



Herbalism
by Gudrun Schürer

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Somewhere on the edge of the Bornwood, Peraine, 1038 after the Fall of Bosparan...

“Yoline!” The loud but musical summons that issued from the hut was addressed to a young woman who stood but a stone’s throw away weeding around a hedge of whitethorn bushes.

“It has been like this since you died,” she grumbled as she plucked withered blossoms from a primrose.

“Yoli-i-ine!”

This time, a different voice called for her.

“People will hear her even in Gartimpen,” she sighed as she spread some soil around the ram’s horn sapling that was growing between the whitethorns.

“Yo-o-li-ine! It is ti-ime!” the two women in the hut sang in unison.



“No, not just in Gartimpen. They will hear that racket all the way on the other side of the Bornwood!” Yoline frowned at the nearby grave. “You were no different than those two. Silly, like Little Alrik at his third Tsa’s Day celebration. All of you should have been clowns, not Daughters of Satuaría.”

She rose and looked at the grave with affection in her eyes. Despite her harsh thoughts, she missed her old teacher.

“Whoever came up with that ridiculous name, that’s what I’d like to know. As if it was an official title to be passed down from teacher to disciple... Two Yolines are already more than enough!”

With these last words she turned to the next grave in line, the second of four. “I bet it was you,” she said, kicking a stone from the dirt.

She crouched down to pluck one last blade of grass from the earth when suddenly something prodded her backside. She spun around angrily. That *something* had been only a cooking spoon. It floated in front of her nose, swaying teasingly up and down.

“Yoline!” yelled the chorus once more. “It is time for the soup!”

Feeling indignant, she snatched the spoon out of the air and trudged back to the hut, where two old hags waited impatiently and waved her to the hearth. A large cauldron was set on the flame, its contents coming to a boil.

“I really wish you would stop!” she snapped at the two. “Yoline lies buried out there, under the whitethorn. Next to Yoline, Maline, and Zeline.”



The two hags seemed unimpressed. “Zeline gathers the herbs, Maline chops the herbs, Yoline stirs the soup,” they droned in a chorus, pointing at each person in turn as their name was mentioned. “It’s tradition.”

Yoline turned away, giving them the silent treatment.

“You need a small bowl of herb soup,” suggested Maline, the crone standing to her right.

“Or better yet, two,” giggled Zeline, to her left.

“All good things come in *threes*,” corrected Maline. “Like the three sisters of Gartimpen, whose herb soup banishes even the worst of distempers. Yoline, swing the spoon!”

Yoline gave a sigh and plunged the cooking spoon into the thick broth. While she stirred, three barn owls flew in, perched on the wooden chandelier hanging from the ceiling, and jostled for the best spot. Maline reached for a bundle of herbs, which were lying next to each other in orderly rows on the table near the hearth. With dexterous fingers, she quickly separated stems and stalks from the leaves. She drew out the largest, sharpest knife the witches owned, wiped it clean on Zeline’s apron, and chopped the herbs into tiny pieces. She then gathered the small pile in her hand and cast it evenly over the simmering cauldron.

“Mugwort,” she announced as she picked up the next bundle.

“Next comes the chervil,” said Yoline, stirring diligently.

“And plenty of that,” added Zeline.



“It makes the soup taste divine,” giggled Maline as she placed the next portion of chopped herbs into the pot.

“Sorrel,” demanded Yoline.

“Quickly, and followed by burnet,” Zeline added.

One herb after another went into the broth: cress (which was very wholesome); parsley (the whole bunch); sage (harvested at night); St. Gilborn’s Wort (which makes people merry); ram’s horn (just a little bit), and... and hadn’t they forgotten something?

“Chives!” sang the sisters. The last of the greens disappeared into the pot.

Six pairs of eyes followed the movements of the cooking spoon, which dragged a spiral of green speckles behind it. Yoline paused as the first tiny bubbles began appearing on the surface.

“Soup!” she said. “Show us what you’ve got!”

A large bubble rose from the soup and burst, blowing its steamy breath into the witches’ faces. A cloud of herbs swirled in its wake. They gathered in the middle of the cauldron as if following orders, and started to form an image.

“A sheep,” said Zeline.

“A cloud,” mused Maline.



One by one, pieces of chive detached themselves from the others in the center and swam in a jagged line to the rim of the pot.

“A thunderstorm!” the three sisters said in unison.

The soup answered with more bubbles of steam, and the image of the storm cloud dissolved.

“The big corn on my toe already told me about that,” Maline complained. “And it itches something fierce.” Reminded now of her discomfort, she removed her slipper and scratched her toe vigorously.

Yoline went back to stirring the pot with the spoon. Another large bubble brought more herbs to the surface. They assembled themselves as before, this time showing the outline of a human.

“A man,” Yoline declared.

The outline grew larger.

“A big man,” Zeline added.

The outline continued to grow and began sprouting a beard.

“A giant!” yelled Maline.

A little whirl formed itself on the image’s left cheek. It grew and shrank back again in a rhythmic way.

“He has his heart is on his cheek” Yoline assumed.

The pulsation grew in intensity and the figure hunched over.

“He is in pain,” said Zeline.

“He’s got a rotten tooth,” Maline concluded.

“Melzenis has a toothache!” the sisters shouted simultaneously.

More bubbles rose to the surface and the image vanished. Sounds of worried cooing came from the chandelier.

“Not you, Milzenis,” said Maline, trying to calm her familiar. “You don’t have teeth. *Melzenis* the *giant* has a rotten tooth. We should visit soon and cheer up the poor fellow.”

Yoline kept stirring. Another bubble rose to the surface, and the images of three women appeared in the broth.

“Three women,” said Maline.

One of the women raised her arm and waved.

“It’s us,” Zeline giggled as she waved back.

The middle of the three herb-women images carried something in its arms.

“What has she got there?” asked Yoline. “A bundle, maybe?”

The bundle stretched out two little arms.



“A baby!” Maline exclaimed in surprise. She looked at the third sister, as did Zeline. “You don’t happen to have a sweet little secret?” she asked eagerly.

Yoline turned beet red. “I don’t!” she uttered indignantly. “What nonsense!”

“We saw it!” exclaimed the two crones.

“But we didn’t say it,” reminded the young woman.

Zeline took the spoon out of her sister’s hand and continued stirring the broth. The image returned momentarily. Yoline stared intently at the wriggling bundle. It squirmed out of the herb-arms of its mother and crawled on all fours to the edge of the cauldron. A curly tail sprouted from its backside.

“Stupid hags,” Yoline grumbled as she snatched the spoon back into her own hands. “Full of laughs. As if this is all just fun and games! One day something bad will come from your pranks, and then there will be moaning and groaning.”

The two hags giggled mischievously and poked her in the ribs. “Oh yes, moaning and groaning,” they confirmed.

The steam bubble rose up yet again, and a hut appeared. A small creature approached, its wings flapping, followed by a four-legged bandit with a pointed muzzle and a bushy tail.

“Our hen house!” the three witches yelled, horrified, but the soup wasn’t finished delivering messages yet. A shadow shot from the rim of the cauldron, swift as an arrow, and flew towards the fox. It grabbed the fox up in its claws, pecked

it with its beak, and shook it until the fox was sent fleeing with its tail between its legs.

“An owl,” Maline sighed with relief.

The owls on the chandelier craned their necks. They did not want to miss this very significant message.

“My owls,” Yoline whispered with delight.

“Mim chases the chicken thief away!” the sisters recited as they looked up at the birds. The smallest of the three owls ruffled its feathers with satisfaction, while the other two looked with newfound respect at their companion. Milzenis hopped a bit to the side, to give the future heroine the best vantage point.

With a loud “bloop,” the soup once more drew the attention of the sisters. Yoline continued stirring and a new bubble welled up. This time the herbs seemed to arrange themselves randomly on the surface. The sisters gazed wonderingly into the cauldron.

“You don’t have more to say?” Zeline asked.

A group of green speckles coalesced into a head and a long body that meandered to the rim of the pot, whereupon it vanished elegantly into the deep. Moments later, the same image reappeared at the same spot.

“A snake?” Maline asked. She seemed uncertain this time.

“The constellation!” Yoline yelled. She clapped her hands, seemingly pleased about her idea. “Look, the Fox is there, too, with its pointy ears.”

“The entire Circle of Gods. And here is the Dragon, and next to it, the Hero.” Zeline pointed excitedly at the herb-star patterns. The soup made a warning gurgling sound and she withdrew her hand quickly. The herbs moved again, and the Snake reappeared. It wriggled and curled upon itself, and then turned into a circle.

“What is it doing?” Maline asked, bewildered.

Again the constellation came into view, forming the head and long body, its tail now set where the jaws of the snake would have been.

“The Snake bites its own tail!” the sisters chanted.

The starry sky image faded, leaving the witches puzzled.

“The Snake bites its own tail,” Maline repeated. “That cannot be.”

“But we said so,” Zeline declared.

“So it must be true,” confirmed Yoline.

The witches glanced around worriedly, trying to remember if they had ever been wrong before. The birds seemed anxious, too, even though that last message had not depicted any owls. But these night hunters preyed upon snakes, and they watched the cauldron with interest.

Their ruminations were interrupted by the impatient soup. A loud gurgle reminded Yoline to get back to her task, and she continued stirring. A bubble of steam rose up, and the starry sky appeared once again. The sisters remained silent, concern etched in their brows.

They almost missed a single roll of chive turning around with incredible speed and then disappearing.

“The Eye of the Dragon,” Zeline mentioned. “It closed.”

“The Dragon falls asleep,” the sisters intoned together.

A new bubble formed, and the star-studded sky appeared again.

“If we don’t say it, maybe it won’t come true this time,” Maline whispered, as if she was afraid the soup would hear her.

“You think so?” Yoline asked, doubt in her voice.

“We should try,” said Zeline with determination.

The sisters looked at each other and nodded.

Yoline stirred energetically, scattering the images. When she stopped, the starry image appeared in front of them again, this time just as it looked in the real night sky. The witches sighed with relief but waited, watching intently for any new messages. Only Yoline’s young eyes noticed that the point of the Sword was missing. She stirred vigorously once more. This time, all the stars appeared in their proper places. Then, in the area of the Horns, five new stars appeared.

“A new constellation!” Zeline said with surprise.

“Is that a bowl?” Maline asked.

“A go...,” the sisters began to say, but they stopped before the word could pass their lips.

Yoline stirred up the strange constellation with her cooking spoon, dispersing it back into the soup. Next she dispersed the Raven, which had pushed itself between the Fox and the Stork as it chased the Dog back to its place. Yoline stirred frantically, but the images kept reforming.

“The starry sky has gone mad,” gasped Zeline.

“Madder than the sisters of Gartimpen!” hooted Maline.

“Too crazy for us!” they all agreed. Yoline put the lid on the cauldron just as the Lizard seemed to be growing two new legs. The soup started to boil, as soups usually do.

“Time for supper,” Zeline declared.

The owls glided majestically down from the chandelier and alighted on the backrests of the three chairs around the table. Zeline set bowls on the table, three large and three small, while Maline pulled the cauldron from the hearth and Yoline swapped the cooking spoon for a ladle.

After the first bowl of soup, their anxieties faded. After their second bowl, they had almost forgotten the images of that mad, starry sky. After the third bowl, even Yoline was giggling. The owls clacked along merrily with their beaks.

“I am in the mood for egg pancakes,” Maline declared.

“With honey,” Zeline agreed.

“And lard,” Yoline added.

“I’ll fetch the eggs,” Maline declared.

“I’ll break them,” Zeline agreed.

“I’ll stir them,” Yoline added.

Soon afterwards, the flour was measured and lard was melting in the pan, filling the hut with a delicious aroma. Maline placed the large honeypot on the table and Zeline broke the first egg on the edge of a wooden bowl. Yoline, who was fetching another spoon, suddenly raised a frightful cry. Instead of yolk, she saw a white, egg-shaped form made of cotton-like gossamer fall into the bowl. The owls, which had been looking forward to egg pancakes, jumped down to the table and gazed curiously into the bowl. Milzenis tore a large scrap from the cotton and swallowed it hungrily. Sitting in the bowl was something black that jerked and twitched.

This time, it was Zeline’s high-pitched cry that startled everyone. The birds fled back up to the chandelier, knocking the bowl off the table in their haste. It fell with a clatter to the floor and the thing inside rolled to the center of the room. Maline grabbed a frying pan from the hearth and swung it down onto the cottony egg like a sledgehammer. It flattened out, spreading surprisingly far over the floor of the parlor. Torn between horror and curiosity, the sisters peered over the table at what lay before them on the floor.

“Is that a head?” asked Maline, pointing at a black spot that was as large as an apple.

“Or is that the head?” wondered Yoline, gesturing at a pear-shaped outline at the other end of the image.

“It has too many heads,” determined Zeline.

“Or too many bodies,” Maline suggested.

“And too many legs,” counted Yoline. “Or is that a tail?”

From the chandelier they heard a smacking and retching sound as Milzenis coughed up a slimy cotton-like lump, which landed at the sisters’ feet. A black and hairy insect leg protruded from the mass.

“No tail,” said Zeline. “Six legs. Does it have wings?”

There was no way to tell.

“Or a stinger?” Maline asked, worriedly.

That, too, was hidden from the sisters.

“Let us see what is in the others,” suggested Zeline. She retrieved the bowl from the floor and proceeded to break open the other two eggs, which, she remembered, Maline had brought in with the strange one from the henhouse. The other eggs contained only golden yellow yolks and clear egg whites. Relieved, the witches turned back to the object lying on their parlor floor.

“What sort of creature is that? An ant? A beetle? A hornet?” whispered Yoline.

“It’s so big!” marveled the three witches in unison.

“In any case, it’s not a chicken,” Maline eventually decided. Then her practical sense won out. “Do we still want egg pancakes?”

The owls, growing impatient, had fluttered onto the backrests of the three chairs again.

“I’ll stir the eggs,” offered Yoline.

“I’ll heat up the pan,” said Zeline.

“I’ll clean up this mess,” added Maline. With a wave of her hand, she sent the bucket to fetch some water from the well.