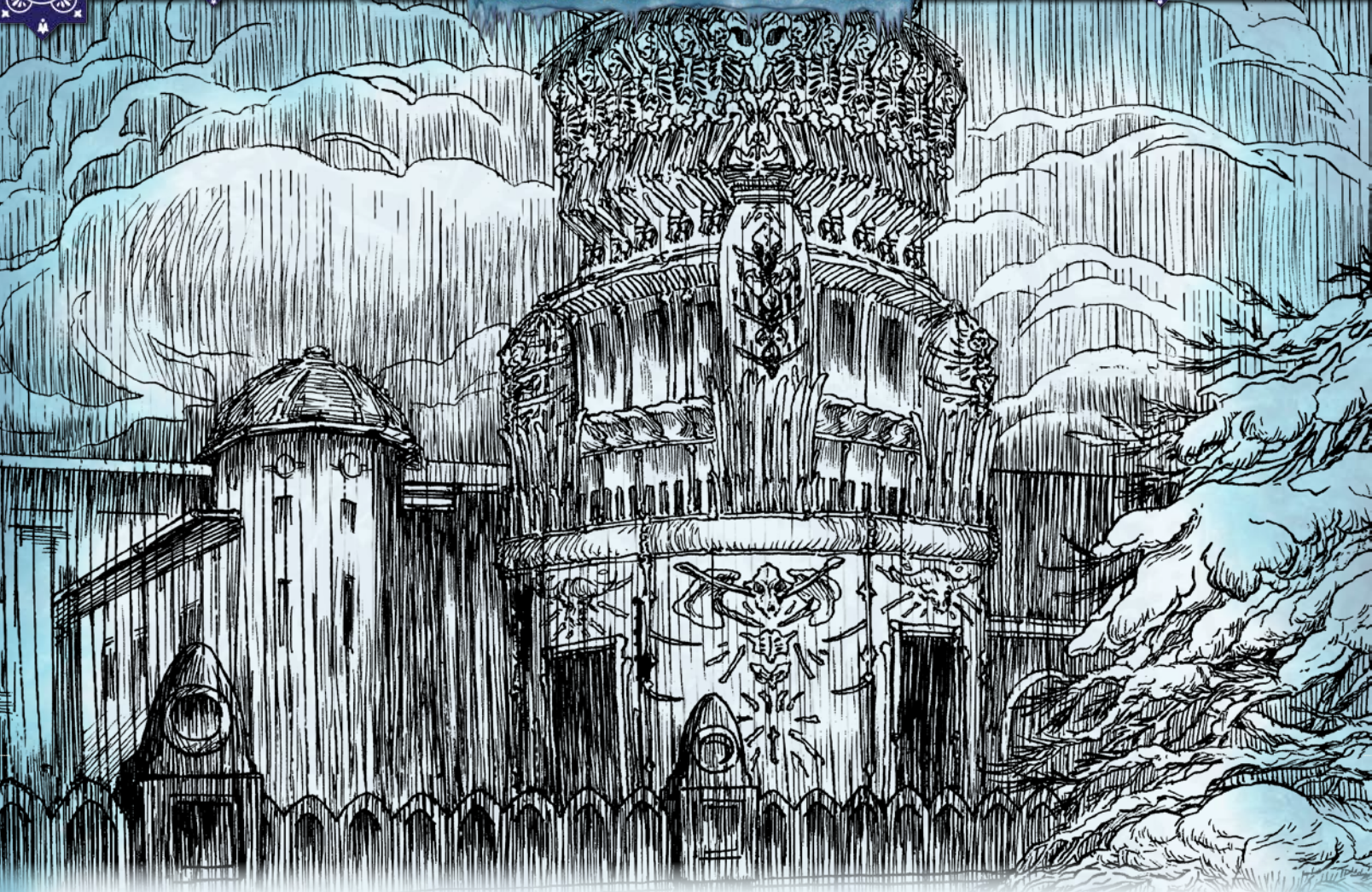


REIGN OF WINTER



WEB OF SECRETS

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At first there was a mad dash up the stairs. Byanka led the troop of dolls, winding her way up, cursing another blue-and-yellow spider into a chipmunk that Murzik chased down a hallway.

I followed. I have charged into battle alongside dwarves or halflings, their heads coming up to my chest or waist, but not dolls. Few reached as high as my knees. It would not do to trip over one's comrades. Luckily, the spiral stairs were wider at one side than the other. I ran up the center while the dolls took the portion toward the inner bannister. I felt like a giant among halflings, even though the stairs to my left were grand enough to accommodate ogres and trolls.

One brown-haired doll ran onto the steps in front of me, but before I tripped over her, she leapt up. "I will

help you, Papa!" she cried, clambering to my shoulder as familiarly as Poskar's monkey.

"Hold tight, Emilie!" I steadied her with my left hand, the duke's ruby winking on the back. I dimly noted that the "magical child" of Arjan and Anais Devore was costumed as a Galtan shepherdess, or at least a pre-Revolutionary fantasy of one, all furbelows and frippery, ribbons and lace. Having known actual shepherdesses, I knew the only accurate detail was her crook, which some shepherdesses did decorate with bows. Emilie had tied a three-pronged lemon fork to the end of hers, forming a makeshift trident.

I spotted a spider behind a potted palm. Partially camouflaged by the striped shadows cast by the chandelier's twisted candles, it lurked there, waiting. I

dropped a lens and peered closer. The arachnid's brindled markings were like indigo inkblots on saffron silk.

All at once the threads tied together: Kyevegeny's shimmering silk screen in the shadow theater; the shiver-laced cocoa; Silvertooth's insinuations.

"It's a dream spider," I warned the dolls. "Don't let it lure you into its web. The strands are drugged."

"We can't be drugged," a porcelain crone pointed out.

"Poisoned, then."

"Silly Papa!" exclaimed Emilie, patting my cheek with her porcelain hand. "We can't be poisoned either!"

"That should prove useful..." I reached to my bandolier. "Use this."

I unstoppered a wide-mouthed flask, the aperture suitable to accommodate knives or sword points.

Lemon forks fit too.

Emilie hurled her crook like a fishing spear, a trail of ribbon spooling out behind. The prongs flew through a palm frond's slots and pierced the spider's mottled flesh. It spasmed for a moment, then froze, paralyzed.

"What is *that*?" Byanka inquired icily.

"A dream spider," I repeated. "A monstrous arachnid from the jungles of the Mwangi Expanse."

"Interesting. Potentially useful. I meant the poison."

"Oh," I said, "giant wasp venom, concentrated, adulterated with venom from the tarantula hawk."

She raised a pale eyebrow.

"Not some wizard's hybrid monstrosity—a wasp from Qadira. Apricot wings, ebony body, absolutely excruciating venom. The Poisoner's Guild of Daggermark has it smuggled through Galt. But it still serves its original purpose as a paralytic agent for arachnids." I couldn't quite suppress a shudder. "I've had unpleasant encounters with spiders before."

"Did you bring enough to share?"

"Indeed."

Flatware was envenomed, and while I had never considered what a gang of dolls wielding ivory-handled cake knives would do to a giant spider, I had seen wasps swarm one before.

The effect was much the same.

We continued upward, past a schoolroom filled with tiny chairs and a slate bearing the word DEPARTMENT in pretty cursive script, past a miniature confectioner with jars of nonpareils and boiled sweets, past a hospital with pots of paste and sawdust alongside a shattered porcelain arm, and ascended a few more floors.

The high doors at the end of a landing stood open, shadows and darkness within.

Byanka touched the knob of her cane to an oil lamp in a niche, and it blazed alight with blue witchfire. It floated out of its niche, spinning like a gyroscope, and assumed a gentle orbit over Byanka's shoulder.

Valya touched her finger to the lamp in the opposite niche, causing it to glow a soft rose.

Orlin took a candle stub out of his tinderbox, showed it to Tinka, then fit it in the lid's holder. He saved a match by having it float over to the chandelier.

I borrowed it on the way back. While my army-issue bullseye lantern may not have been as convenient as witchcraft, it did have the advantage of a directional beam.

I scanned the doors first. The twin ivory panels opened out, the beam revealing scrimshawed images of princes in kaftans and princesses in kokoshniks and sarafans skating on the surface of a frozen lake. I then directed the beam inside, revealing a forest festooned with opalescent cobwebs.

Not a real forest. The trees were paper-mache and pasteboard cutouts. What appeared to be a beautiful trembling aspen was in fact a collection of bleached vertebrae and finger bones wired together in semblance of a tree with painted leather leaves. A clutter of newly hatched spiderlings the size of plums seethed over it.

We entered. Large marionettes dangled from the ceiling like halflings swinging from the gallows: witches and woodcutters, winter wolf pups and dancing bear cubs, even a wooden hut the size of an outhouse with limply dangling chicken feet. We moved through the forest of puppetry and scenery, avoiding contact with the shimmering iridescent webs.

I then beheld the stage and a great silver screen glowing with an incandescent illumination. On it was a shadow spider so immense it filled half the screen, locked in mortal combat with the shadow of an equally immense warrior, his cloak flying, the blade of his axe striking again and again. The sounds of battle accompanied this sight, but were more muffled than such a titanic struggle should warrant.

The shadow titan's axe struck again, but this time it was accompanied by a terrific *boom!*

I spun, for the sound had come from behind me

I shone my lantern back the way we came. One of the two-dimensional trees lay toppled over. I saw a quaking of the bony aspen's leaves, so I aimed the beam up.

A tall figure pushed the uppermost branches out of his way as he ducked—not downward, but upward. The figure dashed across the ceiling upside down, dressed in an assassin's shadowy silks. I did my best to follow with my light as he drew a cutlass and struck. A moment later, a sandbag hit the stage as he grabbed hold of another set. He rode them down and the silver screen rode up.

I quickly closed my right eye and dropped all my smoked lenses on the left. Silhouetted before the unshielded glare of a blazing limelight stood a spider, not titanic, but almost as large as me, locked in battle with a halfling dressed like Kostchtchie from Kyevegeny's puppet show. His fur cloak flew wildly, the ends of the

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otterskin wrappings on his wrists and joints did likewise, and the limelight dazzled across a golden torc worn on his broad bare chest. He swung his great axe with mighty thews again and again—yet they did not quite move as mighty thews ought.

I then realized this was because they were not flesh, but porcelain. The halfling barbarian was a halfling-size doll—an Ulfen warrior who bore a more than passing resemblance to Kyevgeny.

“Oh Klaufi! Be careful!” called Madenya, riding Valya’s shoulder as Emilie did mine.

Then the black-cloaked figure’s hood fell back and Kyevgeny’s blond mane shook free.

“Kyevgeny, you too...” Valya clenched her hands before her chin in an attitude of fright and concern.

Byanka pursed her lips. I guessed she had spat her last curse.



*“Emilie is small,
but formidable.”*

It would be a distance to hurl a dart, but fortunately an alchemist is not without resources. In this case, substances as common as soda ash and vinegar, mixed in my mouth and catalyzed with spittle, produced an excess of air to jet through my blowgun.

Giant spiders scream remarkably like stuck pigs when stung with tarantula hawk venom. Of course, rather than two evil beady eyes glaring at you, spiders have eight. I decided what was needed was more darts. I confiscated the shepherdess’s crook from Emilie, still tied with the lemon fork. This I envenomed again, placed into the blowgun, and shot with considerable force. The expanding gas puffed out my cheeks like those of Calistria on Irynya’s scurrilous little fan charm.

The lemon fork’s tines skewered a lemon-colored blotch on the spider’s abdomen. The monster screamed again, then trailed off into a gurgling froth as it froze in place, ready for a tarantula hawk to lay her eggs in it.

“Where’s Holgrim?” Kyevgeny demanded of the halfling-size doll who I assumed to be Klaufi.

“There!” Klaufi pointed to a shadowy corner of the ceiling and what I had assumed to be another cobwebbed puppet. My lantern revealed it to be a boy.

Kyevgeny dashed up one side of the proscenium arch and cut his valet free, swirling his cloak and rappelling down via silken threads from the cloak itself.

We ran to where he descended. I didn’t have to tell him to strip the cobwebs. His hands, gloved with more black silk, bundled the webbing with supernatural alacrity. “Holgrim...”

“He’s poisoned,” Orlin declared unnecessarily.

“Someone fetch a leech jar,” Byanka snapped. “Valya, you know—”

“I have this.” I knelt down. Holgrim looked like a younger version of Ermutt, his hair already starting to thin. I placed my glove on the boy’s face. I felt an electric tingle through my fingertips as the duke’s glove leeches the venom, the unicorn’s carbuncle on the back swirling like an opal as it consumed the spider’s poison before subsiding to its usual sanguine hue.

“Help him,” begged Kyevgeny. “Wake him up!”

I felt Holgrim’s skin through the fine leather. He was still warm, but the room was too, pleasantly heated by some means. The ceiling would be nearly tropical given the physics of heat. I felt behind his ear for the pulse of life but found none.

If he was asleep, he was not dreaming. The eyes move beneath the eyelids when a man dreams.

I pulled them open and shone my lantern in, looking for any response from the pupil, a contraction of the iris. Holgrim’s were pale blue-gray, the color of twilight on a frozen lake. They did not move. When I released his eyelids, they stayed open.

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I sat back, looking to the concerned faces above me. "I'm sorry. He is dead."

"I'll be the judge of that," snapped Byanka. She hunched down, removing her compact from her sealskin muff. She popped it open with a thumbnail and held the mirror before his mouth, examining it for breath. Then she held it before his dead staring eyes and examined it again. She checked his pulse.

"The alchemist spoke correctly," she told her grandchildren. "Your playmate is dead. But there may still be time. What would you sacrifice to save him?"

The brother and sister's lapis eyes exchanged frightened looks.

Valya spoke first. "I would give my mother's ring." She held forth her right hand upon which sparkled a beautiful diamond heart.

Byanka nodded. "And you?" she asked her grandson.

"Anything," Kyevegeny begged. "Everything. Whatever I—"

Her palm struck his cheek with a resounding slap. "Foolish boy! Never promise such a thing! You never know to whom you might be speaking! Be thankful it was your grandmother who heard your rash offer—but all I will take from you are your secrets. I will have the whole truth, all of it—no lies, no omissions, no deceptions. Swear it! By powers we both will respect!"

"I swear it by the Three Riders, and by our ancestor Queen Morgannan, who walks the worlds forever with Baba Yaga."

Byanka nodded, then placed her fingertip on Kyevegeny's lips. "I will have your truth later. For now we must gather Holgrim's soul while it is still close." She pointed to Orlin. "You, witch child—you have a familiar spirit. Can you see souls?"

"No," Orlin admitted, "I only smell them, sometimes. But Norret can spot them with his monocle."

I swapped the relevant lenses. "On it."

I looked about the theater. I could see the brightness of my own aura and the nimbus of light around Byanka and the others, the smaller aureoles around the familiars and dolls, and the glows around the spiders—not dead, only paralyzed.

Holgrim's body had no aura. It was only meat.

Rhodel waved frantically, pointing near the boy's head. I looked, seeing nothing out of the ordinary.

Then I saw it—a tiny mote of light, dancing like a moth in the lantern-light. It was already fading, the last vestiges of the mostly departed soul detaching from his body.

"He's here," I said. "But fading."

"Quickly," ordered Byanka. "Give me the lantern and the ring. There's little time left."

I placed my bullseye lantern on the floor before her as Valya handed her the ring. Byanka placed it on the ring

finger of her left hand, the heart worn inward toward her palm. She placed her compact on the floor, angled so it reflected the beam to the diamond.

She turned the lantern's knob, adjusting the wick. The light dimmed. She began to chant.

"Blood to Blood and Bone to Bone,

Eye to Eye and Heart to Heart—

By these Four, Ensoule this Stone!

By these Four, I Bind my Art!"

Byanka produced a penknife and nicked her ring finger, the one whose vein ran to the heart. Heart's blood dripped onto the diamond. She lay the tip of her ivory walking stick against it. A tear splashed down from her cheek, intermingling.

She reached out and turned the lantern's knob.

A final flash burst from the lens, drawing the tiny soul fragment toward it like a leaf being drawn along in a stream's current. Holgrim flew into the diamond. Byanka closed her fist.

The witch let out a long breath, her shoulders slumping, as if exhausted by a great effort. She opened her hand again.

Valya's diamond shone with a beautiful light. It radiated out of the facets, and in the lens of my monocle, it seemed to project a dozen spectral images of Holgrim. One looked kind. Another proud. A third wary. A fourth mischievous. Happy, sad, confused—all facets that might make up a boy's life.

"We've saved as much as we can," Byanka said. "Most of him has gone on. But we have enough."

"What about the spiders?" asked Tinka, hugging close to Orlin.

"Spiders tend to hole up when it gets cold," my brother said. "Could we just open the windows?"

Byanka looked to me. "Would that work?"

"In theory," I said. "You'd need to have someone hunt them down while they're torpid."

"We can do it!" Emilie pressed her cool porcelain cheek against mine. "Dolls don't get cold!"

Fires were doused. Windows were opened. The Ivory Tower very quickly became as cold as the air outside, far below freezing, for the sun had now set on Whitethrone.

The mortal staff was sent to Morgannan Abbey for the night. The dolls, except for a few favorites, went off to hunt spiders and egg sacks while we retreated to Byanka's private attic.

The layout was much like the round gallery where we had first been, with the same placement of windows and fireplaces, but in the center stood a firepit with a great copper cauldron of ancient design, burnished to brilliance. The now familiar "M" sigil of the Morgannan clan was hammered around the rim, and four cracked, smoke-blackened tusks served as its tripod.

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DREAM SPIDERS

Native to the jungles of the Mwangi Expanse, dream spiders are trapped and exported to cities all over the Inner Sea region due to the extreme value of their venom, which can be distilled into a potent narcotic called shiver.

On its own, dream spider venom causes hallucinations and damage to the target's mind, yet is not particularly habit-forming. Once boiled with precise ratios of water, alcohol, and the spider's own webbing, however, the venom transforms into shiver. Shiver is ingested orally, and its effects show up within minutes, forcing the user into a comatose state in which he experiences vivid, bizarre dreams. While this is hard on the user's body and mind, the real danger of shiver is its extremely addictive nature. Users who succumb to this vile addiction risk much greater damage from avoiding the drug, and in the worst cases can be reduced to gibbering idiocy, or even a coma from which they're unable to wake. As a result, most governments frown heavily on the use and sale of shiver, yet even a few addicts in a city can foster a thriving drug culture, needing to sell more and more in order to finance their own purchases.

Dream spiders normally live in dark places—in the jungles, they spin their webs in the branches of the thick canopy, while in cities they seek homes among rafters and in attics. Libraries are particularly susceptible to infestation, as books are easily chewed into nesting material. A live dream spider is typically worth 50 gp, while an egg cluster is worth 100 gp. A dose of shiver can cost anywhere from 10 gp to 50 gp, depending on the pressures of supply and demand.

Kyevgeny sat on the edge of the firepit and sobbed. "It was Poskarl's idea," he moaned. "I had the cloak and slippers from the jorogumo ladies, but the scarlet spiders they sent were just like the rabbits—none of them wanted to be my familiar. But Poskarl bought an egg sack for dream spiders and said we could get rich. They were easy to raise—I gave them storybook pages to line their nests and they liked puppet shows—but they grew so big and so hungry! They ate all the geese! And now they've eaten Holgrim!"

"And you were doing all this to make drugs," Byanka concluded. Her face was cold, as hard and pale as the ivory lining the walls.

Kyevgeny nodded. "They were so expensive! Poskarl already ran through all his pocket money and every bit of credit the Elvanna name can buy. He said the recipe was supposed to be simple: just spider venom, webs, water, and alcohol boiled together."

"Kyevgeny always has been good at mixing things," Valya offered in defense of her brother.

"Some brews are more difficult than others, my dear," her grandmother said, then asked me, "Have you made sense of anything yet?"

I was looking through Kyevgeny's notes. Witches may not need spellbooks and formularies, but I knew the scribbles of an amateur alchemist when I saw one. There was some brilliant work here, the youth having tried experiment after experiment to create shiver. Properly brewed, the drug was a potent narcotic that knocked the imbiber into a hypnagogic trance. It was also exceedingly addictive.

Kyevgeny had failed to create it, but in the process had made some marvelous alchemical discoveries, including a formula for hallucinogenic gas and notes on the illusory effect of combining a homeopathic dose of venom in cocoa while listening to a storyteller and looking at shadows projected on a screen woven from dream spider webs.

I looked at his huge hands. "How did you weave the silk?"

Kyevgeny looked stricken, then Madenya spoke up. "I did that." We all looked at Valya's doll. "He asked me. There's nothing I wouldn't do for my sweet children."

The fervency with which she said it made me pause. Then I had an epiphany. "You're their mother."

Madenya's mouth fell open, but she was mute. Her porcelain head turned toward Byanka.

Valya's head turned as well. "Grandmother!" she gasped. "You captured her soul-shard for a doll, then forbade her to ever tell us?"

It was Byanka's turn to look stricken. "I—I was waiting until you were the right age."

I looked at Klaufi, the toy barbarian who sat next to Kyevgeny like a bodyguard. "I'm guessing that Klaufi is their father."

"No," said Kyevgeny, "our father is in the Iron Guard. We seldom hear from him, but he still lives."

"No," corrected Valya, "my father still lives."

Kyevgeny stared.

His sister explained, "Your father was Kurteis, mother's bodyguard, who was once father's whipping boy. You have his hair and his height. I heard them quarrel when you were three and I was six. Father left. I never saw Kurteis again." She looked to her grandmother. "You gave Klaufi to Kyevgeny not a week later."

"It's true," said Byanka stiffly. "I made Klaufi with a shard from Kurteis's soul. It was a tattered, divided thing, but stronger for all that. Your father did not deserve his loyalty. You children did." She looked grim. "You are Morgannans."

She held up her hand, the diamond heart glowing against her fingers. "I captured part of Holgrim's soul. He was a good boy and did not deserve his death, but we can give him new life. It is high time you both learned the secrets of the family business." She looked at me. "The

duke already knows many of them. His brother is his blood." Her eyes flicked to Tinka. "Whipping child, do you know how to play towers?"

Tinka shook her head, eyes wide.

"Then it is time you learned. Baba Alechka can teach you. Klaufi and Madenya? You should play as well."

"Come with us, child," said the babushka doll who had spoken earlier on the stairs. "I will be your partner." She pointed a walnut-spotted porcelain hand toward a low game table checkered with ivory and black horn and set round with cushions, Katapeshi-style. A stack of gilt-edged ivory harrow placards waited beside pawns and other game pieces.

Tinka went hesitantly, but soon was sitting on the pillows as Klaufi shuffled the deck and Baba Alechka explained the rules.

Byanka turned to me. "Do you have any questions, 'Norret Gantier'?"

I thought. "You are going to make what's left of Holgrim into a doll." This was not a question but a statement. "His hair into a wig, his bones ground and mixed with the clay, his blood and flesh mixed with some of the glazes, yes?" My last word met with no answer, simply icy silence. "When you made Emilie fifty years ago, what did you add to the clay? I believe I left Irrisen with all my bones."

"Think. Don't you remember, Duke Devore?"

I thought of what I knew of Dabril's duke, what I had read in his formulary. The mascot of House Devore was Patapouf, the unicorn who had saved my hometown of Dabril by killing Coco the cockatrice, but had been petrified in the process. Most adults assumed the story was entirely mythological—and certainly it had become a ribald favorite over countless generations of retellings. Yet the jewel in my glove matched the one said to grow from the base of Patapouf's horn, and I had found fragments of alicorn in the duchess's laboratory as well.

"Unicorn ivory," I said.

"A marvelously useful substance," Byanka agreed, "but for one descended from the unicorn? Well, the marrow holds the blood, the blood holds the soul." She reached out and tugged the stubble of hair on my chin, which would be an impressive goatee if I let it grow.

Lately it had been getting more impressive still.

"You can always tell a man of Dabril by his beard.' That's

what you said." She reached to my glove and stroked the silky fringe.

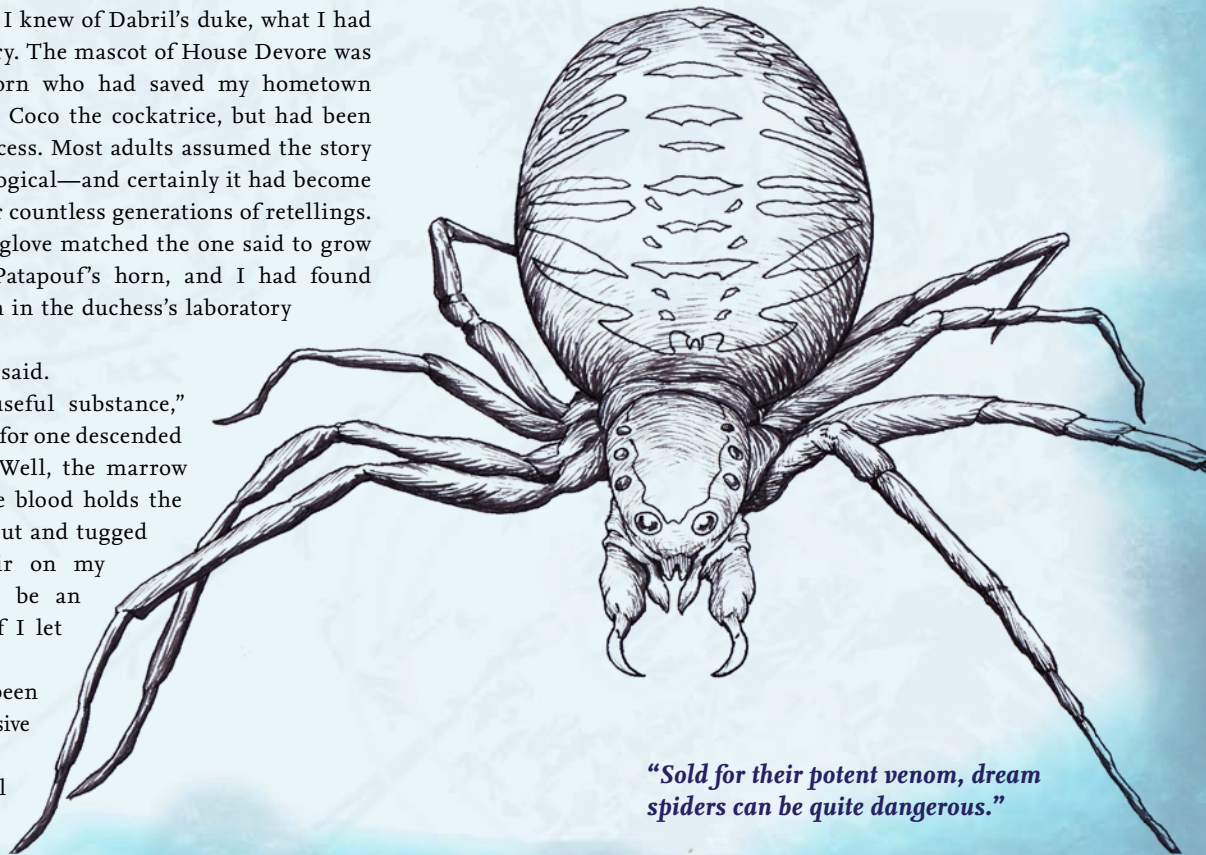
I put my hand to my chin, stroking it on reflex, realizing that the posture placed the fringe where my beard would go. Patapouf's beard.

Could I actually be related to Duke Devore? Moreover, could I be related to the town's patron *unicorn*—the living product of risqué tavern tales? Or was it simply that Arjan Devore had placed a fragment of his soul in the glove's gem, which in turn, by the laws of sympathetic magic, bore a trace of the unicorn's soul? Pretending to be a man long dead was twisting my mind in unfamiliar ways, making me wonder if I even knew myself at all.

Then Byanka dropped the other shoe: "Emilie may of course leave with you, as she is bought and paid for and her soul is not of Irrisen. But sweet little Tinka is a child of Baba Yaga's lands, and I would not wish to explain to my ancestress that I let her go, especially with all the secrets she's heard."

"You're going to turn her into a doll," Orlin stated flatly.

"Only if you leave," Byanka admitted. "Dolls are utterly dutiful." She picked up Murzik and petted him. "But if you choose to stay and allow me to tutor you in witchcraft, she may remain as your whipping child."



"Sold for their potent venom, dream spiders can be quite dangerous."