

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR KNIFE WITCH

“*Knife Witch* by Susan diRende offers seafaring, kraken-haunted adventure centered on a kitchen maid from a coastal village whose “luck” turns out to be witchery. She soon endears herself to a band of pirate raiders and to the reader. It’s pure pleasure to discover, along with diRende’s spiky narrator, how magic and other forces work in this novel’s archipelago universe. Thoughtful readers will appreciate diRende’s dissections of monstrosity and barbarity, but the tale itself is primary: you have to root for this sharp young woman with knives stashed in her hair as she outwits every power ranged against her, from small-town bullies and corrupt witch councils to far greater natural—and supernatural—entities.”

—Lesley Wheeler, author of *Unbecoming* and
Poetry’s Possible Worlds

“Susan diRende’s unique voice marries funny to fantasy in this rollicking feminist tale of a kitchen worker who discovers she’s a powerful witch after she’s captured by pirates. She takes on krakens and kings, not to mention other witches, all while protecting others (including a dog and the pirates) and doing good (mostly). And she does it her way.”

Anyone who thinks feminism—or, for that matter, fantasy—can’t be funny needs to read Susan diRende.

—Nancy Jane Moore, author of *For the Good of the Realm*

Knife Witch

Knife Witch

by Susan diRende



Aqueduct Press
PO Box 95787
Seattle, Washington 98145-2787
www.aqueductpress.com

This book is fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2022951915

ISBN: 978-1-61976-238-1

First Edition, First Printing, June 2023

Cover Illustration courtesy Susan diRende, copyright © 2023

Book design by Kathryn Wilham

Acknowledgments

I owe the genesis of this book to Timmi Duchamp. She read my short story, titled “Knife Witch,” and not only accepted it for publication in the *CSZ*, but also suggested it would make a fun book of episodic adventures. Fast forward two years, and “Knife Witch” the story has become *Knife Witch* the novel.

Many thanks as well to the editorial team at Aqueduct: to Arrate Hidalgo who made sure my most outrageous imaginings made sense and to Kath Wilham who helped me refine the language and put the guardrails of grammar and punctuation on my somewhat careening prose.

*For my Pop Leo, the template I use when I have to write
a hero/lover/all-around badass wonderful man.*

Chapter One

Once again, I was lucky in the worst way. Becoming a witch among savages is not a prize you'd pay money for a chance at. But then, if I hadn't been scratching that impossible-to-reach itch between my shoulder blades with a boning knife when a horde of barbarians burst into the kitchen, I'd be cold meat myself. Or worse. So yes, luck, with a spoonful of awful.

All my life I'd been tormented by crawling, fizzy feelings, usually right where it was impossible to reach. That time, I needed a long knife with a pointy tip. I moved to grab it when Sharma turned away because of some ruckus in the outer hall. Then the ruckus invaded the kitchen and, well... Did you know that if a boning knife is pointing at the chest of a large, rampaging Wildman hurling himself at a girl who spends her days carving up sheep and pigs, it slices right past the ribs and pierces the heart without a thought? Practice makes permanent.

If I'd been a man, that quick kill would've been immediately followed by a quicker, or possibly slower death: mine. That I was a girl changed the deal, though. They figured only a witch could take down a warrior with her virtue intact, making her someone not to be messed with. That someone was me, standing over the suddenly dead second-in-command of that large and smelly horde, brother to the leader, no less, a man no male could do so much as scratch in battle. Itchy girl, however, gave him a little more than a scratch.

Everything stopped while they called the marauder-in-chief. He looked at the corpse and then at me. “Only magic could do this. Bring her for the temple. They will train her and reward us.” And he turned away.

Some bearded behemoth grabbed my arm, the one still holding the knife. I twisted uselessly, demanding they leave me there and go away quietly. Not that I’d been so happy there. “Itchy and bitchy” was what my sister called me, and she loved me. Sort of. My whole family had been wondering how they could possibly marry me off, preferably far away. I was not the rebellious type that a strong man might imagine taming in some fantasy of power. Instead, something about me made other people feel inadequate, and you couldn’t find a husband for that.

The leader turned to look at me, grinned, and shook his head. “We each get a money prize for finding a new witch.”

Be as must be. If I couldn’t save myself, I could save the village, or what was left of it. “Fine. I’ll go with you, but only if you tell these brutes that they have to stop all rape and pillage this instant.”

The big guy laughed at me, pointing out that I knew nothing of being a witch and so could not control my power.

“Sure, now,” I said, “but someday I will know enough to make a man’s seed dry up in his berries and his urine burn with such fire he will want to cut it off. Any enemy of mine today will be my enemy on that day as well.” And I smiled right back at him.

He did that squinting thing that men do when women confuse them. Then with a growl, he turned and pulled some greasy-haired teenager off of Clava, escorted me out of the house, and tromped through the village toward the ship.

Pimply Rovel, who had tormented me all my life for no reason I can think of other than he was just cruel, called me a

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name and spit as we left town. I turned to fearless leader and said, "Him you can kill," to which he smiled and did.

At this point I figured it was a good thing I'd be leaving since a few of his relatives might somehow blame me for Rovel's demise. He was an ambitious bully, and he was bound to hurt a lot of people on his way to becoming the most depraved headman in the town's history if he'd only lived that long. So I saved the whole town from that, not that they'd thank me or ever welcome me back.

See what I meant about my luck?

The boat had rope ladders hanging down from the side that I was expected to climb to get on board. In a dress. Another reason added to my dislike of dresses. They interfered with running away from bullies like the aforementioned and now departed Rovel. They also let cold air blow up underneath in winter, making a private torture where the sun never shone. And hems would get all soggy and heavy in wet weather because skirts won't roll up from the bottom like a pair of pants. And if you rolled them from the top, your legs poked out, and you got called ugly names, even if you were only seven and didn't know what those words meant.

I turned to the leader and said, "You start up the ladder before I finish climbing so you can look up my skirt, and I will pee all over your head. Do I make myself clear?"

He gave me what I guessed was his idea of a sexy leer and said, "Are you trying to make me want to mate with you?"

Men. "No, I'm trying to keep you from going permanently bald and beardless from witch piss."

He half-laughed like he didn't believe me, but his hand went to his beard, which showed he had doubts. I faced the rope ladder and realized I still had the bloody boning knife in my hand. I had been gripping it so hard my hand felt frozen in that position, clearly some kind of traumatic attachment due

to the minor fact that I had just killed a man. I took a deep breath, figuring in for a drop, in for a bottle. I bit the knife between my teeth, grabbed the rungs, and climbed. Hairy leader held the bottom of the ladder steady and didn't look up. Victory to the witch girl.

When I reached the top, I returned the knife to its now permanent home in my right hand and wiped my mouth with my left. My hand came away with a bloody smear. I considered being sick. Then I noticed the way the men all backed away from me, and I figured I could not afford the luxury.

I was shown a tiny room the size of a sideboard table, with some furs on the floor. My cabin. I was locked in while the men hollered and the ship clanked and creaked. A few minutes later I felt the sway of open water. For some reason, this made me happy.

I was miserable in my village. The future with these barbarians looked like a whole other kind of miserable, but it was a change. And change, once it starts happening, could mean anything. I was never brave enough to have picked up and taken my chances somewhere new. Chance picked me up instead, and once I was out and afloat on this journey, I felt free, really free for the first time in my life. Of course, I was locked in a tiny room on a smelly ship full of men who barely spoke my language and whose own language I couldn't begin to understand. These were details. I was floating away from the past and the future written by that past. Even if this future was terrible, too, it would at least be different.

A couple of hours or so later, I was awakened by somebody opening the cabin door. "You can't just walk in here. This is my room," I said as I opened my eyes.

The leader, who the crew called Volzh, stood there smiling condescendingly. Lying down makes it hard to put smug in its place, so I stood up. The ship was really rolling, and I had to bend my knees to keep from falling over. I noticed that just

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because the floor tilts sideways, up and down didn't change, so I got the hang of it pretty fast.

Volzh had a bowl in his hand. "Is that for me? I appreciate your bringing me food, but you have to knock first, or I might get the wrong idea." I gestured with the knife that had blessedly never left my hand. He looked disappointed and just stood there like he was waiting for something. "Food?" I reminded him, pointing. "Give it to me. I'm ravenous."

It turned out I was the first kidnapped witch who did not get seasick. Volzh thought this was an omen. All it meant to me was that henceforth I didn't get clear broth brought to my cupboard-sized cabin, but had to sit in the reeking mess with the rest of the crew if I wanted to eat. Which was bad enough; but then I got the grandmother of all itches right where a girl should never scratch in a room full of marauding pirates.

I reached for the bread knife, but Volzh grabbed my hand saying one knife was plenty for me and that I shouldn't go around collecting them. I explained that my knife was too pointy for where I had to scratch. His eyes got narrow again.

"You have need to scratch?"

"When I have an itch, I have need to scratch just like anybody else. You got a problem with that?"

"You had an itch right before our attack, yes?"

"Yes, that's why the knife was handy."

"Is this itch in the same place?"

"No"

"Where is it?"

"It is in none-of-your-business land."

He roared. "The witch has an itch! From below it comes. Prepare for a kraken!"

The men leapt, I mean literally leapt, from their seats. Some landed on the table. One guy put his foot on the roast and took a fall that would crack a man's head open if it wasn't

made of solid rock. Fortunately for this guy, rock was all he had upstairs. He shook it off and headed topside.

Volzh grabbed my arm and dragged me after them. “You will tell me if the itch gets worse or better.”

“It’s going to get better because I’m going to scratch it,” I said, grabbing the bread knife. Come to think of it, I wondered, why did these barbarians have something as civilized as a bread knife? You’d think they’d just be tearing off hunks instead of being all fancy with the slicing. A puzzle to work out later, because in the present, Volzh grabbed the knife. “No scratching. You must keep us alive.”

“If don’t get to scratch at least a little bit, I will prefer death to the agony. Give me that knife, or I’m going to take my chances with the kraken.”

He handed it over. “Just a little scratching. The only way to survive is if we can light the sea with fire at the right moment.”

I gave myself a few good pokes down and behind my butt and felt almost human again. We hurried up on deck where the men were hanging funny-shaped barrels with long spouts over the railings.

“The only thing that will stop the kraken is fire, but fire will also destroy the ship if it spills. We must light the surface but not the sides of the ship.”

My itch had not come back, and I was thinking everybody had overreacted. I started to say so. “You know that itching. It’s pretty much...aagh!” Forget ladylike. I bent over and reached under my skirt without caring who saw how much. Actually, nobody was looking at my legs and whatever, because the minute I hollered and hiked up my skirts, Volzh gave the signal.

“Dump the barrels now! Fire ready!”

I was perfectly happy for about two seconds, poking the itch with the bread knife. My other hand was still in possession of the boning knife, but scratching underneath with a thing that pointy on the rolling seas was not a wise choice.

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And then this giant tentacle almost knocked me over, slapping its slimy self right in front of me.

The tentacle flexed, suckers grabbing the deck. Instinctively, I did what any cook knows to do with squid; you skin it. I stabbed the boning knife to hold it in place and slipped the bread knife in sideways. Now, normally I would not use a serrated knife for this because the teeth ruin the flesh cutting through, but I worked with what I had. I couldn't expect to skin the whole twenty-foot appendage, of course, so I was pleased when the tentacle pulled away and did my work for me.

Not that I could take credit for getting the monster to retreat. That prize went to the men who poured and lit the oil on the water so that it flamed up with a big whoosh. Suddenly, all the tentacles vanished. Mine was the only one dripping ooze and flapping loose skin, though, a fact not lost on our illustrious and odorous leader. He came over, put a meaty paw on my shoulder, and said, "Never again will I question you when you ask for a knife. I will say 'take it, take them all,' for you are a blade in your mind, and all knives will serve you."

So now I had a fan. If you're starting a cult, it helps to have at least one follower. Volzh was my first.

Nobody took the bread knife away from me. I was starting a collection.

The weather turned really bad, and I went below feeling exhausted for no good reason. I fell asleep the minute I was horizontal. I had weird dreams about monsters with tentacles whirling in the deep water around us and monsters with wings spinning in the skies above us. I told them to swoop and dive all they wanted but to leave me alone as I bobbed on a thin layer right in the middle of stormy seas and clouds.

Knocking at the door pulled me out of dreamland. My whole body felt as heavy and inert as a lump of mud, but I managed to hack up some phlegm and call out, "Come in!" Volzh entered, proving that even pirates can learn manners.

He was holding a large tankard, and I thought he was going to invite me to a party to celebrate surviving a kraken.

“You need to drink this, Knife Witch.” He bent over and placed the tankard in my hands.

It was filled with dark green sludge and smelled awful. I pulled my head back, trying to get my nose far away from it, banging my head on the wall behind me. “This is disgusting. Are you trying to make me throw up so you can retrieve some of your manly superiority? I’m not drinking this.” I put it down on the deck and moved to stand, but went kind of woozy, so I just sat up straighter. I noticed I was stiff and achy.

Volzh picked the cup up and held it out again. “You sleep for two days. This is witch power sickness. I don’t think you use so much before. But the kraken did not come back for us, and no Sirens who follow the kraken came from the sky. It means you sent them away, which is great power. I fail to protect my ship witch, my crew will throw me into sea and pick new leader.”

“Then why are you trying to poison me with that?” No way I was taking the tankard from him again. My hands were tucked under my arms, knives ready.

“This drink for witches. It will fix you. You are weak and you hurt all over, yes?”

I did, but didn’t say so. He could tell anyway, apparently. “Smell is bad, but taste is good to witches.”

“Have you tried it?”

“Only witches drink. Try.”

I figured it couldn’t be any worse than the oil Sharma made all of us swallow the first day of winter frost and once a week after until the second thaw. I accepted the cup and, trying not to breathe, scrunched my eyes and took a sip. Surprise of surprises, it did not taste like the underside of a corpse’s armpit. It was nutty and sweet and salty all at once. I drank deeply and

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my whole body sighed with pleasure. Volzh was nodding. I decided to give him this one. "Thank you. I guess I needed that."

I stretched and practically heard the kinks unclenching. "I slept for two days?" It dawned on me that the seas were much calmer and the air wasn't crackling with storm energy. "I feel the need to move around a bit. But first, I need to pee."

We headed to the closets at the back of the ship that had holes leading down to the water. I did my business thinking how dainty of pirates to have private rooms for such things.

Up on deck, the air tasted almost as good as food. The sight of land on the horizon surprised me. "I thought we were way out in the middle of the sea."

"We have crossed the inner sea. We stop in villages as we go north to the open water and home."

"Stop? You mean attack, rape, and pillage."

"Not unless necessary. These towns know if they give to us food and women, we will not burn their homes and kill all their men."

I caught that "all" business. "Only some of the men?"

"There are always some who think they can fight." He shrugged as if that was inconsequential.

My head dropped to my chest, and I covered my eyes. I wanted no part of this.

He misinterpreted. "I know. They are stupid. We help the town by getting rid of the unfit. Like that one in your own village. You understand."

Well, what could I say? I did get Rovel killed. He did spit on me and tormented me most of my life. Was that enough to kill him over? Okay, yes. But I knew him and what a pustule he was. I sighed. Either I was in the pillage business, or I should jump over the side of the boat and drown. Not the best set of choices. I decided not to drown, for the time being. I'd wait to see how the "stop" went.

Still, the thought of drowning made me think of water, which made me think of washing, something my bloody, salt-crusted clothes and skin would really appreciate. “Do your people ever wash?”

He looked offended. “It is your people who do not wash. At home we bathe every day.”

“But, you all stink!”

He smiled. “On ship, water is for cooking. We not wash until home.”

Every day? I was not buying that one. A weekly bath in summer and a monthly bath in winter was all anybody needed. However, the blood and guts all over me from, you know, had me itchy in an entirely different way. “I am not waiting for your big homecoming to wash!”

“Knife Witch, we will share our last drop of sweet water with you if you wish it. The rain barrels are full. I will have Cook bring some to your cabin for you. Do you want it warm?”

I had never washed in warm water, though I did like the way summer baths are not so cold. “Thank you.” I turned and went below thinking about the crazy idea that these barbarians washed more than we did. Unreal.

The cook showed up with a steaming bucket of water, a large bowl, and a sponge. He was a sleepytime story pirate, with one eye sewed shut, only a thumb and two fingers on his left hand, and a wooden left foot. He was also approachable in a way the others were not. Or maybe it was just that the cooking made me feel kinship. Either way, I liked him.

“Thanks, Cook. And bless you for bringing the sponge.” I gestured because I was not sure he could understand my words. He understood the meaning, though. He nodded, and said what I guess was “you’re welcome” but sounded like “I’m so good.”

A half-hour later I had scrubbed myself raw. I decided to go all in and wash my clothes as well, putting them back on

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wet and letting the sun up on deck take care of the rest. Pretty soon I was dripping but clean skin to skirt. I grabbed the bucket, bowl, and sponge and returned them to the mess before heading topside. When the cook said what I assumed was thanks, I waved and called, "I'm so good" to him, which caused him and his helper in the kitchen to roar with laughter. And I do mean roar. These Wildmen would throw back their heads and pour sound out of their guts like bears. Honestly.

The brightness up on deck made my eyes water as I looked out over the open sea. Tears for the Goddess, we called them at home, offering water to the earth when the sun was cruel. The Goddess was not out here on the water, at least not the Goddess of my past. I imagined a different Goddess for the sea, with a gleaming silver back, whose life teemed inside her belly instead of poking out of her skin. Bright sun on the waves left dark cuts of shadow, as if a sharp knife sliced the silver surface a hundred thousand times. So perhaps the Goddess of the sea was like the earth's, powerful but everywhere torn open so that plants can grow or waves can dance.

I remembered the dark kitchen and muddy yard where I spent my days at home, and felt the blind eye of Luck on me. I had done nothing to deserve this. Nor would the people in the towns deserve getting attacked by these hairy, scary men with no pity.

Neither, I supposed, did the ones among the Wildmen who would die fighting or who would get rich with plunder on this journey. The difference was these men were aware they could die, while the people in towns like mine weren't. We hid from knowing how death hung on our every breath. As for me, since I wrote in death's ledger with the blood of my attacker, I had lived aware of its closeness. I would do my best to keep living without forgetting that every choice I made was taken with death looking over my shoulder. I would never hide from it again.

We neared the shore, and I could hear a gong banging and voices calling out, loud with panic. I did not go below to pretend it was not happening. I didn't want to be without pity, but I wouldn't hide from seeing what it meant to be a witch of the Wildmen.

The world was too big for me to change all by myself, and even if I could, what change would be right? I could save a man unaware that he was this town's Rovel. In the past, any time I tried to make things better, I messed up. I learned not to bother.

Unless I got angry. Then I had zero self-control. Going ashore was probably a terrible idea. I might do something stupid from which I could die. Okay, but at least I had sailed the ocean and fought a kraken and learned I was an honest-to-goddess witch before I died. Be as must be.

When Volzh saw me ready to accompany him to the town, he glowered. "You are the first new witch we have taken who does not try to hide when we go ashore. This is not normal. Witches, even after coming to full power among the People, do not like to help us."

"I do not like to help you, but I cannot pretend that this is not happening, that I do not have a role to play, even if I have no idea what it is. Deal with it. And, get this through your thick, barbarian head," I said, poking him with the tip of my boning knife to make the point, "I am not nor will I ever be 'normal.'"

I noticed that his squint now included a tic in his jaw. "What are you thinking, Volzh? Out with it."

"I am trying to decide if you will become too powerful once you have learned the secret ways of witches and I should just kill you now."

"Fine. Kill me. At least I won't have to go ashore and watch helplessly while you act like beasts among good people." I turned away from him and pretended to look at the approaching shore. It was one thing to decide you will live without fear of dying; it

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was another to actually act like it was true. My pounding heart said I was a fake, but my face gave nothing away.

Volzh sighed. “The men will not like losing the protection of a witch now that they have it.”

“How am I supposed to protect you when I don’t know how to use this power you claim I have?”

“Your power will tell you if there is danger. If you itch, you speak and we will act.”

“Are witches always itchy?”

“No. One sneezes. Another gets hiccups. Another kisses the nearest man or woman madly.”

He was trying to look innocent and failing. “Really? Funny, my knife hand is itching.”

He straightened, suddenly serious. “Really?”

“I think my knife wants to kiss you.”

He grunted an almost-laugh. “Maybe I am just hoping that one day we will find such a witch.”

I patted his arm kindly, “And maybe one day my knife will stab you in the neck. We all have our dreams.”

The village sat on a bluff above the beach. A few small fishing boats bobbed in shallow water. The Wildmen had been working the oars to slow our ride onto the beach, and we softly smooshed into the outer sandbar. Men leapt into the shallow water, roaring. Forty voices doing that raised the hairs on my arms. Volzh tugged at me, and I jumped out beside him into the shallows. Wading through the water toward the shore was hard going in a skirt. I wondered if witches could dress any way they wanted.

The sand sucked and swirled, grabbing my feet with each step, I imagined it doing the same to the ship. “Are you sure we won’t be stuck here?”

“Tide is rising. In an hour, we will be free.”

I figured they knew their business. I saw fighting on the steps cut into the bluff up ahead. One of the crew was knocked down and tumbled down the rocks to the base of the bluff.

Volzh grabbed me. "Did you itch and not tell me, witch?"

I noticed over his shoulder that the man had gotten up and was wobbly but walking. "Warn what? He landed on his head." And I pointed.

Volzh's answering growl was almost conciliatory. We slogged up the steps and found the townspeople standing around grumbling but no longer fighting. Volzh pushed forward and screamed at them with all the menace of a kraken. "You, you, and you." He pointed at random, then turned to his men. "Throw them off the cliff."

A wail went up, but he acted like he didn't hear it. An old woman stepped forward and grabbed Volzh's arm. "Take me instead of my daughter. She is with child. I will die for what was done."

He nodded, and the girl, who was probably only a couple of years older than me, ran to cling to her mother. The mother patted her arm and then shrugged her off, walking proudly to the edge of the bluff. As one of the men moved to toss her off, she leapt. The girl wailed and fell to the ground. Others helped her up.

"The debt is paid for attacking my men. Will you pay the bounty for the peace?"

"What choice do we have?" another woman asked bitterly.

"You fight, maybe kill some of us. You die with honor. Or you submit, and you live."

A small boy stepped forward. "I will die."

Oh no. I didn't wait to see what Volzh would do. "Of course you will die, little man. We all die. What would you save with your death?"

"My goat. I don't want you to take my goat. She is my only friend. I would rather die."

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“Does your goat have milk?”

He rolled his eyes. “Of course. And it’s good milk.”

“Promise a glass of milk today and a wheel of cheese every time we return. In exchange, you may keep your goat and live. How does that sound?”

“You won’t take her?”

“Not if you share her milk and cheese.”

“Wait there. I’ll be back.” And he raced off to, I guess, milk the goat. The crew all looked at me. I scratched my butt, even though I didn’t itch. It was not a lie, but a statement. Volzh snorted and turned back to the woman.

“What will it be, woman of Disgas?”

She bowed her head. “We will bring you what is promised.”

“While we wait, you will bring us food and drink.”

I was confused by how rebellious these people acted. My own town wept and cowered. Nobody fought back. Nobody tried to negotiate. In a strange way, the choice, even choosing to submit to the Wildmen’s demands, let them act more confident.

We “stopped” at three more villages as we made our way north toward the open ocean. Each gave us dried fish. Some had grain, some tubers, some even fruit. All had craft work they added to the pile of plunder. Twice Volzh examined the booty and found it lacking. He burned a few buildings, took some livestock, and generally made it worse for them to refuse or skimp. I didn’t see why the people in these towns should work hard and then hand over what they earned, but keeping it for themselves was never one of the choices. To effectively resist, they would have to train fighters and support them with food and goods while they trained, so maybe in the end the cost would be the same.

At the last village, I got all itchy in my nose. Usually my itches were in hard-to-scratch places. This one I almost missed

because my hand could just lift and scratch it. Volzh saw, though, and batted my arm away.

“No scratching. Follow it.”

“Itches don’t point,” I scoffed with a shake of my head, and surprise! When I shook to the left, the itch went away, and when I shook to the right, it got itchier. I moved in that direction, and the irritating tingle spread to my teeth and tongue. Witchery was weird.

Soon I was standing outside a paddock with some goats and a dog house. I was thinking we were supposed to take the goats...but no. The itching faded after I passed the dog house. I turned back, and the itch returned. Were we supposed to take the dog?

I went over to get the dog, but couldn’t. The chain went inside, but the doghouse was completely boarded up on all four sides. That was creepy. I pointed and Volzh pulled the boards off releasing a smell so bad it made the Wildmen seem sweet as roses. I tugged on the chain but nothing moved. Then I heard a whimper and a weak scrabbling. I knew better than to reach for a strange dog, even a weak one, so I slowly pulled the chain and dragged it out.

The dog’s body was coated with offal. One eye had swollen shut. The chain was cutting into its neck, and the paws were raw and caked with blood. The boards had scratch and teeth marks on the inside, so I could guess how desperate the dog had been.

A girl, maybe ten years old, came running and crying, “Raider!” I thought she was attacking Volzh, but she ran past him and threw herself on the dog. Raider, the dog, tried to stand and managed to achieve a wobbly half-crouch, half-lean. He put himself between the girl and the rest of us as if he had the strength to protect her. As if he needed to.

“What is going on here,” I asked. “Why was he closed in?”

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“They do it to punish me. I don’t care what they do to me, so they punish Raider.”

“What do they punish you for?”

“I keep fighting my new brother. He wants to make babies on me, and I won’t let him. They say I lie and punish Raider until I apologize. They decided to marry me away to an old man in another town. I said ‘yes’ because I would do anything to get away. But I heard he was already married. My parents want me to make babies with the man anyway, without marriage, because he is rich. They locked Raider up and said he will die if I don’t make babies with him.”

“What are you called?” I asked.

“My name is Wisma, but they call me Wakma.”

“Which do you prefer?”

“Wisma means obedient. Wakma means devil woman. I don’t like either one, so I don’t care.”

“Where I come from, we have a word for a person who is good with animals. That person is a marhai. Would you like to be called that, maybe?”

“Marhai. Yes, you can call me Marhai.”

“Well, Marhai, do you want to come with us on the boat? To leave here forever?”

“I can’t leave Raider!”

“Raider can come too.”

“Do I have to make babies with anyone?”

“Not unless you want to. But you will have to obey me in all other things.”

Volzh cleared his throat. “Knife Witch. We cannot...”

“Itch.” I said, pointing to my nose. He nodded.

“Well, Marhai? What do you choose?”

“I will go with you.”

“And...”

“I will obey you in all other things. But not making babies.”

“Good. Now, we need a blanket to carry Raider with. Can you get one from the house?”

“I’m not allowed...”

“You can take anything from the house you want. You are one of the Wildmen now. Go and bring a blanket and anything else you need.”

She raced off. Raider tried to follow, but I spoke quietly to him until she returned. She held out a beautiful quilt that would probably be ruined, but I didn’t care if she didn’t. We wrapped Raider in it, and Volzh carried him back toward the center of the village.

The only other thing Marhai carried out of the house was a ceramic bowl. “Why the bowl?” I asked.

“It was made by my first mother. She made many beautiful things, but she died when she was having another baby. I was only four. My new parents took me in, but they never let me touch any of her things. When I did, they beat Raider.”

So now I was thinking Volzh should torch the town. Or at least the step parents’ house. See how quickly I became cruel.

When we got back to the center of the village, the goods were piled up, and Volzh, still carrying the dog, walked over to inspect them. A woman cried out, “My marriage bedding! You wrapped that filthy dog in my bedding. Get it off him and give it back!”

She leapt toward Volzh, reaching for the quilt, and he backhanded her without a glance. The town was galvanized by her scream, and I got an itchy-all-over feeling that mob madness was coming.

I pull my knife out, pointed it at Marhai, and said, “Who is this girl’s brother?” Not what they expected. Confusion broke the ugly moment. “Where is the brother? The one who wants to make babies on girls too young to have them.”

“What do you want with him?” asked a man holding Marhai’s no-longer-screaming “new” mother.

Knife Witch

“I am the Wildmen’s Knife Witch. Where I come from, we have a way of dealing with such things.”

“The girl’s a liar. My boy is good. We are all good people, but that one is a monster. Take her. Take my marriage quilt. But leave my boy alone, you witch.”

“I’d have an easier time believing you if I hadn’t found the dog boarded up without food or water or room to piss and shit.” I saw a teenage boy cowering behind the man and woman. I signaled to one of the crew. “Take the boy and board him up in the dog house back there. It is better than he deserves, but perhaps it will teach him what bad treatment feels and smells like. His people can release him after we leave. Maybe he will learn something.”

Volzh, who had been calmly inspecting the tribute pile, muttered, “Not a chance.”

I privately agreed, but I was not prepared to kill the boy. I saw that the tribute was going to be acceptable, so I spoke up before Volzh could say so. “There is something else you must pay, for indignities to my apprentice.”

The town gave a collective gasp as they realized I meant Marhai. “Each household will contribute one piece of pottery made by her first mother.”

“But those pieces are rare, and we cannot replace them.”

“And you denied the child any of it. Now your greed is repaid.” I turned to Marhai. “Let’s go. We will collect the ware while the men load the ship.” I took her hand, and we walked past the crowd.

“Witch!” someone spit out.

I smiled and looked at them. “‘Knife Witch,’ because all blades answer to me.”

By the time we finished, the ship was loaded and the tide rising. I had added two excellent knives to my collection and was wearing them tucked in my hair. I worked out how to twist them in with the blades poking out so they stayed put,

didn't just slice through and give me a haircut. Or maybe it was magic.

Marhai struggled beside me under a load of dishes, bowls, and cups, with a ewer looped around each arm. We proceeded with dignity to the shore where the crew helped us out to the ship. There, Raider was waiting for Marhai, and a new home was waiting for me.