

She eyed them coldly. “What are you staring at?”

“Nothing,” the king lied.

“Is it my nose?”

“No,” the queen insisted.

“It’s rather big.”

“We hadn’t noticed.”

“Why not?”

The king and queen hemmed and hawed and stared at their feet.

The Dream Witch enjoyed their discomfort. “And you’re sure of your dream?” she said at last. “Your wish for a child?”

“Yes,” King Augustine replied, his voice as dry as a desert.

The witch scraped the kernels off a dried corn husk with her fingernails. She spat on them, muttered a few strange words, and gave them to the queen. “Grind these into a porridge and eat it on the next full moon.”

“Thank you.” Queen Sophia’s filled with tears of gratitude. “And what would you like for your reward. We’ll give you anything for this kind-

ness. We promise.”

The sorceress smiled. “I shall let you know in good time.”

“Please, tell us now,” the king begged. “We are a small kingdom without power or wealth. We’d hate to disappoint you.”

The Dream Witch waved a bony wrist. “Fear not, your Majesty. I am a simple soul who lives in a humble cottage in the woods. My needs are few. A little keepsake – so small it will fit in my hand – is all I shall require. Now go.”

The king and queen did as they were told, and in due time the queen delivered a baby girl. They named her Olivia.

Olivia was a happy child. All day, she’d lie in her crib and gurgle. So much so that her parents feared she was simple.

The old court wizard, Ephemias, reassured them. “All babies are like that,” she said. “Wait till she’s two.”

On the day of Olivia’s christening, the royal family rode to the cathedral in an open carriage pulled by six white horses. The king’s wig had

rolls of plaited hair that spilled to his waist; his wife's was shaped like a swan. Baby Olivia was no less elegant in a white christening gown with purple piping and lace trim.

The ribbons in her parents' wigs caused the baby to point with delight. It was the first time her parents had seen her do anything besides burping. They prayed it was a sign of things to come.

At the cathedral, Olivia was nestled on a goose down pillow in a gilt pram. Everyone filed past to give her their gifts before the ceremony: Blankets from the weavers, bells from the blacksmiths, slippers from the shoemakers, and a very special present from Ephemelia.

Although the good woman's spells could not be trusted, she still made the best *pysanka* in the kingdom. These hens' eggs, coated in colourful wax with bright squiggles, crosses, circles and lines, were said to provide protection against spirits. Yet only Ephemelia's *pysanka* had the power to confound the Evil Eye.

The wizard placed a dozen of her talismans in

a circle around Olivia's body. "Precious child," she said, "may these protect you. Twelve *pysanka* for the twelve apostles, the twelve tribes, the twelve successors, and the twelve months of the year that roll us to infinity."

She placed a finger in the baby's hand. Olivia gripped it tightly. "See how fiercely she holds it?" Ephemera continued, the wrinkles in her smile more numerous than her years. "She's a fighter. She'll go far."

Suddenly, a bitter wind whipped black clouds across the sky. Thunder rolled -- and the Dream Witch flew down on a giant meat cleaver, her hair as wild as a sea of snakes, her face as grim as a tombstone. Everyone dove for cover as the cleaver landed hard in the cathedral courtyard and sliced through the cobblestones before grinding to a stop near Olivia.

The king and queen stood between the sorceress and their child. Peasants cowered. Little ones hid their faces in their mothers' skirts.

A great owl landed on the witch's shoulder. "I trust we're not too late?"

The bishop held up his silver staff. "It is always too late for you, Dream Witch. Step not on hallowed ground."

The sorceress ignored him. "I'm here to claim my reward from the king and queen."

"No! Depart, Impious One! Begone to your lair in the forest."

The witch pinned him with a glance. "You of all people should know my power, Bishop, you who came to me on the last new moon." She waved her monstrous nose at the crowd. "All of you, you come to the cornfield by my woods to make your dreams come true. You seek a spell to wither a neighbour's crops, or to speak to your dead, or to bring forth a child from a barren womb. Yet you who seek me out by night -- you would deny me in the day?"

King Augustine stepped forward. "No, we're true to our word. We promised you a keepsake, so small it would fit in your hand. What is it you want?"

The witch smiled. "The heart of your little girl."