

Gwynafra Needs a Love Potion

by Greg Stolze

Gwynafra took the road out of the village. Her mouth was dry, and when she got to the fence that wound around Farmer Timur's fields, she realized she was about to go farther from her home than she had ever been. But that was what one had to do, to see the old lady of the woods, who was a witch (probably) and whom no one ever, ever called a witch.

She'd been to Farmer Timur's farm when his daughter got married, she'd been young and had eaten honey-topped custards until she threw up. She tried not to think about that as she took a deep breath and stepped past his most distant fence.

The old lady of the woods was named Jode, a name she shared with no one in the village nor anyone in the neighboring towns or settlements. Jode hadn't been born there, either. She'd shown up one day, fifteen years earlier, in a wooden cart with big coarse wheels, drawn by two horses who didn't look like the thick drays local to the area. She'd pulled it off the road, which was very old, and sickled down saplings and shrubs to make a track into the forest, winding around trees too big to be felled without axe or saw. With her little trail made, she'd pulled the cart down to the end of it, sold the two horses to the Squire, taken the wheels off and turned it into a cabin. On Sundays, she did not go to church, but she had walked into the village every Tuesday to trade coins for eggs, fowl, flour and similar provender.

Her clothes were different, and when she said words with an "s" or a "t" sound, they didn't sound like everyone else. Some of the coins she used had letters on them that no one had ever seen before.

Because Jode was so obviously foreign, it wasn't long before people suspected her of witchcraft, and her failure to attend mass—or, as Stout Piter phrased it, "can't set foot in a church, can she?"—convinced most people. At least, it convinced Stout Piter, who traded in horses but hadn't been involved in selling hers. Stout Piter helped the shire-reeve when he came to collect the Squire's taxes. One year the blacksmith had insisted it was too much, with what he'd had to spend on medicines for his mother, and Stout Piter had knocked him down to the ground with one punch. Many notable events ended that way, when Stout Piter was involved.

So the night Stout Piter finished off a whole bottle of applejack with two of his friends and they decided it was time to "deal with" "the witch," most of the villagers (including Gwyn's mother and father) had simply latched their doors and thrown an arm over whichever ear was exposed as they tried to sleep.

But the next day, when asked about it, Stout Piter's two friends said nothing at all, and Piter himself just muttered "She's not so bad, when you get to talking with her." One of the friends died that very next winter of a bad ague, and the other moved to a far town, or so people said.

As for Jode herself, that was the spring she started coming to the market with mushrooms she'd found in the forest, and rabbit skins. She used those to pay in addition to coins, or instead. When Goodwife Chandler was bold enough to ask about Stout Piter's visit, all Jode said was "He iss not so bad, when you get talking with him."

The difference was, when Jode said it, she had a broad warm smile showing all of her wooden teeth as well as three natural ones on the left side. When Piter said it, he wouldn't meet your eye and seemed a bit paler than his usual ruddy state.

That settled matters. No one would call her a witch and everyone thought she was. Even the priest went out to her house for a talk and came back shrugging.

(He was a very good priest. He hardly said anything that wasn't Latin, and didn't know he was permitted to refuse to help birth cattle and repair barns.)

That autumn, when Jode came to town on Tuesdays, she started bringing things from her garden, herbs and mosses and leaves that no one could remember seeing before. She recommended them for assorted ailments and, since she was a presumptive witch, people bought them. They seemed to work as well as anything.

That was why Gwynafra trudged all the way out to her hut in the woods (which had, over the years, expanded as new rooms were built on to the old) for help with her Geordain problem.

###

"I need a love potion," Gwynafra said.

"That is stupid," Jode replied, then added, "Also, is rude to ask for something before you are even inside someone's home."

She started to close the door and Gwyn burst into tears.

Jode sighed, opened the door and said, "Come in, sit, I make you a tea."

Sniffing and wiping her nose on her sleeve, Gwynafra entered. The first room in the house had once been the carriage, and she could see that it was elaborately carved, with a deep inset bench along one side that could have served nicely as a traveler's bed. The paint on the carvings was faded but still colorful and attached to the ceiling with strings was something that made Gwynafra startle back and emit a brief shriek.

"Is normal, normal," Jode said, following Gwyn's eyes. "In south land, you have to watch for them in river for bathe."

"What's it called?" Gwynafra asked, fingertips over her lips, eyes wide. Jode's answer was a string of syllables that did not seem to connect to the languages Gwyn had heard—not even Frankish, which some lost travelers had spoken amongst themselves before Stout Piter had knocked one of them to the ground with one punch.

"Why you want love potion?" Jode asked, pushing open a door to the next room, which proved to be a kitchen when Gwynafra followed her in.

"Out!" the possibly-witch cried, making a sweeping gesture at her guest. "You sit! Sit in sitting room! Iss for sit!"

"I don't like that thing on the ceiling."

"Then walk on the walking path and do not trouble Jode with foolish love potioning."

Gwyn stayed seated, but kept an eye cocked upward untrustingly at the stuffed beast of the south land as her hostess returned with two wooden mugs of surprisingly sweet earthy tea.

“Thank you,” the younger woman said. “Now, I need your help to make Geordain fall in love with me.”

The old woman groaned, taking no pains to hide it. “Have you tried treating him nice, maybe you cook him tasty pie or something?”

“I’m not a very good cook,” the girl said, and looked down at her lap.

“Hmph, so maybe you go alone with him, hold hands, press up against him, kiss and so on?”

“Oh, he’s far too much of a gentleman, he’d never do anything so improper!”

Jode rolled her eyes. “Uh huh. When you talk with this ‘Jeer-ohr-dan’ then?”

“Geordain! It’s pronounced ‘Geordain.’”

“Shee-or-dan?”

This led Gwynafra to open her mouth, then close it, out of conflicting feelings that old Jode needed to take this seriously, and a deeply taught sense of respect for her elders.

“Jee-or-dan, you know him, you grow up sside next to side?”

“Oh no! No, he lives way over on the other side of the village!”

“Ah, so iss hundred, *two* hundred steps for reach him.”

“He works so hard, so there’s no time for... for courting.”

“What is ‘courting’?”

“*You* know,” Gwyn said.

Jode shrugged. Then she turned around, hugged herself so her old, liver-spotted hands were caressing her own back, and mimicked kissing and a passionate embrace. “Like so, is ‘courting’?”

“No! No, not before marriage!”

“Oh is one of those.” Jode faced her once more, face impatient.

“One of...? A proper courtship is, the man sees the woman and is smitten by her beauty, and finds some pretext to see her, and get close, and perhaps offer her a bouquet of flowers, and then he has his father talk to my father and...”

“Ach, why not you just talk to his father first then? No middle-deal. Middle-deal is where they chisel away the money, you know.”

“What? No, I couldn’t *pay*, I don’t... that’s not how it works! I don’t have any money!”

“Then how you buy love potion?”

Gwyn hugged herself.

“Did ever give one little thought to that?” Jode asked. “How you pay me?”

“I guess I didn’t... I hoped...”

“Hoped?”

“It’s love, isn’t it?” Gwynafra lurched forward, face flushed and blotchy. “Love’s the most important thing there is!”

“Is it?”

“Isn’t it?”

“Once,” Jode said, “Cart break down. Take stiff turn, up in mountains, coming out of Golden Lands. Starts snow. No way off. Frozen. We have to wait over, make camp for weeks. Provisions run out. What are we to eat? Not love.”

“What did you do?” the girl asked, horrified.

“We all lose fat, argue and slap, skid down mountain and get wagons fix,” Jode said. “All without love.”

“But I’m not in the mountains!”

“Can’t eat love in forest either.”

“If I don’t have Geordain, I’ll die! I’ll just die!”

“I think you die in time, whether boy love you or not.”

Stymied, Gwynafra started weeping again.

“Ugh,” Jode said. “So much wet face. All right.” She said something foreign, a few syllables that sounded extremely resigned. “Like this. You work for me, I help you.”

“You’ll make me a love potion?!?”

“...eh. Your mama, papa, they know you are here with me?”

Gwyn bit her lower lip and looked down at her lap.

“Ugh. You don’t much like make plan, do you? Help old woman stand,” Jode said, and Gwynafra leaped up to comply.

“We go talk your parents.”

“Do we have to?”

Jode’s stare was so baleful that Gwyn didn’t ask her anything else for the whole walk back to her family farm.

###

“You sstay here,” Jode said at Gwynafra’s front gate.

“Don’t you want me to come and, and introduce you?”

“They know who I am,” Jode said, which was indisputably true.

“But... I could, erm... explain...?”

“Like for you explain me? How good that work, hm? You sstay here.”

Gwynafra never did find out what Jode said to her parents. The tones of their voices could be heard, but not particular words. First the nasally drone of Jode making statements, then her father’s rumble of consternation, followed by the dry, slightly sarcastic rhythms of Jode demolishing an argument. Gwyn’s mother spoke next, fluting and uncertain, eliciting philosophical, resigned but pragmatic sounds from the old witch. After some more of her parents’ compromise accents, Jode emerged.

“You fix fence?” she asked, surprised.

“Well, I noticed the slats were loose, so I started shimming them, and then I saw the posts were wobbly so I shored those up with some stones. I mean, since I was waiting.”

“Hm. Maybe you are not complete ssilly. We agree, you work for me this summer, since your sister is old enough for watch geese. You get up at dawn, come to my house, bring loaf of bread each day.”

“Every day? You want me to toil on the *Sabbath*?”

“Ugh, fine, you go hear Latin on Sunday and have day of rest. I have day of no Gwynafra. Good for both of us. Come tomorrow.”

###

Gwyn was at the old woman’s hut the next day, bright and early with a loaf of her mother’s most finely-milled barley loaf. While Jode went out into the woods to gather herbs, Gwynafra was instructed to add a new layer of thatch to the roof.

Over the weeks that followed, she pushed the cart of Jode’s wares into town every Tuesday; said and did certain things where she could be observed, in order to justify Jode’s haggling strategies at market; sickled down the overgrowth on the path; learned how to make tea the way Jode preferred; skinned rabbits and squirrels that Jode trapped, then learned how to set traps herself, then learned how to make the traps to be set; mended the old woman’s winter clothes; rubbed ointment on Jode’s warped and shriveled feet, then learned how to make the ointment; accompanied Jode into the woods to gather mosses, leaves, cuttings, mushrooms and a few toadstools that she’d been taught as a child would kill someone frail and leave even Stout Piter groaning and distressed for a day and a night.

“What are the toadstools for?” she asked, having learned not to say things like “Those are poisonous, surely you’ve made a mistake!”

“Whole one, very bad, make you sick—even sturdy girl like you. Three of, dried, chopped, simmered in vinegar down to paste... kill a man with that. But...” here she flipped the fungus over and indicated the slender skirt around its neck. “This, you trim with sharp knife, dry out and chew up when all wheezy with sick? Open nose up good. And gills here, three, four gills dried, you give to person who ate spoiled food, bad food, fever food? Bad sstuff come out fast. Stand back!” She made gestures of violent movement from her mouth and backside, then laughed.

“How did you learn all this?”

“Eh, I watch, listen. Try things and fail, try things and succeed. Got a cow with swell-up mouth, udder all blotches, dung too wet? One toadstool of this, fresh, or two dried out, cow all better in two days.”

On top of the use of toadstools, she learned how to spot a false coin; how to cope with a breach birth in goats and cows, something she’d already partially understood; which mosses alleviated headaches; how to partially offset woman troubles with willow bark and gravy made in an old iron pan; how to read the population of the close region by the actions of birds; and a bit of how to read palms.

“Is it true that everyone’s future is written in the lines on their hands?” Gwynafra asked Jode, when the older woman brought up palm reading. Jode laughed and laughed.

“No future written anywhere but on life. The *past*, now past is written on body, and very on the hands. You read past and you guess future—especially future on someone have silver for fortune tellers. Someone ask about future, either they sweat, they afraid, they are desperate... or else giggle, simper, nice clothes, all joke. You look at hands for work marks. Look at you. Strong hands, sturdy girl, tough palms. Farm girl, yes?”

Gwyn responded by folding her hands into her armpits, prompting merrier laughter.

“Farm clothes, sun-color skin... sturdy girl!”

“I wish you wouldn’t call me that.”

“Bah, your Shee-or-dane have no use for frail girl, rich girl, never-work girl.”

“Geordain,” Gwynafra said quietly.

“Sturdy farm girls have no use for fortunes, *mostly*. But if she scared, maybe need to know if baby inside, maybe need know to whose baby? That girl comes for fortune.” Jode briefly digressed on how to tell by skin, hair and fingernails when a woman was in the early stages of pregnancy, then continued. “Silly rich girls, they want hear ‘you marry dark stranger, handsome but sad’.” Jode struck a pose of wistful masculine melancholy that made Gwynafra frown more.

“If someone asks you about their future you can’t just make guesses about them and tell them what they want to hear.”

“Nobody pay you say what they *don’t* want to hear. ‘Your husband, he going to hit you—hard!’ No one want hear that.” Jode sucked on her wooden teeth, making a soft and distasteful noise. “Sometimes they need hear that, though. You can tell that too.”

“Tell what?”

“Ever see dog, got beat too much? People same. Same eyes, same turn away, same sadness.” Jode frowned now too, adjusting her mouth with her hand. “Someone who that, fortune is always ‘Run! Steal what you can carry, take baby, run far! New help, friends and fortune, they wait you in three towns east, but run now!’”

“You tell women to leave their husbands?”

“Better alone than with thirsty-fist husband,” Jode said firmly.

“But what if she... I don’t know, tries to make him happy?”

“Thirsty-fist husband never happy. Only less ssad than wife getting beat.” She followed this up with advice about how to avoid being tracked when unexpectedly fleeing town.

Jode taught her all these things and many more, but never said a single word about love potions.

###

Geordain was driving wain of excess hay to the market one Thursday in the late summer when he heard a voice from the ditch.

“Hey. Help. You help me.”

He frowned, reined in the ox, checked that the brake was on the wheels, and made his way to the side of the road.

Down in the weedy growth was the old woman Jode, whom his parents had sternly warned him to avoid. “Might be a witch,” they said, when he asked why, “And she’s certainly far too clever.”

“Did you fall?” he asked.

“What you think, dirt jump up for grab me?”

“What?”

She scowled poisonously. “I am old woman in ditch, you strong young Christian man, you supposed to help me up!”

Geordain processed this, then nodded and made his way down towards her. He would not have been able to explain that she really did look like she’d just climbed down and laid there—her dress was tucked demurely around her ankles, and she was lying flat and not sprawled, and she didn’t seem to have any injuries. Even her hair was mostly neat in iron-colored plaits next to the sides of her head.

“Are you hurt?”

“I think I am live,” she replied. He squatted, as his father had taught him, to lift with his legs, and suggested that she put her arms around his neck. Then he picked her up and carefully made his way back up to the track.

“Would you like a ride to market?”

“I suppose,” she sniffed. “Thank you. You are a very strong young man, arms good and firm!”

“You don’t weigh much more than a goat,” he said in reply.

“Hm. I dropped my cane over there,” she said, pointing, and he obligingly went across the ditch, picked it up and brought it back. She waited a moment as he held it out, then took it from his hands with a sigh and dusted it off.

“Lucky it wasn’t wet down there,” he said, glancing up at the sky.

“More luck for not be down there at all,” she grumbled, then tilted her head back too. “You think we get rain?”

“I dunno.”

“Why not?”

“Huh?”

“You have what, seventeen summers? Seen skies before rain, before no rain, what they look like?”

“I dunno. I don’t watch the sky much.”

“You farmer and you no watch the ssky?” she asked, then made a tsk noise around her wooden dentures. Then she reached out one gnarled, clawlike hand and turned his face towards her.

“Hmph.” She squinted, and he was uncomfortably reminded of the way his father had examined the ox before purchase. “Clear eye, strong jaw. Show me your teets.”

“My what?”

“Teets! Teets!” She grimaced and pulled out her own wooden chewing apparatus. “Teegh,” she said.

With some hesitation he pulled back his lips and opened his jaws. She grunted again.

“Good mouth at least. I get off here.” They’d reached the outskirts of the village, meaning, they were almost in the blacksmith’s yard, and were a stone’s throw from the market square, and three times that distance from the village’s far end.

“You sure you’re not hurt?” Geordain asked.

“If I was hurt, you think I not know?”

“Sometimes people get hurt and need help but are too proud to ask for it,” he said.

“Hmph.” Her expression softened a little. “Not me.”

###

The next day, when Gwyn had shown up with a barley-and-dried-apple loaf, Jode said “You sure you don’t want dog?”

“What?”

“I met Geordain.”

“He’s not a dog!”

“Many peoples like the dog,” Jode said. “Dog herds the sheeps, warm up your bed, bite people for you. Strong dog, maybe he pulls ssled or cart.” She looked up at the stuffed creature hanging from her rafters. “Maybe do *I* want dog?”

“Stout Piter’s bitch just had a litter,” Gwynafra said drily. “But tell me more about meeting Geordain.”

So Jode explained, leaving Gwyn staring, jaw momentarily slack before she said, “You laid in wait for him so you could *trick* him?”

“No! I lay in *ditch* for him so I could *test* him.”

“Well did he pass?”

Jode shrugged. “This Geordain, he iss not scholar, is he?”

“He can read *and* write!” Gwynafra said with great hauteur, which was diminished when she added “Write his name, at least.”

“He has nice arms, nice face,” Jode admitted.

“Doesn’t he just?” Gwyn sighed. “When I see him I just, I... I don’t know, I feel...”

Jode groaned. “I thought we past all this.”

“All what?”

“All wet face nonsense! Sigh, and ‘my heart, she feels like butterflies when he near’ and big eyes like a cow and...”

“I never said my heart was butterflies!”

“You would have.”

For a moment, Gwynafra glared at her. “I’m going to go empty the rabbit traps,” she said at last, storming towards the door.

“A dog,” Jode said at her back, “Always look at you with love in its eyes.”

Gwynafra stopped. “Geordain is not a dog,” she repeated.

###

A few days later, she was coming towards the ex-wagon with a honey loaf when she heard strange sounds. It almost sounded like Jode, but higher and louder and plaintive, which she could not imagine. But she quickened her step until she cleared enough trees to see, and then she ran.

Jode was sprawled on the ground, and it was clear she wasn’t faking. The top step of the wagon had splintered and given way, Jode’s entire right side was smirched with mud and crushed greenery, and her face was screwed up in a grimace, eyes red and teary as she wallowed herself around, trying to get back up or reach her cane.

“Jode!”

“Aaah! Sturdy girl! You come, help me!”

“I’m here, I’m here!”

Like Geordain, Gwyn was surprised how little Jode weighed.

“Are you all right?”

Jode said something in her native language, and from its tone Gwyn guessed it wasn’t “I’m just fine, thanks.” With one generous hip, Gwynafra knocked open the door and then she half led, half carried the old woman to the bench.

“Go back, through kitchen. Third room. Trunk with leaves carved on lid, open that. Wood box, rabbits on it. Bring that.”

Gwyn rushed through the cramped, tidy kitchen into a bedroom, also very tidy. The bed had a quilt of red and gold and blue, and there was a chunky clothes-press she recognized as the work of Leo, whom everyone in the village called “Woodworker Leo.” It was not nearly as nicely made as the chest Jode had described, which was age-darkened and smelled like cedar when Gwynafra opened it. Under some dresses and shawls, and under an absolutely gorgeous gown with beads like Gwyn had never seen, she found the rabbit box. She rushed back to Jode without even closing the leaf-carved lid.

“What’s in here?”

“Medicines, strong medicine,” Jode said, grabbing it and opening it. She pulled out a glass jar wrapped in cotton, its stopper held in place with wax. She started to fumble it free, and it tumbled out of her hands. With a little shriek Gwyn lurched forward to catch it.

“Let me,” she said, wiggling it open.

“Careful. Those plants not grow, but for a thousand miles away.” Gwynafra didn’t let the bottle go completely, just supported it as Jode lifted it to her wrinkled lips and took a moderate sip. Then she laid back.

“Ugh. Never want need that stuff,” she sighed.

“What *happened*?”

“All this summer I tell you, ‘look with eyes, figure out’ and *this* is a mystery?”

“So the step gave way and you fell? Did you hit your head?”

“Head, arms, breathing chest. I do not hear snap though. I like that, no snapping bone.”

“What should I do?”

Jode sighed. “Pull off my boots,” she said, sounding even more resigned than usual.

When Gwyn complied, she saw that Jode’s left foot was badly swollen. At Jode’s direction, she splinted and bound it.

“How do you know so much about healing people?” Gwynafra asked. “And don’t tell me you watched and figured it out.”

“I did though.”

“Who did you watch? Someone taught you.”

“Hah, like I teach you? You puzzled it out.” Her words were lightly slurred, even beyond their usual accent and denture distortions. She gave a piney smile and leaned forward to tousle Gwyn’s hair, something she had certainly not done previously. “You getting to be smart girl, not just sturdy girl.”

“Is that medicine like ale? You sound like Stout Piter when he gets into the ale.”

“S not ale. Better. Less headache, no ssick. Make silly though.” She giggled a little. “I could tell you where go, learn and learn. More than me. Even me!”

“Where’s that then?” Gwyn asked, tying the splint even tighter.

“If you go, Geordain maybe not wait for you,” Jode said, and it sounded a bit like a sneer.

“You’re the one telling me love is false and worthless all the time.”

“No, not worthless. Not everything, but love is something.” Jode sighed. “Geordain could make you a kind of happy, a ssmall happy, here on farm with cows and babies. Or you go, become wise woman, different happiness.”

“How do I know which is better?”

“No one knows,” Jode said, and closed her eyes.

“Jode?”

The old woman didn’t answer, just lay still.

“Jode?”

“Gwynafra, is little tin bottle with star on. Drink that.”

“You want to drink that?” Gwyn asked, pulling it out of the rabbit box.

“No I want *you* drink that. For what you want. Drink all down.”

“What is it?”

Jode said nothing.

“Is this the love potion?”

The old woman started to gently snore.

###

The moon got fat and thin again before Jode switched from crutches back to her cane. She did get a dog, though not a puppy—something with mastiff jaws and big loping legs and a slightly off-kilter eye that made it look like it was smiling, somehow. She named it something in her own language, which any literate local would write as “Dlawk” or “Tloc.” Dlawk towed her cart to market, and as she was setting out her mushrooms, game skins, mosses and herbs and forest gleanings, Gwynafra’s father approached her.

“Good morrow, madame Jode,” he said.

“Blessings be,” the old woman grunted in reply.

He stood there for a bit, silent. She did too. He didn’t speak. Neither did she.

People were starting to notice when he finally asked, “What did you do to Gwynafra?”

Jode shrugged. “Gwynafra is smart girl,” she replied, not meeting his eyes.

“You think that’s why she left? Because she was smart? Is that what you think of our village, that the wise thing is to leave?” His voice was starting to get louder and louder.

“I’m *here*,” Jode said in reply. “I travel, far, near, there, all the many places. I stay here. I take wheels off wagon *here*. So village is not bad place, is good place. Even your worst man, not so bad.”

“Then why did you tell Gwynafra to leave?”

“I no tell her. You know girl, you think she listen one way or other way? I taught her this and that, never said stay, never said go.”

“You changed her,” the father insisted, and his voice was moving from anger to something else, something sad and pained. “My daughter went away and I want to know why.”

Jode sighed, still avoiding his gaze. “She can come back. She goes, learns, comes back maybe? Sees places like I did, then sees this place.”

Gwyn’s father folded his arms. “When she asked us to let her leave, she said you gave her something. Some drink.”

“Love potion,” Jode said, very softly.

“What? You must think me a *great* fool to believe that.”

“Don’t tell me what I think.”

“Love potions aren’t *real*, her mother told her that, I told her that, you can’t just give someone an, an elixir that makes them lovable!”

“You know she was lovable,” Jode said, and she finally turned to look him in the eye. “What I give her... let her love *herself*.”

THE END