

Excerpt from "Bearskin"

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Henrick spent an uncomfortable night in a drafty room at the back of the mansion. A silent, bedraggled serving-man gave him a meal of dry bread, questionable meat and weak ale. The man scuttled away as soon as Henrick took the tray. After scarcely sleeping, Henrick didn't linger when Gottilf knocked early in the morning.

"I've found a way to get the sylphyl out of you without killing you and without destroying it," the magician announced, leading Henrick down the hallway. "However it's going to be a tedious process." He opened the door to the workroom.

The first thing that Henrick saw was a giant bearskin stretched out on a rack. The skin side had intricate patterns and arcane symbols painted on it. "I've enchanted this skin to slowly extract the sylphyl and unravel the spells on you, while blocking the magical effects that have been warped. However, to do it without killing you will take a while."

"How long?" asked Henrick.

"Seven years," said Gottilf, examining his fingernails.

"Seven years!"

At his tone, Gottilf took an uneasy step back, saying, "It wouldn't do either of us any good to go faster. It would destroy the sylphyl and it's unlikely you would survive the process - you would go insane or die or maybe both."

Henrick gritted his teeth. The despair he had pushed aside yesterday welled up. But then, what did it matter, as broken as he already was? Seven years had an end - and looking crazy and dangerous wouldn't be new.

"Fine," he said.

"Before you agree, there's more. During those seven years you cannot cut your hair, pare your nails, or even take a bath."

"Seven years without taking a bath? People are scared enough of me already - without looking and smelling like a troll."

"It's what I can offer, my friend," said Gottilf. "Oh and once you do it, you can't change your mind. If you take the skin off too soon, the shock will kill you."

Henrick stared at the skin. "How am I supposed to live for the next seven years?"

"Well," said Gottilf. Henrick had the sense that he had been waiting for the question. "I have another offer for you. If you let me take the opals around your eye out now, while they're still magically charged, I'll give you a generous allowance of gold when you come back each year."

"When I come back?"

"You're going to have to come every year, so I can remove the sylphyl the spells have extracted. People may not like you very much, but I am sure with plenty of gold, they'll tolerate you. If I take the opals out now, it will blind you in your right eye, but perhaps that's not too much to pay not to avoid being a beggar for seven years."

Henrick stared at Gottlif. He shut his right eye. Blind? But then what did it matter really? Better half-blind than broken. "Fine," he said. "Do it."

"Splendid," said Gottlif, rubbing his hands. "Let's get this skin on you, and then I'll take the opals out. You're going to have to strip," he added.

Henrick gave him a sour glance but stripped off his tunic, boots and his breeches. He didn't much care for the greedy look Gottlif gave the swirling patterns of sylphyl across his body.

"Beautiful," murmured the magician.

"Give me the skin," growled Henrick.

Gottlif took the skin off the rack and gave it a shake, muttering a few words. The fur rippled in a disconcerting way, becoming a long, hooded fur coat. He held it up for Henrick to stick his arms into it. The fur rippled again and closed up the front, encasing Henrick.

"I've spelled it so you won't get too hot or too cold," said Gottlif. "Oh, you can put your boots back on if you want. You don't have to have the hood up, though the more you do, the faster the stuff around your eye will be leached off. Here." He fumbled in a chest and tossed a heavy bag of coins at Henrick. "Don't lose it. I can't have you coming back here whining that you were robbed." He looked severe. "I am a busy man." Then he grinned and pointed to the table. "Lie down, so I can get my opals out."