




T R O P H Y N E W B E R Y

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*the midwife's
apprentice*



1. The Dung Heap

 WHEN ANIMAL DROPPINGS and garbage and spoiled straw are piled up in a great heap, the rotting and moiling give forth heat. Usually no one gets close enough to notice because of the stench. But the girl noticed and, on that frosty night, burrowed deep into the warm, rotting muck, heedless of the smell. In any event, the dung heap probably smelled little worse than everything else in her life—the food scraps scavenged from kitchen yards, the stables and sties she slept in when she could, and her own unwashed, unnourished, unloved, and unlovely body.

How old she was was hard to say. She was small and pale, with the frightened air of an ill-used child, but her scrawny, underfed body did

give off a hint of woman, so perhaps she was twelve or thirteen. No one knew for sure, least of all the girl herself, who knew no home and no mother and no name but Brat and never had. Someone, she assumed, must have borne her and cared for her lest she toddle into the pond and changed her diapers when they reeked, but as long as she could remember, Brat had lived on her own by what means she could—stealing an onion here or helping with the harvest there in exchange for a night on the stable floor. She took what she could from a village and moved on before the villagers, with their rakes and sticks, drove her away. Snug cottages and warm bread and mothers who hugged their babes were beyond her imagining, but dearly would she have loved to eat a turnip without the mud of the field still on it or sleep in a barn fragrant with new hay and not the rank smell of pigs who fart when they eat too much.

Tonight she settled for the warm rotting of a dung heap, where she dreamed of nothing, for she hoped for nothing and expected nothing. It was as cold and dark inside her as out in the frosty night.

Morning brought rain to ease the cold, and the

kick of a boot in Brat's belly. Hunger. Brat hated the hunger most. Or was it the cold? She knew only that hunger and cold cursed her life and kept her waking and walking and working for no other reason than to stop the pain.

"Dung beetle! Dung beetle! Smelly old dung beetle sleeping in the dung."

Boys. In every village there were boys, teasing, taunting, pinching, kicking. Always they were the scrawniest or the ugliest or the dirtiest or the stupidest boys, picked on by everyone else, with no one left uglier or stupider than they but her. And so they taunted and tormented her. In every village. Always. She closed her eyes.

"Hey, boys, have off. You're mucking up the path and my new Spanish leather shoes. Away!

"And you, girl. Are you alive or dead?"

Brat opened one eye. A woman was there, a woman neither old nor young but in between. Neither fat nor thin but in between. An important-looking woman, with a sharp nose and a sharp glance and a wimple starched into sharp pleats.

"Good," said the woman. "You're not dead. No need to call the bailiff to cart you off. Now out of that heap and away."



"I am Alyce. Not Brat or Dung Beetle or Beetle. Alyce."

One frosty evening, a girl who knows no home, no parents, and no name but Brat finds shelter and warmth in a farmer's dung heap. There Jane the village midwife finds her. So it is that Brat—now called Beetle by her new mistress—begins her career as a midwife's apprentice.

It's not a soft life. Jane is a hard woman with a sharp glance and a sharper temper. Still, Beetle makes a place for herself, adopting a cat and befriending one of the village boys. By secretly watching Jane work, she learns some of the skills the midwife greedily tries to hide. Beetle even gives herself a real name at last: Alyce.

Then one day she fails at an important assignment. Alyce runs away, believing she is too stupid to be of use to anyone. Is she truly Brat, a know-nothing who belongs nowhere? Or is she Alyce, the midwife's apprentice, a person with a name and a place in the world?

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