

Grimalkin
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Abstract

This is a work of fiction examining the impact of witch-fears on the lived realities of women in mid-seventeenth-century Germany. It is largely based on the seminal work on demonological witchcraft, Heinrich Kramer's *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), which reflected the principal fears and beliefs surrounding witchcraft, and which dominated much of the next few centuries' discussion on it. Demonological beliefs, the most common school of thought on witchcraft in early modern Germany, were deeply (and often sexually) misogynistic, as well as bloody—writers imagined witches to be infanticidal, cannibalistic, and insatiable.

Previous research has stressed that women were disproportionately both accused and accusers during German witch panics; this project attempts to imagine the experience of the former and the motivations of the latter. It also argues that (while the modern reader knows witches did not and do not exist), due to the widespread belief in witchcraft, the frequency of the trials, and the extent to which it motivated women's and men's actions, the fear of witches constituted a reality of witches.

I am often suspected of wrongdoing, but I am no longer a true sinner, no longer any witch. I am only a little beast, saved by my master, and I mean you no harm.

Yes, I wind between your legs to make you stumble, and tip the bucket to spill the milk, and lay bloodied mice carcasses at your door. But I can only lead you to my master, or lead my master to you, and from there you will make your own choices. I cannot command or compel a woman. I am only a little cat, with black fur and yellow moon eyes. See them shining through the dark?

He carries me on the wings of shadow and on the breath of the wind. We need no sticks, nor goats neither, my master and I.¹ We fly across the freezing ground, over hill and black forest, past the manor of the prince-bishop and to his smallest and remotest village.²

¹ Two ways it was believed witches flew. Lyndal Roper, *Witch Craze* (Yale University Press, 2004), 108.

² In the German context, the worst panics typically occurred in these areas. Roper, *Witch Craze*, 15.

Darkness. The houses are shuttered against the night, keeping the candles and hearths in. There is only a little strip of light left, the sun lingering at the edge of the world. Not even the moon shines for us.

Good luck, my creature, he says.

And then he leaves me to do his work.

The village is ripe with prey for us. The year is ending soon, this year of your Lord 1649. Winter comes—feel that wind sharper than my teeth and claws? See the crops withering in the fields, already half-wrecked by storms? There have been fights already, without any of our stirring, even—the stonemason cheated the baker, who jilted a weaver’s daughter, who often steals apples from the orchardist, whose sins weigh heavy on his heart...³

You are amusing creatures. I’ll grant you that.

—

Juditha the midwife is the first. I am thin and pathetic for her, my fur plastered to my ribs with cold rain. I howl at her door until she opens it and peers down at me.

“What’s the matter with you, then?” she says sternly. Her hair is ash gray, wrinkles growing on her face.

When I meet her eyes and began to purr, she is mine. She takes me by the scruff of my neck and brings me inside, out of the storm. She feeds me bits of fowl from her hand. I purr and purr and purr. I do not bite her yet. We must make friends first.

—

Her son scolds her when he comes by with the allowance later.

“Could be a slave of the Evil One,” he says, aiming a kick at me. I dart out of the way and go to crouch trembling beneath Juditha’s skirts.

³ Mass persecutions often erupted in times of stress as people looked for someone (or something) to blame. Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 285.

“Or perhaps just a stray,” she says. “One of God’s creatures like you and I.”

“You will damn us all.”

“Oh, Hennig,” she says. He wearies her, though she admits it not. “I cannot believe God would condemn me for giving my table scraps to a little cat.” She lays her hand on his cheek, says, “I am no witch. Believe that.”

“I believe it, I believe it. I believe it is true now. But any woman might be led astray.”

She lifts her hand from his face and holds it there, just for a moment. *Strike him, strike him.* She does not. Will not. Lowers her hand. “I will not be.”

He stands, replaces his hat. “And if the bishop believes you have been?”

“It matters not. God is with me. I am with God. What else is there?”

Hennig does not answer. He looks at me, as though he knows I know what else there is, and leaves into the storm. The rain has turned to hail, and I wish him bruises.

—

The storm will go for a long time. They are calling it up at the dance. I do not know their names. None of them are mine. They have come from miles, some of them leaving their body asleep beside husbands,⁴ some flying through the air, the night wind drying the blood smeared over their bodies.⁵

They go, one by one, the witches, to stand under a scarred oak tree and above a bucket of water. I watch. This one is old, older than Juditha, blood around her mouth, the witch-mark visible on her bare chest.⁶ She dips her hand in the bucket, thrusts her finger out. She calls on the

⁴ There were stories of witches appearing to be asleep and at sabbaths at the same time; demonologists concluded that one was an illusion. Roper, *Witch Craze*, 104.

⁵ Witches gained the power of flight by killing unbaptized infants and making ointments out of their bodies. Heinrich Kramer, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. P.G. Maxwell Stuart. (Manchester University Press 2007), 137.

⁶ Relations with Satan left a physical mark on a witch’s body, the discovery of which was proof of a covenant. Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender*, 289.

Evil One, on the evil spirits here gathered. And the hailstones double in size and the wind howls in savage joy, and all of the witches howl with it and my master laughs.⁷

He is atop the gallows, standing, watching, smiling. And they are dancing, dancing, the witches, dancing under the gallows, the circle moving leftward, always leftward, but they do not look at each other for they know they will be caught and it will be bad for them if they betray each other.⁸ The feast is laid out in the center of the circle, near the dancing fire, a crooked table loaded with the dense black bread and the bloodied little hearts.⁹ I leap onto the table, sniff, flinch, tail and whiskers twitching. The hearts have rotted in their bowls as their owners rot in the ground.

My master has seen and he laughs and calls me. I go, slipping among the dancers, bouncing up the gallows steps. I miss the way it used to be between us, when I was the best of his women, but he is kinder to me now than then. He picks me up with his cold hands,¹⁰ strokes me, and sets me on his shoulder where I can see all as he sees it.

He shields me from the hail, says, *Have you got me one, creature?*

The midwife doesn't fear suspicion, thinks the beasts alike to humans. Her son plagues her but she's dependent on him. Still, she loves God, that's clear. Doesn't fear death for love of him.

He twitches at the name, and I fall rather than dig my claws into him. I land on my feet, look up at him.

⁷ Two women (allegedly) confessed to summoning hailstorms this way. Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 173-174.

⁸ The locations of the dances varied from place to place, but were said to be held at the gallows in Obermarchtal. Descriptions of them vary between accounts, but the major divergence is between demonological writings and confessions; they were something like village dances in the latter and something more grotesque in the former. Roper, *Witch Craze*, 109, 113.

⁹ Popular demonology held that children's hearts and black millet bread were served at the dances. Roper, *Witch Craze*, 113, 115.

¹⁰ Many women testified that Satan's body was cold. Peter Morton, ed., *The Bedevilment of Elizabeth Lorentz*, trans. Barbara Dähms (University of Toronto Press, 2018) 36; Roper, *Witch Craze*, 44, 82.

He looks down at me, says, *Eat out of her hand if you like, but find another if she'll not be turned.*

Aye.

Morning after, a weak but persistent sunlight, a pale blue sky. Juditha sleeps later that she usually allows herself, my weight and warmth on her chest keeping her in bed. She wakes only when Hennig comes again, though it is not his usual day.

Juditha weeps to hear the news he comes bearing. The storm was the work of witches, he says. That is the word of the bishop. That is fact.

“Are you afraid now?” he asks her. He is afraid for her, and for himself, too. The child of a witch is not much better than the witch herself, alive but so shamed it hardly matters.¹¹

“No,” she says. “Not for myself. But I have seen this before. I know what comes from it.”

She sinks into her chair, weeping as though some plague besides fear is gnawing at her spirit. Hennig touches her shoulder, knows not what to do.

“God will spare the innocent,” he manages.

“Aye, as His own son was spared?”

“Mother—”

“Son! There will be blood before winter. No words of yours or any man’s—no, nor woman’s...neither can heal that.”

“If they are innocent, they will be spared. Or they will go to heaven.”

“But what a journey.”

¹¹ The children of witches were assumed to have been taught their mother’s abilities; Kramer writes of this specifically in terms of young daughters, though also says that “their whole offspring is tainted”, implying all children of all ages. Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 168.

I've kept a little power, and with it I cause a log in the fire to snap as bones snap, a cloud of sparks dancing out the grate. Mother and son jump, startled, and stare into the hearth, seeing their pyre. Hennig shuffles his feet, is sorry he came.

When he leaves, I pad behind Juditha as she tries to salvage some of the garden. The half-dozen chickens that survived peck at the edges, clucking, and we exchange a look, consider our odds. There's no love between us, and hunger in me, but I've no wish for Juditha to cast me out. Besides, a meaner beast never walked the earth than a common hen, forget six. I tell my master often they'd be fine and eager servants for him, but he says he's enough to contend with.

She chatters to me as she weeds and harvests and replants, for she is a lonely old woman and I have remarkably large ears. And there is much on her soul, much she cannot tell her confessor, for it was no sin by his scales.

She says, "Now, it was many winters ago, I cannot recall exactly how many. I was a young girl, not yet in service. My father, my brothers, my sister, all under the same roof, still. My mother at the hearth. We were happy. Oh, we were happy."

Stops, straightens her back, runs her hand down the aching of it. Looks to the sky, which is gray and heavy, which is dotted by winter birds on their pilgrimages. We listen to their calling, listen to the wind answer them.

She says, "Then it was like this now. The storm rose, the village fell. And the accusations flew. Oh, how they flew. And my mother, she had had a fight with the family beside us for no reason anybody could recall after, and their cow had been killed in the storm. The bishop then, he was a fair-minded man, but he believed all of it. He spoke to me, because it was known that I was my mother's special favorite, and he read to me from a terrible book, things that I know now are false but he convinced me then that it was true. I have never forgotten it."

Her voice and face harden. She stands very tall and I realize suddenly that I am a fool for thinking my master or anyone could sway her. Her voice drops quick into a harshness I've never heard.

“He said women were unfinished animals, always deceiving. Always suspicious, weaker in faith. Never satisfied.”¹² She crouches, scratches under my chin. “Have you ever hunted church mice? Have you heard of Christ in your hunting?”

Mrow.

“Good creature. You see, if God had intended we women to be saved, he would have sent a daughter.”¹³

Then her voice grows thick with tears.

“And he said I was growing fast into a woman and therefore on the same path, but that redemption was offered to all creatures. And so I told the courts that I had seen my mother lay a curse on the cow, and that she had often taken me to the woods and that I knew not what we did there. Perhaps she did curse the cow. She muttered about it often.¹⁴ But I suppose now that she simply liked the woods.”¹⁵

She is weeping steadily now. I can see in her face that she does not wish to weep, but there is nothing else for her to do. She forces a laugh to stop it, scoops me into her arms, and holds my head to her mouth.

“Now,” she says, “now, my grimalkin, if I tell you something dreadful, will you keep it a secret?”

¹² Reasons given as to why women were more likely to become witches. Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 75-76.

¹³ Kramer argued that men did not suffer from women's various weakness (detailed above) because Christ lived and died as a man. Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 77.

¹⁴ One of the many supposed abilities of witches. Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 171.

¹⁵ Witch trials typically ran in generational cycles. In Germany, a woman born in or around 1600 “would have lived her whole life in the shadow of the stake”. Edward Bever, “Witchcraft, Female Aggression, and Power in the Early Modern Community,” *Journal of Social History* 35, no. 4 (2002): 973, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3790618>.

Mrow.

She hisses, “I have prayed every day of my life that Heinrich Kramer is burning in Hell!”

She holds me a moment longer. I feel her heart racing. Then she drops me, and I commence washing the mud from her hands out of my fur.

Juditha will not be turned. She might find herself in trouble, but it will not be on our account.

—

Magdalena the serving-girl is next, and I think will be quicker turned than Juditha.¹⁶

She’s hardly kind, shoos me when I first come crying to the kitchen door, swinging the broom at me.

“We’ve enough lice here in this house,” she says. “Go and beg somewhere else.”

Mrow?

“We’ve enough devils, too. Get away.”

She is nineteen and pretty, resents her master’s wandering eyes and hates his wandering hands. She’d not mind much if it was his heart on the table at the next dance, but a bitter meat it’d be.

Though maybe worse is the way the mistress looks away. She’s often sickly, guiltily grateful for his roaming attentions even as they shame her. I have heard whispers about the village even in my little time here of more than one serving-girl sent away with a handful of ducats and a straining bodice. No, my Magdalena is hardly the first, though my master’ll quickly have her the last.

Mrow, softer and weaker, a slow blink.

¹⁶ Young women and girls were both more likely to confess to witchcraft and less likely to be punished, though old women remained the default suspect. Alison Rowlands, “Witchcraft and Old Women in Early Modern Germany,” *Past & Present*, no. 173 (2001): 53, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3600840>.

She sighs and slams the door in my face.

I leap to the kitchen-window. Her master is a rich man, and glass covers them. I can hear and see all, still. See her working at the hearth, glancing often at the door.

The master comes in soon enough. He's her father's age, at least, though strong and trim as a young man. He plucks a mushroom from the table, eats it raw. A strange taste of his, though I'll not throw stones when I eat raw mice and my master's ladies eat children.

He slips a hand around her waist, presses himself to her. She turns, waves her finger in his face like he's a naughty boy. He laughs and takes her hand, kisses the finger. She says something with a blush—or perhaps just a flush from the fire—and he says something back, flushes himself, retreats from the kitchen.

She brushes her skirts furiously as though it'll stop her feeling his touch. Presses her lips together, looking heavenward. Turns back to her work.

—

Next morning, after hearing of this, my master appears at her door. He forms himself into a handsome young man with gentle eyes, dressed in good white linen, a dagger at his hip.¹⁷ He knocks and enters without waiting for her answer.

I do not like to see this part.

But I know well what they speak of, while they speak. She will know him by a feeling before he introduces himself. She will tell him to leave her be, and he tells me later that she swung the broom at him.

He will tell her of the powers of the witches. How they can bring down the storms, heal the sick and sicken the well. How no one can touch them.

¹⁷ Satan was often said to appear like this. Dähms, *Elizabeth Lorentz*, 13.

She'll not be turned by pity. But rage, helplessness—my master promises balms for those and that will be harder to resist.

—

And indeed, that night I pad through the woods to the dancing circle, and she follows, no trouble keeping up with me even in the dark. She's the youngest there, by many years, and they call her granddaughter, admire her hair, paint her face in blood.

And me, curled in my master's arms, watching from the gallows, I purr and purr and purr.

—

I go back to Juditha the next morning. She gives me bits of meat and drops of cream, tells me of the babies she has seen born. She still aches for the ones who did not live, even if it was years ago. Tells me the village gossip, that somebody stole the roofer's tinware and sausages and he's spitting angry but no one will confess it or return them.¹⁸

I catch a mouse for her, lay it at her feet, and she tells me to eat it outside, if I must.

My tastes have been growing more and more cattish of late, my understanding of man shakier, my memories weaker, save for that of the flames. Perhaps one day, nothing of who I was will remain.

The mouse is delicious.

—

I am allowed in Magdalena's kitchen now, allowed to sleep all the day away on the fire-warmed stones, and lick the meat-drippings off her slender fingers. We are good friends. She calls me sweet, calls me precious, sometimes calls me baby. Her earthly master has removed any

¹⁸ Drama from Brunswick, 1663, that led to a witch trial. Peter Morton, ed., *The Trial of Tempel Anneke: Records of a Witchcraft Trial in Brunswick, Germany, 1663*, trans. Barbara Dähms (Broadview Press, 2006), 6.

wish for a husband, and her devilish one has removed all hope of it. But she'd like a child still, and here I am to play the part. It means treats and entrance, so I'm willing enough.

Snow today. I hear it drubbing on the roof, rustling through what's left of the crops and trees. God's called this up, not us, but snow is snow, cold is cold. Magdalena slips an extra log into the fire, and smiles at me. I wrap around her ankles and she strokes my back and scratches my head with a warm hand.

Mrow.

“Yes, it's cold.”

Mrow?

“No, it won't get warm again until spring. But the mice will be coming in from the cold and there'll be plenty for you to do until then. Plenty for all of us.”

She puts the pot on the fire, busies herself with it. She says, her tone different, “Is it true we must kill an unbaptized baby so as to fly?”¹⁹

Mrow.

“He didn't say so, but I have heard that. I would like to fly, but...”

I rub against her ankle, curl my tail up. She reaches down, gives it a tug.

“I will not do that. Even if he...well, it doesn't matter. I won't do it.”

Mrow.

She will, before long. Our master has ways of wearing you down, little by little, until you know yourself not, and all the better if you are innocent when he takes you.²⁰ He will like to see Magdalena's first blood, after that declaration.

¹⁹ One way witches supposedly gained their power, as detailed previously. Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 137.

²⁰ Kramer wrote that Satan preferred to recruit virgins for witches, as it was a greater fall. Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 123.

Her earthly master comes into the kitchen, and perches himself on the edge of the table, his arms folded over his chest. Eating the mushrooms slowly out of the basket beside him. She gathered them in the early dawn before the snow came and I followed to make sure she didn't try to flee. The snow will have filled the prints we left in the mud by now, buried like the secrets of the dead.

She snatches the basket from him quickly, retreats to the hearth, avoiding his eyes. He watches her work, adding herbs to the broth, picking through the basket of mushrooms gathered in the dawn hours before the snow. She stirs them in, brings it to boil quickly, turns to the eggs.²¹

His eyes haven't left her and I pad to him, nip at his ankle, raise my hackles and hiss when he jumps away. He laughs.

"A sweet beast, Magdalena."

"Wandered in from the cold," she says carelessly.

He reaches down, takes me by the scruff of my neck, lifts me as though to drown me. I twist, all my claws out, all my teeth out, hissing, hissing. Oh, that I were still one of my master's elect. I'd have cursed him before he touched me. He holds me before his face, just out of my reach. The laughter lingers in his eyes.

He says, "It suits you. As a rose suits you. Almost too sharp to make the beauty worth it."

She wipes her hands down her skirt. She's not turned away from the fire, but we all know how close to her hand that iron poker is. It's only her bargain he's ignorant of.

He drops me and I land on my feet, saunter back to the hearth, and wash myself of his hand. The table creaks as he stands.

Magdalena stiffens, asks, "Is my mistress better this morning?"

"No."

²¹ Eliza Smith, "To Stew Mushrooms", in *The Compleat Housewife*, (J&J Pemberton, 1732), 15.

“Shall I tend to her?”

“She is sleeping well now.”

I recede to the shadowy corner. I could trip him, leap on him, knock the poker down so she might catch it. I could bring up the fire, catch his breeches. But let him be her prey. Let her vengeance bring her irrevocably to my master.

The rushes whisper ruefully as he cross them. Magdalena’s eyes dart left, right, and back again, but there is no one to save her but herself.

He takes the poker, tosses it aside. It almost hits me, though I dodge it and know not whether he aimed for me.

She turns to him, hatred writ on her face, mouth open and hands ready to throw a curse, but he is already on her. They grapple, the flames nearly touching her skirt, her body curved backwards to escape, but there is no escape, only a little distance.

I wonder if I should do something, if there is something I can do. I stay in my corner.

She gets a hand free and strikes him across the face and he strikes her back, hard enough that she falls.

He stands huge above her, says “I’ve no wish to hurt you, but I’ve no will against it, either.”

The fire spits sparks. There’s terror on her face, and rage in her heart because of it.

She says, “You will die if you touch me.”

He laughs, goes to his knees as though praying. His hand finds her. She screams, writhes back, but he pursues—and then stops.

Some foam bubbles at the corner of his mouth. His eyes open, bulge, close.

“What have you done?” he whispers. “What have you done to me?”

“I warned you,” she says. The terror is gone. She rises to her knees and meets his eyes.

“Didn’t I warn you?”

Then she shoves him, and he falls and does not rise.

She is still, looking at him lying there. I creep out of my corner, sniff at him. Dead. No doubt of it.

My master lands on the roof, light as the falling snow. She hears him too, or senses him, perhaps, looks up quickly.

Mrow.

“No more of any of you,” she whispers. She leaps to her feet, darts away, and I follow to the mistress’s chamber. Magdalena falls to her knees at the bedside, shakes her mistress awake, says, “We are free of him, do you hear? We are free.”

“What? Of who?”

“Of our master. He’ll not bother either of us any longer.”

“What?”

Magdalena’s eyes gleam in the little light. She takes the mistress’s withering hand in hers, says, “He is dead.”

I leap to the bed, curl up on the mistress’s lying lap, and she strokes me absently. The meaning of Magdalena’s words has hardly become clear, let alone the truth of them.

“Dead?”

The snow shifts. My master crouches in wait.

“Yes, dead, we—”

“What is to become of us?”

“What?”

There are no children, grown or otherwise, which cannot by any stretch be blamed on my Magdalena, but since the witches have come, someone will burn for it.²² There's no family of any kind, and no trade, either, since the master's wealth was in land and his father or some things of that sort. Human money has fallen beyond me now, I admit that freely.

What is not beyond me yet is the mistress's dilemma.

She forces herself to sit, shoving at me when I dig my claws in to keep my seat. I look up at her. She's snow-white save for the violet under her eyes, rail-thin and stringy-haired. I can feel the sickness moving in her.

"We are ruined," she says. "And you—"

"But he—"

"And you are glad!"

"Yes!"

"Yes! You—"

"He tried to—"

She stops suddenly, says nothing else. Perhaps she think the mistress will allow herself to be saved by fate, if not by witchery. But in her silence guilt grows.

The mistress can hardly breath for coughing. But she wraps herself in cloaks, limps hunching to the bishop's. Waits an hour in the cold before the mention of *witch* gets her a quick audience.

He is kind to her, shows her to a chair, throws a blanket over her, calls for hot broth. And he listens as she coughs and rambles.

She says, "I accuse my serving maid, Magdalena Blome, of witchcraft. Of the murder of my husband."

²² A major source of anxiety around witches was their supposed ability to interfere with conception and pregnancy. Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 147-149.

Says, “My husband’s been acting unlike himself, and witches steal all reason from men, that is known.” Says, “She says he was after her, but witches inflame men, drive them mad with love, that is known.” Says, “He’s not come to my bed in months, and witches impede men, that is known.” Says, “It’s her that’s been making me sick all these months,” and since no one can quite remember when she fell sick, that becomes truth.²³

The interrogators gather, the holy men, dressed all in black.²⁴ Ruined crops are proof of an assembly, sure enough, but a name, and one attached to a murder, now, there is something to do.

I am with Juditha, watching the strings sway as she knits, when they summon her a day later. Magdalena sits silent in prison, but the Evil One’ll have left a mark. And they cannot search for it themselves. They are holy men.

I slip into the cell with her, see my Magdalena huddled on the bench in the corner, her knees drawn to her chest, her arms wrapped around herself. The women know each other vaguely, have passed each other on the street, have perhaps waved a greeting. They did not think they would find themselves here.

Nobody sees me. I am the color of shadow, and just a little cat. I curl in the warmest corner, listen to the mice creep.

“Have they mistreated you?”²⁵ Juditha says, whispering, though the walls are thick and the interrogators can hear little.

“No,” she says. “Not yet.”

²³ All supposed abilities of witches. Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 77, 80, 77, 164-166.

²⁴ Roper, *Witch Craze*, 53.

²⁵ There were documented cases of the sexual assault of accused witches by jailers. Roper, *Witch Craze*, 59-60

She rises. Steps into the light, stands tall in the gray light of morning. They've not given her any cloak or blanket, and there's little diamonds of ice glistening around her nose and eyes. Juditha shrugs her cloak off and offers it. Magdalena reaches out, touches it, lets her hand fall.

"Why have you come?"

"They have asked me to search you for his mark."

"Then the cloak won't help either of us much." She laughs. "You wish to see a mark?"

Magdalena strips, lets her clothing pool on the floor, stands bare before Juditha. She poses, points. There on the curve of her ribs, a mark about the size and shape of my mouth.

She says, "There's your mark, Juditha. Tell them you've done your duty."

I watch Juditha's face change. She is the old woman, afraid. Then she is the little girl, testifying. Then she is the old woman again, who has seen too much and done too little.

She says, her voice quick and low as a hare through the underbrush, "I will tell them there was nothing. I will tell them—I will say you are tormented by spirits, not consorting with them,²⁶ and I have a sister in Brunswick who has need of a serving maid, and you can repent, return to God.²⁷ And it will be all right."

Magdalena laughs. Says, "I am not mistaken. I know what I did, and I only regret how quick it happened."

"The Evil One has warped your mind, Magdalena—he has made you kill your earthly master—"

"My earthly master is the only devil that made me do it."

Juditha takes her by the shoulders, makes her meet her eyes. Her fingers brush across the bruise he put on Magdalena's cheek. Sorrow crosses her face.

²⁶ One possible outcome to a witch trial, and one that would save the accused's life. Dähms, *Elizabeth Lorentz*, 46-48.

²⁷ Witches giving up their power was possible, though rare. Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 169.

“All the more reason not to die for it, then. Please, child.”

“We all must die sometime.” A wicked smile crosses her face. “If it was God’s plan that that man die with me, then I thank Him for it.”

“I cannot believe God would allow this,” Juditha says. “Listen to me. I have doubted. But it is man’s failing. We have fallen. We have misunderstood his words. The demonologists—”

But Magdalena laughs harder, shaking with laughter. I hear the interrogators shuffling in the hall. They hear her laughing and it frightens them, and they think of rushing in.

She says, “The demonologists say what they all feel. We are to blame for their lust, don’t you see? They force shame onto us because they won’t take it on themselves.”

Says, “Men failed God? God failed women. We cannot win, don’t you see? It’s Hell on earth if we want Heaven or Hell after earth- if we cannot tolerate it.”

Says, “I’ve made my decision. I’m freer than the Devil.²⁸ I can do anything I like except fly, and even that is my choice. Why would I give that up?”

Says, “I’ll go gladly to the master I chose. Just pray for me while I burn, will you, please?”

The interrogation of Magdalena Blome, without torture.

How the Evil One came to her. Whether he offered gifts. How she bound herself to him and whether it was through intercourse.²⁹ Whether she caused the hailstorm a few days past, whether she wished to starve the village.

²⁸ Witches work through Satan’s power, but they have free will while he can be stopped by God. Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 163.

²⁹ Questions asked of Elizabeth Lorentz. Dähms, *Elizabeth Lorentz*, 33.

She tells them nothing. Keeps silent. They grow angry at her silence, furious at her lack of fear, convinced of guilt by her dry and pretty eyes.³⁰

Whether the Evil One told her to kill her master.

She says, “No. He never told me to do so.”

The scribe takes it down, and the interrogators exchange a look. It is not an admission or denial of guilt, but it is an admission of something. They don’t know what. Perhaps it will be asked of the next witch why she made the bargain, what wicked desires lurked in her heart even before the Evil One came knocking.³¹

So they continue. Whether she did kill her master, silence. Whether she made her mistress sick or barren, silence.

The torture will begin soon. They will ask her for the others, and she will say *Juditha*, because it is the first name she’ll think of, because the old woman was kind to her. She’ll tell of bargains made in darkness, of a distrust of the clergymen. The interrogators will nod solemnly, think of *Juditha*’s age,³² of bloodied sheets and murdered infants.³³

And Hennig saw her muttering to me in the garden the morning after the storm. And he will look at his wife and daughters, and reason that there is no saving *Juditha*. And he will choose his side.

And the blood will water the earth and more blood will grow. *Juditha*’s earned the trust of most mothers in the village, and they will be angry, looking for someone to blame. *Magdalena*’s mistress has not wept at her husband’s death, and it would be easy, after all, for two women of the same house to fall...

³⁰ Crying during interrogations was a sign of innocence, inability to do so a sign of guilt. Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 230.

³¹ Demonological beliefs were created between interrogators and the interrogated, each confession incorporated into what was thought to be a singular overarching system. Roper, *Witch Craze*, 116-117.

³² Old women were thought to be much more likely to be witches. Rowlands, “Witchcraft and Old Women,” 53.

³³ Midwives were thought to be uniquely situated to perform evil acts. Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 92-93.

If she had grown more in her powers, perhaps she might have saved herself as I did, falling away from my body, a little cat darting between the flames and into the woods. But Magdalena had just begun. I have grown fond of her. I am not supposed to do that. And now she will burn.

That is all to come. That and more.

But for now, Juditha paces her little cottage, weeping, praying, thinking of what Magdalena suffers, thinking of who else will suffer and leaving herself off the list. Thinking of her mother, dead all these years. She works her way through her prayers and begins again without ceasing, wrapping it around and around her hands until the rosary has bound her wrists.

I stay with Magdalena as long as I can stand. The last I see of her, she is dazed with pain, her face pale, her eyes glassy in the torchlight.

“I...I...I...” she gasps, and the interrogators lean close as one, waiting for the confession. She raises her face to the heavens, searching the room for some light that does not come from their hands. The room is windowless. She does not find it.

Her voice is half-gone with screaming. She speaks in a voice like stone on stone, like wind through a dead field.

Says, “I have learned to fly.”³⁴

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³⁴ Gertrauta Conrad confessed to this during her torture in 1595, likely due to disassociation from the pain. Roper, *Witch Craze*, 44.

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