



Heavy oak doors swung slowly open, allowing Ingamald and the merchants and peasants who waited impatiently to enter the walled city. Much commotion attended their bustling as each hastened to his business and to the market square. Bewildered amongst the thrusting goodwives and their cackling poultry, the carts of noisy hucksters, the running, laughing children, Ingamald thought to herself how easily the Musica would find their place within this crowd. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted Beezle's cat-tail disappearing into the shadow of an alley, and quite suddenly the witch stood alone, not far within the gates, and considered her bearings.

Dwellings, with strong wooden beams and thick straw thatches, were fine and grand, spreading out in a fan from the main road. Shops and smithies lined streets opposite the houses. Somewhere off to the right the train of people had headed for the market square. Ingamald followed the dust they rose, looking for the spires of the Ruheplatz palace. Along the way she espied several of the notices she had penned announcing the arrival of the Musica. She smiled at this thought as streets opened up into a large central square where waresellers were already setting up tables and stands. Ingamald approached a knife grinder and inquired after the whereabouts of the palace. Her request met a gruff dismissal. She wandered away seeking a friendlier face, but

paused, fascinated, before a theatrical wagon where actors, tumblers, and jugglers practised for that afternoon's performance.

A burst of flame just to her left made her gasp in surprise. A wiry young man in motley raised a burning torch to his gaping mouth. Ingamald reached forth a hand too late to stop him as he seemed to swallow the torch. Pulling the smoking instrument from his mouth, he smiled at her. Then, lifting his chin to the sky, his open lips flamed forth a pillar of fire.

"You might want to close *your* mouth, then," his first words greeted her. "I'm quite alright, y'see. Jus' a bit o' soot from me flame." He wiped his blackened cheeks with the back of his hand. "Me name's Ingo. What's yours, lass?"

"Ingamald. Th – this is your living?" Ingamald stood incredulous.

"Aye. This an' a bit o' that. I'm with me troupe 'ere. But mostly I'm a fire-eater. Me specialty. And tell me, 'ow do you make your living?" He eyed her leather pouches.

"I don't. Well, at least not yet. I must speak with the wizard Jygaard. I would ... like to be his apprentice."

Ingo whistled softly. "Apprentice to the great wizard, y'say? One so mighty will look to you?"

"Aye. And I would greatly thank you to point out the road to the castle, as my time is pressed, and I would be on my way."

Something in her tone made him consider her seriously. "Aye. We ourselves go there this very night. The young prince lies ill in a deep sleep, and the boys and me – for a pretty price, mind you – will do all that can be done t'ease the poor king's mind. And that o' his daughter's." He chuckled. "Now the way." He rambled off a series of directions which Ingamald noted carefully.

"My thanks, Fire-eater Ingo."

"A pleasure, wizard's apprentice Ingamald."

Turning on her heel to the left, she sought the beginning of her path, and left him puzzling behind her.

“I will speak with Jygaard,” Ingamald crossly told the guard who barred her entrance to the great castle before her. “Send a message. Tell him Ingamald of Hören Wood is here.”

“Admit the girl, guard,” commanded a bass voice. From the shadows stepped a tall, pale man, grey-bearded and dressed in a rich blue robe dotted with silver stars.

“I am the wizard Jygaard.”

“I am the witch Ingamald.”

“I have prepared a room for you in the castle, student of Hana. Come.” Jygaard passed stately through the corridors, and led Ingamald through a maze of passages and flights of steps before pausing at a chamber door. “Your room. Inside is your maidservant who will attend to your comforts. I must return to the king. His son lies very ill. I trust you can find your way to the royal antechamber once you are settled.”

“Aye.”

He turned abruptly from her and rushed down the corridor.

Ingamald lifted the latch of the door and entered the room. Her eyes were greeted by a large, bright chamber with latticed windows thrown open to catch the morning breeze. A four-poster bed, capable of sleeping four people it seemed to Ingamald, stood against one tapestried wall. The other walls were similarly covered, and she admired these for a few moments before a soft-spoken girl appeared at her side.

“Be there anything the mistress wants?”

“I am no mistress. I am Ingamald. What are you called?”

With lowered gaze the maid replied, “Gært.”

“Well, Gært, as you see, I have little with me to unpack and what I have I will do myself. So you are free to go.”

“I mayn’t go, mistr ... Ingamald. My duty is here.”

Ingamald frowned, then acquiesced. “Show me what else there is to see of this room.”

Gërt brightened and led the witch about the chamber, commenting on the story of a piece of furniture here, a particular scene in a tapestry there. Behind a curtain was another door leading to Gërt’s own small room, and a basin of steaming water. Ingamald took a moment to wash and dry her face, and then wandered over to Gërt’s side at the window. A lovely courtyard garden full of trees laden with ripening fruit lay below. Songbirds darted about and several paths invited casual strollers. Ingamald was delighted. Gërt then took her to the small writing table set before the fireplace hearth, where parchment, ink, and quills were available for her mistress’ use.

Her tour finished, Ingamald prepared to meet Jygaard and the King of Ruheplatz. She pulled her green cloak from her pouch, but found it wrinkled and of no use to her. Gërt took it in her capable hands, promising it would be good as new when she had done.

In solitude, Ingamald sat upon the great bed, pondering the way to the antechamber. True, she could use a spell of revealing to unravel the maze of corridors, but she did not appreciate this game Jygaard had set before her. Or she could use another’s wits.

“Gërt,” she beckoned, and the young woman appeared from behind the curtain. “How does one reach the royal antechamber?”

“Oh aye!” exclaimed Gërt, eager to be of assistance. She gave detailed directions, and satisfied, the witch quit her chamber and brought herself before the great apartment of the king.

Jygaard strode out to meet and accompany her into the throne room.

“Majesty, the girl I spoke of ... Ingamald, pupil to Hana of Hören Wood,” he pronounced, with a slight bow to his superior.

The king surmised the rough, common attire, the wild red hair, the bold green gaze. Then he smiled, “Greetings, Ingamald. Come closer child. Be not afraid.”

“I am neither child nor afraid, King.”

Both he and Jygaard started. “Ingamald, you will address his Highness appropriately or you do yourself dishonor and ...”

The king waved his words. “She spoke no insolence, Jygaard. I would more men were as forthright in their dealings with me.” Then turning his attention back to her, “Ingamald, if you please, a little closer.”

She approached the raised platform, where King Rote of Ruheplatz sat upon his gilt throne.

“We are pleased with your arrival. Indeed, we have expected you these several weeks. Jygaard himself is very eager to begin your lessons. However, you arrive at a time of deep anxiety,” his face relaxed its formality to reveal a sad weariness. “My only son, who fell from his steed ten days past, lies in impenetrable sleep. We have tried everything, everything, and I fear ...”

“Majesty,” Jygaard interjected, “today I have concocted another medicine draught. Do not lose hope.”

A young woman stepped into the room. “Ah, my daughter Gretchen. Come hither, my dear, and meet Ingamald who has come to study with Jygaard.”

Ingamald greeted the young woman dressed in a velvet gown the color of sky. Her face was downcast, her beautiful eyes sorrowful. The witch had never seen anyone so delicately lovely and so disheartened.

“Papa, he worsens,” Gretchen half-sobbed.

Ingamald was moved by pity to speak. “My greatest skills lie in the healing arts. I ...”

Jygaard laughed quietly. “We appreciate your offer, Ingamald. However, this is an illness immune to even my best arts, thus far.”

Ingamald lifted her green eyes to the king and his daughter. “We will take you to him, Ingamald,” said the king. “Perhaps your witchery may work some good.”

Together the small party left the grand throne room through a small door to enter the young prince’s sickroom. A brazier heaped with coals

was near the bed, and the stifling air hung heavy with the smell of medicinal herbs. Beneath thick robes lay a pale, fair young man whose skin glistened with perspiration. Ingamald saw movement behind the closed eyes and moved to lift an eyelid, but Jygaard's deep voice invaded her thoughts.

"You know naught of this illness. You are but an apprentice, witch. Know your place! Do not imperil the prince!"

Ingamald snapped a bold retort, "You forget who I am, Jygaard!" and she shot him a cold emerald spark. Neither king nor princess knew anything of what passed between wizard and witch.

Aloud, Ingamald spoke, "The prince is in the realm of dream. I must cross the threshold and bring him back. But first I must know his name."

"Randulfr," Gretchen blurted, her hopeful eyes upon the witch. Ingamald smiled at her and without warning, placed her lips to the prince's.

*She slipped from the sick chamber, from her body, through the prince's body and into his thoughts. A long spiralling walk brought her to a deep, dark chasm: the one she sensed Jygaard the Wizard had feared to cross. But Ingamald would challenge the dark place.*

*She jumped the chasm. And saw what waking mortals never see: the stuff of dreams. Ingamald meandered past a carnival where mythical beasts performed to strange music. She wandered a cavern of weirdish colors, and stranger sounds bounced off its walls. Above her soared a flying machine, noiseless and graceful. A stream crossed her path, and so she swam, emerging dry on the opposite bank. Strangers greeted her at random. Pungent tastes and aromas touched her senses. And all the while she called out for Randulfr.*

*Quite suddenly she came to a desert. No sound, no one in sight. Puffs of dust rose from her softly treading feet. Ahead, upon this nightscape was a cliff-face and within it a cave, a whirling, shadowy void. Across the hollow mouth, strands of moonlit spider's web, fluid with motion in the dry wind. Ingamald paused, shuddered. She had seen this place before. Her feet took a few faltering steps forward. But this moment was neither her time, nor her quest. She sought to help another. Ingamald turned on her heel sharply to the left.*

*Some paces further, she found the prince, leaning against a willow tree, a self-indulgent smile upon his face.*

*"Randulfr, I have looked long for you."*

*"Who are you?"*

*She told him.*

*"Charming. Sit awhile under this willow tree and all we may wish for will come to pass."*

*"No. I will not sit. You must return with me at once, Prince."*

*"No. I will not," he countered.*

*Ingamald studied the young man's expression, glazed with ecstasy.*

*"You see, I wish for a sweet. Now I have a sweet," he laughed, munching.*

*"Aye, you have a sweet. But it is no real sweet, but an illusion. Neither this sweet nor any other food here gives your living body sustenance."*

*"What care I for my living body?"*

*"But to stay here, Randulfr is a kind of death," she persisted reasonably.*

*"It is a death I choose."*

*"Why, when you have an anxious father who longs to see you healed, a kingdom that you will one day rule, a life in the sunshine rather than shadow, a loving sister who grieves for you?"*

*His brow furrowed as he absorbed her words. "You are no beauty."*

*Ingamald met his gaze. "No, I have not the fine, sweet features of your sister, who is indeed very lovely."*

*"Ah, Gretchen."*

*Ingamald sensed her advantage. "I have spoken of her grief. She misses you. Do you not long to see her again?"*

*"I may see her when I wish. I may have any conversation with her I choose. You see, here she comes now." He stood to embrace the image of Gretchen who smiled lovingly into his face.*

*"But this is not Gretchen with whom you speak. This is but a reflection of your memories, a reflection of yourself. You do not truly see or touch*

*her. The living Gretchen takes no comfort from your embrace. She weeps still on the other side of dreaming.”*

*The prince gazed languidly at the shadow-Gretchen, unheeding of the witch’s words. There was nought to do but frighten him back to waking. “Besides,” continued Ingamald, centering her energy, “betimes what we dream is not so pleasant.”*

*“Whatever do you mean?”*

*The witch raised her arms. “Look to the Princess now, Prince! Behold!”*

*Ranðulfr was willed to obey. He turned to survey a scene on a rocky, windswept shore. A single barren tree clung to the cliff edge. Bound to this tree, his beloved sister wept and cried out in terror. Towards her, mighty with green scale and firebreath, swung a firedrake. Sparks flew from clawed, grotesque feet as it landed next to Gretchen. A belch of flame engulfed the terrified princess. The prince tried to block the death-scream from his ears, but there was no refuge in this place of dream. Merciless, the beast poised a twisted talon, ripped a gash from chin to stomach, disembowelled Gretchen’s writhing body. Hungrily it feasted as the prince watched on, pale and aghast.*

*The scene changed instantly to a funeral bier. Upon it lay a shrouded figure. Ranðulfr felt his feet drawn towards the raised platform, his shaking hands lift the shroud ... Screaming, he shrank away from the mangled, rotting corpse of his sister, wormsmeat.*

*“Take me back! Oh, let me awake from this vision! This horror! Take me, take me back!”*

*The nightmare ended. Ingamald smiled and took his hand. “Just as you wish, my Prince.”*

*She led him as though he were a child across a now serene mindscape, the visions of his dreams having dissolved away once he resolved to wake. Slowly his fear gave way to trust, and Ranðulfr held fast to his guide’s hand. Composed and reassured, he jumped the chasm without hesitation. Together they wended back. At threshold, Ingamald left him, reentered her body, returned to the room.*

The prince’s eyes fluttered open, and he breathed a deep sigh of relief. He smiled up at Ingamald. In an instant of real time, all that the onlookers beheld was the witch wake the prince with a single kiss. And so ever after the legends told it.