

Swan's Lake
by Susan Shwartz

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Denied even the small luxury of a maudlin binge, the tutor Wolfgang had drunk himself sober while the sailors spent the night dragging the lake. Now, clouds scudded over the rising sun. It looked pale and impossibly remote. Wind rose and scattered great white feathers of spume onto the rocks. Toll-ing from the lake, bells echoed from castle to cliffs and down to the village. The lake's surface teemed with tiny boats on which tiny figures moved si-lently, heavily. They lowered the great seining nets, raised them, then lowered them again and again. Each time, their movements were more and more hope-less.

Finally, the boats came in to shore. The thirteen swans who floated there in a silent cortege parted, as if to escort the fishermen to the docks. Wolfgang was waiting at the landing, flushed but otherwise far, far too sober. Benno, who had been the Prince's closest friend, stumbled as he disembarked. The fish-ermen steadied him. Wolfgang wrapped his own marten-lined cloak about the younger man, who was trembling, and hugged him for a moment. Then, he pulled out the inevitable flask of brandy.

Benno tried a weak grin; Wolfgang's fondness for the grape was an old joke among . . . there were just two of them left now to mourn. Abruptly, both men looked at the flask and winced at the coat of arms stamped into the heavy silver. The flask was a new one, Prince Siegfried's last gift to his old tutor only a day ago. It had been the anniversary of his birth — his twenty-first birthday and his last.

"We dragged the entire lake, Wolf-gang," muttered Benno. "And do you know what we found? One odd white rock, shaped like an owl, some branches, and an odd boot or two. Sweet suffering Christ, how shall I tell the Queen her son is drowned?"

Wolfgang shut his eyes in grief, wish-ing that it were merely the pain of a hangover. Benno was just Prince Sieg-fried's age. He had tutored them both, birched the one and scolded the other when both were boys. They were the only sons he was likely to have, and he had entertained bright hopes for the men they might become.

Last night had been Prince Sieg-fried's twenty-first birthday. As al-ways, the royal Birthday was celebrated with a ball. At this year's Ball, how-ever, he had been formally invested as Heir. That was — or was supposed to be — his moment to choose a bride. At supper, with trumpets before and fire-works thereafter, the betrothal should have been announced.

Six lovely princesses, all young, all dancers, had been invited so that he might

make his choice. They had been half in love with him already, had waited, hoping wistfully that he might hand one of them the bouquet that Queen Hedwig Elisabeth had laid in his hand. But the Prince had wanted no part of them. Even after Her Majesty had risen from the throne and rebuked him sharply, the Prince had drawn apart.

God knows, it had not been that the Prince didn't know what his duty was. Wolfgang had spent hours dinning the customs and proprieties of the Birthday into the Prince's hard head, but the boy had not wanted to settle into life as Heir, husband, and — inexorably — father quite so quickly. He had wanted time to dance, to hunt, and to laugh. Had any of those six dreaming, dancing princesses wanted a friend, a brother, a dance partner, she might have twined him about her delicate fingers, but no, they had had to dream about *him* . . .

And then *they* had entered the room in a flash of splendor. The dark, glit-tering princess in her gown black as night and sewn with stars and her tall, avian father strode into the ballroom, accompanied by a retinue of magnifi-cent strangers from the warm southern lands, outshining the somber Northern court. They looked more regal than even the Queen.

The man had gestured. The Princess had danced; and their retinue, from golden baskets, had flung apricots, dates, amber pears, and glowing Valencia or-anges to an astonished court, greedy as children for that one evening. For all the good, though, that the court had had of them, they might as well have hurled poison.

The black-clad Princess had dazzled Prince Siegfried. He had needed no re-minders of duty to declare his eternal love and homage. No sooner were the words out than her father extracted the Prince's solemn vow to wed his daugh-ter. But it had all been a trick. Once the promise was out, they taunted Sieg-fried with a vision of a maid he had betrayed — he who had never willingly harmed man, woman, or child in all his life. Even then, the girl had tried to warn him. Her white hands fluttered like tired wings, but, intent on his be-trothed, he did not see.

Finally he noticed — or was permitted to notice. When he saw the maid who had trusted him weeping in de-spair, he too despaired. Then those two regal sorcerers had laughed at him, scoffed at his pleas, and disappeared in a crack of thunder as sharp as heart-break. The white flowers of what should have been a bridal bouquet lay on the parquet of the dance floor, petals bruised and scattered.

Wolfgang shook himself like an old dog. *Faithful hound, worn out in my Prince's service*, he thought. *I'd hoped to spend these last years at his fireside, with children tugging at my ears and heartstrings.*

He sighed and took Benno's arm. The surviving lad hadn't yet learned that what could not be cured *must* be en-dured; and God knows, there was no cure for this sorrow, short of the grave. Wolfgang could feel Benno's bone and muscle

under the heavy cloth of his cloak. The man was young, taut, fit; yet Wolfgang knew that during the long climb up the clifflike rocky stair to the Castle, he was the stronger man.

“These same miserable rocks . . .” Benno muttered. Wolfgang tightened his grasp. This very dawn, the Prince had hurled himself from these very rocks, following the maid who refused to live loveless and enslaved.

“You dare not think of that, lad,” he said.

Behind them came the tread of heavy fishermen’s boots that all but drowned out their scandalized whispers and hisses to one another not to bother the gentry with the clack of their gossip. For all Wolfgang cared, they could go straight to Father Bertwald and let him deluge their little boats with holy water. There was no comfort for any of them either in faith or in reason right now, as Wolfgang knew.

Well, he had spent many pleasant, tipsy years as the mildest of Epicureans, preaching pleasure and joy — always in moderation, though; he would not be the first philosopher who turned Stoic in his old age.

“Lord Benno, Master Wolfgang!” a voice trained to halloo out over wind and rain hailed them. “Look over there!”

Young Jurgen knelt beside a boulder the size of a turret. He reached forward, raising by her slender wrists a girl who would have been lovely had she not been so terrified. Her hands bled from grubbing up pebbles to cast at the fishermen. Her lips were pulled back in a silent shriek. Her dark eyes were full of anguish, but no tears. Though a cloak trimmed with ashen feathers lay crumpled beneath her, she was clad only in her long hair. It too was the color of cold ashes on the hearth; but when the pale sun struck it, it gleamed.

Benno’s head shot up. Angry recognition began to smolder in his amber eyes, and Wolfgang could follow his thoughts. Change that maid’s hair from ashen to ebony, stitch a proud crimson smile on that pallid face, garb her in black satin and lace, not the pathetic grace of her own skin, and she would resemble the sorceress who had destroyed their Prince.

Wolfgang jabbed the younger man with his elbow. “Not now, fool!” he hissed. Not when they were both worn out and heartsore; they could imagine anything. But as Wolfgang gazed at Jurgen, the young fisherman who held his surprising new catch, he didn’t think that he imagined how much the man resembled the last Prince. Both men had dark hair that flowed over tanned brows, brown eyes more apt to flash with friendship than with anger or scorn, and wide, generous mouths.

For that matter, both men resembled Prince Siegfried’s father, who had

al-ways loved his people well . . . far too well, muttered Queen Hedwig Elisa-beth, who had reasons of her own for that sour, pinched-lip look she too often wore.

Benno too stared at the sailor and the girl whom he struggled to enfold in the strange feathered cloak. So like the Prince and that dark Princess; and yet, where Siegfried had been all fire and dreams, this Jurgen was sober and kind. Where the dark Princess had been sure and brilliant and cruel, this maid was terrified past anguish. She flailed her arms in a feeble attempt to ward off the cloak's soft embrace.

"Little lostling, see, it's warm and fine. I can give you nothing else that is so fine," he coaxed.

"Stop trying to shoulder me aside," Benno hissed at his former tutor. "I swear, that girl is . . ."

As if sensing the rage in the grieving man, the girl flung herself onto the ground. Her white naked back turned in as graceful a line as the neck of a swan. Jurgen reached down and gathered her in to rest against his rough jacket. His weathered hands smoothed down her long, silver-gray hair, which tangled and clung to his fingers. He glanced up reproachfully at Benno.

"What's thy name, lostling?" he asked.

Her lips moved, but no sound came.

"A mute!" Benno exclaimed under his breath, his fingers moving in an old sign. "The other one could laugh, at least."

The girl's lips parted again. Jurgen, bent closer to listen. He was half in love with the chit already, thought Wolfgang. Though he himself could hear nothing, Jurgen nodded. "Dillie," said Jurgen. "Is that your name?"

The maid shook her head:

Dillie? Too close by far to Odile, the name of the dark princess. Yet, Jurgen had not been to the ball, had not seen her . . . would not know. And how could Wolfgang be so sure?

"Shall I call you that till you tell me your true name?" Jurgen asked. "Yes? Here now, then, Dillie, just let me wrap this . . ." Again, the girl writhed away from the feathered cloak. Her back and bare legs were very white. Some of the fishermen crossed themselves or reached for charms. Others simply looked away.

Jurgen fumbled at his jacket, and Wolfgang winced at the thought of the coarse wool and leather against that white, white skin.

“Give him your cloak for her,” he hissed at Benno. After all, it had belonged to him first. He would go colder this winter so that this foundling would be warm, but the Prince would have expected nothing less of him. (The Queen, however, would bite her lip at the tutor’s extravagance.)

Slowly, Benno took off the cloak and offered it, though with little of his usual courtliness. With a nod *of* thanks, Jur-gen accepted the garment and laid it tenderly over the girl’s slender shoulders. Then he swung her up into his arms.

“My mother has lacked a daughter. And see, Dillie trusts me,” he explained. “Besides, you will not need me up at the Castle.”

That one had a head on his shoulders, Wolfgang thought. It would be savage cruelty for Queen Hedwig Elisabeth to have to face a man as like her only son as his brother.

A murmur arose from Jurgen’s companions, and he glared at them. “Will it satisfy you if I fetch Father Bertwald and the Sacraments to her?” he asked them, his chin lifted defiantly. It could have been the Prince himself speaking. Wolfgang had been proud that His Highness had grown up without superstitions; he himself had never shared the local beliefs in woodwoses or shapechangers, creatures who shuddered away from the touch of cold iron or garlic (so fine in venison or a stew!) or who recoiled at the peal of church bells. These villagers and the fishermen gave more heed to herbs and berries, markings on old stones, than to the Creed.

Dillie’s slender white feet dangled as Jurgen carried her down the track toward the village. She glanced out once, saw the white rock like an owl’s skull in the center of the lake and hid her face in Jurgen’s shoulder. Benno stirred at Wolfgang’s side, ready to follow.

“The Queen needs us more,” Wolfgang reminded her son’s friend.

They climbed the last rough stairs, and still Wolfgang could hear Jurgen’s voice. “Now then, no need for this fear. Who would hate a pretty thing like you?”

Many, feared the tutor. One of them walked at his side.

Above them pealed out the chapel bells: nine strokes of the passing bell for a man, followed by twenty-one more — *one ring* for each *year of the Prince’s* life.

Night was her friend. At night, the hearthfire died into embers so comforting to her eyes after the glare of daylight. At night, her new friends, the old woman with the warm eyes and gentle hands, the young man who had carried her down from the rocks she feared, would fall asleep. Now they even left their door unlatched. Now they trusted her enough to believe that she would not wander up the cliffs or down

to the shore.

She feared the cliffs, of course. As for the lake, the one time she had gone there, the water had been brackish . . . *like the sea*, a stranger's voice whispered in her mind. Dead fish littered the shore. She had heard Jurgen and the suspicious men who stared at her too much talking that over. She had eluded them and run to the water's edge, but the white swans had been there, and had left the ruined water to hiss at her and dart forward, stabbing at her bare feet with their strong bills, flapping their wings in her face until she recoiled and, amazingly, found her-self caught up and cradled in Jurgen's arms.

But the swans had reminded her of what remained for her to do. For a week, she had waited, regaining her old friends' trust. Then, silently, she slipped from her pallet, flung the fur-trimmed cloak, gift of the young man with the angry eyes, about her, and let herself out the door. The hearthcat stirred at her going, then laid its head with its black and white mask back down and slept again, white paws twitching as it hunted in its dreams.

She ran to the cemetery. Already, she had been this way twice before: once when the man in black, whom they called Father Bertwald, splashed sweet water on her face and chanted strange words over her; a second time when more people than she ever dreamed could exist in one place crowded into the banner-hung chapel. The weight of grief would have made her faint if Jur-gen had not taken her away. How they had muttered at that!

It was time, and past time, for her to act, and then to be free. No need, now, for her to have to enter the chapel again. What she sought lay outside, tenderly clustering by the old, leaning stones that the villagers tended with such care. Fragile blue asters, cold, perfect asphodels. Rue, yes, and fragrant rosemary. She broke them from their stalks, breathed upon them, and began to weave them into garlands. Though she realized that she had never done such work before in her life, her fingers were very nimble. Always before, she had had servants, maids . . . *had* she, indeed? Only that day, she had scrubbed the hearth; impossible to think that ladies waited on her as if they had been serving girls themselves; yet that was what the fragments of her memory assured her was true.

The moon soared high in the night sky, giving her light for her work, and she wove faster. As she worked, she moved her lips in silent song. The pain that had waked her in the night, that had forced her to creep onto the ledges below the castle to watch swans and stones and sorrowful men, seemed to ease somewhat.

Night after night, urgent compulsion woke her. She stole to the graveyard to pray her silent prayers over her weaving: aster, asphodel, rosemary, and rue, each bound into a chaplet tied with three strands of her silvery hair. Silvery hair? She remembered rising once in the middle of the night, and catching sight of herself in well-polished brass. How odd: she had remembered her hair as being dark. It was

always dark in the terrible nightmares that mention of a tainted lake, a Prince who had hurled himself into its depth, brought on. The grief of such events seemed to heal her somewhat too. Each chaplet eased her burden further. Now she found herself able to murmur, not just to move her lips.

“I knew you could speak. Try again, Dillie! Try to speak to me! Say my name!”

She started violently. Lilies scattered from her skirts over her feet. Before her stood Jurgen, her rescuer and her friend. His face was set and pale. Her lips formed his name, her shattered memories all but reminded her of charms and artifices, but no sound came from her.

“What is this rubbish?” he asked her, his voice as angry as the eyes of some of the villagers, yes, and even some of the castle-folk when they looked through her, or when they spoke of the ruin of their livings or of their dreams. “Is this witchery that you do here?” He held but a hand to her. Despite its strength, it shook.

She shrank back. Jurgen was so strong. In an instant, he could tear up the garlands that she had already woven; and already, it was nearly autumn. A week, two weeks more; and no flowers would bloom until spring. And by then, it would be too late. The white stone in the center of the lake, the one shaped like an owl — by spring, it would have poisoned the lake past all remedy.

By spring, then, the swans, too weak to fly south, would have frozen or starved, assuming that no bowman shot them first. The girl felt an urge to *flee* with the garlands that she had woven, but forced herself to remain crouched beside a leaning gravestone, watching Jurgen as he forced *one* callused hand out to touch a wreath.

She nodded and held it out to him while, with her free hand, she stroked his cheek. He laughed hoarsely and gathered her up into a bearlike hug. She rubbed her face against his rough garments.

“Maybe you swept up your footprints, Dillie, but this morning, the hem of your cloak was wet. So I watched you . . . and followed you here when you slipped out.”

She had no words yet to plead with him, so she followed him with her eyes.

“You want me to let you finish what-ever this is, don’t you?” he asked, and she nodded vehemently.

“Can you tell me why it is so important to you? Do you not know what people might say if you are seen here?”

This is life, freedom, atonement! she thought, but had not the words to say so.

“You wish I could understand too? Dillie, this is dangerous. People might fear. . . some think you’re half a wood-sprite now. Can you promise. . . would you swear before Father Bertwald — that what you do holds no harm?”

She nodded. Then she felt Jurgen sigh. He leaned down and kissed her hair. “Then that’s good enough for me. Just try not to be seen, love. If people saw you in the graveyard by night, I don’t know how I could explain it.”

As if sealing a bargain between them, he handed her back the chaplet. Sol-emnly, she took it and laid it in its hid-ing place with the other ten. Each was as fresh now as the one that she had most recently woven.

Now she realized that there were other ways than words to tell him what she did here. Hesitantly at first, fearful of her feet on the rough ground, she began to dance. Her toes ached at first with the unfamiliar, lovely motions; but as she danced, she gained strength and passion. Memory of dancing flowed back into her, dancing before another man with Jurgen’s face. She smiled, but her smile lacked the craft of the last time she had thus danced.

About the only thing, Wolfgang thought, about being regarded as an old, scholarly sot was that people con-fided and gossiped when he went among them. The late King and Queen Hedwig Elisabeth had found his ability to charm stories from their subjects very helpful. Wolfgang himself saw it as a mixed blessing. Long before the folk at the castle heard, Wolfgang knew that the changeling down in the village wan-dered by night in the graveyard, where she picked flowers and sang spells over them. Worst yet, when the moon was high, rumor had it, she would dance amidst the tombstones.

Old men sleep little: the next moon-rise found Wolfgang kneeling in the chapel where the Prince’s banner (a swan, argent, on an azure field beneath a crescent moon) overhung his empty tomb. That they had never found Prince Siegfried’s body was a familiar, even a homely grief by now.

Moonlight filtered through the deli-cate rose window, moonlight and some-thing more: lightnings without rain or thunder. The night before, St. Elmo’s fire had flickered on the castle turrets. Some called it a sign of the trouble that had befallen. Fire walked the roofs, and, in the lake, which had fed the peo-ple roundabout for as long as anyone or his grandsire could remember, the fish died because the water turned from fresh to salt. The fishermen had taken especially to avoiding one spot in the lake after a boat capsized by the great white rock that resembled a snow owl. Now there was mourning in the village, some hunger, and the promise of more privation in the cold season that ap-proached. And the swans whom some called the village’s luck were feeble.

Wolfgang read those signs like a primer. Perhaps they were indications of magic and perhaps not; he neither knew nor cared. They were, however, signs that soon the people would seek a scapegoat for their misfortunes. A lost girl who never spoke and who haunted tombs by night was perfect for such a role.

Nor was it only the commons who sought someone to blame. Wolfgang had seen Benno speaking with those strangers from the East Marches. One of them bore a heavy, black-letter volume. *Malleus Maleficarum*, the Hammer of Witches, was stamped on the worn leather binding. Wolfgang had glanced into that book once and seen only torture of the helpless, the deluded, and the simple. He saw a mute, frightened child strapped to one of the instruments in the crude, lurid wood-cuts, her mouth open in a silent scream. How would she confess, even with a lie, if she could not speak?

And what of Jurgen, who loved her? He was strong enough to withstand torture for a long time, yet his only crime was to love a maid whom he had rescued. Wolfgang thought of the young man, so like the dead Prince, his fingers crushed, his spirit broken, and he was hard put not to cry out in grief.

Benno was too angry to judge wisely. But give him his due; there was reason to fear.

Shivering a little in the dank chapel, Wolfgang rose from creaking knees, and limped out through the small door in the chapel's carven narthex.

What he saw froze him in his place.

Like children intent on the most innocent of games, Jurgen and the girl knelt in the shadow of a tombstone so old that the engraving on it wasn't honest Latin, but spiky, angular chisel blows and serpentine scrawls, much worn away by generations of the curious. The maid's eyes were fixed upon her lap, and Jurgen's eyes upon her with such an intensity of love and protectiveness that it hurt Wolfgang to watch. Just so Prince Siegfried had regarded Odette that night before the fatal dawn. Just so he had regarded the dark witch Odile before she had scorned him. Just so he had looked before he and Odette embraced for the last time, and he had followed her up the cliffs to hurl . . . Wolfgang would not think of that. It had taken an eternity for the two slender bodies to hit the water.

He glanced up at the quivering stars and fancied that he could hear a crystalline, sweet humming. After a time, he looked around. The stars were silent, but the humming continued. Gradually, he realized that it came from the lips of the girl who he had believed was mute.

"One more garland," Jurgen's voice came low. "And then what?"

The girl held out a chaplet adorned with pale, funereal flowers and what Wolfgang realized had to be her own hair. Jurgen took it and thrust it into hiding. The girl rose and began to dance, a series of steps about casting away, of greeting, of relief. At first, her motions were halting, but they gained speed and assurance as she circled the stones. For an instant, she stood poised as if listening to the music Wolfgang had thought that the stars were sing-ing. Then she began an intricate, ex-ultant series of flashing turns, her face spinning about, always turning toward Jurgen, spinning faster and faster with innocent, unselfconscious bliss. . .there was joy in that dance, and hope, and then the stirrings of some sad, benign power . . .

“Just as I told you,” Benno’s voice from the shadows broke the lovely spell. “Witch . . . and her warlock with her.”

The girl broke out of her spins. Only her astonishing grace kept her from falling and harming herself. She stag-gered off-balance only for an instant, then rose to curtsy to Benno.

“Didn’t I tell you that the village lay under a spell?” Benno demanded. “We’ll have the good fathers here examine the witch and her lover. Take them!” He beckoned, and the black-robed strangers emerged from the shadows. Their eyes glistened in the light of the torches that they carried along with the heavy book in their arms, and they could not take their *eyes from their prey*.

If she had her voice back, the girl would have shrieked that she needed more time. Now they would seize her, those cold-eyed men in black, so unlike the gentle man who had laid hands on her brow, gazed into her eyes, and not recoiled from her. He had even blessed her, “Not for what thou art, but for what thou wouldst be.” These men saw only what they wanted her to be — what she had been. Dark beauty. Witch. Fallen princess, not a creature of ashes, love, and hope.

Though the men of the village shrank from the task, they finally came for-ward to seize her. She spread her fin-gers wide, as if clutching at fragile stems to stay rooted where she was. When they pulled her away, the flowers came free in her hands. Frantically, she began to weave them into one last crown.

“What about her man?” came a voice behind her.

Poor Jurgen had done her only good. How much he looked like the Prince that she had betrayed while she was Odile. But he loved *her* as she was now. If he kept very still, very silent now, he just might have a chance to live.

Of course, he did not.

It might be justice that she be forbidden to accomplish her dream of ex-piation. It might be that the fear and the silence were not sufficient penance; perhaps she needed further punish-ment before she could earn forgiveness. But

Jurgen was innocent. Odile turned in her captors' lax hold to look at the fisher. Then — and how she despised herself for her fear! — her glance slid over to the bushes in which she had hidden the chaplets.

“What does she stare at?”

“Look!” ordered one of the men in the stark black robes.

Using a long stick, a reluctant fish-erman drew the chaplets from their *hiding place and flung them to lie at Jurgen's feet.*

“In my country,” the man opened the thick book, “there is a simple test for witches. Fling the witch into the water. It is the natural property of bodies to sink. Should she float, however, she is no woman but a witch . . .”

“What if she sinks?” The old man, the red-nosed one called Master Wolfgang, asked that contemptuously.

“Then she dies in a state of grace. Trust heaven to know its own. Unless, of course, you yourself dive in to save her. But I do not think that would be wise.”

Wolfgang stared at Benno and his witchfinders. How Prince Siegfried would have mourned to see hate trans-forming his friend. Benno would never permit this girl to be fished out before she drowned. Natural properties be damned, Wolfgang snorted to himself. Hadn't these fools ever seen a swim-mer? Certainly, they smelled as if ba-thing were something unknown to them. The live body's natural property was to float — unless you had to count anyone who was able to float as a witch. In that case, the witchfinders would simply have to condemn the village, the castle, and their own ignorant selves. Best not even give them the glimmerings of such an idea.

Wolfgang gestured at Jurgen to stay down. Probably the girl was doomed, but there was still a chance that Jurgen could be gotten off. Then the fisherman looked at her as she stood between her tall, reluctant guards — his old friends — and she tore away from them, twin-ing the flowers she still clutched into a chaplet like those on the ground.

The stranger-priests shouted in out-rage and holy horror. “Even now she works her spells. To the rocks with her!” They dragged her hands down to her sides and pushed her up the steep rock stairs, past the point at which Jur-gen had found her, lost his heart, and maybe his soul along with it, all in the same moment, until they reached the peak from which Siegfried and his be-loved had cast themselves. Wolfgang swallowed hard and looked away. He was glad to see that Benno looked sick.

You've got second thoughts now, have ye, lad?

From this height, the village looked very small, and the lake seemed leaden, except for the white owl-shape of the rock in its center. Now it resembled the skull of some bird of prey. By the shore floated the swans, their graceful necks bowed, their feathers dingy, and their movements sluggish, as if they were sickened by the water in which they lived. As the fishermen dragged the girl to the cliff's edge, the swans raised their heads to look at her. One opened its bill as if it might sing for the first and last time.

The girl shrank back, but her guards forced her to the brim as the blackrobes muttered their prayers of exorcism.

Wolfgang muttered a child's prayer, which was all he could remember at the moment. He reached for his flask, but found it empty. Then he heard shouts, rapid footsteps pounding up behind him. He felt a hard hand shove him aside — to think that he, at his age, would be set sprawling thus! Jurgen raced up to where Odile stood pinned. His arms were full of garlands: aster and asphodel, rosemary and rue.

Men tried to stop him or trip or hold him, but he dodged them all. *My poor lad*, Wolfgang thought. *You have doomed yourself. Just like the Prince.*

What looked like half of the men of the fishing fleet bore down upon Jurgen, and Benno drew his sword. But Jurgen rushed to the cliff's brink and tossed the garlands into the water. Then he took the girl into his arms.

"At last we will be together," he said, and laid his cheek against her ashen hair as it whipped about them like the banner of some forlorn but starlit hope. People were reluctant to compel them, Wolfgang saw, and he had a brief, bleak hope that they might yet be spared.

"Get a boat pole up here and *push* them off!" shouted one man, and that hope quickly died.

Jurgen tightened his arms about the girl and moved between her and the mob. She gazed out of the water, where the flower crowns, twelve of them and one, floated untouched by the salt that slowly was killing all else within the lake.

Slowly, painfully, the swans came to-ward them. Odile raised her eyes. The night those others had died, a storm had risen. How she remembered the lightning and the wind. The wind! A tiny breeze blew, then strengthened, tossing her hair about her hot face. In toward the thirteen swans drifted the garlands. Each swan extended her neck, then plunged it delicately beneath a garland to emerge crowned with asphodels and aster, rosemary and rue . . . and a lock of silver hair.

The hands that pinioned Odile's arms went limp. She flung herself forward to kneel over the cliff, her arms out-stretched. Tears burned down her face, and she fought to breathe. As the crowned swans turned in toward the land, moving more

surely, more swiftly with every yard, she drew breath in a great sob.

“Odile,” Jurgen tested the name, which had been that of the dark princess. “Is that truly your name?”

She had her hands over her face now, and tears dripped into them. Now he would know for certain, and now he would turn from her. She had all but cost him his life . . . and she might yet do that too. But he was kneeling at her side, was forcing her hands away so he could gaze into her eyes.

Now her tears dropped down her fingers and splashed into the lake far, far below.

“You can weep now,” he marveled. “Odile — is that truly the name I should call you?”

“Give me another!” she cried. “Call me love!”

She buried her face against him. Now that the constraint that had locked her voice was gone, her tears came easily and brought healing with them. Where they dropped into the lake, light danced on the water. Blue ripples, the color of icemelt, spread out until the lake gleamed with healthful splendor. The owl-shaped rock began to crumble. The ripples caught it up, and it fell in on itself, and was gone.

As the sun rose, its light turned the long, flowing strands of Odile’s hair to silver and shed glory on the crowns worn by the thirteen swans. It even cast a healing light on the faded gilt letter of the priests’ book in the instant that they turned to go. But the lovers, lost in one another, did not see them leave, nor did they notice the transformation of the lake.

Not until gasps of wonder broke their wonderment in one another did they notice the thirteen maids who set bare foot on shore and walked toward the village. Each wore a long white shift through which her flesh glowed like spring roses. And on her long, gleaming hair, each wore a crown of flowers and herbs that cast a rare, lasting fragrance. The swan-maids walked to the church where Father Bertwald stood waiting. Hand in hand, Jurgen and Odile followed them. And the bells rang out to celebrate their wedding.