

WITCHGRAVE

an original short story by Rachel Caine

"Welcome to you, friend!" the innkeeper cried, and banged the door shut behind the newcomer with a grunting effort to shut out the howling wind and rain. "The devil's own storm, sir, eh? Black as a witch's heart, and not fit for manor beast!"

The newcomer shrugged off his oiled cloak, and the innkeeper took the cold leather and hung it on a peg over a trough of dirty water. "You shan't be sorry you chose us, sir, the Brass Bell may not have the lordliest rooms in the town, but we have the finest food. Roast lamb, sir, tender and fresh. And savory stew. Smooth, creamy ale if you-- "

He stopped, open-mouthed as he caught full sight of his new custom. Well-bred ladies always dressed in full skirts, with layers of kirtles and petticoats to disguise any hint of their shape from lustful eyes. This -- creature -- wore leathertrews, a thick cotton shirt of a mannish cut. It clung to the swell of her bosom, slid in to define a waist no decent woman would dare show, flared over hips and stopped indecently short to flaunt the shape of her leather-clad lower limbs.

The female was armed with two matched daggers, a boot knife, and an ivory-handled sword of Caldish workmanship. She had no outriders, and no attendants for virtue's sake. She was, in short, the most immodest hoyden he had ever seen, and for a fateful second his outraged sensibilities insisted that he send her on her way, storm or no.

"Lady-- " he began, a thing which he could plainly see she was not. "The Women's Lodging House is at the end of the way, to the north. Perhaps you could--"

"No," she said flatly. "Perhaps I couldn't." She was a mannish thing, from her hair cropped and dripping at her shoulders to the bold look in her dark eyes. More muscled than any woman he'd ever seen. "How much for a bed?"

Abed? As if he'd accept such as her in his honest rooms. "None available," he said shortly.

She had the temerity to smile, as if he had amused her. "I saw the size of your inn, friend, and the number of horses stabled. You have more than one bed going vacant this evening, save for the lice and fleas, which I think you will agree do not pay good coin for the privilege."

He swept her with another disbelieving look. "And you can."

Insolent, that smile. Dangerously so. "Perhaps," she said. "And perhaps you might find it wise before the evening ends to make a friend of me."

He gave her a disgusted look and went to the door as it flew open yet again, admitting the roar of thunder and a silver curtain of rain. The woman moved to the huge roaring hearth, where the spit-dog slowly turned a roasting chunk of meat that sizzled deliciously. She wrapped her shoulder-length black hair into a knot and twisted out a drizzle to the rush-strewn floor, then shook the damp waving strands back in place around her face.

Across the room, two men watched her every move. She had marked them upon entering, as she'd marked everyone in the small, overheated room, as well as the exits from it. Those two were of interest to her, as they did not seem to fit the mold of broken farmers into which the others had been poured. Too young, too fine, too neatly dressed. They sat close together, and as she watched them, the taller one with longish white-blond hair nodded deliberately in acknowledgment. He was pale, almost albino, and when he raised a hand to summon the serving girl his hands were long and graceful. He mimed another round, and pointed across the room to include the swordswoman in his order as well.

She set a hand on the hilt of her sword and joined them, settling lightly on the rough wooden bench opposite the two young men. Seen close, the blond was a startlingly lovely creature, with blue eyes like jewels and an angel's face.

The other man was dark-haired, the devil to his companion's angelic countenance, but comely in his own right. He smiled at her, too.

"Would you have the name of Tatyia, then?" he asked. He had a low, pleasant voice, with the burred, lilting accent of the far north.

"Would there be two swordswomen traveling to this godforsaken place tonight?" she asked, and sat back as the serving wench slapped down a mug of spiced wine before her. "You'd be the ones looking to hire me."

"Aye," the dark one said. The light one continued to smile silently. "My name is Silk. My companion here is called Silence."

She laughed -- not a lady's polite titter, but a man's full-bellied explosion of amusement. "Silk and Silence? Are you whores?"

They continued to smile. "No," said Silk. "Our names are a part of the tale we have to tell, my lady. If you will ...?"

Tatyia shrugged, mail jingling, and took a long pull of hot wine. "The coin you already spent guarantees you at least my ear, if not necessarily my sword," she said. "Tell away."

The blond one -- Silence -- signaled for the wench again, and mimed eating. She nodded, cheeks flushed and eyes bright, and hurried away to cut them pieces of the roasting lamb. Tatyia's stomach rumbled at the thought of fresh, hot meat, rich with spices. She'd had nothing but old bread and thin soup for the better part of a week.

"They call you Witchkiller," Silk said. "Is there truth to it?"

Tatyia Witchkiller sipped her wine and cocked a single eyebrow. "Have I killed a witch? Aye. More than one. You need not worry -- unless, of course, you be witches."

Those same, unsettling smiles. "Mistress," Silk said politely, "that, too, is part of the tale."

She nodded without speaking. Silk opened his mouth to begin, but was halted by his blond friend, who seized his arm and shook it gently. Tatyia watched in fascination as Silence's long, pale fingers danced in complicated, mesmerizing patterns. Almost she could understand...almost ...

Tatyablinked and stood, tipping the bench over with a loud thump while her hand found the hilt of her sword. "What spell is this?" she barked, and showed three cold inches of steel in outright threat. "Speak!"

Silk flung out a hand, alarmed, and said, "He cannot! He speaks with his hands. It is no spell, only a language learned by those who have no voice. A language! It was taught to us at the great university in Padua."

Tatyafrowned. The serving wench, undeterred, delivered a platter of thick-sliced roast lamb, redolent with rosemary, in the center of the trestle table. "Not magic," she said. "You're certain of this."

Silence spread his eloquent hands, still smiling.

After a black second, Taty righted the bench she'd overturned and grudgingly took her seat again. "Continue," she ordered, and speared a slab of meat upon which to gnaw.

"In the mountains above this town lives a witch," Silk said. "No ordinary spell-caster, Lady Witchkiller; no simple mumbler of spells such as you might have faced before. He is rich in the currency of death."

"I have no use for poetry," she mumbled around the first delicious mouthful, grease running down her chin. "I deal in odds and swords."

"Then I will make myself plain." Silk's dark eyes took on an unholy glow -- passion and hatred, she recognized the look well. "Know you of the tale of a succubus, who draws forth a man's seed by night in dreams?" She nodded for him to continue, still chewing. "A succubus can then turn incubus, take male form and deliver the stolen seed into another, unwilling vessel."

"A succubus is a demon, not a witch."

"Witches use demons for their own purposes," he said. "And witches can neither quicken a woman, if male, nor bear their own children, if female."

Old news, tales long since spread. She nodded for him to continue.

"The child of an incubus grows quickly within the vessel the witch chooses for it. There are certain rituals the witch completes, but before the child can be born, he performs his cruelest ritual of all: he buries the mother alive, still swollen with child."

Tatyastopped eating, frowned again, and washed down a mouthful of meat with muddy wine. "Why should he go to such trouble to simply do murder?"

"Not murder," Silk said. "Sacrifice. For every fifty women who go into cold graves, one child is born living, though the mother perishes. Such children are valuable to witches, as they contain the power of death passed to them from their unfortunate birth."

She said nothing. Her lips were compressed, her eyes bright and fierce. Silk avoided the look and raised his mug to sip wine. He wore gloves even in the heat of the tavern, she saw. All of his skin, save his face, was covered. He continued, "This particular witch has through the years created two such children in this manner. His ... pets, you might say. But those dogs have slipped his leash."

"Have they." She surveyed them through half-closed eyes, leaning forward with elbows on the table.

"Yet perhaps they have come sniffing at the gates, whining for their lost master."

Silence's fingers, which had been relaxed and elegant, tightened on the edge of the table until they looked bone-white. All of Silk's charm and good humor drained away. Ahhh, there, she marked them now for honest men. Honest in their hatred, at least.

"Say that again," Silk whispered, "and there will be blood."

"It strikes me that there will be blood whatever I say," Tatya shrugged. "Do you not hear the voices outside?"

He did not understand for a moment, and then his gaze slid away from her, fast, and she heard the creak of the outer door and another harsh howl of wind, with harsher men's voices shouting above it. More travelers, but no honest ones. She had a sense for such things. Silk's expression didn't alter, but she became aware of the small things in him – the muscles of his arms tensing, the seemingly casual way he moved his hand to be close to his sword, which was lying in a pile with a thick leather belt on the bench beside him.

"Perhaps we should settle our matters some other time," he said. "It appears there will be trouble."

Tatya turned her head when she heard a loud crash, and a frightened yelp. Four drowned rats in the doorway, as miserable as might be expected, of much poorer status than either of the two boys across her table, or even Tatya herself – ragged clothes, patched leather, no mail. Only one of them had a sword, and it was of Caldish workmanship far too fine for the scarecrow carrying it.

One of them asserted his rights by kicking over a bench and an inoffensive old man sitting on it, spitting insults. The others laughed.

The innkeeper hopped to his duties with the fervor of fear. He hustled a sturdy, dark-haired girl out of the corner and loaded her with wine and stew and sent her in the direction of Tatya's table. Trying, Tatya thought, to get the wench out of reach and put her between three armed guests, as if said armed guests had any obligation to protect her.

Any road, the girl never arrived. One of the four newcomers – the one with the sword – lunged and caught her arm and swung her around. Wine and stew splattered the floor and a couple of unlucky bystanders, who quickly wiped themselves off without objection and took themselves to a safer spot.

"Aye," Tatya shrugged. "Trouble for someone. Not for me."

"Do you know them?" Silk asked.

"Such men are of a type, as a single louse is of lice. I don't need to know them."

Silence bent forward, catching her eye, and then Silk's in turn. His fingers moved. She needed no help to understand his meaning. "No," she said. "It's not my business. Let the man fight his own battles, if he can. She's his daughter, not mine."

"I see," Silk said. "I wonder just how much it takes to move you."

The girl was screaming. Her father stood, whey-faced and shaking, and around the tavern no one else had moved. All this, Tatya noted with no more than a tactical interest. "Move me? Gold, friend. Little

else."

Silence rapped his knuckles sharply on the table, frowned, and stood in a swirl of thick gray robes. Silk grabbed his arm and tugged, sharply. "No," he said. "This is not the place for either of us to be foolish, and you know why." Silence shook him off, face hard and jaw set, but hesitated. He reached into a fold of his robes, withdrew a leather purse, and flung it to the table in front of Tatyia .

It landed with a heavy metal thump. She eyed it curiously, but did not move to take it. Silence reached over, opened the bag, and spilled gold out in a thick river before her.

Across the room, the girl's shrieking rose to a frantic pitch. So did the rough sawing laughter.

"It's your coin," Tatyia said, and stood up. She drew her sword in the same motion, and the musical chime of metal sliding free sounded loud even over the scuffle.

"Then give us our money's worth," Silk shrugged.

She bared her teeth and went to work.

Two of them were sharing the girl, one groping her exposed breasts, the other with hands up her skirts. The others were waiting their turn, laughing and spitting on the helpless innkeeper. They continued to laugh as Tatyia walked toward them. All ugly, all made faceless by the eroding forces of poverty, malnutrition and malice. She cared nothing for the girl, nothing at all; women made their own way in the world, or the world had its way with them. She had long ceased to feel any pity, and as for justice, it was a word to fools.

But revenge, ah, revenge was breath and life and blood, wasn't it?

She needed a starting point. Her gaze fixed on one of the laughing men, a scrawny, ill-kept specimen with stringy, filthy hair and a hillman's beard. He swiped hair back from his eyes to give her a lewd assessment.

His eyes were gray, a light and piercing gray, and the instant she saw them her world turned red. No words, no warnings, no quarter. She attacked without delay, but not *that* man, no, the one beside him, the stupid-looking brown-haired slug. Her first victim was taken by shock. She simply took a final step and plunged her sword straight through his guts, yanked it free in a dark spray, then drove an elbow into the next man's throat that crunched bones with a dry crackle. He went down gagging, eyes bulging, and she gave him one fast brutal kick to the chin, then ripped him open from neck to waist in one slash. His guts boiled out, slick and red and foul, and he began screaming in a high, breathless whisper.

That left two. She killed the first with a slice across the throat and a lunge to the heart, then whirled and took the gray-eyed man's first cut on the turned blade of her sword. The steel sang and trembled in desire for the fight, and she saw the stupid malice in the man turn to fear.

His responding slash was a clumsy cut at her right side, nearly laughable, had she not been consumed by a red, flickering fury that allowed for no such possibility. She parried with a sharp move of her forearm, tossed his blade far out of line, and slammed her steel home in his chest with such violence it went in to the hilt, shattering bone as it sliced through his body and emerged bloody-streaked and dripping from his back. He sagged, mouth open, eyes wide. She grabbed his filthy jerkin as his knees folded and he fell dying, and followed him down, straddling him. She crouched atop him, staring intently, waiting .

Pale, wide gray eyes. Tatyia watched them flicker with terror, saw herself reflected in them. Watched them go blank and the dark pupils expand to consume the gray. She came back to herself with a shock when it was done. *Not him*. Not the right eyes pair of gray eyes at all. She had wasted her fury, and not for the first time.

She stood up and wiped her steel on a marginally cleaner corner of his filthy clothing. She was breathing hard, bathed in a light, sweet sweat, and there was a kind of wild euphoria in her that she knew would take time to pass.

The inn was completely silent. She looked up and saw that Silk and Silence were still sitting where she'd left them. The girl had taken shelter in her father's shadow, but peered around him to stare at Tatyia with huge blue eyes. Terror burned in them. Terror, and wonder.

Tatyia met the innkeeper's eyes. "I'll take them out."

He nodded convulsively. She grabbed the gray-eyed one by his booted feet, and dragged him out the door through mud and rain, all the way to what smelled like a midden heap. She went back for the other three, one by one. Their miserable possessions and clothing were of no use to her, but someone in this wretched village would gladly rob them in the night. When she was finished she was soaking wet again, boots clotted with mud, and the fight's magical elixirs chased out of her skin by the chill. She went back into the stifling warmth of the inn and sank back on her bench with a guarded sigh of relief. The innkeeper's wench was already scrubbing at the bloody streaks near the door. *The life of a woman*, Tatyia thought in weary disgust. Serve men. Endure them when necessary. Clean up their mess when they're gone. It was a matter of contempt to her that so many chose to accept it.

The proprietor brought them more wine, stew, and an entire loaf of fresh-baked bread, probably meant for his own table. He did not look at Tatyia at all. When he was gone, she took a deep drink of wine that she no longer craved, and found Silk was studying her.

"You have something to say?" she demanded. He drank a thick mouthful of stew, chewed tough mutton, swallowed.

"Subtly done," he said. "Now they're more afraid of you than they are of anyone else."

Silence smiled at her and made an open-handed gesture.

"He says thank you," Silk shrugged. "No need to offer thanks, brother, you already paid her for her troubles."

Like a whore. Tatyia felt the returning hot tingle of fury, and let it slip into her answering fierce smile. Silk found it prudent to focus on his mug of ale.

"Continue your story," she said, and stuffed her mouth with the soft, gritty bread.

Silk finished his stew in four huge mouthfuls and attacked the thick bread crust that served as bowl. "Story's finished."

She pointed her dagger at him, its tip still slimed with grease. "Not quite. If you want to employ me, you'll tell me why you can't climb the mountain and deal with this witchmaster yourselves."

This time, Silk did not so much smile at her as bare his teeth in a snarl. "Perhaps we don't wish to risk

our own lives. Isn't that why you put yourself out for hire?"

It was deliberate provocation, again, and she ignored it. "Why do you wear the gloves, Silk?"

"I'm prone to chills."

"You tell me a tale of two children born in the witchgrave, each with power over death. Tell me, Silk, what is your power? What taint do you bear?"

He was silent for a time, his eyes gone dark and lifeless. The remains of the food he had attacked with such relish grew cold between them. Abruptly, he said, "The midwife who drew me from the witchgrave died shrieking from the touch of my skin. My master, thus warned, never touched me himself. Others who did either went gloved and hooded, if he wished them to live, or came to me without warnings if he wished to test the limits of my -- venom. As he did regularly, to assure himself it was something that would not pass with the years, or grow less lethal."

"Your touch kills."

"A single fingertip on bare skin," he said.

She turned to Silence. "For you, it must be either breath or voice."

Silence's fingers flashed. "Voice," Silk translated. "He can't speak even so much as a whisper without destroying all who hear it."

Two children, grown to manhood, who had been created by the witch for his own purposes. Assassins, yes, most definitely. Cold and flint-hard, for all their smiles and beauty, and yet wounded, too. Tatyia thought of her own childhood, rough and lonely, but with at least one person's love and warmth to ease it. How cold might she now be if she had been born poisoned, and so robbed of any such kindnesses?

"Why not kill him yourselves, then?" she asked. "Seems a waste of gold to hire me, if you're so good at the art of death."

"Spells. Our father --" Silk spat the word. "-- is many things, but a fool he is not. He has protected himself all his life from us, knowing how bitter our hatred is for him. We have many times tried to bring about his downfall, but he is well guarded against our particular ... talents. And one of us was always hostage for the other. We are all we have, lady. One acts, the other was punished, and the witch was ever more brutal in his torments. Even now, we cannot be sure we're beyond his reach. We can no longer risk direct opposition, but we know he must be stopped."

"Why now?" she asked, and sopped up the last of the gravy with a crust of bread. The trembling exaltation left by the fight was well and truly gone, leaving her burned ash-gray within. She'd need to sleep soon. "Why not just leave him behind?"

Silk and Silence regarded her for a long moment -- two pairs of eyes, different in color, alike in their flat, strange appraisal. Silence's fingers moved, but Silk did not glance toward them. "Would you do that?" he asked. "Walk away and leave him like a knife pointed at your back?"

She knew full well that she wouldn't, but she let her shoulders raise and lower indifferently just the same. Her reasons were unimportant. Theirs could get her killed. "I might," she lied. "But in any case, you have another reason."

The two young men regarded each other in the unspoken way of siblings. Silence's eyebrows rose. Silk sighed. "Very well," he said. "Our father -- the witch -- having lost his two prized weapons, is determined to create himself a still greater one. A true heir to his legacy. I told you that one child like us will be born in the witchgrave for every fifty women buried there." Tatyia nodded impatiently. "There is a legend -- no one knows whether or not it is true -- that a greater ritual using the witchgrave could bring about a child with power over life, not death. A child who could create life, could even grant it to that which never lived. How would you fight a statue, my dear warrior lady? Or a living sword? Or an army of the dead raised against you? All this, such a child might do."

And a child the witch could raise as his own, teach his spells and conjures, twist into any shape. "You said it was a legend."

"It is said to have been done, once. Our master aims to do it again. His -- legacy. And we think he is close. Very close. More than a hundred women and girls have vanished from this district in the past year."

"You said one child was born in fifty."

"For *our* ritual," he said. "For this, it could be hundreds. Or thousands. No one knows. He is simply willing to continue to kill until he succeeds."

Tatyia felt a slow, fierce fire building in her guts. The two boys sitting across from her, with their cold beauty and colder eyes. They were masters of killing, and yet they feared the birth of this child. *Of course. With such an heir at his disposal, the witch might no longer need these two alive.*

Silence rapped the table again, drawing their attention. His gesture and expression needed no translation from his brother. *Well?*

"I shall think on it," she said, and shoved her bench back to stand. "For now, I need sleep."

The boys thought she was a fool, she supposed, but that was all to the best; Tatyia knew at least that they had not lied to her in any particular that mattered. Still, she was not overconfident of her odds of living through the day; not one witch in this, but three at least. For all the boys' protestations, they were witches, clearly, and the most dangerous sort: witches she had no choice but to trust. For now.

She was waiting downstairs in the early darkness, lit only by the low-burning fire in the hearth, when her two young employers slipped down to join her.

"Gods!" cried Silk, on almost falling over her. "Your pardon, I did not see you." He had gripped her by the shoulders, and she glanced down at his hands, which were gloved in fine kid leather. He quickly stepped away. "You rise early, lady."

"It seemed a matter of urgency," she said, and shouldered her pack. She had already seen to the horses. "Dead of night or full glaring day, it makes no difference to me."

He bowed to her, half a mockery, and she stood back to let the two precede her from the tavern. They were mounted and leaving the inn's courtyard in moments.

Morning was barely dawning, weak and veiled in grave-cold mist. The town was nothing but shadows in the fog. The clapping sounds of hooves were softened by the thick mud -- fetlock-deep in places -- and there were few figures moving about yet. The ones who did were dark shapes only, faceless and hidden. Tatya kept her senses alert, searching for any hint of danger, but if there was deception planned, it did not present itself so clearly.

They did not ride up the mountain, as she expected. Instead, they continued on, past the borders of the town, until they met with the cold-meat stink of a graveyard. The unrelenting rain had turned the ground to soup, and Tatya knew that if she looked closely she'd find bones -- or bodies -- swimming out of the dark soil toward the gray light of day. It was the perfect spot for a wraith or a mournful spirit. Any twist of mist from the ground could form into a face, eyes, a mouth hungry for human souls and flesh. She'd seen it happen.

"Here," said Silk. He seemed half-wraith himself, wrapped in a cloud-gray cloak. Next to him, Silence looked like Death, all in black, his pale skin and hair hidden from view. "This is the place."

"Why here? Why not up there, where he lairs?" Tatya nodded up at the black bulk of the mountain, brooding and bare as a carrion crow. "What sense does it make to place his prize so far out of reach?"

"Consecrated earth," said Silk. "It must be done in consecrated earth, and his very presence has fouled the mountain so that nothing can be called sacred there. He steals here in the dark to bury his victims, and returns to check the graves them the next night. If we are lucky, we might find one still living."

Her flesh constricted all over her body, and she felt the hair rise on her head. She feared little, and the dead held only disgust for her, but there was something eldritch about this, truly inhuman. "There must be hundreds of dead under the ground, and the mud tells no tales. How--?"

Silence gestured for quiet, and pointed to his ears. *Listen.*

The mist muted all natural sounds. Silence slid from the back of his horse, sinking ankle-deep into the thick, fetid mud, and forced his way deeper into the mist. Silk sighed and kicked free of his stirrups to follow. "Well?" he demanded of Tatya.

She dismounted without comment, and checked to be sure her sword was loose and ready in its scabbard. She kept her hand on the pommel as she followed the two witches deeper into the graveyard. It was old, this place, old and foul. It stank of plague and murder.

A dark shape loomed in an eddy of fog -- a twisted, lightning-blasted tree, its black branches clawing the air like a bony hand. And beneath its bare branches stood Silence, hood tossed back, white-blond hair glistening with droplets of water. As Tatya watched, he sank down to a crouch in the mud, heedless of the filth, and reached out to caress the wet ground. Then he came bolt upright, whirled, and clapped his hands sharply three times. His face was pale and strained, and as Silk joined him Silence's fingers flashed in that complex, fluid speech she could not quite understand.

Silk turned to her, and his wild grin flashed. "Here," he said. "We dig."

The thought of it tightened her throat. She was not womanish about such things, and blood and entrails were common currency to her, but this had a filthy chill to it. The two witches had brought digging tools,

and soon all three were knees-deep in the glue-thick mud. The time went by without marking; the mist did not lighten, the sun did not show. It seemed to her that she had been trapped in this gray and sinister neverworld forever when Silk suddenly let out a wild yell.

His rough shovel had found wood.

The box was shallowly buried, swimming like the rest of the dead to the surface. Tatya crouched next to Silence in the black, stinking mud as he got his knife under the lid of the box and pried it away.

The lid fell back, and Tatya knew she would carry the sight with her to her death. The woman's skin was bloated and white, and her eyes were the vivid color of cornflowers -- wide, insanely wide. Her lips were drawn back in arictus .

Silence lunged forward and reached in to draw her up. Tatya knew it was useless; she had more than enough acquaintance with death to recognize it. Perhaps the girl had been buried living, but she had died soon after, died hard and shrieking. Bled out, by the look of the thick red soup that dripped from her shift as he hauled her up and into his arms.

As he did, something small and still rolled from between her knees. An infant. Small, weak, blue with cold and soaking wet. Still smeared with fresh blood, and like its mother, robbed of life.

Silence's elation turned horror and Tatya knew, in that instant, that things were not as she'd thought after all. Silk had not lied so much as failed to convey the truth of it.

His mouth opened.

"No!" Silk screamed, and lunged to clap both his hands over his brother's lips. "No, you fool! She's gone! There's no use to killing the rest of us! Don't! Don't scream!"

Had Silence truly been bent on uttering a cry, even a muffled one, she doubted that the improvised gag would have stopped him, but surely his childhood had been ruled by ruthless control. There was no need for words or cries to tell her the story of it, however. His suffering was more than enough.

"Well?" Tatya asked, as Silk folded his brother in a fierce embrace. She slid the dead girl back into her wet, cold grave and straightened her arms and legs to give her some semblance of dignity. The child she rested on the mother's breast, which was all the cold comfort the day offered. "What now?"

Silk sighed. "She was his," he said. "You understand? Silence's woman."

Obvious indeed. "His child, too?"

"No! It is as I told you. She should have come to him days ago, but when we went to fetch her, she was gone. Vanished. And we knew ... as I said, our master understands punishment." A blankness flashed across Silk's normally clever, good-humored face, and she recognized it well as unspeakable fury. "We had hoped to save her."

"One of you did, any road," Tatya said. "How long has your master been dead, Silk?"

He blinked at her, and if she had not had such a deeply held belief, she would have thought herself mistaken, and him innocent. The demon's own dissembler, this one, with a fair angel's face. Silk had said it himself: they had been twisted by their master. Tainted. Poisoned.

Broken and remade.

"When does the victim become the villain?" she asked. "When you finally destroyed your tormenter, did you realize his power was now yours? Was it only that, or something more?"

Silk's look of bewildered injury did not change, but he slowly pulled away from Silence's trembling form, and stood. Tatyia matched him, hand on the pommel of her sword.

"You don't understand," he said. "I can create something good. Something that redeems us from all the horror we have lived and caused. Is that such a terrible sin?"

"It is arrogance," she said. "This was done not for any higher cause. You chose to kill her to bind your brother closer."

He was no longer listening. He pulled at the wet leather of his gloves and bared his strong, white hands, staring at her with eyes that looked into a darkness deeper than any she had known. Witch, indeed. More than a witch -- half a demon, perhaps.

"I employed you, Witchkiller, only to placate my brother," he said. "I had long ago buried my master by moonlight as Silence slept, and so I did not need your help. I'd planned to put you in a witchgrave; it would have been a fitting punishment for your crimes. But now I think I will only-- "

Silence parted his lips. There was something terrible on his face, a betrayal Tatyia could neither comprehend nor comfortably look upon, and he drew breath to shout down doom upon all of them.

Silk, without so much as a look in his brother's direction, said a Word of Power that rocked through Tatyia and drove her back three steps, stumbling in the mud.

And then ... darkness. It could not have lasted long, but long enough that when she found herself down, and her sword and daggers were gone.

Silk stood a few feet away, and her weapons were in the mud behind him behind him. Silence lay crumpled beside the grave -- breathing, but asleep.

"I watched how my father controlled him," Silk said. "Useful. I use it more and more often. He scarcely remembers."

She spat the taste of rancid mud from her mouth and stood. "For now. Soon, you will kill him. You'll have to."

"Never. I love him."

"You have no love in your soul, boy, nor ever had."

He laughed, and it was a pleasing laugh, merry and infectious. "You would lecture me, you scruffy bitch? Who ever loved a creature as unnatural as you? Who will ever mourn you?"

He lunged for her, hands outstretched, and fastened his cold, cold hands on the exposed wet skin of her face. She felt it race through her, his curse ... death, strong and icy. It found her heart and squeezed it in a vice, and darkness fell over her ...

...and then lifted.

She closed her eyes, opened them, and looked square into his face. His look of triumph turned to horror.

"You proclaimed it yourself," she said. "The ritual had already succeeded once. Your master was only seeking to replicate it."

He cried out, angry and terrified, and jerked a knife from his robes. She did not move. The knife jabbed, went deep in her side, and withdrew. Momentary agony. He did it again, and again, and then backed away wild-eyed and panting.

"My mother escaped the witchgrave," she said. "I was raised in love, and death does not touch me. You may think on that, boy, because it is as much a curse as what you bear. Nothing touches me. Nothing kills me. Not even you."

Tatyashoved him away with one hand flat against his chest, and he tripped, screamed, and turned to bolt for freedom.

"I would not," she said. "There are dark things in this mist today. And in any case, it will not matter. You cannot kill me, and you cannot escape me. I came here for you, Silk."

He ran.

Silence woke long moments later. He was confused, of course. She explained it as baldly as she could -- all the cold betrayal, all the prices he had paid. Taty watched him as he wept.

"You can speak to me, boy. I trust you know how. You won't harm me."

His voice, when he managed to produce one, was a raw croak. His words were clumsy with disuse and barely recognized. "Thank you."

She felt the unmistakable shock of his curse ripple through her. Silk had not lied about it: Silence carried a powerful taint. "You shouldn't thank me," she said. "I may still kill you. If you follow the ways of your brother, I will."

He nodded. Tears glittered in his deep, lovely eyes. "He was -- all I had."

"He would have killed you, sooner or later. Once you ceased to worship him, it would have been as simple as fingertips on your forehead as you slept." Taty finished cleaning the muck from her weapons and slid them back into their sheaths. "Bring the woman and the child."

Silence blinked. "What?"

"Bring them."

She walked away, through the mist, and heard his raw, hoarse breathing as he struggled with his anguish, then obeyed her. She led the way back to the horses -- Silk's was gone, of course, no doubt heading up-mountain. Silence followed, the girl in his arms, with her child still tucked lifeless between them.

"Put them down," Tatya said, and he did, arranging the girl with care, as if she could still feel pain. "Cut the cord."

He hesitated, frowning at her, and she sighed impatiently, pulled her own dagger, and sliced through the tough gray flesh connecting mother to child without a qualm.

Then she reached down and spilled life into the woman with a brush of fingertips across her lips. After her, the child.

Flesh slowly turned from the color of ash to pale snow, and then to pink. The girl breathed a deep and whispering breath, like someone dreaming, and smiled.

The child cried, weak and angry, and her eyes opened in surprise. "I dreamed-- " she said. "I dreamed -- "

Silence was weeping. Tatya slammed her dagger back in its sheath with an impatient motion. "Enough," she said. "She'll freeze if you don't make her warm, and the child as well. They're your responsibility now, boy. Don't be your brother or I'll find you."

He swallowed convulsively, nodding. The girl, weak as she was, rolled toward him, into his arms, with the baby cradled in her own. A small, ridiculously damaged family, but one where love might, against all odds, find a foothold.

Tatya stood. She was weary, and unreasonably angry and cold.

Alone, as always.

Silence reached out to her when she turned to go, and his fingers flew gracefully.

"He asks what you're going to do," the girl whispered. She was a pretty thing, all blue eyes and heart-shaped face, and she gazed on Silence with unquestioning worship. "He's worried for you."

How odd. "I'm going to kill his brother," Tatya said. "Tell him not to come after me, if he wants to live."

Silence didn't. Tatya went to her horse, mounted, and turned toward the black, looming shadow of the mountain.

Miles to go, yet. And a wearying number of witches to track. One day, with the gods' own luck, she would find one of them whose gift was stronger than her own.

It wouldn't be Silk.

--end --

