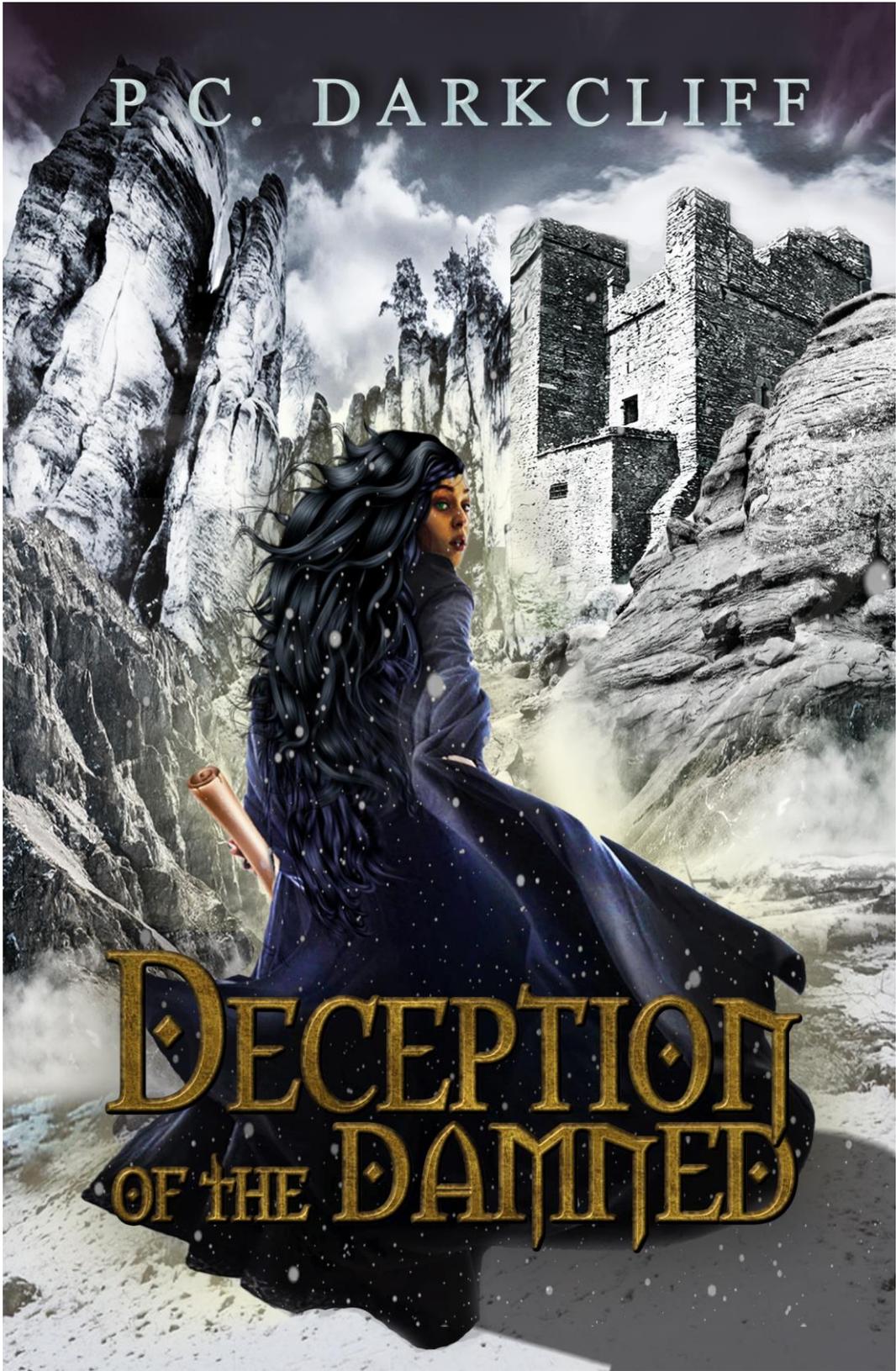


P. C. DARKCLIFF

DECEPTION
OF THE DAMNED



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To Rosa, my best friend and soulmate.

To my family.

PROLOGUE

A pair of yellow eyes watched Jasmin ascend the turret of a ruined castle. Although she was only four, she rushed up the spiral staircase so fast she beat her parents to the top.

“I can’t see, Daddy,” she said, pointing to a high arrow slit.

Father lifted her to peer outside at the masses of trees and sandstone rocks. “This is where your Czech grandma grew up before she moved to Alaska,” he said. They were sixty miles northeast of Prague, in the heart of the Bohemian Paradise.

“Beautiful!” Jasmin exclaimed, her large, fern-green eyes glowing like the sunlit trees. She’d inherited those eyes from her grandmother while she had Mother’s mane of glossy black hair. “And Grandma lived here? In this castle?”

Father chuckled and put her down. “No, treasure. She lived at Great-Grandpa’s, in the little cottage we’re staying at.”

“But Great-Grandpa said Grandma was a queen.”

“I’m sure he didn’t say she was a queen, treasure,” Father said with a smile. “But there *is* a legend that your great-great-great-great . . .” He repeated “great” over and over until Jasmin squealed with laughter. “. . . great-grandmother was beautiful enough to catch the eye of a king called Rudolph. And guess what? They had a baby!”

“And the baby was a princess?”

Father scratched the back of his head. “It’s more complicated, treasure. They say the mother was a witch and—”

“Witch?” Jasmin’s eyes flew wide open. “Witches are ugly!”

“That’s enough stories for today,” Mother said with a nervous smile. “Let’s go back to Great-Grandpa’s. We can have ice cream in town.”

As they descended to the bailey, Jasmin skipped a few steps ahead, hoping to find an ice cream parlor among the crumbling keep and palaces. A storm cloud floated over the curtain wall. It strangled the sunshine and cast the bailey into twilight. Jasmin gasped when she saw a man emerging from the shadows of a vault.

The stranger halted on the vault’s top step and looked at her. He had long, tangled hair and a wild beard, just like the man she’d seen pushing a shopping cart in downtown Juneau. But his clothes were filthier and more tattered.

Jasmin froze. She’d feared the man in Juneau, who often screamed and flailed his hands. Although he was calm, this man scared her more—because she saw through him as if he were made of mist.

When he noticed her staring, the man fell to his knees. “You can see me, little girl?” He spoke the same language as her great-grandpa. Although his tone was gentle, his voice was hoarse as if he’d also been screaming.

Tears of dread stood in Jasmin’s eyes, like dew on spring ferns. She blinked them away and looked at her parents, who had halted to read the castle’s brochure. A group of tourists passed by, laughing and chatting as if nothing strange was happening.

“Don’t be afraid of me,” the man pleaded. “I’m a friend. A friend! I’ve been waiting four hundred years for someone to see me! Please, don’t run from me. What’s your name? I’m Hrot. Don’t cry, please!”

A bee buzzed around Jasmin's head but she didn't notice it. Numb with terror, she burst into tears.

"What is it, treasure?" Mother bent over her. "Did the bee sting you?"

She scanned Jasmin's skin for a sting mark while Father swatted at the bee with the brochure. The stranger scrambled to his feet. He begged Jasmin to calm down, but that scared her even more. Why wouldn't her parents see and hear the man standing in front of them?

"I found no sting anywhere," Mother announced.

"Maybe something spooked her," said Father. "You know how strong her imagination is. She might think there's a boogeyman down in the vault."

"Or your family witch," Mother said with a reproof. "I think we should go. It will rain, anyway."

Father took Jasmin in his arms and turned toward the exit. Hrot howled in despair. Peeking over her father's shoulder, Jasmin bawled harder when she saw him follow them across the bailey.

As he halted by the gate, Hrot also wept. Through his tears, he watched them cross the stone bridge over the moat and disappear behind a clump of spruces. Jasmin would forget she'd ever set foot in the Ruins, but Hrot would always remember her.

The yellow eyes narrowed in a grin. In about two decades, Hrot and Jasmin would meet again. This promised to be interesting.

PART ONE

HROT

CHAPTER ONE

On the first day of his doom, Hrot stirred long before dawn, as if he couldn't wait to plunge into the horrors that were awaiting him. Physically, he was ten years younger than he would be when he scared little Jasmin—and centuries less haunted.

That morning, he didn't wake up to the smoky stench of his hovel or to the snoring of his parents and siblings. Only a fresh breeze tickled his nose and whispered in his ears. Instead of a straw mattress poking at his back, he felt cold water rushing around his ankles.

Hrot opened his eyes with a gasp as if not just his feet but also his head had been submerged. He stared dumbly at the wide river into whose shallows he'd waded.

The light of the strong summer moon made the river look like a long, silvery tongue. The old willows that grew along the bank stretched their branches toward him as if they wanted to grab him by the hair. Their shadows fluttered wildly on the purring water. The grunting and squealing of wild boars rolled from the black woods.

Hrot knew this place well, as the river constituted the northern boundary of his tribe's hunting territory. He could even make out the outline of the fisherman's path winding through the woods toward his village. But how did he get here? The last thing he remembered was falling asleep under the thatched roof of his home. He had never sleepwalked before in the twenty or so years of his life. It was all so confusing.

The river ran deep and fierce midstream. Hrot shuddered when he realized he might have drowned if he'd waded in deeper. He scrambled out and walked along the grassy bank toward the path. His head buzzed, and nausea skulked up toward his throat. His skin stung and itched from mosquito bites. When he cut his big toe on a sharp stone, he realized he was barefoot.

Clouds floated in and robbed the moon of its light. Hrot had seldom heard wild boars before. But now they had gone mad.

A pair of eyes flared in the dark. Hrot staggered when he recalled the tales of ghouls and spirits dwelling in the woods behind the river. The moon struggled out to show him that the eyes belonged to a person.

Just before another cloud plunged the world into blackness, Hrot noticed the stranger had a slender figure and a pale, gentle face. Hrot would have taken it for a woman's if it wasn't for a neatly trimmed mustache framing the upper lip. The man looked nothing like the scruffy and filthy nomadic merchants. And nobody else had ever ventured into the territory of Hrot's tribe.

"Who are you?" Hrot called into the dark. "Did you get lost?"

The stranger didn't answer, but grass rustled under his feet. Those eyes got closer. They shone like the eyes of a nocturnal beast. A hysterical voice in the recess of his mind shouted at Hrot to turn around and run. But the glowing pupils mesmerized him and made him step forward.

A bolt of lightning kindled the sky and flashed a bright light on the stranger. The man was smiling benevolently under that mustache. But his shadow made Hrot scream in fright.

It was only a moment, but Hrot knew he would never forget the horror he'd seen in the glare of the lightning: the slender figure had cast a massive shadow of an antlered

monster with talons instead of hands and with tentacles growing from his back. The shadow had rolled over the river, making it bubble and steam. The night filled with the stench of rotting fish.

“I’m the Emissary of the Otherworld,” the stranger said into the roar of thunder. “And I’ve brought something for you, Hrot.”

But Hrot wasn’t in the mood for presents. He turned around and ran. Mud sucked on his feet like a giant leech. Branches tried to knock him over, and thorny undergrowth raked his skin and tunic. Staggering through the night like a blind drunkard, he left the path to his village far behind.

The moon came out as he slid on a large, slippery stone and fell face down into the grass. He turned around, half expecting the monster to leap at him and shred him with his claws. Fortunately, the Emissary was nowhere to be seen.

The night plunged into silence: the wild boars were gone. A trout jumped out of the burbling water and plunged again. The breeze occasionally brought a slight howling of the wolves that roamed the sandstone labyrinth in the east. But where was the Emissary?

* * *

Hrot spent the night shivering behind a large boulder. It was only at dawn that he dared venture back to the fisherman’s path.

An eerie stench still lingered at the spot where the shadow had stained the river. Hrot felt safer when he scrambled up the hill and walked toward the pastures. He could already see the palisade that embraced the cluster of wattle and daub hovels of his village. However, his heart came loose and sank with every step he took; it always did when he headed for the gate.

Although he’d spent every day of his life in the village, he’d always felt like an

outcast. He was too different from the two hundred or so tribespeople to ever fit in. While his siblings gawked as Mother made soup, Hrot's head always burst with vague yet clever ideas for ways of putting steam to work; when the whole tribe cowered during thunderstorms, he dreamed of taming and controlling the energy that created the lightning bolts. He was an awkward, absent-minded dreamer with a wild shock of hair and a faraway look in his eyes—and everyone saw him as the village idiot. His mother was the only person who treated him kindly.

Hrot would do anything to leave the village. Unfortunately, as he was too clumsy to kill and skin game, he would starve to death alone in the woods—unless the wolves, enemy tribes, or nomadic cutthroats got him first. The merchants always traveled in big groups for safety. And they never let him come along.

Hrot sighed as he shambled out of the forest and entered the pastures. A few cows stared at him dumbly from a grove of oak trees. A flock of sheep bleated in the hills. White butterflies fluttered around the grass at his feet, and the buzzing of insects filled the warm air. A group of boys passed through the northern gate, carrying birch fishing rods. They gawked at him for a while and then turned around and rushed back, shouting, “He’s coming, he’s coming!”

A sense of foreboding crept up Hrot's spine.

His mother scurried toward him on a pair of crooked legs. A little over forty, she was a shriveled old woman. Her gray hair hung in a greasy braid over her hunched back down to her waist. It swayed like a calf's tail as she ran.

“What have you done, my poor little boy?” she lamented as she gripped his hand and led him toward the palisade. “What have you done?”

Hrot's nocturnal adventure began to take its toll. Claws of pain crushed his skull, and the strengthening sunshine seared through his eyes. The lack of sleep made his head

spin. He felt as if he were sleepwalking again as he followed Mother through the gate and toward their hut, which stood behind the dirt square, tucked in between a forge and a pottery workshop.

The villagers rushed at them from all sides like wasps at a pair of rotting plums: filthy children who clung to their pretty but rough and calloused mothers, and brutish men with waxed mustaches drooping over their long beards. Same as Hrot, most of them had light brown hair, fair eyes, and sunburnt skin. While the children were naked, the adults wore coarse linen tunics.

Everyone laughed when they saw Lesana leading her son, who towered above her by at least two heads and outweighed her at least twice. It looked as if she were dragging along a stocky bull.

Since he was little, Hrot had always tottered as if one of his legs were shorter than the other. Today, his strange, lurching limp was even more pronounced, which made the villagers laugh even more. The crowd got so thick that Lesana and Hrot had to halt in the middle of the dirt square.

“Here you are!” somebody roared over the jeering and murmuring of the throng. Lesana’s older brother Jelen stomped toward them, his wrinkled face swollen with anger. His mean, round eyes bored into Hrot in wrath as he shouted, “Your poor mother has been looking all over for you! You snuck out of the village in the middle of the night like a thief. And you didn’t even close the gate, did you, maggot?”

Too exhausted to respond, Hrot hung his head.

“You didn’t even close the gate,” Jelen repeated. This time, it wasn’t a question. “And you know what happened? Huh? All my mules escaped, all four of them, do you hear?”

“Leave my little boy alone, you fiend!” Lesana snapped, and the whole village

roared with laughter.

“Leave him alone?” Jelen snarled. “He might as well have stolen those damned stupid mules. And stealing from your own clan is the worst of crimes!”

“Is that so?” Hrot finally lifted his head to meet Uncle’s eyes. “What about the damned stupid hare you stole from us this past winter?”

“I thought it was my damned stupid hare!”

“But you took it from *our* hearth!”

“I confused the hearths. It’s much better than confusing the woods with a mattress, dimwit.”

Hrot was about to reply when Lesana uttered a high-pitched shriek. “Stop it, Jelen! Can’t you see how wretched he is? He needs to get some sleep.”

“Sleep?” Jelen shouted. “He needs to get some sleep? What was he doing at night? Everyone has already started working, and your *little boy* is going to bed? Look at him: while other young men are brawny from laboring in forges and logging sites, or wiry from chasing game through the woods, Hrot is pasty and paunchy from doing nothing. He’s so lazy he never even learned to walk properly.”

“And his titties are bigger than his mother’s,” volunteered a young potter.

“But his mustache is much smaller,” someone shouted from the ceremonial hearth, and everyone laughed again.

“That’s right!” Jelen beamed with malicious happiness at the support he was getting. “And he doesn’t even have a beard like a man because he never acts like one!”

People laughed harder when they saw Hrot unconsciously lifting his hand to his chin which was—back then—covered with scattered patches of fluffy light hair that made his lower face look like a dandelion seedhead.

“But I do make myself useful!” Hrot shouted angrily. “It’s true that I am not a

craftsman or a hunter, but I go trapping, and I spend whole days doing odd jobs. I don't know what happened last night. I don't even remember getting up and leaving the village. I must have been walking in my sleep, and when I woke up I was up to my ankles in the river. Can you even imagine the shock? Can you imagine the horrors lurking out there at night?"

He shuddered at the recollection of the stranger and his monstrous shadow. A wave of fear swept over his tongue and made him mute.

"If you sleepwalk, you must be possessed by an evil spirit," Jelen said.

"Oh, leave him alone, you beast!" Lesana retorted. "He could've drowned or been killed by wolves!"

"And good riddance it would have been!" Jelen boomed. "What if the next time he leaves the gate open, a horde of nomads gets in to finish us all off? He shouldn't have come back, am I right?" He turned to the throng.

"How can you speak like this, you monster?" Lesana snapped. "Don't you remember you're Hrot's uncle?" She also looked around, hoping to see everyone as indignant as she was. But the crowd had sided with Jelen.

"There must be evil magic behind his restless night!" an old woman shrieked.

"Let's tie him up every evening, just as we tether the goats," somebody shouted from the back.

"Yes, he's crazy like a goat, anyway," another one added, and everyone laughed.

"Let's expel him!" roared one of the patriarchs, and the crowd cheered.

"You can't expel him, you pack of ghouls," Lesana screeched. "Chieftain? Where's the chieftain? We must wait till he comes back from hunting."

"No need to wait for the chieftain!" Hrot shouted. "I'm leaving. I should have left this hole years ago!"

Forgetting the fact that he wouldn't last more than a few days alone in the woods, he turned toward the gate. Tears of anger blurred his vision, and he bumped into a little girl and sent her sprawling. The girl bawled. A strange hysteria flushed over the crowd. The children tugged at the skirts of his tunic as he tried to elbow his way through, and the adults shoved him around, shouting wildly.

When someone pulled at the string of the pouch that hung from his belt, the string broke and the pouch fell to the ground. Hrot crouched to pick it up. He lifted it so clumsily, however, that the flint and iron rod he always carried inside fell out. And with them, six golden nuggets rolled into the grass.

In the light of the rising sun, the gold shone like hot embers. The throng froze in silence, gawking at the treasure. Only the chieftain had gold, a thin bracelet he'd traded for his finest dagger. Nobody could even imagine how many daggers these nuggets would be worth.

Hrot was even more dumbstruck than the others: he'd never seen this gold before. This had to be the present the stranger had been talking about. But how had it gotten into his pouch?

Hrot had hoped that meeting the Emissary had been nothing but a sleepwalking dream. Nevertheless, these nuggets proved that the eerie encounter had really taken place. So who was this Emissary? How did he know Hrot's name? And why would he give him the gold?

Hrot's first notion was to leave the unclean nuggets in the grass. But when he saw that Jelen was about to leap at them, he scooped them up and pressed them against his chest like a protective father. If he let his own uncle steal from him in front of everyone, his life in the tribe would become even more unbearable. And he'd finally remembered he had no chance to survive on his own outside the palisade.

“Where did you get the gold from?” Jelen asked, but Hrot did not reply.

He smirked when he saw the greed in everyone’s eyes as they gawked at the treasure. Some people even licked their lips, like starving dogs tickled by a whiff of blood. Hrot recalled the diabolical shadow, and he knew he had to get rid of the nuggets fast. If he let Jelen have the largest one, would it be Jelen’s turn to sleepwalk and see monsters?

Hrot looked Jelen deep into his mean, avaricious eyes. “Would one nugget be enough for your damned stupid mules, *Uncle?*”

Jelen did not even blush. “Yes.” He pointed at the biggest piece. “One nugget would do.”

Hrot handed it over with a roguish grin.

* * *

A few weeks later, Hrot left for the woods to inspect his traps. It was the only manly thing he was allowed to do. Masters had chased him out of the forge after he’d accidentally branded another apprentice with sizzling tongs. Much as he tried, clay turned into a crumbling heap whenever he sat at the pottery wheel. He had cut his brother’s finger while sawing, and he had chipped his own shin with an ax, which he always wielded so wildly and clumsily that everyone ran away as soon as he picked it up.

His lurching limp prevented him from walking quietly while hunting. In any case, his aim with a spear or a sling was so dreadful he wouldn’t hit a herd of deer at point-blank range. As he was forbidden to even touch a bow after he’d managed to impale his finger with an arrow, trapping was his only means of providing meat for his clan.

Until his encounter with the Emissary, he’d always inspected his traps on foot,

wearing his old, scrubby linen tunic. Now he did his rounds on the back of a splendid black mare, which went perfectly with his blue silk outfit.

Hrot had bought the horse and the clothes from the chieftain for two nuggets. When the merchants arrived, he exchanged another nugget for salt for the whole village. The second last nugget had rolled to his eldest sister as a wedding gift, which gave his middle sister the idea to look for a husband. No more gold weighed down his pouch once she had found one, and Hrot secretly sighed in relief.

Hrot was rich and respected—and he'd managed to get rid of the accursed gift. He hadn't sleepwalked once, nor had he seen the Emissary.

He smiled happily as he trotted into the valley where he'd laid his traps. His horse was restless, though, because Hrot was a terrible rider. He always hunched his back and leaned on one side or another like a bundle of firewood, which made the mare snort and toss her head.

“Don't worry, my beauty,” Hrot murmured as he patted the mare's neck. “We'll learn to get along.”

He checked all the traps, but they were as clumsy as he was, and all he found was a skinny old badger. Disappointed, Hrot set for home.

The vast forest teemed with life. Four eagles glided on warm currents above their heads. Farther to the east, a few blackbirds pursued a buzzard deep into the realm of sandstone rocks, which spread out toward the river and constituted the northeastern border of the tribe's territory.

Not even the chieftain knew what lay behind the rocks. No other tribes lived within walking distance. Only imps, ghouls, and evil spirits were said to inhabit the river's other bank.

Hrot reached the fields, where hares darted back and forth, making the horse

snort. A pack of deer emerged from the golden wheat and ran across the path, so close by that the mare reared and nearly threw Hrot off. As he approached the village, Hrot saw a group of children playing tag by the southern gate. They halted and turned toward him. Their eyes followed him with admiration.

A deep ditch ran along the southern palisade. Hrot was about to dismount and lead the mare through the ditch when he recalled the other tribesmen jumped over, although their horses weren't half as good as his. That made him decide to jump as well.

"Trot!" he said, but the mare halted and snorted. She obviously admired him much less than the gawking children did. "Trot, my beauty!" She sidestepped and tossed her head as if she were attacked by a swarm of bees. "Don't be afraid."

Unnerved by the kid's open stares, he rammed his heels into the mare's belly. The pain made her yield. Her massive hooves pounded the earth. A swine bellowed a piercing squeal in the woods.

When they were a few paces from the edge of the ditch, Hrot realized it might be too wide. He pulled at the reins just as the mare was about to jump. The mare reared, her hind hooves slipped over the edge, and they went crashing into the ditch.

The impact nearly knocked the soul out of him. He groaned as he struggled to his feet. The children screamed and ran to the village.

Hrot's body was covered with cuts and bruises. Strips of dirty skin hung from his bleeding hands like tattered gloves. His beautiful outfit was a mess of bloodied rags. But that wasn't the worst.

The mare was still sprawling in the ditch, screaming in agony that was dreadful to hear. The humanlike pain and terror in her eyes made Hrot wince. He bent over her and pulled at the halter. "Get up, my beauty. I'm sorry! Get up."

When he finally managed to make her stand, he realized she couldn't put down

her hind right foot. Her three good legs trembled as if she were freezing. The fourth one dangled at a weird angle.

The children were back, followed by a smith who ran in wide strides, wiping his sweaty hands into his apron. Two women rushed out right after him, their hair smelling of the fires they'd been cooking at. The rest of the tribe poured out of the gate a moment later. They lined the ditch, murmuring excitedly as they stared down at Hrot's tattered skin and clothes. A collective gasp ran through the crowd as the mare collapsed.

"What have you done to my horse?" the chieftain roared through his toothless mouth, his bald scalp glowing with fury. Hrot parted his lips to say it was *his* horse, but then he hung his head. "And look at my clothes," the chieftain continued, his hands desperately pulling at the patches of graying hair that still sprouted above his ears. "They're all in rags! Damn you, Hrot! You're such a disgrace! Oh, my poor beautiful mare. Quick, quick! Bring me a knife so I can put her out of her misery!"

Shouts and insults hailed down on Hrot's head from all sides. A few boys leaped back and forth over the ditch as if to show him it wasn't that wide after all. His mother slid down to him, crying and gibbering. He sat down beside the agonizing animal and hung his head.

Only this morning, Hrot had been a silk-clad idol who looked down on the tribespeople from the back of a splendid horse. And one bad jump had made him lose it all. People would soon forget where the salt that glistened on their meat had come from. They were already scowling at him in contempt, and even his two gilded sisters shook their heads at him.

A boy brought a knife. The chieftain jumped into the ditch and cut the mare's throat. Blood gushed out of the artery and drowned every remnant of Hrot's pride and dignity. The spectacle was over, and everyone left. Only Lesana remained, but Hrot sent

her away.

Alone with his shame and misery, and with nothing but the ruined clothes and the cooling carcass to remind him of the good, golden days, Hrot realized he needed more nuggets. The Emissary and his shadow no longer filled him with fear. He didn't care where the Emissary and his strange present had come from. With six more nuggets, Hrot could become the village god again. Or better yet, he could pay the traveling merchants to take him far away from here.

Hrot lifted his head and shouted, "I swear I would sell my soul for more gold!"

As in response, a squeal came from the woods.