to the little village nestled along the left bank of the Neckar. It was nearly sunrise and the dim early morning light, as it filtered through the fog rising from the river, masked the horizon in an eerie green haze. The birds had begun to sing and squirrels were scurrying about in search of some, hopefully more than meager, springtime meal. It was only the affairs of men that disturbed the balanced way of the natural world.

The church, while small, was the only stone structure in the village and was stately and heavily built. Shilgen stationed himself so as to watch the front; he had investigated the previous night and knew that anyone going in by the main entrance would be trapped, since both side doors were locked. The building was west facing and the façade was still dark when the old woman entered and he strained to catch sight of anyone who might be following her, but the distance and darkness were too great.

Many minutes passed and Shilgen watched and worried that the malefactor could have been inside the church all along; he feared for Heilewif's safety and was about to break his cover when he heard horses fast approaching. Several knights quickly dismounted and surrounded the church; within seconds several other horsemen arrived with a two wheeled cart and some others began gathering. Shilgen knew immediately that this was an ambush, as he recognized one of the men to

be Bodenolph von Vulpes. As the knight ran toward the hectic scene below him, he saw Vulpes and another man enter the church.

"Are you the woman called Heilewif?" Vulpes demanded.

"Yes," she answered already aware of her predicament.

"You are seized, madam, by order of the archbishop, under grave suspicion of witchcraft. You are to be transported from this place to the diocesan court at Mainz and there you will be delivered to the inquisitor for trial. Take her into custody," he ordered and two men flanked the old woman and immobilized her arms. "Do not talk to her or look into her eyes, as witches have great power to harm those that oppose them."

At this moment, Shilgen arrived and confronted Vulpes, demanding that he release the woman immediately, as she was a guest of the Count Robert and it being beyond his competence to interfere with her.

"I am acting on behalf of the archbishop whose authority in these matters extends even here," he responded, with an obvious snicker. "Do not try to interfere if you value your life." Then he turned to the guards and said, "place her in irons and lift her into the cart."

"Must she be chained?" Shilgen responded.

"Yes, as she is not from here and is a threat to flee."

The absurdity of the remark annoyed the knight, who sensed that Vulpes was trying to goad him into acting impulsively. "Where will she be taken?"

"She will be transported directly to Mainz. You may accompany her in the cart if you wish," he finished with a sinister smile.

Shilgen thought it best to back off and first report the incident to the countess and ascertain her wishes. After assuring Heilewif that she would not be abandoned, the knight retrieved his horse and rode rapidly back to the castle.

He went directly to the private apartments where he was challenged by the guard in the vestibule. "What is your business here so early Shilgen?"

"I must see the countess. Has she arisen yet?"

"No."

"I must wake her then; it is urgent."

"It can't wait an hour?"

"No," Shilgen answered angrily.

The guard was reluctant, but, seeing the fire in the man's eyes, finally rang a bell for one of the chambermaids who went to the bedroom of the countess and woke her. She came quickly and Shilgen recounted the events that had unfortunately unfolded moments before. "Go after her, Shilgen. Don't leave her alone with them. Represent her before the archbishop and do whatever you can to stop or delay the trial; and for god's sake, don't let them torture her." Carrying a letter appointing him emissary, empowered to act on behalf of the countess, the knight departed.

As though not plagued by enough misfortune, only minutes later, Ludwig rushed into his mother's bedroom. "It's Aurianna. She's falling under the spell again," he blurted, and the two rushed to her side.

"Where was she?" Ava asked.

"I found her in the oratory. She was groggy and weak so I helped her here to the bed."

Aurianna was lying face up with her eyes open. Her pupils dilated and her mouth slightly ajar. It was clearly too late for the emetic and Ava said, "get her under the covers and we will send for the priest and the physician."

"No," Ludwig asserted. "Heilewif said we were to take her away from where we found her. I think that means out of the apartments entirely."

"Yes, perhaps you are right," Ava responded, and they lifted Aurianna from the bed, steadied her, and guided her slowly down to the great hall. This was the first time that the general household staff had seen the young woman under the power of the spell and it caused a considerable stir.

Before they reached their destination the priest arrived. "Where are you taking her, madam?" he asked.

"To the courtyard, we are going to walk her around in the court yard."

"I don't advise this, madam. She should not be away from the symbols of Our Lord when she is attacked by the evil spirit. She should be brought to the chapel. She must stay near the Cross of Our Savior or she will be in danger."

Before Ava could evaluate the advice of her chancellor, her daughter spoke. "Where am I? Why am I here? Mother, what's happening?"

In an almost ecstatic tone Ava answered. "You were lapsing again and we brought you here and it seems to have broken the spell."

"Do not be fooled," the priest interjected. "The demon is cunning and has receded into hiding. He will return."

As she rode in the cart up the steep slope from the village and reached the main road to Mannheim, an itinerant monk who had accompanied the raiding party addressed the gathering crowd of on-lookers. "This woman is a witch and will soon be punished. God created Adam in his image and Eve was created out of Adam's rib. Woman is not made of the same immortal substance as man. The woman is less perfect than the man and was clearly meant by God to be subordinate to the man. They are weaker and more susceptible to temptation and to sin, as was clear when Eve succumbed to the temptations of the devil and reached out to the evil one in the Garden of Eden and brought all sin into the world."

As the cart gained speed and began to pull away from him, the monk threw a rag over Heilewif's head saying, "cover her head as a sign of her shame," and she could hear his voice fade into the distance saying, "mother of sin, weapon of Satan and the source of all evil who kills all she deceives..."

Heilewif's mind returned to her earlier encounter with accusations of witchcraft and how others of her family had suffered from the same charge. How women became the agents of Satan in the minds of so many men, not only churchmen but layman and learned men as well had frightened her for her whole life. The attitude of men toward women had always been quixotic, vacillating as it did between attraction and repulsion, at once revered and even deified as the mother of

mankind and the force of creation only to be dominated by patriarchal social systems unwilling to allow her to be free.

Fear drove it, she thought, fear of the power of motherhood in which all the woman-hating rites, rituals and taboos were rooted. The woman was closer to nature and understood it better, she reasoned, and for men, afraid of this aspect of feminine superiority, the force of societal aggressive moralism remained their best refuge and so they created their own truths with rules to capture and control the feminine mysteries.

Heilewif was brought before the vicar of the Archbishop of Mainz. Shilgen was beside her and the man spoke first to him. "According to canon law, it is my duty to shorten and to simplify these proceedings so as not to confuse them with needless and contentious pleas. What is your purpose here?"

Shilgen presented his letter from the countess and said, "I request the right to act as advocate for the Lady Heilewif, as it is her right to be represented in any proceeding against her."

The vicar read the letter, nodded and said, "let it be noted that Sir Shilgen Sturmere, on behalf of the Countess Ava von Wittelsbach, is acting as advocate for the accused."

Shilgen, who had very little training that would prepare him for this demanding challenge substituted boldness for finesse. "I demand to know the charges and the names of those who accuse this innocent woman of witchcraft."

The vicar responded. "You are aware, I am sure, that to accuse a witch is a most dangerous undertaking and the need to protect the identity of the accuser is paramount in these matters. You may be made privy to the contents of the deposition, but, the identity of the deponent shall remain sealed." The vicar then turned to a clerk and said, "read the deposition."

"This witness was called and questioned at Mainz on the 23rd day of April in this year of our lord, etcetera, and etcetera. When asked if he knew the accused woman, he answered yes. When asked how long he had known her, he said for many years. When asked about the woman's reputation, he answered that she was kind and generous, but

when questioned further about her faith, responded that she practiced certain rituals and expressed certain beliefs that exuded of witchcraft. When asked if she used certain words he responded that she did and that she made brews and concoctions, which were seen to have a most powerful effect. When asked if he saw this himself, he responded that he did, and when asked if others were present, he said there were others present, and he named them. When further questioned about the words she spoke, he affirmed that he heard these utterances himself and that they were not made mistakenly or in jest, but, were deliberate and intentional. This deposition was made at Mainz under Apostolic authority, etcetera, etcetera. It then lists the judge, scribe and notary as well as two witnesses identified as honest men."

"And who are these honest men?" Shilgen said sarcastically.

"The names of course must remain under seal," the vicar answered, and before Shilgen could speak again added, "all cases of witchcraft and heresy may be heard by the diocesan court of the ordinary, but, since this case involves suspicion of heresy by a high noble, it must be reported to the Holy See and will be turned over to the inquisitors. I therefore order that the accused be placed in fetters and held in the dungeon at Mainz until such time as a trial can commence."

"She is an old woman," Shilgen pleaded. "Why must she be in chains?"

"It is well known that keeping a witch in chains blunts her ability to attack her accusers, which they are want to do."

There seemed to be no way to prevail and Shilgen resigned himself to regrouping. "When will the trial begin?" he asked.

"The inquisitors are presently on the way from Speyer and are expected within a few days."

Shilgen was utterly out of his element and felt woefully inadequate; wanting desperately to help the old woman he had come to deeply admire and respect he could think of no strategy to employ. He was allowed no private words with her before she was taken to the dungeon below and only a few seconds to say that she was well loved and would not be deserted in her time of direst need.

The knight rode his horses hard through the night to Heidelberg, hoping to save time during which some plan could be fashioned. When he arrived he found the countess already in conference with lawyers from the university. "Good that you've arrived Shilgen," Ava said, seeing the knight enter still clad for travel.

"Tell us quickly," Aurianna added, "of Heilewif."

"She is imprisoned at Mainz and bound over for trial. It is to be conducted by the inquisitors, who are presently on the road from Speyer. We have only a few days to prepare."

"Is she well?" Ava asked.

"Yes, she has not been abused or tortured, at least not yet," he answered.

The countess reviewed for Shilgen the purpose of the meeting with the professors of law and begged them to continue.

"And what is the nature of the case against her?" one professor asked.

Shilgen answered. "She has been accused by a secret witness and he has given a deposition which was read to me and is so general as to offer little hope of finding a defense. People accuse her of witchcraft, but we cannot know who they are or the details of their accusation."

The professor nodded knowingly and said, "this is a process in which an accuser has denounced the woman, but, is not willing to step forward to prove it under penalty of talion, should he fail. This is the most difficult proceeding to face, since the accuser need not present himself and only offers enough information to bring the accused under suspicion. When this happens, it is the duty of the inquisitor to investigate and call the witnesses whom the accuser has named in his deposition. If two witnesses concur, and offer supporting evidence of witchcraft or heresy, the inquisitor will proceed to torture the accused to gain a confession. This is normally the way it is done."

"So then they just torture her until she confesses?" Ava responded in disbelief. "What chance does she have?"

"Very little I'm afraid, since to successfully resist torture is seen as proof that the accused is possessed by Satan who, through magic, fortifies her resistance."

"What sort of torture might be used?" Aurianna asked.

“Oh, there are many ingenious and exotic tortures, my lady, but these inquisitors are known to prefer the Spanish Boot.” The professor paused and seeing that this was unknown to them continued. “It’s very simple and very effective, madam. It consists of two hollowed pieces of wood between which the foot is placed and then the two are drawn tightly together by a screw mechanism. As it slowly crushes the bones of the foot, it causes excruciating pain. No human, unaided by Satan, can withstand the Spanish Boot.”

There was a long pause, during which the urgency of their mission became increasingly clear. The silence was broken by the professor who asked Shilgen if he were appointed advocate.

“Yes.”

“You must know there is great danger for the advocate because to defend heresy is deemed itself to be a heretical act. So, if one pleads with too much zeal and the case is lost, the advocate himself will be charged next.”

“My God, is there anything we can do?” Ava asked, with obvious frustration.

“The best strategy is to attack the accusers and impugn their motives. If it can be shown that the accusers bear malice against the accused their evidence is tainted and cannot be used to obtain a conviction.”

“But, what can be done when the names of the accusers are withheld?”

“The judge will make all the depositions of witnesses available to the advocate and from this it may be possible to deduce who the witnesses are. Then Heilewif should tell the judge that she believes that there are people who are her mortal enemies and would be willing to jeopardize their souls to make false accusations against her; and she should name those you suspect of being the witnesses. If you have guessed correctly, and she names the actual witnesses, the judge will be obligated to investigate the claim, since evidence from mortal enemies is not admissible.”

At least it was a plan and they resolved to follow it. Shilgen was sent immediately to bed, to rest before riding back to Mainz, while the

family met again privately that evening to determine what more might be done.

“Well, we definitely know Vulpes is behind it all,” Ava said angrily. “We must uncover his accomplices to smash the plot. If we could watch Black Swan and see who enters and leaves, perhaps this would tell us more.”

“But, how can we without Shilgen? Aurianna said. There is no one we can be certain of.”

“What about me?” Ludwig asked, “I can watch Vulpes.”

“No, that’s out of the question, Ludwig, you are too young to do something so dangerous.”

“I’m not too young, mother. I’m almost fifteen and I can ride as well as any man. I want to do it.”

He could see the look on his mother’s face and had little hope when his sister said, “he’s not a child mother. He can handle this.”

Tears filled Ava’s eyes as she nodded and embraced her son. He was not her little boy any longer and she begged him to be careful.

Chapter Twenty

LUDWIG LEFT THE CASTLE EARLY and by mid afternoon, riding off the road to avoid detection, he reached the wood overlooking Black Swan. He made camp near a small stream where his horse could easily find water and immediately made his way to the edge of the clearing where he could survey the house and its grounds. There was a considerable bustle of building activity, as the newly erected defenses were nearing completion. He could see barges on the river below, some loaded with field stone and others with limestone. The limestone burning pits had been active for weeks and some of the quick lime they produced was being slacked on site along the river bank. Near the foundation of an unfinished tower were piles of clay and sand along with other aggregates he did not recognize. He could also see where huge wood fires had been burned to produce ashes for the cement. Since ancient times it had been known that a mixture of ash, aggregate gravel and slaked lime, properly proportioned, would make hydraulic cement, which when hardened was impervious to water. The walls around Vulpes' manor were being built of stacked fieldstone, pointed out with this ancient cement, which was tamped and hammered into the voids between the stones. The work continued apace and Ludwig could do nothing but wait for nightfall.

It was a sunny day, the warmest yet that spring, and Ludwig settled back in the tall grass to sleep. Considering the circumstance, as well as the importance of his mission, it is hard to say how he could have slept so long or so soundly, but he did. When he awoke it was night and

he realized he had neglected to retrace his steps to the campsite, as he had been taught to do, and he worried that he might not be able to find it again in the dark.

Then suddenly he noticed a faint light coming from the ground floor windows of a single story wing in Vulpes' manor house. The extension jutted toward the partly raised tower and the barely visible movement within refocused his purpose. The boy was easily able to make his way quietly along the unfinished wall and around the base of the tower; he then crawled, unnoticed, across the open ground to the house.

An annex was used, as at Heidelberg, to separate the kitchen from the main structure and there was definitely something going on there that night. The large windows were set low to the ground, since the kitchen floor was a few feet below grade; they had no glass and were wide open with their massive shutters swung outward and almost back flat against the house, except for one that was nearly closed, covering half of the opening. Ludwig stood behind this shutter, invisible in the shadows, and peered between the slats. There were two men. One he recognized to be Vulpes, the second man he did not know; they were busy with something in a large kettle suspended over an open fire in one of the cooking fireplaces. He could clearly see and hear everything.

"It's time I learned these tricks of yours Scardo," Vulpes said to the smaller man, who was forcefully stirring the big cauldron, in which something was vigorously boiling.

"This is how we will concentrate the power of the poppy gum you have become so fond of," Scardo responded with a laugh. "But it yields a poison of dangerous potential, not to be trifled with." Scardo continued to stir and skim off bits of twig and debris that had been mixed with the poppy gum before it was dissolved into the boiling brew. The kettle was a big one, holding about twenty gallons of water to which about ten pounds of the gum had been mixed. "This will take some time, my lord, and you need not wait," Scardo said, reluctant to give up his secret; but Vulpes was insistent.

"You're not going to put me off this time, Scardo. I mean to know how this is done."

The cooking went on for a few minutes more and then the kettle was emptied, by bucketing out the broth into another vessel. "Now we add the slaked lime," Scardo said, adding, "convenient that you have so much at hand." He then shoveled several scoops of the chalky substance into the kettle and stirred vigorously. After a short time he remarked, "the lime makes the poison soluble in the water and now we need only separate the liquid, which holds the poison, from the spent solids to complete the first stage of our transformation." Once again the kettle was bucketed out to a new one, but this time the brown liquid was strained through cheesecloth to catch and remove any last bits of debris and sediment.

"Now that we have the poison dissolved in the water, with all of the inert elements out of it, we need only separate it from the liquid to have our potent powder," Scardo said, his tone betraying obvious delight, knowing that Vulpes had no notion of what came next.

He then began to reheat the liquid to a point just below boiling and brought, from beneath the bench, three large covered earthenware crocks. When he removed the clay covers and lifted the leather seals, the room was quickly filled with an irritating and caustic gas. It wafted through the window and caught Ludwig off guard and he gagged audibly. This certainly would have revealed his presence had, at that precise moment, Vulpes not gasped loudly. "What in hell is that, Scardo?"

The little man roared with laughter as he began pouring the disgusting fluid into the heated broth. "It's piss-water, my lord."

"Piss?"

"Indeed, stale human piss, collected every morning for weeks from the chamber pots and left in the warmth to ferment until it gives up the gas you smell. This gas will cause the poison to solidify in the solution and then settle out to the bottom as a solid cake, which we will later dry and crush into powder."

"And this concentrated powder is much more potent than the gum itself?" Vulpes asked.

"It draws all of its power from the gum, but is so reduced as to be many times stronger by weight and volume, and is also rendered into a more useful form, one which can readily be administered, undetected, as you have seen. When we mix it with the Hog's Bean we can produce

the kind of stupefied amnesia that so mimics the Satanic possession and so suits your plan.”

“Will we have enough?” Vulpes asked.

“Oh yes. We need now only to prepare the gift for our friend in Heidelberg Castle.”

The two men laughed and left the kitchen confident that their scheme was going well. Ludwig initially thought to climb through the window and tip over the pot, but realized that this would only delay and not stop the conspiracy. No, it was better, he reasoned, to wait and watch in hopes of learning more, especially the identity of the inside conspirator.

In Mainz, the inquisitors had arrived and Heilewif was brought into the interrogation chamber to be questioned. She was chained and carried by four guards, in a kind of litter basket suspended between long poles, which were then set on four posts so her feet wouldn't touch the ground; she asked what the purpose of such treatment was.

The inquisitor answered, not looking up from the papers spread before him. “It is maintained by indisputable doctors of the church, madam, that the vanity of witches must be repelled with like vanity and it is known that witches held in this manner are unable to maintain their silence when questioned. If you are innocent, this will not harm you. Your complaints about it are clearly noted.”

Heilewif knew that the presumption of guilt pervaded all such proceedings and that the likelihood that she would prevail was very remote, yet she was determined to fight. “In that case good sir I must also protest that my advocate, Sir Shilgen Sturmere, is not yet present and I demand a delay.”

“You are hardly in a position to make demands, madam,” the inquisitor quipped, and then said, “state your name.”

“You know my name quite well sir, as it is written on the documents before you.”

“And what is the place of your birth, madam?”

"I will not participate further in these interrogations as I do not recognize them to be legitimate in the absence of my advocate," she responded clearly.

"Let the record show that the woman, Heilewif, is obstinate and uncooperative, that she was born here in Mainz and presently lives somewhere in the Black Forest." The inquisitor continued without looking at the accused. "Why did you go to the Black Forest? Are you aware that witches abound in the forest where their rites and rituals can go undetected? Is this why you now live in the forest, madam?"

Heilewif was silent.

"Is it true madam that your mother was burned as a witch in this diocese?"

Heilewif suppressed her urge to respond, remembering the ordeal her mother had suffered at the hands of a similar witch hunt two generations earlier. She had relived it all in her mind the night before and could see herself suffering the same fate.

"It is well known, madam, that witches offer their children to Satan and often these children become witches as well. What do you say to this?"

Heilewif was angry and saw little profit in engaging the inquisitor. "Why am I here? What charges are brought against me and by whom?" she asked.

The judge paid no attention to her remarks and went on. "Why do so many common people fear you madam? What harm have you done to them?"

The exchange continued as Heilewif demanded for a second time, "lay forth your charges so they might be refuted. Who are your witnesses and what do they say they have seen me do?"

This time she succeeded in redirecting the inquisitor's questioning. "It is well known, madam, that witches do not perform their deeds for public view and hence witnesses cannot always be found. But, the results of those deeds are often manifested." The inquisitor lifted one of the documents, read for a short time and asked, "did you recently descend the Rhine on a timber raft?"

Content that they were now dealing with real events the woman answered, "yes."

“While on that raft, did you cast a spell that incapacitated a man for several hours, nearly causing his death?”

“I cast no witch’s spell on any man. Let him come forward and accuse me of this.”

“You were seen, madam,” the inquisitor responded quickly. “Admit that you are a witch, for witches are often coerced by the devil into performing their evil deeds and are not always fully culpable for their actions.” He paused for a few seconds, then looked up at her for the first time, although studiously avoiding eye contact, and said menacingly, “you are a witch are you not, madam?”

Heilewif knew that these questions were only the beginning, that the inquisitor was seeking to establish probable cause to suspect her of witchcraft, and that her accusers would try to connect her with the demonic possession at Heidelberg. “Is this the extent of the charges or are there more?” she probed.

“Know, madam, that you can be convicted by the consonance of any two of the following three conditions: when it is proved by irrefutable evidence drawn from events that you performed evil and hurtful deeds by magic or sorcery; when it is proved by the agreement of at least two unimpeachable witnesses to the same; and when it is proved by your own confession. There are witnesses who have testified under oath as having seen these acts performed on the raft and this satisfies the first of the criteria. Their depositions are here in these papers. It is all written down. The victim is unknown to us and the spell has passed, hence only your confession is required to find you guilty. Do you confess?”

Heilewif responded boldly. “You cannot show that I performed a hurtful act by this evidence, in the absence of the victim or any indication that anyone was injured and are therefore bound to release me at once.”

Her response drove the inquisitor to his real purpose and he asked, “is it true that you possess the instruments of witchcraft, unguents, potions and other concoctions meant to assist you in casting evil spells?” He paused for a response which did not come and then continued, “do not try to lie to us, madam, for we have witnesses. It’s all here, written down in detail.” And then clearly aimed at the Countess

Ava von Wittelsbach, he said, "those who hide your belongings and try to protect you do so at their peril."

Heilewif remembered well how lies and threats were a routine part of the inquisitor's method and knew that obtaining a confession was the primary aim of the questioning.

"Confess, madam, and you may save yourself for it is known that only Satan prevents you from telling the truth and so long as you resist it is proof that the devil still resides within you. If you confess you may go free."

Heilewif remained silent, seeing no point in continuing, since the events on the raft were clearly not sustainable and not the true focus of the inquest. They were, however, enough to convince the judge that she very likely was a witch, that the trial should proceed and that the real charges should now be revealed. "You are accused, madam, of witchcraft performed at Heidelberg Castle, in which you cast spells that incapacitated several honest men and interfered through magic with the efforts of the clergy to cast out the demonic possession presently afflicting that place. It is also attested to, madam, under oath and is written in these papers, that you made certain heretical utterances and threats toward the Church and to her servants. Do you deny these charges?"

Heilewif knew that her best defense was to make counter charges and to thereby expand the inquisition, hoping in this way to bide time as well as to unravel the plot. "I do indeed deny them and say to you now that they are all malicious lies, themselves the spawn of Satan's scheme and I demand that you investigate the source of these scurrilous and unfounded indictments so that the true and cunning witches, whoever they may be, will be found and punished."

It was hard for her to tell if her words made any real impression on the inquisitor, who was at that moment signing his name to documents pertaining to her case. After a short time, during which the papers were passed about witnessed and notarized, he spoke. "I, the judge, have studiously noted the evidence against you and rule that sufficient cause has been presented to place you under grave suspicion of being manifestly taken in the heresy of witchcraft. Know well, woman, that this offense is punishable by death. In order to hear the truth from

your own tongue, and to silence your blasphemous lies, I rule that on this day you be placed under the question and torture. You will be allowed three days to reflect. During that time, let your friends and relatives urge you to tell the truth, for only then can you avoid execution.”

At that very moment, as the inquisitor announced the charges, and soon enough to hear it all, Sir Shilgen entered the chamber. He was accompanied by the professor of laws from the University of Heidelberg. They were stopped by the guards and prevented from speaking to Heilewif at that moment, although she saw them and it comforted her. The inquisitor denied them an interview and they were told by his assistant that they would be allowed to see her the following day.

“What advice do you have professor? How can we combat this?” Shilgen asked.

The professor answered. “They have placed her under the question and torture, which means that they will interrogate her secretly and torture her after each question until she answers in a way the satisfies them.”

“We cannot allow them to torture her,” Shilgen responded with some sense of urgency. “She is an old woman and may well die under the torment.”

“Before the torture is resorted to it is the regular inquisitorial practice to offer clemency and try to induce the accused to confess by continuously postponing the ordeal and by persuasion from people near her. If after a few days there is no progress, the torture will gradually increase in severity, while she will continue to be offered an escape from the death penalty.”

“The strategy is to obtain a confession by any means then?” Shilgen asked.

“The plan is to apply some manner of moderate torture and then release her from it and ask her to confess. If she refuses they increase the torture, incrementally, all the while promising her clemency. But, a confession given under torture alone will not suffice, she must also later, while not being tortured, confirm the confession as having been true.”

Shilgen then concluded. "Hence the promise of clemency, coupled with the fear of renewed torture, induces the double confession."

"Precisely," the professor added smiling. "But, there is apparently more in her case. Since she is accused of trying to use witches brews to cure a bewitchment she is considered a mistress of witches, whether they call her that or not, and will be suspected of commanding other witches and probably heading a witch's coven. They will no doubt try to get her to name other witches and will use the torture to compel it. This being the case they will promise her anything, but in the end will renege on those promises. They will imprison her and spare her life for the time it takes to investigate those she implicates, but, at the end of the expanded proceeding, she will be burned."

Chapter Twenty-One

LUDWIG WATCHED THE HOUSE ALL DAY from the edge of the wood. Late in the morning he saw Roger Maybach returning from his routine rounds. The messenger stopped and picked up a small package, which caught Ludwig's attention since Heilewif suspected Maybach. He debated with himself for the rest of the day about whether he should break off the surveillance and return to tell his mother and sister what he already knew. Then, as evening approached, he saw another figure approaching on foot, this time moving away from Heidelberg. It was difficult to make out but he thought it was Father Crapho. He knew that the priest had a friend in Mannheim and routinely traveled there on foot. He was not surprised to see him here in the late afternoon, but he was shocked to see him enter the house. It could have been an innocent pause, perhaps for a drink of water or to rest, but perhaps not as well.

It was broad daylight and, although the workmen were busy well away from that part of the grounds, it would still be very dangerous to approach the manor. Nevertheless, Ludwig took the chance. Getting to the tower was not difficult since, as he approached, he could keep its blocking bulk between himself and the house. He had to crawl across the open space to the kitchen windows, which were still open.

There was no one in the kitchen, which seemed strange for that time of day, although he could hear muffled voices somewhere near by; he easily climbed in, lowering himself quietly to the cold stone floor. It was much darker within the walls and he moved stealthily toward the

voices, pressing his body against the wall and slithering along the corridor to the door behind which the voices came. Then what seemed like raucous laughter out of which the first discernable words emerged. "So you had a good time in Mannheim, Crapho, huh?" came from a voice he didn't know, followed by more laughter.

Then he recognized Crapho's voice. "This isn't funny, Scardo. I don't like this. I could be seen."

Then another voice interrupted. "Stop worrying and remember how much you have to gain. There's no time to waste. We have made the poison and prepared the devices. The trial is beginning and you must strike immediately. Only this time, make it more widespread, try to afflict others in the house as well, especially the countess. It will show the curse spreading and getting stronger."

Ludwig's heart was pounding so loudly that he feared it might be heard as he backed away down the hallway. He was close to making good his escape when, without warning, he was confronted by two almost fanatical small dogs, barking furiously.

He heard a voice say, "what's that?" from the room behind him as he broke headlong past the dogs to the window. The inside sill, however, was much higher from the below grade floor, seriously slowing his escape. As he tried to pull himself up and out he felt strong hands dragging him down; he was caught.

"Looks like the ratters have finally caught a meal. Let's see if we know him."

Vulpes held the boy tightly by the back of the neck while Scardo twisted his face around. "It's the Wittelsbach heir, the boy Ludwig! Sound the bell and search the area for others, especially that knight Sturmere," he ordered, as one of the doormen, responding to the commotion, entered. "Take him away and we'll have a talk with him," Vulpes added and two guards dragged Ludwig into the darkness of an inside room.

"He's seen and heard everything," Crapho said, obviously shaken. "What will we do now?"

"Stop sniveling. This will work out even better for you, Crapho. He's the heir, remember, and now we can't let him leave here

alive. Go back to Heidelberg and do exactly as we planned. I'll take care of the boy."

"I don't think you should kill him, yet," Scardo advised. "Hold him as insurance should anything go wrong."

"Yes, Scardo, you are right; we'll throw him into the oubliette until we need him, but first let's have a little talk with him."

The boy was seated on a stool; his hands were tied behind his back. Vulpes stood behind him and said, "who is helping you? Are their others out there? Is Sturmere with you?"

Ludwig said nothing.

"What did you hear? How much do you know about what we are doing? Your life is at stake boy and you had better speak quickly and truthfully."

Ludwig tightened his lips and continued to refuse to speak. Vulpes repeated the questions and more like them with the same result. "You don't seem to appreciate the trouble you are in boy. You broke into this house and were caught. You are a thief and we could kill you now and be done with it. Do you understand that? Now tell me how much you know. How much does your mother know?"

"I know that you are somehow responsible for my sister's sickness and that our own chancellor is a traitor and your lackey."

"Oh, now he has found his tongue," Scardo sneered, "and with some spirit as well."

"We'll see how spirited you are after a few days on bread and water," Vulpes said. "Take him away."

The oubliette was a small windowless subterranean room beneath the stone floor of one of the interior basement store rooms. It was accessed by a trap door through which the prisoner was pushed, with only a rope to cling to. Once down into it, the rope was retrieved and the door dropped shut, leaving the prisoner in the complete dark and silence of the damp cold dungeon. Some were said to have gone mad in only a few hours when left in the oubliette.

Early the next day Shilgen and the law professor were admitted to Heilewif's cell. She seemed heavily weighed

upon and after some brief introductions she said, "I am frightened Shilgen, of the torture. I'm not sure if I can endure it."

"That is why we have brought the professor. He will help us."

The professor took this as a cue to speak and began by explaining the procedure called the question and torture. Heilewif was only a small girl when her mother had been so abused and remembered how broken and wasted she looked when she was carried to her execution. "They will try to intimidate you and frighten you with the thought of torture. You must remember that these men really believe that you could be a witch, leading Satan's assault on the world, but they are also very mindful of the possibility of mistakes and will be very careful not to falsely accuse and mistakenly punish an innocent person. They are not sadistic men. They don't want to torture you, but they will if they think they must. They are not evil men, only misguided. But, even to say such a thing is heresy and reveals the trap we are in. The only way to prevail is to play their game. Do not deny that witches exist; only deny that you, yourself, are a witch. If evil deeds can be shown to have taken place, then others must be the real witches and you must convince them that you are helping them uncover the actual malefactors. It is likely that someone will burn before this is over; we will try to take care that it is not you."

"How much time do we have before they begin?" she asked.

"They will wait for one more day, then they will bring you to the brink of a torture, but, at the very last second they will postpone it and let you think another day about it. They may do this twice before beginning to apply real pain between the questions."

"Then we have no more than three days," Shilgen said, "and little time to waste. We plan to return to Heidelberg to uncover the cause of the curse, since it seems to be our best hope."

"What are these tortures they will threaten me with?" Heilewif asked, unable to free herself from memories of her mother. Shilgen saw that it would be a mistake to leave her, even for a short time.

"They will probably show you the rack, but it is unlikely that they will impose it on an old woman. It would be too dangerous. But they may take you to it and threaten you with it. Perhaps they will even lay you on it, binding your hands and feet to the frame. They may also

threaten you with the strappado, which is an ancient technique, whereby your wrists are tied behind your back and your body is lifted by a rope attached to the bindings. With the arms behind the back, the body weight causes a gradual dislocation of the shoulders and, of course, excruciating pain. Sometimes stones are tied to the feet to add to the torment. But again, they are not likely to do this to you, at least not at first."

Shilgen asked what Heilewif was, at that moment, thinking. "What are they likely to do first?"

"I have heard that these inquisitors usually start with the hot coals. First they spread lard on the soles of the victim's feet and then hold them close to a brazier of hot charcoal long enough to scald them and cause serious pain."

Shilgen could see that the professor's candor was causing Heilewif considerable discomfort and said, "I have changed my mind, Heilewif. We will not return to Heidelberg. Do not fear; we will be here."

"Thank you," she said softly, and the knight put his arms around her and held her very tightly for a long time.

The witch trial was beginning to generate considerable local interest and people were gathered outside the archbishop's residence, where Heilewif was being held. The itinerant preacher, who had followed them from Heidelberg, was speaking and, as they left, the two men paused briefly to listen at the back of the crowd.

"Does the house need cleaning? Yes, yes it does. Well, let her clean it then. Do the dishes need washing? Well then make her wash them. Does other work need doing? Have her do it. When you have a servant there make sure she serves you. Not because it is necessary, but as a lesson to her. Make her care for the children and wash the diapers. If you don't make her work, she will become nothing but a pretty piece of flesh. Never let her rest I tell you. Keep her trotting or she will hang out the window and thoughts of someone else will run through her head..."

As the knight listened he couldn't help thinking about Aurianna, how perfect she seemed to him, which was so inconsistent with what was so adamantly expressed by so many ecclesiastics, that women were

weak creatures of impulse and emotion, easily seduced and destined to do Satan's bidding. How could she be that he thought when she was so spirited and so smart? But, his world was saturated with mindless superstition that saw Satan behind every catastrophe with a woman nearly always at his side. For many, mostly poor, these woman-hating tirades could have only one outcome and Heilewif faced it now.

The countess had worked an hour or more composing and writing a letter to her husband, begging him to return from Prague. She knew the complications this would cause when his feudal obligation to the emperor would seem to have been disregarded to indulge the needs of a weak woman unable to carry out her charge in his absence. She was hardly unable to act decisively on her own, but, that is how it would be interpreted. She agonized over this, not because it would reflect badly on her, but because she knew he would come and be ridiculed for it.

"Call Roger Maybach," she said to her secretary as she poured the melted wax and sealed the letter with the Wittelsbach Lion.

Just at that moment Aurianna entered her mother's sitting room and said, "I'm worried about him mother; it's been two days now. Do you think we should send someone to look for him?"

"Now what would that do to his fragile little psyche?" she responded, and the two laughed lovingly. "Let's give him another day. Shilgen will be back soon. We'll wait for him." She then added, "I wrote to your father and told him what has happened to Heilewif and that we need him back here right away. I just have a feeling that we will need the knights too and he has nearly all of them with him."

"Have you thought any more about Ludwig's dream?" Aurianna asked. "I have such a powerful feeling that it can lead us out of this."

Ava, who hadn't given much credence to the dream and whose mind was elsewhere answered, "I haven't dear. What do you think?"

"I wouldn't ordinarily believe so, but the ghost came to him three times in dreams and with the same message, that the lighthouse will lead us out of danger. I spoke to Father Crapho about it and he said that the light represents Jesus Christ and the message is to trust in Our Lord who is the light."

"Well, there's certainly wisdom in that, Aurianna."

"Yes, but it hasn't helped yet. And besides how do we do that? Do we just pray and wait?"

"Praying doesn't preclude us from doing other things, as we have been doing. I believe Father Crapho is right; we must first of all trust our Savior to guide us."

"But, I read that this Sostrates lived hundreds of years before the birth of Our Lord Jesus and it seems strange to me that a pagan should be appearing on his behalf. For some reason, I don't think this has anything at all to do with God."

At that moment the two were interrupted by an announcement from the doorman, "Roger Maybach, my lady."

The currier approached and bowed, but said nothing.

"Roger, you are to take this letter to the count in Prague, with all possible speed. It is extremely important. Can you ride immediately?"

"Yes, my lady," he responded, stepped back once, and bowed before turning and exiting in haste.

"He's so professional," Aurianna said smiling. "But you know Heilewif suspects him. Do you think it was wise to entrust him with the letter?"

"Yes, he's not involved in this. I have no doubt."

Then the doorman announced, "Father Crapho, my lady."

The priest approached and the countess said, "good that you are hear Father; we were just praising your valuable counsel."

Crapho responded. "It is wise, my lady, to stay close to Christ in these turbulent times. The inquisitors will be asking many questions, especially concerning the strength of the faith of those around the accused witch."

"Are you Heilewif's accuser?" Aurianna asked bluntly, and with some measure of aggression.

"No, my lady. But it is no secret that I believe she is a witch and will so testify. I cannot do otherwise." Then he repeated, in an almost pleading tone. "My lady knows that I must testify truthfully as I will be under oath."

"Do you know who the accuser is?" Aurianna pressed.

"The accuser is not, to my understanding, a witness, but rather a person with indirect knowledge and probably not from within the household. The proceeding is an inquisition, during which the judges will investigate the charge by looking for witnesses. We will all be called to testify."

"It's Vulpes," Aurianna went on, "isn't it?"

"I do not know, my lady," Crapho answered.

Ava intervened by saying, "we are fortunate to have your advice and counsel, Father Crapho, and I appreciate your honesty and candor. What do you suggest we do now?"

"You should disassociate yourself from the witch and let the proceeding take its course. You are not out of danger yourself. Present yourselves as the pious and faithful Christian women that you are and make it easy for all to so attest."

"You mean abandon Heilewif to the torture and perhaps the stake?" Aurianna broke in again angrily.

"She is a witch, my lady, and deserves nothing less."

"She is no more of a witch than I am," Aurianna reacted swiftly.

"Do not speak too hastily," the priest said menacingly, "you may yet be accused."

Ava intervened again saying, "I think it best that we follow Father Crapho's advice to not create an enemy of the archbishop or alienate the inquisitors. Be confident that we will not lose faith, Father, but neither will we forsake our own Heilewif."

"Will I see you at Vespers this evening?" the priest asked.

"Yes, father, you will," Ava answered.

"And will you both pray to Saint Benedict, in Aurianna's oratory, before retiring?"

"Yes, father, we will," Ava finished before dismissing the priest.

"I don't like him mother," Aurianna said as soon as Crapho was beyond hearing.

"It's difficult to serve two masters, Anna. Crapho has been with your father for many years. He has some right to be bolder than the others."

"And why is that mother?"

“It’s a long story and I don’t know all of the details, but I understand that he is the son of a woman who served here at the castle many years ago. I believe she was sent to a convent where he was born. He was raised by the nuns there and later entered a seminary and became a priest. Your grandfather brought him back to Heidelberg and gave him the position of court chaplain. He has served here ever since. Your grandfather made him chancellor just before he died. That was over twenty years ago and before I met your father. No one remembers much about it anymore, and your father never speaks of it, so I am not absolutely sure of what I say.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

ON THE FOLLOWING DAY, three women, acting under the direction of the inquisitor, came to Heilewif's cell and told her that they were to prepare her for questioning. They then proceeded to strip her naked and to shave every hair from her head and body. The water was cold and the soap produced precious little lather, making the scraping action of the dull blade seem more like the first torture. They spared nothing, not even her eyebrows. What followed was a meticulous examination of every inch of her skin and every stitch of her discarded clothing.

"What is the purpose of this humiliation?" Heilewif asked.

The women did not respond to her complaint and one said, "drink this madam and be silent."

"What is it?" Heilewif asked.

"It is holy water, madam, intended to induce you to tell the truth."

They handled her roughly and when they had finished one of the women placed a sack cloth over Heilewif's head, took her things and left her standing barefooted and shivering on the stone floor. She wrapped herself in the thin cloth for what little warmth it could afford, but before she was able to return to her straw mattress, two guards entered and told her to remain standing and to face the wall. A few seconds thereafter the inquisitor slowly entered, approached, and stood behind her.

"Are you ready to confess now woman?" he asked sternly.

"Confess to what? I have done nothing to warrant a confession." She began to turn to face him, but was restrained. "Do not turn around, madam."

"You are accused of casting a witch's spell at Heidelberg in an effort to end a bewitchment. Do you deny this?"

"Yes."

"There were witnesses, madam," he said, and paused for her to reconsider before continuing. "Do you still deny it?"

Heilewif remembered the strategy she was instructed to use and said, "the witnesses are lying."

"You impugn the witnesses yet you do not deny the act. Is this correct, madam?"

"If harm was done to anyone at Heidelberg, it was not my doing. Perhaps some other is the witch and I stand accused as an artful ruse to conceal the real evil doer." Heilewif knew that the inquisitor was ever mindful of Satan's cunning and that the evil one often offered false trails for the questioner to follow and in so doing hoped to escape detection and remain free to do his deeds. Because of this, the inquisitor was taken back a bit by her contention and decided to change course. If she were a witch, he thought, the devil would be reinforcing her ability to resist, by saying nothing at all or by parrying all of his questions and frustrating his efforts. As in all cases, he fell back on the strengths of scholastic scholarship, which held that all that was known or that could be known was already revealed and explained in authoritative texts. The Holy Scriptures, as interpreted and glossed by the great doctors of theology throughout history could answer any question. One need only study and memorize the books.

It was taught by learned men of the Church, and born out repeatedly in experience, that a witch would be unable to shed tears and a common test was to determine if the accused could cry. "If you are a witch, madam, you will be unable to weep now in my presence. Do not try to fain grief and conjure tears by whimpering or moaning as I will watch you closely. Nor should you think that by drooling or smearing spit on your face I will be fooled." He then placed his hand on her head and said, "I conjure you by the bitter tears shed on the cross by our Savior Jesus Christ... weep, madam, if you can." A few seconds later he

added, "I conjure you by the burning tears poured over his wounds by the most glorious Virgin Mary... Weep, madam, if you can." He waited again and then said, "I conjure you by all the tears shed in this world by all the Saints... If you be innocent, weep now, if you can."

Heilewif was so emotionally drained and exhausted by her ordeal and so insulted and shocked by the tactic imposed upon her that she made no response to the inquisitor's charge.

Thinking he had succeeded, the inquisitor remarked, "tears are the humble gift of penance, madam, and are most welcome in heaven. The devil hates tears and has prevented you from shedding them even when reminded of the suffering on the Cross of Our Lord. I will ask you a second time to confess. Mind my words well, madam, you are very near to the torture."

The inquisitor waited for several minutes while Heilewif stood silently, at wit's end as to how to respond, and finally he said, "she is obstinate. Bind her hands behind her and raise her."

This was the strappardo! But the lawyer told her they wouldn't do it, at least not right away. She was frightened as she felt the cords tighten around her wrists.

"Save yourself, old woman, and confess," the inquisitor repeated.

As she felt the pressure of the rope begin to wrench her arms, tied awkwardly behind her, a sense of hopelessness and despair, magnified by exhaustion, began to overcome her, and she began to cry, very softly at first, but audible enough.

"So... you weep at the thought of your own pain, but were insensitive and silent when I spoke of the unimaginable suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ," the inquisitor said scornfully.

Heilewif lifted her head proudly and struggled to support at least some of her weight with her toes, as she was jostled and pulled off of her feet. The pain spreading through her twisted joints was already intense and was magnified by the jarring tugs on the rope, needed to nudge her up. She felt faint and fought the urge to scream as she finally swung free of the floor. The inquisitor then said slowly, "lower her."

The rope was suddenly released and she dropped heavily and, unable to restrain her fall, collapsed in a heap, striking her face on the

floor. She didn't dare look up, fearing that they were only preparing to ask her once again to confess, when she heard the door slam behind her. She was still bound and her nose and lips were bleeding.

Almost immediately Shilgen was allowed into the cell. He untied her hands, lifted her from the floor and helped her to the mattress. "What have they done to you? Are you in great pain?" he asked sitting close by her side.

"I'm alright," she said in a resigned tone that told Shilgen that she was rapidly losing hope. He wiped away the blood from her face and waited for her to rest and recover before listening to the details of her ordeal. He had no answers and felt helpless.

"They have told me that I may stay with you for a time and have asked me to urge you to confess," Shilgen told her, and then added that the professor had warned him that this was a typical tactic, which would be accompanied by friendly treatment, food and drink, all intended to soften her and speed her confession. All the while spies would be stationed at listening posts behind the walls, along with scribes who would take down every word of the conversation between the accused and her visitors. Shilgen told Heilewif this and the two were careful to whisper very softly so as to frustrate the eavesdroppers.

"The judge told me to tell you that he wants to be merciful and that it pains him to see you suffer as he thinks you are not fully responsible for what you have done. This is a trick. The professor warned us that he will come to you, in the night after I have gone, and promise you freedom if you confess. He may even swear by the Holy Trinity that he will be merciful. A confession is all they now need for your conviction. Do not confess, no matter what you are promised, as it is a promise they have no intention of keeping."

"Do they not damn their own souls by such lies?" Heilewif asked, in disbelief that otherwise honorable men would deliberately swear to a lie.

"Yes, I too asked this question and the professor told me that, while the judge promises mercy to you outwardly, in his mind he restructures his words to mean that he will be merciful to the faith and not to you personally; and, uncovering a witch is considered merciful to the faith."

"Can we not force him to limit his promise to me specifically and so bind his own salvation to his words?" she asked.

"If you insist that before you confess you must have his sworn assurance that he will release you or only impose a sentence of exile or some other light punishment, he will do so. He will even put it down in writing and have it legally notarized. But it will all be a trick, later he will disqualify himself from further participation in your case and another judge will condemn you to death."

"There seems to be no escape from them and you are saying that my only chance is to endure it."

"It is very important to them that through you they get to other witches. They want you to confess willingly and to cooperate. It will be a failure on their part should you die resisting and they will be careful not to be too heavy with the torture. There may be some comfort in that."

Heilewif said nothing and Shilgen continued. "We have one more strategy to gain time. If you tell your jailer in the middle of the night that you want to talk to the judge he will come. Summon him because he will think you are ready to confess. When he arrives discuss this in very general terms with him and lead him to believe that you are close to a confession, but then tell him you need more time and, as you have no friends in the area, would like to talk about it with a village priest not knowledgeable about your case. They will allow this and it should buy a day."

Heilewif knew she was offered nothing more than hope, but somehow she believed that Shilgen would save her. He stayed with her well into the night and after she fell to sleep he began the hard ride back to Heidelberg.

At that very moment the countess and her daughter entered Aurianna's private chapel to pray before retiring as they had promised to do. Aurianna lit the altar candles and the two women kneeled and bowed their heads silently.

Holding the Cross of the Holy Father Benedict they repeated the words, "may the Holy Cross be my light. Let not the dragon be my guide." As Aurianna looked up toward the altar her eyes became

increasingly blurred and she felt the familiar spell coming over her. "Mother, she said, it's here. I feel weak."

Ava frantically continued with the exorcist's prayer. "Be gone, Satan! Suggest not vain things to me. Evil is the cup thou offerest; Drink thou thine own poison..." For the first time the countess felt it too and said in a slurring tone, "Anna, what's happening to us?" as she steadied herself against the railing.

Aurianna struggled to stand and as she gazed trancelike into the glow of the flickering candle she suddenly saw the specter of Sostrates standing there beside his lighthouse. The rush of adrenalin flooded her senses. "It's the candle! It's not the light, mother; it's the smoke!"

The women, spurred by their grit and determination to defeat the evil doer, doused the candles and ran from the chapel. "It's Crapho!" the countess said, still in disbelief. "Crapho, my god how could he?"

"Heilewif was right; it's no more than a man-made poison," Aurianna said, "infused into the wax and inflicted in secret through the smoke of the altar candles he puts in my chapel."

The two women were now left alone to overcome the schemes of the deceitful and duplicitous priest. They trusted no one. As they sat in the darkness of Aurianna's bed chamber, Ava repeated the words of Benedict's prayer, "evil is the cup thou offerest; drink thou thine own poison," and they formulated their plan.

Late that night, as the chambermaids had done a thousand times to meet their lovers, they stole along the pitch black corridor to the balcony overlooking the chapel. They then silently descended the spiral staircase and removed the candles from the main altar, replacing them with the poison.

Later, as the priest prepared to begin the morning Mass, he looked up to the balcony and saw that neither woman had appeared. He turned and lit the candles, confident that everything was working perfectly, and began the first Liturgy with Psalm 102. "Hear my prayer, o Lord, and let my cry come unto Thee. Hide not Thy face from me in the day when I am in trouble; incline Thine ear unto me: in the day when I call answer me speedily." As he once again looked up at the balcony he thought he saw the women there, but, his eyes were

beginning to lose focus. "For my days are consumed like smoke, and my bones are burned as a hearth. My heart is smitten, and withered like grass; so that I forget to eat my bread..." He paused and steadied himself before continuing, "by reason of the voice of my groaning, my bones cleave to my skin. Because of Thine indignation and Thy wrath: for Thou hast lifted me up, and cast me down." He struggled again to see if anyone was there, but couldn't, and collapsed on the altar saying, "my days are like a shadow that declineth; and I am withered like grass."

Several people from the household staff ran to the priest's aid and the countess called down for them to carry him into the Sacristy. "Shall we send for the physician, madam?" someone asked, and she answered, no, that she would personally attend to him.

As soon as they were alone with the priest, Ava said, "tie his hands and feet firmly, but not excessively or so as to pain him, Anna, and we will gag his voice." The countess was angry, but not vindictive, as she wrapped and tied the priest's own maniple around his mouth. "Get the candles, Anna, before others are stricken. We will need them as evidence."

Aurianna ran to retrieve the poisoned candles and Ava pulled off one of Crapho's ceremonial stockings, placed them in it and tied it around the priest's neck. "What will we do with him now, mother?" Aurianna asked, as the dilemma became increasingly clear. "Who are we supposed to present the evidence to? And how are we going to get him there?"

Ava knew that at this point they needed help and there seemed to be no one to trust. She thought first of Bulstrich. But if he were implicated it would be a disaster and Heilewif was suspicious of his stepson, Roger Maybach. No, better not, she thought. There were guards and doormen in the house and they were supervised by the usher, Berwich Mann. Surely he could be trusted. Or could he? Or perhaps even the chamberlain, Steinmutter, could help. It didn't seem likely that he could be implicated. But, no matter, they would still need a carriage and could not avoid Bulstrich. It was indeed a problem. "Heilewif trusted the cook!" Ava remembered. "Summon Ucco Frass," she ordered, as she walked into the great hall. Aurianna remained in the Sacristy with the prisoner.

Frass was a loyal and reliable man and he helped the two women carry Crapho down the chapel's ambulatory service stairs to the basement, where they placed him in a locked storeroom. When he regained his senses, the countess removed his gag so he could be questioned.

"You are caught, Adelbrech, and I have no idea why you would do such as thing. Was it money? What did he promise you?" The priest remained silent and Ava continued, "oh, yes, ...we know all about your plot with Vulpes and the poisoned candles. Did you think we would not find you out?"

"What will you do, madam?" the priest asked, finally cognizant of his dilemma and probing for a way to negotiate.

"The inquisitors are at this moment torturing our poor Heilewif because of what you have done. You will soon take her place."

Crapho was terrified by the thought of facing the inquisitors. As a priest he would be a particularly prized catch in their hunt for heretics and there would be little he could do to defend himself, beyond denial. This may well lead to torture, but it would be his only chance and Ava knew that he might die without implicating Vulpes in the plot.

She had a ploy to recruit him. "You are a witch, Crapho and you will burn; I have no doubt. We are now preparing to bring you to the inquisitors. We have the evidence. Be certain of that. Unless you earn my mercy by cooperating and testifying against your master, Vulpes, we will have no alternative."

"It will matter little; if I implicate Vulpes, I confess my own crimes and I will be convicted," Crapho said, keen to his diminishing options.

"Yes, but there is a way," the countess answered. We could bypass the inquisitors and accuse you before the Ordinary Ecclesiastical Court where leniency would be far more likely. I would be willing to recommend this to Archbishop Vriunt myself should you prove useful in capturing Vulpes."

This was a real hope for Crapho, since as a priest in the diocese he could expect mercy from his own judges that might not be accorded some outsider. There were things that he knew that might prove embarrassing to certain individuals and there could be a willingness to

encourage his silence. There was at least a chance. "If you deliver me to the Ordinary at Mainz, I will speak," he answered.

That was it then. He remained tied, gagged and under the watchful eye of Ucco Frass while the two women returned to the main hall to put the plan into motion. With no certainty that there were not others who might be implicated, they thought it was wise to move the prisoner secretly. The road to Mainz passed directly by Black Swan, creating a very problematic point in the journey should Vulpes somehow suspect that they had solved the plot and were carrying the means of his destruction.

The marshall was summoned and the big decorative covered carriage was ordered. "Aurianna and I will travel to Mainz today to visit and comfort Heilewif. Perhaps we can testify on her behalf," she announced to an attentive service staff. "Father Crapho is well and he is resting."

The carriage was ordered to report first to the kitchen, where the cook was to load some provisions for the journey, and it was through this subterfuge that the priest was spirited by Frass into the coach and hidden on the floor beneath a fur cover. Bound and gagged as he was, there was little chance he could be troublesome, but Ava carried her stiletto nevertheless. In addition to the four coachmen, six knights were ordered to ride escort and the procession made an almost regal departure to the waving and best wishes of the household personnel, oblivious of the carriage's secret cargo.

Chapter Twenty-Three

THE ROAD WAS WELL MAINTAINED and they made good time. Normally they would have paused to rest at Vulpes' manor, but this time they dared not, deciding to push through to Mannheim with the first four-horse team. Before reaching the Rhine they heard a coachman yell, "riders approaching," and they pulled to a halt, while the knights closed around the carriage. Highway robbers, common on most of the trade routes, were rather rare along this stretch; nevertheless the knights were trained to take precautions. The carriage was closed and offered very little forward view; Aurianna leaned out the side window to see.

"Please stay inside, my lady, there may be danger," one of the knights cautioned.

"It's Shilgen, mother!" Aurianna said excitedly, recognizing his ride even from a distance, "and someone is with him. This is wonderful."

Ava felt a sense of relief that was quickly erased by the thought of not knowing what had happened to Heilewif. "I hope he has good news," she said, and Aurianna too became anxious, although the appearance of the loyal knight was very comforting.

"Shilgen, much has happened, but first tell us of Heilewif," the countess said, beckoning him to sit with them in the coach.

"Heilewif is suffering severely; she has been subjected to the torture and is not holding up well. We have very little time, perhaps a day before they torture her again."

"Oh, no, that's awful. You say she is not bearing up?"

"She fears the torture, as she remembers well that it was inflicted on her mother, but she is determined not to break under it. I fear she will die from the stress if we don't do something soon."

Ava pulled the shades on the carriage windows and, speaking softly, told Sir Shilgen the details of their encounter with the priest and that they were bringing him to the archbishop. "We didn't know who to trust and wanted him hidden when we passed Black Swan and so we put him under the floor cover," she said, smiling, as she pulled the fur up revealing the bound and gagged priest.

Shilgen was astounded at the details of the plot and the resourcefulness of the women. He agreed that Vulpes must be behind the scheme and that great care should be taken. He assured the countess that the knights were loyal and honorable to a man and asked to be put in command of the detail. The priest was taken from the carriage and mounted, still bound, on the professor's horse, for the ride to Mainz. Shilgen led the entourage, while the professor rode in the carriage to advise the two women and help set their strategy.

The lawyer briefed them on the crime of heresy and on the feasibility of their plan to deliver the priest to the archbishop and ask him to take jurisdiction in the case. "The priest may be tried in the Diocesan Ecclesiastical Court, since he cannot be considered a heretic, because his crime did not involve an error of faith," the professor began, and seeing that the women were not well versed in canon law he went on. "To be judged a heretic a person must first of all be a professed Catholic who, while retaining at least some orthodoxy, professes an error in reasoning, which is contrary to the teachings of the Church. But more than this, the heretic must persistently and stubbornly stick to the heresy, even after being shown its error. A Jew, or an Infidel, for example, cannot be a heretic. Also, one who is a non-believer cannot be a heretic, but is rather an Apostate. A person can commit any crime including witchcraft and if these conditions are not present that person is not a heretic and not subject to the Inquisition."

"Are you saying that the inquisitors only have jurisdiction in matters of heresy, but not in witchcraft, per se?" Aurianna asked, cutting quickly to the essence of the question.

"The damage done by witches falls into both the ecclesiastical and the civil jurisdiction, since witches do harm to both religious and temporal interests," the professor answered. "It is always a confused jurisdiction, but it is clear in the canons that a witch, to be tried by inquisitors, must be charged with heresy."

"It seems that we have a good argument that Crapho ought not to go before the Inquisition then," Ava asserted

But, the professor countered. "They will argue, also from the canons, that anyone who practices divination or spellbinding, after having professed the Christian faith, must have in his mind denied the faith and must therefore also be a heretic. This of course, could mean that Crapho's case belonged before the inquisitors."

"So it all comes down to what Vriunt wants to do," Aurianna said, ever able to reduce the issue, "and he will do what is in his best interest I am sure."

"Yes," the professor went on. "Bishops clearly can proceed against witches without inquisitorial consent and can assume jurisdiction in any case within the diocese, but they don't have to."

"Vriunt may want to avoid becoming embroiled in this case, considering the delicate matter of the emperor's deposition and his difficulties with your father," she said to Aurianna. But Ava knew that her cousin, King William, had relieved Robert of the obligation to support him and that the count had decided to abstain from voting. This would clear the way for the archbishop, but Vriunt did not yet know this. "Yes, I'm sure he will do what he sees as most beneficial and what he wants most is to depose the emperor and he believes my husband still stands in his way. Perhaps if we are artful, we can make a deal."

"But, how does this help Heilewif?" Aurianna asked, seeing the disconnect, "unless the archbishop asserts his jurisdiction over her as well. Is that possible, professor?"

"We could argue that Heilewif's case also involves no heresy, since she cannot be shown to have denied or in any way impugned the faith. Casting spells alone is not heresy, no matter how much damage may be done. Her case also could be heard in the ordinary court."

Ava then asked. "Has it been asserted that her deeds, even if proved, involve errors in faith?"

"No," the professor answered. "You have a good claim to make before the archbishop."

"Or at least we have enough to allow him to justify his own self-interest," Ava responded.

The countess was correct; Ucco Vriunt was a practical man and easily induced to see wisdom in securing his political objective at so small a price. The complaints of the inquisitors would surely reach Rome, but would pale before his success in efficiently ousting the emperor and he was more than eager to promote himself this way before the Holy See.

"And you say the count has assured you that he is prepared to acquiesce in the removal of the emperor?" Vriunt asked, unsure of whether a woman could speak with authority in these matters.

"My dear archbishop," Ava answered, "as you know, William is my cousin. Robert's only loyalty to him was because of me and I guarantee that if you see fit to come with us on this and free Heilewif, he will not oppose your plans."

With nothing to lose, Vriunt's caution was quickly discarded. "Done!" he said.

As the archbishop's vicar interrupted the inquisitorial proceeding, Bodenolph von Vulpes was about to give his testimony under oath.

Vulpes placed his hand on the Cross and held up three fingers to signify the Holy Trinity. "I swear to tell the truth on pain of damnation of body and soul."

"There will be no need," the vicar interrupted. "By order of his Excellency the Most Reverend Ucco Vriunt, Archbishop of Mainz, I halt these proceedings. The accused woman, Heilewif, will be remanded to my custody and her case reviewed by the ecclesiastical court of this diocese."

"This is highly unusual," the inquisitor responded. "I trust there is an adequate explanation."

"New evidence has come forward implicating a priest in the Heidelberg household who has been arrested and is awaiting trial before

the Ordinary. The old woman is likely innocent and merely a victim herself of the priest's scheme."

Vulpes listened intently, although he dared say nothing. He had no idea what had unraveled the plot and, fearing that he might be arrested himself, slowly backed away and disappeared in the commotion. He reached his horse and bolted back toward Black Swan, deciding not to risk taking the time to gather his retainers, who were at leisure, and scattered about the town. He was alone now and resolved to use his hostage to make good an escape.

When the priest was brought before the archbishop he was given a sign of hope. "Adelbrech, my old friend, are you guilty of these things as they say?"

Now, the priest had had several hours to reflect and to fashion a rationale to explain events that on the surface seemed damning. He could not establish his innocence, but with a few lies he might mitigate his guilt. At least that was how he planned to begin, but hearing the archbishop refer to him as an old friend encouraged him to fall back on that friendship, be cooperative, tell the truth and hope for mercy.

"Yes, your excellency," the priest answered contritely, and to avoid implication in the kidnapping added abruptly, "Bodenolph von Vulpes is now holding the Wittelsbach heir in his oubliette."

The words went through the countess like an arrow. "Is he hurt?" she asked intently, turning to face Crapho. "No, he was not hurt, but is being held in the dungeon at Black Swan and I believe his life may now be in danger." The priest could see the anger welling up in the woman and added, "I had nothing to do with this, my lady. Please believe me, and that I pray like you for his safety."

But Ava was not going to rely on prayers. "Shilgen," she pleaded almost in panic, "take the knights and rescue him!" Aurianna rushed to his side, and taking his hands said, "please hurry, Shilgen; he must be so scared."

The horses were tired, but willing; they ran as though they understood the urgency, perhaps sensing the energy in the knight's body and were all lathered and galled when they reached the

first way-station. As Shilgen rushed to change his saddle, the groom quipped, "you're at least an hour behind."

"What do you mean?" the knight asked.

And the groom answered. "Your chasing Vulpes aren't you? He came through here like the wind and took the fastest courser. He said he was in a big match race. He didn't mention you though."

They rode on into the night, changing horses twice more and each time Shilgen asked how far behind they were. They gained ground over the distance, but reached Black Swan dead tired and with no plan. Vulpes' horse was wandering around the grounds in front of the house, which strangely seemed calm and quiet. They should not have just rushed right in, but they did. Although Vulpes had left all of his knights behind in Mainz there should have been at least a dozen watchmen and household guards. Shilgen had six good men. With the defenses unfinished, they easily approached the house unchallenged and, using one of the timbers piled at the construction site, quickly battered down the main door.

As they swept quickly across the first floor public area and up to the private quarters they encountered no armed resistance. Nearly everyone was sleeping and the unarmed doormen surrendered without a fight. Most of the daytime staff lived in the village and in a matter of seconds the few live-in household servants came into the corridors, generally confused, some thinking it was a fire or a pillaging. The knights kept moving room to room in search of Vulpes, not stopping to explain their presence or take any prisoners. When they had cleared the bed rooms they regrouped in the great hall. They knew that the oubliette had to be in the basement, but had no idea where Vulpes was or if he were even in the house at all.

"Where are the knights?" Shilgen demanded assertively and a man answered. "There are no knights here; they all went with our master to Mainz."

"Who are you?" Shilgen asked.

"I am the usher," the man answered. "What do you want from us?"

"We have come to arrest your lord, Vulpes, under the authority of the archbishop." Shilgen noticed that there was no shock or disbelief

from the man who seemed to have anticipated some such outcome for their duplicitous master. "Take me to the oubliette," Shilgen ordered and then turned to the others. "Return to your rooms and do not interfere."

With no knights to protect him, Vulpes was a cornered rat, alone and very dangerous, and Shilgen ordered his men to surround the building to prevent his escape, while he went alone to flush him out. The man led him down the stone steps to the basement and to the oubliette. It was dark and Shilgen ordered him to carry the torch and lead the way. The man was frightened, but obeyed willingly and seemed strangely cooperative. The dungeon door was up and the rope was hanging down into the opening. He got no answer when he called the boy's name into the black hole. Vulpes was somewhere in the house and he had the boy as a hostage Shilgen reasoned, but where was he and what was he planning?

Suddenly and inexplicably the usher offered, "there is a secret passage, underground to the stable. I can show you where the door is."

Was this a trick, Shilgen thought? The knights had surrounded the wrong building and would be of no help if it were a trap. But there was no time to correct that now.

Shilgen took the torch and entered the narrow tunnel alone. He stopped for a moment to assess the void into which he would walk. He could smell the wet earth and hear the trickle of water seeping down the walls. Beyond the small capsule of light made by the flame, it was pitch black and as he crouched forward he felt himself dropping deeper with each step. The roots of trees penetrated from above and had not been cleared for years. In some places they blocked the entire passage and he could see where Vulpes had cut through them. He walked in water nearly to his knees as he passed under the foundation stones of the outer wall and as he gradually ascended from the depth, he saw a flickering light ahead. He dropped and doused his torch against the muddy floor and, staying as low as his boots and belts would allow, made his way quietly to the open door.

He could see by the dim orange light of an oil lamp hanging from a rope tied to the rafters. Vulpes was frantically saddling two horses. Ludwig was gagged and tied to a post. There was no reason to

wait. He burst into the stable, his sword glinting in the glow of the lamp light. Vulpes said nothing and drew his sword, knowing that this time he had no easy escape. Or did he?

The clanging clash of swords rang crisply as the titanic struggle began by the meager light of the tiny flame. The two men were hardly able to see each other. The horses reared and neighed, kicking up dust from the straw covered floor and knocking the lamp sideways until it swung, back and forth, casting a rhythmic changing aura, causing the combatants to appear and disappear in a kind of eerie cadence.

Vulpes was a skilled swordsman, but seemed to have no stomach for the fight. He maneuvered and retreated constantly, making few attempts to strike a mortal blow, preferring to cover himself defensively. Shilgen thought this odd and took care not to be lured into foolhardiness, but pressed the attack vigorously. Finally backed into a dark corner and apparently exhausted from swinging the heavy blade, Vulpes offered to drop his sword in exchange for his life. He knew that the knight was honor bound to accept his surrender. "Give up your weapon and you will live," Shilgen ordered and Vulpes complied, but did so with a sly smile that Shilgen did not see in the dusty darkness.

He also did not see the silhouette of Trapsta Scardo emerge from the tunnel behind him. Ludwig saw the little man and struggled to scream, but could only murmur incoherently. Scardo slipped silently out of the shadows and, about to strike, raised his dagger. Vulpes' satisfied smirk grew wider and then suddenly collapsed in despair as Scardo slithered back into the darkness and disappeared.

"You bastard!" Vulpes exploded, and in a mindless rage of revenge, pulled out his own concealed dagger and lunged toward the knight. Shilgen's thrust was straight and true, slicing into the flesh and cracking through Vulpes' ribs. The wide razor sharp blade sliced neatly across the heart, killing him in seconds.

Epilog

IT WAS DECREED, AND ALSO ORDAINED, that the Archbishop of Mainz would call the princes, ecclesiastical and secular, and summon them within three months to present themselves at Frankfort on the Main to elect a king of the Romans and prospective emperor. These letters patent were already underway when, on that early spring morning, Archbishop Vriunt intervened in the Inquisition.

It was August and very hot when the gates of Frankfort were closed and the city sealed to all outsiders for the deliberations to begin. As they had been instructed by the Golden Bull to do, they went at dawn to the church of St. Bartholomew the Apostle, where a mass was sung to the Holy Spirit, to illumine their hearts and infuse the light of his virtue into their senses; so that they, armed with his protection, would elect a just, good and useful man to be king of the Romans and future emperor, and as a safeguard for the people of Christ. And this they would do. When they entered the church, as was the custom, the Count Palatine of the Rhine, as Arch-Steward of the Holy Roman Empire, was escorted by the Archbishop of Mainz. It was at this time, that Vriunt confirmed with Robert that the deposition of King William was done.

The electors were given thirty days to reach a decision and with three of the lay princes in contention and dividing the seven votes, no majority could be reached. It was as the deadline neared that Vriunt approached Robert and told him that if he were to vote for himself, the three bishops would join him. It was in this way, that Robert of

Wittelsbach, Count Palatine of the Rhine, became King of the Germans and Holy Roman Emperor.

One of his first Imperial decrees was to deprive the heirs of Bodenolph von Vulpes of all fiefs held under the empire. Sir Shilgen Sturmere was raised to the level of Freiherr, the highest rank in the lower nobility, and given these fiefs, including the manor, Black Swan, and all of its lands and vineyards. He was much honored during his life, which was long and prosperous, although his servants talked often of a sadness that no one understood. He never married and died without heirs. His fiefs fell back into the Heidelberg domain and his name disappeared forever from the ranks of the German nobility.

Aurianna von Wittelsbach suspected that Sir Shilgen was in love with her, but he never told her so. After her ordeal, she was sent immediately to Vienna, to rest and recuperate; there she became betrothed to the Burgrave of Nuremberg, as was her father's wish. They were married the following spring, in one of the most splendid and beautiful ceremonies ever seen. She bore four children and became the matriarch of the House of Hohenzollern; her heirs came, successively, to rule as Margraves of Brandenburg, Kings of Prussia and German Emperors. Although she returned many times to the Rhineland and her Heidelberg home, and hoped to see Sir Shilgen once again, she said nothing of it and the knight never knew.

The priest, Adelbrech Crapho, was Count Robert's half brother, the bastard son of an affair between Robert's father and one of the chambermaids. She had been secretly spirited away to a convent, where the baby was born. The young mother, hardly sixteen, was then sent first to Prague and later to Russia and not heard from again.

The boy was raised by the nuns in the convent at Mulhausen. His life fixed for him, as a very young man he went from there into a seminary. Robert's father, driven by guilt, became the young priest's patron, brought him to Heidelberg, and raised him to the office of chancellor; no one in the castle suspected the truth, even Crapho knew nothing of his real identity until years later when Bodenolph von Vulpes hatched his plot. Vulpes told him that he too was a Wittelsbach and that he, and not Ludwig, was the rightful heir. Crapho, who had never known his mother, dreamed of finding her and bringing her back to

Heidelberg in glory. Vulpes used this weakness and, with cunning lies, enlisted Crapho in the evil scheme. After a brief trial, in which he confessed and every detail became known, the archbishop, with Robert's blessing, sealed the depositions and sent the priest into exile. He lived out his life in a monastery, high in the Hunsruck.

And finally, we come to the wise woman, whose knowledge and bravery will never be equaled. She was much adored and held in the highest esteem by the most powerful and regal of families. Feted and honored and offered riches and comforts beyond her dreams, Heilewif chose rather to return to her simple cottage at the edge of the forest and her loving family in the far away village of Fichtestamm.