

CHAPTER THREE

THE CRONE

The echoes in the hall were so deafening, the girl was almost in pain from the piercing noise. As she and her escort dashed along the corridor, she covered her ears with her hands to smother the sharp blasts. This action did help, but not much, for the thunderous echoes were relentless.

The girl was wearing a long peasant dress, very plain, and a short, ruffled hooded cape. Both were made from light cloth that produced little sound as she moved. Conversely, her companion was armored in jingling chain mail and creaking leather, with a long sword and a short knife, both clanking, and all of this gear announced their approach as they passed through the castle.

These were the normal sounds of a soldier, the girl knew, but the overwhelming echoes now in the hallway were not due to them, but to the soldier's heavy boots rapping against the gray stone floor. The pounding rhythm, increasing in tempo as they hurried past, reminded her of unrelenting drum beats. The booming tones reverberated off the hall's rough masonry walls and beamed ceiling with a resounding staccato.

Working hard to keep up with the short but stout man at her side, she was relieved the hallway was not a long one. Soon, they would be through the worst of the deafening noise. However, the determined warrior seemed unaffected by the din.

In fact, he was becoming more determined with his strides the closer they came to their destination, adding his puffing breath to the mix. As their speed increased, his footfalls enhanced the echo's

volume. Then, becoming aware of her discomfort, the old soldier went faster still, to sooner end her torment.

At last, the two of them came to the end of the hallway, and the deafening echoes ended. As the pair turned and climbed the narrow staircase there, the wooden steps forced the excited soldier to slow his frantic pace. The typical jingling and creaking sounds made by the man's uniform resumed, but now accompanied only by his scraping footsteps, with several well-placed grunts thrown in for good measure.

The two began to hear muffled voices as they neared the small anteroom at the top of the staircase. The voices were loud and heated for they carried through the heavy double doors from the great room beyond. By the time the girl and her escort finished their climb, both of them recognized the loudest one.

The most vehement and booming by far, although distorted by the great oaken doors, belonged to the strong and passionate young Duke of Fervent. Handsome and vain, he was indeed much younger than the old man now sitting on the throne, but of late many believed he would make the better sovereign. The old king's current policy was on the whole disliked, and the young duke's family line did give him a legitimate claim to the kingdom.

The duke's now dead grandfather, the imperiled realm's late monarch, was the present king's sire, but it was Fervent's father who had been the old king's eldest son.

Upon the death of Fervent's grandfather, with the empire at war on all sides, the current king had usurped the throne from the infant prince, his own nephew. Of course, this action was distasteful to say the least, and was frowned upon at the time. But it was deemed necessary by all, for the empire of Am-Rif needed a strong warrior to lead its beleaguered fighting forces.

The young prince's father, the former king's first-born heir, had been much beloved by all, but he was long dead on the field of battle. Such slaughter, unending to this day, was a constant occur-

rence. And all could see that a baby monarch under such dire circumstances was unthinkable.

The infant prince had been granted a dukedom, and now, these many years later, he was strong and well past his majority. He also was viewed by many as courageous, and to some he looked better every day because of the current, widespread turmoil. The once powerful State of Am-Rif was now experiencing a deep crisis, and the duke was for some the secret, unspoken choice for king.

He was untried, but all in the kingdom knew the failings of the cruel man they had now, and many would not shed a tear if the vigorous young nobleman replaced him. Under the present circumstances, any change would be welcomed by most of the beleaguered citizenry. Yet, neither the girl nor her escort held this treasonous view, as both supported the current sovereign.

Having completed his duty as guide and safe voucher, the soldier turned and pulled on his gauntlets for effect. He smiled at the girl with one bushy eyebrow cocked in question. She knew that he was interested in her royal audience.

As the commander of the king's tower forces he was overworked and always under appreciated, but as an old veteran of many a bloody campaign, he still knew a good fight brewing when he saw it coming. He also knew this pretty girl could take it, and more. The girl returned his sly smile.

She liked this tough, old man, a hardened veteran by any standard. In the last year, she had seen him on many such occasions, and always he had accompanied her on this same trek. Although she did not know him well, she did know he was ever busy, yet in each instance he had taken the time to walk with her when he could have assigned another of lesser rank in his stead.

"Once again, thank you very kindly, Captain," the girl said.

Tonight the captain would have liked to follow her inside, to see for himself what would happen next, but now he only nodded his head and grunted in acknowledgment. Still smiling, the old soldier

then turned and descended the staircase without a reply. He would hear soon enough, he knew.

The girl watched him go, but only for a moment. She had other business. She turned and faced the far side of the small anteroom.

The two royal guards stationed there, like bookends to the great double doors, stood to attention. In the last weeks they or their comrades had seen this girl many times, and all knew well their duty. The standing orders were clear, and the girl would be admitted promptly, no matter what time of the day or night.

It still amused the girl, a young woman in truth, how some within the castle perceived her. All there were aware of her unique service to the king, and while all were curious, most acted aloof and somewhat awed by her, young as she was. Looking at the guards, she was not surprised they did not meet her gaze.

It was all so silly, she thought, but at the same time the girl knew that it was all very serious, as well.

The muffled but ardent voices within the room were yet conversing. Waiting for any pause in them, the girl knew, was useless. There was not a better, more opportune time, nor would there ever be, there never was.

She took a brief moment to arrange her simple cape and smooth her long, golden hair. Then the girl bobbed her head staring not at the two men there, but at the ornate doors towering before her. The guards opened them as always, without the benefit of a knock, and the girl strode boldly into the room.

Unlike her previous audiences within the king's chambers, empty save a retainer or two, this time the large, vaulted enclosure was crammed to capacity, packed with soiled and exhausted looking nobles. All wore full battle dress, including weaponry, and all bore with pride their family's crest upon their haggard tunics. She couldn't help but notice that many of them were bloodied.

The Duke of Fervent had been caught in mid-sentence, and he turned as all the rest of them did, to look at her when she entered.

He soon backed away with a nod of his noble head, to grant her easier access to the royal presence. The girl acknowledged this with a nod of her own, delivered while crossing the large chamber to stand alone before the throne.

"Well," barked the seated king as the girl curtsied, adding in a deep bow. "What news bring you, lass? Speak."

The room had fallen silent to hear her reply, but it exploded in low, agitated comments when she answered, "Not yet, Your Majesty." And then, over the increasing buzz she added in a louder voice, "But soon, your highness. Very soon."

"My king, this is madness," cried the charismatic young duke, grateful to have an opening once again to state his impassioned case. He crossed the royal chamber to stand before one of the room's large, arched windows. He didn't like what he saw.

Pointing out in the distance, he said, "The city is cut off and under siege, our supplies past running out." He turned to face the king and the girl, continuing, "By all the gods, attack is now the only true option, sire, yet we must hold, by your command, and take losses that we can ill afford." He again looked out through the large, hand blown glass panes of the windows, adding under his breath, "And all the while pulling valuable fighting men from the ramparts, to use as nothing more than moles and gophers."

This line caused some in the assemblage to smile, although no one standing there dared laugh aloud.

"Digging and more digging, the situation is intolerable," the young duke added. "My liege, we are bleeding and under horrendous assault while holes are everywhere dug, and we do not attack. Time is precious, and slipping away."

The girl knew that no one in the kingdom believed in the value of the holes. All in the city were dumbfounded by the king's bizarre dictum in this regard. Many in the population were frightened, concerned for the king's very sanity.

She saw that several young nobles, representing with bravery what was left of their family's fighting men, agreed with the duke's grim assessment. In faith she could not blame them, for their great houses had been whittled down by the long years of gruesome war, and many of their fathers and elder brothers already had fattened the endless casualty lists. First with the old king and then with this one, who himself had grown old in the staggering effort, the years of death in battle had continued unabated.

The empire of Am-Rif, once so vigorous and far-flung, no longer existed. The kingdom itself was now in peril. The besieged city was literally all that was left of it.

The girl was surprised by how young some of the nobles standing there were, with a few of them being only boys. None of them knew what was possible given time, and how could they? They had never experienced a day of peace.

Sadly, it was too true, for there never had been any to see. Yet they did see this young duke. With all being old enough to die, some there liked what they saw.

The dynamic duke was well aware of this fact, and he used it to his advantage. Fervent decided to hold his stance before the largest, arched window. It framed him well, and added to his effect as he continued his speech making.

"We dig and dig, my king, under constant barrage, against all known wisdom," he said, his strong voice booming throughout the room, "and all on the word of this wench's old mother."

The king said nothing to this. What was there to say? It was the truth and all in the room knew it.

But this young duke was not finished, by far.

He pointed his ornately gloved finger at the girl. All eyes fell on her. When Fervent spoke again it was in a slow pace, almost spitting the words for a fuller result.

"All on the word of the Crone," he said with heavy sarcasm. He had stated these views many times before, to the king as well as to

others, so all knew his leaning. But never before had any seen such drama, and the great room fell silent.

The Duke of Fervent was pleased with the reception his blunt assessment had on the occupants within the vaulted, beamed chamber. Gazing about he saw many there were spellbound. Holding out his arm with its steady digit aiming at the girl, he was expert at looking determined and heartfelt.

In truth, Fervent cared not a whit for the lot of his soldiers. For that matter, he cared not for the peasants or even for the nobles. In fact, this duke cared for nobody of a lesser station, which in his exalted case was almost everyone.

All he cared about was sitting his arse on that royal chair before him, or perhaps one more suitable to his majestic person. He belonged there. He was, after all, the rightful king.

True, his uncle had no direct heirs, and the duke would inherit the throne once the aged king died. Yet, the current sovereign, ancient as he was, showed no signs of dying with convenience anytime soon. And because the young royal still lacked the allies he needed to take back the throne, he was forced instead into play-acting the part of the faithful vassal to the tired old man.

He was good at it, too. Fervent cut a dashing figure striding to and fro upon the works, barking orders left and right, but the duke knew that he was safe enough upon the ramparts. The chances of death there, for him at least, were scant.

The duke could always leave if things progressed badly, to report in person to the king. The real dying, Fervent was well aware, came in open conflict upon the battlefield, where no quarter was given and none was asked. Yes, on the bloody field in the heat of fierce action, it was ever possible to die with alacrity, as had his long absent, butchered father.

That was why this duke had never fought in an open, pitched battle. Neither had he served in a prolonged land campaign. He chose instead to remain detached, and always he had made certain, to linger at the king's side.

There, dispassionately but from afar, he had observed the never-ending, unfolding carnage, adding to the contest only his choice comments on the current action.

The young Duke of Fervent did know that rebuffing an extended siege was quite another thing, however.

Still, he was not afraid of dying in the event of a breach in the city's wall. He knew that in such an instance, he could always dicker with the victors, and that a ransom of some description could be arranged if the wall did wane. It was the standard transaction, at least for one of his class.

Therefore, this duke cared not how many fools perished. It was no matter in the least to him. The more the merrier would be his stand, if he ever even thought about it.

They could all dig holes till Judgment Day if only it got him what he wanted. Once he was king, he could negotiate something or other with the enemy, to be a friendlier and more pliable ally or some such rubbish. And, if Am-Rif fell with him not yet on the throne, he planned to use this line as suasion on the victors, when the time came to arrange for his ransom.

A vassal king was a king nonetheless.

Still holding his rigid stance, the duke looked to the girl and was surprised that she met his stare with bold determination. Strange he had not noticed before just how pretty she was, with great blond curls surrounding her high cheekbones and piercing green eyes. She held herself well for a commoner, he saw.

Fervent prized a thing of beauty, especially one of lowborn status. They could be used at will and discarded with ease. Now he saw that this one was haughty as well.

That was just the way he liked them, at least at first. It would be an exciting escapade to teach this wench her proper place. He would amuse himself much by doing so.

Fervent then had the distinct feeling that she knew exactly what it was that he was thinking, for he could see it in those big green

eyes. For just a moment the duke was concerned, but then he thought, so much the better. If she knew what was coming, he would enjoy himself all the more.

The Duke of Fervent then dropped his arm and turned his head to face the king. His stance was flawless. Most of the assembled nobility had been awed by his performance.

"Always the Crone," he said, looking appropriately solemn.

"The Crone is a true subject," answered the hard-pressed ruler, loud enough for all present to hear.

The old king was seated while all the others in the room stood, each of them awaiting his pleasure. His throne was just a plain, unadorned chair, but it was a stout one, and built well. To serve the royal preference, it had been placed upon a raised dais, only slightly elevated to accommodate several steps.

A normal man sitting there would have been eye level to those standing, but this majesty was tall as well as old. The king looked down on all before him, back straight as he sat. His stance was flawless also, dignified and regal.

But he was tired, and wished only to shed his heavy battle dress. It was similar to what the others' wore, save a small but stylish crown placed over his helmet that conveyed his station. Yet the old king now seemed exasperated with his upstart nephew, and he looked to the floor rather than meet his eye.

"No," replied the duke, "she lies," and those in the room who agreed with him murmured their assent. But most of the men there were older than this brash young duke. It was honor, not words that meant the most to them.

To a man they were strong and brave, but they were not great thinkers. The details were unimportant. They wished only to be told what was needed to be done.

All would then know their duty and carry it out no matter the outcome or consequences. Still, there were the damned holes to consider. Of late they were everywhere.

But the king was sly, and always thinking. He had to be. He looked up, and waited to see if such an accusation of high treason against the Crone was in fact the truth, or just wild speculation.

"She lies," again stated the impassioned duke, stepping closer and adding, "and with her lies, by all the gods, she buys more time for the enemy. The old Crone deals only in folly. Her sweet words are tender, but stink like rotted flowers."

The king now realized that no telling evidence was forthcoming against the old woman. He stared his nephew in the face. At this, the duke dropped his head in a curt bow.

The hard-pressed monarch was well aware that the situation was desperate, that tempers were short and growing shorter. But he also knew that the nobles needed him, at least as things now stood. He bent them to his royal will.

None could deny it, he was an imposing figure facing them, sitting still as chiseled stone. His long arms were thrust out before him as he gripped the throne, resembling the front legs of a reclining lion. Only his piercing eyes were moving, scanning the throng, and demanding their attention by his very bearing.

"The Crone is like the ash tree," the somber sovereign lectured the assembly, "she is small and twisted but tenacious and strong." The nobles understood this observation, and agreed with it. Again they murmured their concurrence.

"Like the ash tree, depending on its use her fruit may be deadly or sweet, and so her name is Sorbus," the king added, employing the genus of that astringent plant.

He then looked to the girl. Time was running out, there was no denying it. Everyone there knew it.

By the king's demeanor, the duke now knew that he was beaten for the present. Still, he persisted, to save face with the assembled nobles and to throw more question on his uncle and his royal prerogative. He again turned to the window.

"At least I must have the diggers back to the wall, my liege," he said, feigning despair. "I must have them to protect against the coming onslaught, and now, I beg of you, as later may be too late. By all the gods, it must be so."

"Enough," said the weary king, hearing his fill. He raised his hand for emphasis. "I am unmoving, and so my name is Invar."

All eyes in the room fell to the girl standing before the throne. She spoke well, hence her present calling, but now she could not find the proper words. She thought of all that was at stake here, and she thought of her mother, Sorbus, the old distorted woman that everyone called the 'Crone.'

Of course, she was not the girl's real parent, but Sorbus was the one and only mother the child had ever known. While just a babe, sickly and near death, the girl had been given to the Crone, in hopes the old woman could save her young life. She did, using her vast knowledge of illness and healing.

While growing, the girl was unaware that the Crone was shockingly, physically different from other people. But Sorbus, even with her bent back and wrinkled, toothless face, had always been a loving and tender parent to her. And she had cherished her dearest mother beyond what mere words could convey.

Things were simpler then, before her mother had begun her years of service to the king. Together they had lived free and unimpeded in a crude but snug hut deep within the wood. Constructed of stones and mud with a sod roof, it had been located on the edge of a beautiful glade by a lazy stream the girl had loved.

In this uncomplicated place they had lived a happy life, with not a care in the world as well as she could remember.

Now and then, people of the forest would come to the glade by the stream, leery, even fearful of the Crone, but also wanting what only she could give. Sorbus had long been known as a healer and a wise woman, rich in knowledge the average person lacked. The old woman was an expert concerning herbal remedies, and those she always helped held her in the deepest respect.

As the young girl grew, she realized that Sorbus was in large part simply a good cook, and that a sick, ill fed person often got well with rest and plenty of hearty soup inside them.

The child had quick wits, and soon she had learned from the old woman all the differing plants of the wood. She learned these lessons well. After a time, she was gathering every component needed by the Crone to ply her healing and tasty ways.

Yet what the girl remembered most from those tender days were all the stories. They had started early on, when she was very young. Sorbus had always amused her with all manner of fantastic tales of great kings and high conquest.

Episodes of what they had done and how they had acted had entertained her for many a carefree hour. After a time, the girl could recite them all. It had been an easy thing to do, for she had loved these exciting stories, and her simple life in the forest had lent itself to daydreaming the time away.

Now that she was grown, things were not so simple anymore.

"How much longer must I hold, child?" the king asked her, and all present awaited the girl's reply. Yet she didn't know how to answer him in truth while also serving her mother. He had nerves of hammered steel, but the angry nobles being chewed to bits daily could not last indefinitely, honor or no.

"My lord king," she said with her head bent, but she could not continue for she had not the proper words to convey her thoughts. Still, the girl had to be convincing. There was no other way.

"Good King Invar," she began once again, but looking up at him the girl was stopped once more.

She had known this man since her childhood. Yes, she remembered the day that he had first come with desperation to her mother, at their small hut in the wood. The great king had been pitiful then, a far cry from what he had wished.

The dejected royal had come quite alone, for all his fancy retainers had abandoned him. After acquiring the throne through

ruthless manipulation, he could do nothing with it save run it further into the ground. The desolate despot had pleaded at great length with Sorbus for her assistance.

That part the young girl remembered well.

Help me, he had begged of her for long days on end. It was not possible do it alone was his bitter, unending song. At last, the king had broken down and cried, and this the girl had never forgotten.

She recalled that occasion with ease, even though it was now many years in the past. For it had been at that very moment that the girl had realized the truth. However, at the time she could not foresee the import of the situation.

She could not know then of the great changes to come, neither in her life nor in the life of her dear mother, but the truth of the matter was revealed to her once the king had wept.

The girl knew then that the wonderful stories she had loved so much, all the stories of kings and kingdoms, of great battles fought and greater victories won, her stories, the stories of her mother, were not just silly legends told to pass the time away.

She knew then that the stories were in fact real tales of what would occur, and she knew as well that the Crone had seen them all, even before they had transpired.

The king had traversed a long distance, alone and defeated, and at length he had cried real tears, just as in her stories.

Sitting there, all these years later, was a powerful man before them. King Invar's kingdom might have been in peril, but he was a monarch to be reckoned with just the same. It had taken much time and hard effort, but nonetheless it had happened, just as the stories related to the girl had foretold.

The old Crone had indeed seen it all, and told the tale. Sorbus had known how they would come and what then would occur. Yet, they were not just innocent fables now, for all of it was indeed happening, and with all too bloody an abandon.

She looked about the large, vaulted chamber and saw desperate men standing there with real fear on their faces. This was life and death, no doubt about it. Everything was at stake here.

The king must not give up, no matter what, not when they were so close. Not when they had come so far. Not now.

It would happen. She knew it would. It had to.

It had been her favorite story.

"Soon," she told her sovereign.

Just then, a commotion was heard outside the king's chambers. The massive wooden doors were opened and a smiling man, a common peasant, burst into the assembly. His escort, the old captain of the guard, was left standing on the landing with his chain mail gloves resting on his hips and his generous eyebrows raised in wonderment at the scene.

Without words, the girl asked the man the most important question. He responded by winking at her as he crossed into the crowded chamber. Clothed simply without armor, but with a plain and battered soldier's helmet tucked under his arm, he was still smiling as he went down to one knee.

"King Invar," he said, "thank all the gods, we have found it."

Gasps of surprise escaped from the nobles in the room, but the old king just sat with a blank expression on his royal visage.

Stunned, he stared in numb silence at the peasant.

The man was a lowborn commoner, but in the last year he had addressed the king many times. He had never thought, even in his wildest dreams that this would ever occur, for he had not been raised to think in terms of such lofty heights. Far from it, for he had been bastard born, and though that appellation held little real stigma in the kingdom, he himself had never forgotten the fact.

True, it had made no great difference in his life, save in the law of inheritance, but it had grated nonetheless. He was the son of a prosperous miller, but he would never own the mill. Luckily for

him, his father turned out to be a kind and loving man, and the growing boy always had been acknowledged and consistently fed, something of which most could not boast.

His big dream in life, therefore, his only lofty ambition had been to own a mill as his father did, the better to continue eating well.

As a lad, working for his father he had labored hard, learning well the various operations involved in the trade. Years later his father, falling sick, turned over to him the day-to-day running of the business. No facet of the operation had escaped his notice.

He had proved himself to be an able administrator. The mill had flourished. However, sad to say his father had not.

The man soon died, and ownership then passed to a younger, legitimate son. The young miller's dreams had been dashed, but not his will. He had made immediate plans to move on.

There had been no question. He was a simple man, but not a fool. He would start from scratch if he had to, and be glad about it, rather than work hard only to make another prosperous.

But the stepbrother's mother, the new widow, knew a good thing when she saw it, and knew as well her own son had no head for business. She had wanted the mill to continue running, and the profit therein, to continue to flow. This meant that the bastard must stay on, for he ran the place after all, and did so very well.

She persuaded him to hold his stance by an outright gift of half the concern, for half ownership of a working mill was much better than owning all of one that didn't produce, and she knew his pride would accept nothing less. She also gave him the promise of a free hand, by agreeing to keep out of the business end of the whole operation. The bastard had been astounded at the offer, and he had with great eagerness accepted her proposition.

By doing so the peasant had achieved his life's only true desire, and so his name then became Apex.

Later, the king, finding his forces besieged and cut off, was impressed with this commoner's work ethic and administrative

abilities. He then placed Apex over all of the city's bakeries. This was a position of vast importance given bread was the only staple for most during the terrible siege.

The Crone had later raised him further still.

Of late, the hard working Apex had preferred the simplicity of the mill or bakery, but no longer.

The nobles and soldiers, calling him 'that bastard,' had scoffed as he had directed the various crews of diggers. They would not scoff now, and no one in the city ever would again. The Crone had been factual, and they could all go to hell.

True, he had not believed at first. He had only carried on under orders from the king and the old woman, but he had not thought anything tangible would come of it. Now he knew better.

Yet the girl had known. She always had known the true state of affairs. Meeting with her day by day for the Crone's latest instructions, the beautiful girl often had tried to convince him, to bolster him when he needed it, and she had been correct.

He would be a powerful man now with the girl by his side, and all because of the gnarled old Crone, Sorbus.

He stood in pride before the king. Apex may have been of low birth, but now he held his head high. He had justifiable reason.

"We have found it," he repeated. "We have found the Fortress of Forecastle." At this news pandemonium broke.

The nobles screamed out in joy. Some walked over to slap him on the back, congratulating him on a job well done. This levity ceased once the king stood.

He was a tall man anyway, but standing atop the raised platform that contained his throne, he seemed immense.

"Show me," he commanded the peasant.

All tramped, en masse, to the lip of the newest hole. One of many scattered throughout the city, this example had just been dug in

the castle courtyard. Between soldiers holding blazing torches, they descended freshly carved, crude steps.

Next they passed through a set of large metal doors, newly broken open by a crew of the bastard baker's diggers.

All then continued down a corridor to yet another set of metal doors, also large and imposing. At this juncture the girl advised the king that all must hold fast and await the Crone. The nobles balked at this, but the king silenced them.

The Fortress of Forecastle was real, the Crone indeed a true subject, and all of them would wait, he decreed.

At this point, Apex and the daughter of Sorbus, who were standing on either side of the old king, looked at each other and smiled. The pair had worked hard of late, and now both were well satisfied. However, the young Duke of Fervent was upset, and this was not his normal, collected nature.

He had never believed in the many promises of the Crone. In fact, he had based all his actions thus far on that very premise. At this juncture, he had no other to fall back on.

"What is this witchery?" he asked, visibly distressed, while looking about the damp, underground enclosure.

They all began then to speak of the mysterious fortress. Who built it and when? How does the Crone know of it?

What secrets does the fortress possess? Was it a gift from the gods? If so, why, to what hidden purpose?

Many of the nobles, much as the young royal, were uneasy standing there, surrounded by the eerie torchlight.

"I feel no good can come of this, my king," the now agitated duke stated with displeasure, but a voice, strong yet obviously old, answered him from behind the crowd.

"Not so, young Fervent," it said.

The Crone, repulsive to see, had arrived at last. The densely packed group of nobles and guards were startled, and they parted with alarm to give her access and entrance to the king. Only then, with the aid of a stout walking stick, did the old woman shuffle to the head of the awaiting assembly.

She was a small person, hunch-backed with masses of stringy gray hair protruding from beneath her plain peasant's wimple. Her blanched face was overly wrinkled, and her eyes were mismatched, with one squinted almost shut while the other, bloodshot, was opened overly wide. Her toothless mouth twitched often, as if she were talking to herself, and spittle was near spilling out of it to drool over her wart-covered chin.

"The fortress shall grant us much, and all of it favorable," she said as she produced a set of keys from a string about her neck. Making a selection, the Crone unlocked one of the great doors but she turned to the throng before opening it. All present were spellbound, wondering what was next.

"The fortress is alive," she announced, "and not in need of torch light." She added the command, "Follow me, but touch nothing." Sorbus then spun around and entered the doorway.

All those in the group save the Crone were dumbfounded to see the underground Fortress of Forecastle was bathed in bright sunshine. The guards, mumbling among themselves, extinguished their torches and left them in the corridor. Unperturbed, Sorbus then led them into the mysterious edifice.

As they walked along, all became aware of a noise, a low humming buzz that permeated the place. It sounded somewhat like a far away beehive. It was a strange sound, both disconcerting in its newness, but also comforting in its constancy.

Through long halls and down endless stairways the Crone led them. At each descending floor they passed through more corridors as if in slow motion, Sorbus shuffling on her ancient feet, the stilted horde following wide-eyed behind. They passed by innumerable doors, some of which contained large glass panels.

These doors, however, revealed nothing of the rooms beyond, for no sunlight was shining within them. The windows were therefore black as pitch, and each one acted as if it were a looking glass, rendering a distorted image of them as they passed. The whole scene was ghastly and foreboding.

No one had ever seen such strange wonders. Every door they encountered was labeled in neatly scripted, black lettering. The literate ones in the assembly noticed with distaste that the words there were wrought in a bizarre and unknown language.

At last, they stopped before a set of double doors that looked much the same as all the others they had seen, save these two were somewhat wider. Each contained a larger than normal glass and again the room beyond was dark. As the wary group crowded about the Crone, the dim and contorted image the windows reflected back at them was hellish looking.

The Crone was unconcerned with their reflection. She placed her grizzled hand on the door to the right and chucked to herself. Smiling, she then handed her staff to her daughter.

"Yes, yes," Sorbus said softly.

"Mother," asked the girl, almost breathless, "what is this place?"

Unlocking the door with another key from the same string about her neck, the diminutive old woman then pushed it open. She entered the room beyond a few steps and stopped, bathed in the spilled hallway sunlight. Sorbus cocked her hunched head about in rapid recognition, then turned with proud accomplishment and faced the now crowded doorway.

The Crone looked into the bewildered faces there and clapped her bony, spotted hands together in joy at the sight.

They were all lost in the strangeness of it, she realized. They had no idea of where they were, nor the consequences thereof. Sorbus did though, for she knew everything.

At last it was happening. The game was afoot, no doubting it now. After a happy, satisfied cackle she answered the girl.

"This, my daughter," the old Crone said, holding out her thin, spindly arms, "was once my office."