

THE FAVOURITE

The three witches hovered outside the window of the great hall. It was the biggest window in the castle and it was decorated in stained glass with a beautiful pattern of vines and snakes, which made it hard to see what was going on inside. But they were witches, and they were resourceful, so they changed their form from hummingbird (excellent for hovering) to eagle (excellent for seeing).

Inside the great hall, the king and queen were fussing over Carmelda, their eldest daughter.

“Carmelda, how old are you now?” asked the queen.

“Why, mother, you know that Carmelda is almost eighteen,” said the King, and his wife smiled:

“I am in a teasing mood,” she said, smiling. “As Carmelda well knows.”

Carmelda said nothing, just gazed modestly at the ground.

“Almost eighteen,” the queen continued, “We must throw a party!”

“A special party,” agreed the king, “So that all may see what a fine young woman our daughter has become.”

Again Carmelda said nothing, but this time made a small sound that might have been agreement, or excitement, or anything really.

“She is a fine young woman,” the queen said. “Yet dare we make her finer! Summon dressmakers, and embroiderers, and hairdressers, and jewellers, and make of her a flower in human form.”

“Indeed,” said the king, his smile so broad it threatened his ears. “Let it be done!”

And a score of courtiers, who were lurking at the sides of the great hall, put their screeds away and, bowing, left to attend to the task of making a girl into a flower.

The witches hovered, a little heavily, as the king and queen took their leave of Carmelda. Then they flew back to their rude hovel in the dark forest and returned to human form with great relief.

“So,” said the first witch, whose name was Ordure and had a nose like Cornwall, “the king and queen favour their eldest, do they?”

“’Twas ever thus,” replied the second witch, whose name was Blotch and had something on her knee that cried in the night.

“Our path is clear,” said the third witch, who called herself Knife and had once eaten a bishop.

“That which they love most,” said Ordure, “shall we take.”

The others looked a little confused. Ordure’s grammar could be a little difficult sometimes.

“Like I said before,” she explained. “We’re going to take Carmelda away from them.”

The witches had disliked the king and queen from the start, and by “start” they meant from the day the king’s great-great-great grandfather Ogham the First had carved out his kingdom from a hundred vile hamlets and boggy streams in the land between the valleys. Ogham had disliked witches for the very good reason that his mother-in-law Eglantia was one, and perhaps it was the fact that he owed his throne to Eglantia’s magical interventions, or just that he found her pointed hat ridiculous, that made him dislike witches so. Ogham couldn’t ban them from his kingdom – as soon ban sharks from the sea –

but he could ignore them, which he did with great success until his death from the chuckling sickness some three years later – an illness he quite rightly attributed to his mother-in-law Eglantia, who was sick of his comments about her hat.

Ogham's son, Ogham the Second, had therefore no time for witches: and in fact lacked a droplet of witch's blood himself, having been adopted by Ogham's childless wife and raised as a royal prince. Ogham the Second was loud in his belief that his success as a monarch was due to a complete lack of any witchy influence on his reign (a belief he only made public after his wife's mother had fallen off her broom while circling a volcano). In fact, all the Oghams were very anti-witch, so much so that, while other kingdoms and realms were subject to major witch problems over the years, Ogham's Kingdom lacked any such problems, the witches keeping pretty much to themselves and the populace being fairly witch-tolerant, especially when it came to the odd discreet charm.

The current king, Ogham the Eighth, had been raised with a scientific bent, as befits a modern monarch, and as such did not so much ignore witches as not really believe in them. As he surveyed his kingdom with his brand new telescope, he found it hard to believe that in the modest cottages of his realm people were still wrapping frog's legs in dock leaves or crossing the palms of hags with gold.

And this was the thing that had annoyed the witches. They were not, you see, local witches. They had not grown up in the kingdom and so were not familiar with the realm's laissez-faire attitude to magic and its practitioners. Where they came from – a far off land called Torn – witches had been first revered, and then (which was why they were here) persecuted. Ordure and Blight and Knife had been compelled to leave Torn and cross the valleys to their new home in the Kingdom. And once arrived, they had been surprised to be told – by a fellow witch no less – to keep their heads down.

"But we are witches!" said Ordure.

"Even so," said the fellow witch, whose name was Bacon, "This isn't Torn. People like us here, but they don't like it when we start getting all... you know..."

"All what?" asked Blotch.

"All 'Look at me, I'm a witch'," said Bacon, twirling slightly. "'I can do spells, me, I'm magic'. 'Has anyone seen my cauldron, I want to do some magic – because I'm a witch'. That sort of thing," she finished.

The three newcomers looked at her.

"Are you saying?" asked Knife, unable to believe her craggy ears, "that witches in this land do not get the respect they deserve?"

Bacon shook her head. "Not at all," she said. "It's all very integrated. People admire our abilities, they respect our customs and our way of life, but they just don't like us going on about it.

"But we're superior beings!" shouted Ordure. "We command the spirits of earth and air!"

"Do we though?" asked Blotch. "I mean, I made it rain that time, and Knife flooded a cattle market once, but we're not, you know, all that."

"Anyway," said Bacon, clearly bored with her new visitors, "All of you clear off now. I've got to go and curse a vineyard and you know what it's like with curses. Fifty fifty game." And she shooed the three witches out into the rainy night.

"This is ridiculous!" said Ordure.

"Not like back home in Thorn," agreed Blotch.

"They kicked us out of Thorn," Knife said. "And," she added with a sigh, "I'm beginning to understand why."

Ordure turned.

"I'm not letting this lie," she said.

"What can we do?" asked Blotch.

"Try and fit in," said Knife.

Ordure shook her head. Something with wings fell out and flapped across the wet road.

"I'm going to the top," she said.

All waiting rooms, since the dawn of time herself, are exactly the same. You go in, you state your business, and you wait. And you wait. And you wait. The Chamber of Request in the king's castle may have been grandly named but it was still a waiting room, and the witches had been in it for several hours now.

"We should curse someone," said Ordure.

"I don't know that it would help," Blotch replied.

"Might make us feel better," said Knife.

They looked around the room. There was a man with a goat, a woman with a grievance, and a goblin with a pot on his hand who had come to the wrong place. None of them looked like a curse would affect them much, except for the goat, who looked like he might enjoy it: goats are like that.

"Him," Ordure said, pointing a cracked fingernail at a clerk behind a small table who had taken their names, written down their request – *To See The King On A Matter Urgente* - and asked them to sit down over there please.

"We could," said Blotch doubtfully, "But then we might have to wait here even longer."

As it was, they had to wait six days and five nights for a reply to their request.

"What do you mean, he won't see us?" shouted Ordure. "We are witches!"

"And he's a king," the clerk replied. "A very busy king."

"Well, so are we," said Ordure. "Witches, I mean. We're busy witches, not a busy king."

"We're not that busy," Blotch said.

"Come back in five years," the clerk said. "Things might have settled down a bit."

"Five years is but a twinkling of an eye to a witch!" said Knife.

"Oh, are you witches?" asked the clerk. "You never mentioned it."

Back at the rude hovel in the dark forest, the witches threw things into a cauldron, but in a desultory fashion. One or two frog's eyes missed the cauldron entirely, while the flounce of elf that Knife added might have actually been flounce of elk. But nobody cared: their hearts just weren't in it.

"You'd think we were mere peasants," said Ordure. "Not sistren of the dark bond."

"People today have no respect," Blotch agreed.

"Perhaps we could do something else?" suggested Knife.

"Like what?" Ordure snapped. "Once a witch, always a witch."

She stood up. Something slithery fell out of her lap and slithered under the settee.

"The king won't take notice of us, eh?" she said. "Well, let's *make* him take notice of us."

"Ooh," said Blotch. "Are we going to blight him? I love a blighting."

"In a way," Ordure replied. "We're going to take from him that which he values most."

"His horse?" asked Knife, who could be unimaginative. "Kings love horses."

"Bigger," said Ordure.

"His castle?" Blotch suggested.

Ordure shook her head.

"Bigger," she repeated.

"His *kingdom*?" said Blotch and Knife together.

"Bigger," said Ordure then, correcting herself, "Well, not bigger, nothing's bigger than a kingdom. I mean - "

She smiled, her teeth a ragged line of yellow gravestones.

"Worse," she said.

And so it came to pass that the three witches began the not-unpleasant task of discovering what it was exactly that the king valued most.

"He does really like that horse," said Knife, one morning as they watched the king set off on a boar hunt.

"He can get another horse," Ordure replied.

"He seems very proud of his castle," Blotch remarked, as the king rode back through the fine gate of his royal home.

"He's got six castles," said Ordure. "Now shut up and hover."

They hovered.

After a while, Blotch said:

"So what are we hovering for?"

"Look!" hissed Ordure.

And the three witches, in their eagle forms, watched as the king and queen made plans for their daughter Carmelda's wedding, while Carmelda said nothing, and when they had seen enough, they flew back to their rude hovel in the dark forest, and made plans.

"A simple spell of capture should suffice," Blotch said.

"With extra charms of unmovement and stillness," said Knife.

"You're getting ahead of yourselves," Ordure said. "We haven't got near her yet."

"Shouldn't be a problem," Knife remarked. "Princesses are easy meat."

Blotch nodded in agreement.

"Always wandering around glades and coppices," she said. "Leaning out of windows and opening doors to pedlars."

Ordure shook her head.

"We need to do this properly," she said. She took a huge book down from a shelf and blew a storm cloud of dust off it.

"We need to *plan*," she said, once she had stopped coughing.

Meanwhile, back at the castle, the king and queen were walking away from the great hall with unusual haste. Once they were sure that they were a safe distance from their daughter, they stopped.

"I think we fooled her," said the king.

“We?” asked the queen. “I did all the work. You just spouted nonsense like a buffoon.”

“I did not!” said the king. “I was very convincing,” he said, sounding hurt.

“I apologise,” the queen said, relenting a little. “That was hard work for both of us.”

“She believed us?”

The queen shrugged.

“Does it matter?” she asked. “The point is, it’s done. We can now announce to the world that our daughter, the eligible Princess, is on the marriage market.”

“You make it sound like she’s a cow, ready to be sold to the highest bidder,” said the king.

“Well, isn’t she?” said the queen, and the king said nothing. “Anyway, you said it yourself. All she does is mope around the palace, staring at things. Much better to get her married off to a young prince from somewhere solvent and get a decent dowry out of it.”

“I suppose so,” said the king.

“Besides,” the queen went on, “Matilza and Esmeray are much nicer.”

And, with thoughts of their other, younger and allegedly nicer daughters replacing any worries about Carmelda, the king and queen went upstairs to change for dinner.

Carmelda was unaware of the conversation that had just taken place, but she would not have been surprised by it. Ever since her sisters Matilza and Esmeray had come along, Carmelda had been left in no doubt of her place in her parents’ affections. She remembered without pleasure how the two sisters had always been showered with gifts and affection from the moment they had each been born whereas, in stark contrast, Carmelda had received neither gifts nor affection in great quantities.

There had been the pony that Matilza had received at her christening: perhaps not an appropriate gift for a babe in arms, but there it was. Then there was the solid gold chess set Esmeray had been given for her first birthday, which she had immediately attempted to eat. Carmelda, who had received a christening present of a small wooden spoon and a first birthday present of another, admittedly larger, wooden spoon, could only look on in silence lest she be accused by her parents of envy. And so it went on: Matilza was given dancing lessons, while Carmelda got a wooden spoon. Esmeray had her own galleon at age six, while Carmelda’s sixth birthday present was a wooden spoon with a mast.

Year after year her sisters received preferential treatment – the finest gowns, the most exclusive perfumes, books bound in gold (not that either of them read books, or indeed anything) and holidays in the form of voyages to tropic lands. Carmelda just got spoons. And now, as she turned eighteen, she was under no illusion that her parents’ excitement about her possible marriage was everything to do with financial gain and nothing to do with her happiness. She saw herself married to a fat old prince of some cold realm far away, producing fat young princelings every year, and getting nothing out of life apart from a creeping sense of futility and the odd spoon (having little experience of any other kind of present, Carmelda found it hard to imagine different gifts). Meanwhile, she was sure, her sisters would wed young, attractive princes with flyaway hair and wry smiles, and dance the night away in silken dresses on galleons headed for foreign lands.

There seemed no rhyme or reason to this unfairness. Matilza and Esmeray were, it is true, as soft as the dawn and as pretty as a picture, but so was Carmelda. True, her nose was slightly longer than their noses, which were snub like the shells of baby snails, and her ears were not so much round like rosebuds as slightly pointed at the ends. And while Matilza and

Esmeray were cheerful and pleasant, so too was Carmelda, most of the time. There really was no sense to it.

With a sigh, Carmelda dismissed all these thoughts from her mind and went back to her room, where she settled down to read one of the many books she had filched from her sisters' unread library and finally, having first marked her place with a wooden spoon, fallen into a fitful sleep where she dreamed of faraway silver and gold sandy beaches, on which princes with soft skin and flowing locks showed her the gavotte.

The witches were, of course, aware of none of this. They were deeply mired in skulduggery and lunch, stirring potions as they chewed their way through a plate of mushroom (at least they hoped it was mushroom) sandwiches and hazelnut fancies.

"Why are we making potions?" asked Blotch.

"For the guards," explained Knife.

"Why the guards?"

"To render them supine, of course."

"But how," Blotch said, after a moment's thought, "do we get them to drink the potions?"

"As a toast!" boomed a burly voice, and the two witches turned to see a fine lad, hale of face and stout of beard, standing in the middle of the hovel.

"Kill him!" cried Knife, while Blotch just screamed.

"It's me, you idiots," cried the man and his face and body shimmered back into the form of Ordure.

"Tell us before you transform next time, not after," said Knife. "I nearly turned you into a stoat."

"Why a - " Blotch began.

"First thing that came into my head," said Knife.

Ordure sat down on a knotty stool.

"We shall enter the castle disguised as fine lads," she said. "We will offer the guards to drink the princess' health and they will collapse."

And that was exactly what happened. Three fine lads arrived at the castle gates, bearing trays of good ale, which was passed around the guards and, a toast drunk to the happiness of the princess, which caused the guards to become unconscious, propped up only by their halberds.

The witches changed from fine lads to sleek castle rats and scuttled across the flagstone to the stairs, which they mounted at great speed, scurrying down corridors and past doorways until they found what they were looking for.

Carmelda's chamber.

Carmelda was dozing slightly when the three rats skittered under her door, so she didn't see them transform back into witches. Nor was she awake when they bound her with a spell of capture. She was unconscious as the witches carried her past the still supine guards and stayed that way as they loaded her onto a cart and took her back through the dark forest.

So when she awoke several hours later to find herself, not in her own chamber but in a rude hovel, with three hideous hags surrounding her, Carmelda was both surprised and furious. She tried to stand up, the better to vent her rage, but nothing happen.

“Charms of unmovement and stillness,” said Blotch. “They should wear off in an hour or two.”

“Who are you?” said Carmelda, “and why have you kidnapped me?”

“We are witches,” Ordure replied. “And we have brought you here so as to take from the king that which he loves most.”

Carmelda looked at Ordure. It was a strange look in the circumstances, not so much terrified as... amused.

“I beg your pardon?” she said.

“We are witches - ” began Ordure.

“No, I got that,” said Carmelda. “I mean, maybe it’s the hats, but yes. It’s the bit after that I need to hear again.”

“We have brought you here so as to take from the king - ”

A strange noise issued from Carmelda’s throat.

“So as to take from him - ”

The noise grew in both volume and intensity.

“Take from him that which he loves most.”

Ordure frowned.

“Is she *laughing* at us?” she asked.

There is nothing so peculiar as the sight of someone laughing whilst under charms of unmovement and stillness, because while the noisy part – the actual laughing – is unaffected, the rest of it – the shaking shoulders, the tears of merriment and the wiping away thereof – is absent. The witches stared in astonishment at Carmelda, who was howling with uncontrollable laughter while maintaining an attitude of perfect repose.

“For goodness’ sake, take the bloody charm off,” snapped Knife, who was finding it all a bit too odd.

Blotch undid a small bag from around her neck., and ate it. Immediately liveliness returned to Carmelda’s limbs and body. She raised a trembling hand to her eyes and wiped away a tear.

“Oh, thank you,” she said, “I haven’t had a proper laugh in ages.”

And she stood up and clasped each one of their hands in turn.

The witches were entirely taken aback by this. Normally the sight alone of three witches would be enough to terrify any young girl, while the added knowledge that she would never again see those whom she loved had been known to turn a maiden’s hair white. But Carmelda seemed to find the whole thing hilarious.

“Is she just going to stand there laughing all day?” asked Blotch.

Knife frowned.

“Maybe she’s gone into shock,” she said. “In a bit she’ll probably start crying and have a complete breakdown.”

“Let’s hope so,” said Blotch. “It’s nearly four of the clock and I’ve got to get the dinner on.”

At this, Carmelda stopped laughing for a moment. She ground her fist into her mouth and, taking it out again, said:

“Dinner?”

“Yes,” said Blotch irritably. “And I should have got the turnips on half an hour ago.”

“Don’t worry about that,” said Carmelda.

She beamed at the witches.

"I don't know about you," she said. "But I'm starving."

And she strode off into the kitchen.

To be truthful, it was no great effort for Carmelda to stride off into the kitchen. The hovel was, as has been noted, a rude hovel, and while it was spacious and dry, it lacked rooms. The kitchen was merely the corner of the hovel where the stove lurked under its rickety chimney, and where a heap of pots, pans, dishes and cutlery lay in a rough blanket.

The witches stared in amazement as Carmelda began to sort through their vegetable bucket. When she had thrown out several elderly turnips and a particular juicy-looking mouldiwarp, she turned to them and said:

"Could one of you kill a rabbit for me?"

"A rabbit?" said Ordure.

"Or two," Carmelda replied.

"Certainly not," said Ordure, "Who do you think we are?"

"You're witches," Carmelda said. "And if you can kidnap a fully grown princess and take her to your hovel, you can certainly kill a rabbit."

"I'll do it," said Blotch suddenly, "I love rabbit."

From outside the cottage came the zap and fizz of witchlight. A minute later, Blotch walked in with something in her hand.

"A brace of conies," she said, and threw them to Knife, who nearly dropped them.

An hour and a half later, Carmelda had laid the rough oak table with knives and fork and was ladling hot rabbit stew into rough oak bowls.

"This smells fantastic," said Knife.

"I caught the rabbits," Blotch announced.

Ordure sniffed her bowl.

"Rather have mouldiwarp," she said.

But she ate it anyway. They all did, two bowls each.

When they were all settled by the fire later than evening, Ordure said, "We're still going to send your head to the king, you know."

"That's fine," said Carmelda.

Blotch looked at her.

"Fine?" she asked.

"Yes," Carmelda said, sighing so deeply she seemed to be shaking from inside. "I don't think I would be able to live without my darling daddy and mummy anyway." And she continued to shake.

"Look at her," said Knife, "She's racked by sorrow."

"She was laughing earlier," Ordure pointed out. "At us," she remembered.

"Oh, that," Carmelda said, and her face took on a regretful aspect. "It was a hysterical reaction," she explained.

"Really?" said Ordure.

"Why, of course." Carmelda fixed doe eyes on the witches. "How could I find any of this *funny*?"

And once more she began to shake.

“Sorry,” said Carmelda, “It’s the sorrow.”

Carmelda made hot whisky toddies for the witches before bedtime. They were delicious, with ground henbane and bat’s milk.

“Not having one yourself?” said Ordure, suspiciously but also drowsily.

“Teetotal,” explained Carmelda.

But Ordure, along with Knife and Blotch, was fast asleep.

The next day, the witches woke late, later than they had ever woken before.

Ordure cleared her eyes of sleep and looked around. Then she got to her feet.

“Where is she?” she screamed.

“She’s run away,” Blotch said. “Can’t blame her, really.”

“Oh,” said Iron, looking out of the window. And she pointed.

Outside the rude hovel, caught in a shaft of morning sunlight like the sky itself was pointing her out, was Carmelda. She was collecting logs and singing to herself.

“She’s still here,” said Blotch. “Good,” she added, trying to sound fierce.

Ordure frowned as Carmelda swept out the grate and replaced the old blackened logs with fresh wood.

“Why didn’t she run away?” she asked.

“If you want to talk to me, I’m right here,” said Carmelda. “And ‘she’ is the cat’s mother.”

She sat down in a faulty rocking chair.

“I didn’t run away,” she said, “for mortal sure was I that you witches would have set many a fatal trap for me.”

“Ah,” said Ordure, hastily, “Of course.”

“We didn’t - ” Blotch began.

“Many a trap,” Ordure interrupted. “You wouldn’t have got far.”

“Just to be sure,” said Carmelda, doing something innocent with her fingers, “What sort of traps did you set for me?”

“Oh,” Ordure said, “Um,” she added.

“A trap of ensinkment,” said Iron, inspired. “Wherein the ground beneath your feet becomes a bog and therein you are shucked.”

“Yes, that,” Ordure said. “Also,” she went on, “A curse of wasps, in which everything you touch turns into a wasp. A lot of wasps. Stinging wasps.”

“And a bear,” Blotch added.

Ordure gave her a fierce look.

“A bear?” asked Carmelda, her eyes blameless saucers. “What about a bear?”

“Just a bear,” said Blotch. “Bears are scary,” she explained.

Carmelda folded her hands and placed them on her lap.

“Well,” she said, demurely, “it is clear to me that I was right to stay where I am. Bogs and wasps and bears! I am no match for you ladies.”

She stood up.

“Now,” she said. “Would anyone like a cup of tea?”

The days of Carmelda's captivity passed pleasantly for the witches. Sometimes Ordure thought idly of turning her into something viscous, just to make her remember who was boss, but it was hard to think evil thoughts after a slice of Carmelda's extraordinary hazelnut cake. Knife occasionally wondered if they ought not to have sent the king his daughter's severed head by now, but not as often as she wondered how Carmelda got her bedsheets so soft and white. And as for Blotch, she was purely delighted to have Carmelda around, and would secretly mouth thank-yous at her as she plumped the cushions on Blotch's chair. Life in the hovel had never been so delightful.

And if they were sleepier than usual, well, that was surely because of the large meals Carmelda made for them. If they went to bed earlier, it was because they needed their sleep. And if they never woke up in the night, then that was all right too.

Of course, it also meant that none of the witches ever saw Carmelda sitting up at night with their books of magic, books that normal mortals never even saw, let alone read. They were certainly all fast asleep when Carmelda suddenly exclaimed to herself as she unclenched her hand and released a tiny ball of fire into the air, which flew out of the window and into the night.

And then one morning, when the witches had all finished their pancakes with honey and their strawberry and elderflower tea, Carmelda clapped her hands and said:

"Right! I think it's time we went to the castle."

Knife's face dropped. Blotch burst into tears. Ordure frowned.

"You mean, you want us to - " she began.

"Cut off my head and take it to the king," said Carmelda, briskly. "Yes I do. It's been lovely looking after you all but all good things come to an end, and I can't hang around waiting for you to kill me for ever."

"But you can't want to die, surely!" said Knife.

Carmelda sighed. "Sometimes I get so sad thinking about my inevitable doom and the effect it will have on my poor father," she said, "that I just want to run out of here and straight into the arms of the wasps."

"Wasps don't have arms," Blotch said. "Besides, there aren't -"

"Very well, then," said Ordure, with a heart she was surprised to discover was heavy. "We shall go tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's washday," Carmelda replied. "How about the day after tomorrow?"

And so it was agreed. The witches would behead Carmelda in two days' time and deliver her head to the palace the same day, the faster to distress the king.

"She seems remarkably unworried," said Knife, as Carmelda hung their black dresses and white sheets out to dry.

"I expect she'll break down soon," Ordure declared as Carmelda returned from the shed with a large and rusty axe.

"I'm not sure," said Blotch as Carmelda hummed to herself as she sharpened the axe.

"There," said Carmelda, carefully placing the shiny, sharp axe on the table. "Now who wants to do it?"

The witches looked from one to another and back again.

"It was Ordure's idea," said Knife.

“Just because it was my idea doesn’t mean - ” Ordure said.

“Yes it does,” Blotch said, in a voice that for her was oddly firm.

The witches followed Carmelda as she took the axe outside and, setting a large log on its end, knelt down and rested her head on the log.

“Ready when you are!” she called out.

Knife thrust the axe into Ordure’s hands.

“Get on with it then,” she said thickly.

“Do you have any last words?” Ordure muttered.

“No!” Carmelda all but trilled. “Just cut my head off!”

Ordure lifted the axe up, then stopped.

“Is there a problem?” asked Carmelda.

Ordure sighed and put the axe down.

“I can’t do it,” she said.

Knife and Blotch threw their arms around her.

“Get off me,” said Ordure, but not very loudly.

“Now what?” asked Knife.

They were in the hovel. The axe was back in the shed, and Carmelda was making lunch.

“Here we are,” she said, “Blotch, you carve the chicken, and Knife, you pour the wine.”

And she brought to the table a huge platter of steamed vegetables, home-made bread, a whole roast chicken and a flagon of wine.

“Where did this come from?” asked Ordure, surprised.

“Oh,” said Carmelda, “I got it from a travelling pedlar. I bartered some of my hazelnut cakes and raspberry pies for it.”

“Goodness,” said Blotch.

The witches ate and drank. Then, when they were entirely full, Carmelda said:

“I expect you’re wondering what to do now. With me, I mean.”

“We are a bit,” agreed Blotch.

“I mean, you can’t just let me go,” Carmelda said.

“Because?” asked Knife.

“Because of your reputation,” explained Carmelda. “If word gets round that you were going to cut my head off and send it to the king, but you - ”

She waved a vague hand.

“ - *changed your minds* - ” she went on, “Then people might think you were weak.”

“They might come for us,” said Blotch, frightened. “With flaming torches,” she remembered.

“And pitchforks,” said Knife.

Ordure looked at Carmelda.

“What do you suggest we do?” she asked.

Carmelda smiled. It was a smile full of charm and innocence.

“Well...” she said.

"I don't understand," Ordure said. "You want us to take you back right now?"

"Would that be a problem?" asked Carmelda.

"No, not at all," said Ordure. "It's just" – and she twisted her shawl so hard it became a tourniquet – "I was hoping, I mean, thinking you would still be here for a few more days."

"Strike while the iron is hot," said Carmelda.

"Could we just have one more meal together?" asked Knife, a touch plaintively.

"You've just had lunch," Carmelda pointed out.

Blotch could take no more. She threw her thin arms around Carmelda.

"PLEASE DON'T GO!" she wailed.

After a while, and with some difficulty, Carmelda prised Blotch away from her.

"You should be happy for me. I'm going to see my mother and father, who I love dearly and who," she said, a twitch appearing at the corner of her mouth, "love me more than words can say."

Knife blinked. She had noticed the twitch, which seemed awfully like a sign of – what? Distress? Displeasure? Amusement?

"I agree!" she said, loudly and suddenly. "Let's take her back this very instant!"

And she winked at Carmelda.

"You changed your tune," said Blotch to Knife, accusingly, as they closed the door of the rude hovel behind them.

"Yes," said Ordure, handing out broomsticks, "Why are you suddenly so keen on her leaving?"

"I'm not," Knife replied as she checked her satchel for spells of violence and charms of harm, "It's just I think something's going to happen. Something *interesting*."

And with that she rose into the air.

Flying high above the ground, the three witches followed Carmelda as she rode a small pony through the dark woods towards her father's castle. It was a long ride but the pony was unusually fast and soon Carmelda was outside the castle gates, where the startled guards realised who she was and, keen to erase the stain on his character caused by their earlier supineness, raised the alarm at once and in no time, the king and queen were summoned to the courtyard.

"My darling! My darling!" cried the queen. "You are alive!"

"And you have a pony," said the king, who was still a little confused by Carmelda's return.

"Mother," said Carmelda, bowing. "Father."

"Thank goodness you're all right," said the queen, and to her surprise, she found that she meant it.

"You must be tired," said the king. "We shall have your room prepared at – what?"

For the queen was violently shaking her head at him. The king, remembering that Carmelda's room was now being used as a music room by Esmeray and Matilza, said, "Never mind! We are just glad to see you" and made a mental note to get all the harpsichords and dulcimers moved before bedtime.

"But where have you been?" the queen asked.

Carmelda paused to give the pony, who was for some reason growling at everyone, some sugar lumps. Then she turned to her parents and pointed up at the sky.

"I've been with them," she said.

And, taking this as their cue, the three witches landed their broomsticks in the courtyard.

"Guards!" shouted the king, but too late, for Knife had already performed a spell of unconsciousness on them.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?" shouted the queen. "Carmelda? Is this your doing?"

But Carmelda wasn't listening. She was looking at the pony as it grew thick grey fur, long claws and a hairy tail, filled out, stretched in all directions and finally took on the long-toothed, red-eyed form of a giant wolf.

"I think," she told her mother and father, "that we need to have a little talk."

The witches looked on in some surprise.

"Did you see what she did to our pony?" asked Blotch.

"I didn't know she could do that," Ordure replied.

"I told you it was going to be interesting," said Knife.

"It seems to me," said Carmelda to the king and queen, "that for a long time now I have not been high in your affections."

"We love you very much," said the king, eyeing the wolf.

"You are our favourite," the queen said, not even sounding convincing to herself.

"Really?" said Carmelda.

"Yes!" shouted the king and queen.

Carmelda raised an eyebrow.

"So you'd be all right if I fed Matilza and Esmeray to this wolf, then?"

Even the witches caught their breath.

"That's *cold*," said Ordure, admiringly.

"But didn't we think she was the favourite?" asked Blotch.

Knife said nothing. She was enjoying herself.

"Um," said the king.

"We love them too," the queen said. "Just not as much as you."

"But my wolf is hungry," Carmelda said. "And she only eats princesses. However," she went on, "I expect she could manage on just one princess for now."

"Ah," said the King.

"So which one shall we feed her?" asked Carmelda.

"Wow," said Ordure.

"What?" asked the queen.

"Well," said Carmelda. "If I'm the favourite, then you won't want the wolf to eat me."

"Of course not," said the king. "But –"

"So it's got to be Matilza or Esmeray. Right?"

"No!" shouted the queen, so loudly that the ancient glass windows of the castle rattled in their frames.

"Why not?" asked Carmelda.

The queen looked at the king.

"You tell her," she said, her voice trembling.

The king sighed.

"You are not our favourite," he said, sadly. "Because you are not our daughter."

The witches gasped.

"We got that one wrong," said Ordure.

"Bit harsh," Knife said.

"Yes, you should love her whether she's yours or not," agreed Blotch.

"We found you in a bower," said the king. "You had on a woollen blouse and trousers and a woolly hat. And we had no child so we took you in."

"We treated you as our own," the queen interrupted. "Until -"

"Until our own children were born," said the king. "Matilza and Esmeray."

And, despite the circumstances, the king and queen smiled.

"We're sorry," said the king. "But that's just the way it is."

"You can't help love," the queen said. "Or the lack of it."

"Please don't feed our children to your wolf," said the king.

Carmelda shook her head.

"I'm not going to," she said. "I don't bear grudges. And besides, this wolf is really a rabbit, and rabbits are vegetarian."

As she spoke, the wolf shrank and become fluffy until it was a rabbit.

"Double transformation!" said Ordure.

"I can't do that," Blotch whispered.

"Shh," said Knife.

"I always suspected," said Carmelda. "I mean, everyone in this family looks alike apart from me. And I've always been different. But," she went on, looking at the witches, "I never knew *how* different until these three kidnapped me."

She handed the rabbit to Blotch, who stroked it behind the ears.

"It was the evenings," said Carmelda. "They were long and dull, so I began to read the books of magic. And I read the charms and the spells and I found -"

Carmelda closed her hand.

"I found I could do them," she said, opening her hand. A ball of fire rose up.

"Easily," she said, as the fireball leapt into the air and flew over the castle walls.

"She's one of us!" whispered Blotch.

"I knew it!" said Ordure.

"Like fun you did," Knife replied.

"We suspected," said the king. "There are portraits in the old halls of the castle."

"Portraits?" asked Carmelda.

"Of Eglantia," said the King. "The mother-in-law of the first King Ogham. You have a look of her. But not," he said, with a smile, "the hat."

"But if I am the descendant of King Ogham's mother-in-law," said Carmelda, "then -"

"Then you are of the royal blood," said the queen.

"More so than me," admitted the king. "Remember, my ancestor Ogham the Second was adopted, like you are. Only unlike you, his ancestor was not King Ogham's queen."

"She had a name," said the queen.

She looked at Carmelda.

"Queen Carmelda," she said.

"No way," said all three witches at once.

"Queen Carmelda," said Carmelda. "I like the sound of that."

She took a small switch of hazel wood from her clothes and waved it.

The king and queen were gone.

"I've sent them to the summer palace," said Carmelda as the witches helped her into her coronation robes.

A week had passed, during which proclamations had been read throughout the land, and celebrations allowed to begin. Congratulations and princes were flooding in, and the entire realm would soon be engaged in one enormous party.

In the throne room, all was hustle and bustle. Gavottes were being taught, and spinets tuned. An archbishop was rehearsing his sermon, trying not to catch Knife's eye. Guards were slapping each other, keen to avoid supineness.

"Is it a nice summer palace?" asked Blotch.

"It's huge and has massive grounds," said Carmelda, "And when Matilda and Esmeray return from their voyages, they can live together there quite happily."

"I still think you should have turned them into something," said Ordure.

"I did," said Carmelda. "I made them into earls and duchesses. Much nicer than being monarchs, and a lot more leisure time."

She smiled at the witches. They looked splendid in their brand new long black robes and gleaming black pointed hats.

"My family," said Carmelda, and there was a slight wobble in her voice.

She took their hands and smiled at them all.

Blotch sniffed.

Knife blinked.

Ordure wiped her eye with her sleeve.

"Now," said Carmelda, "will somebody please crown me?"