
a FACE
LIKE
GLASS

Books by Frances Hardinge

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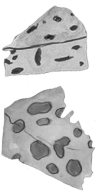
A Face Like Glass

Cuckoo Song

The Lie Tree

A Skinful of Shadows

A FACE LIKE GLASS



FRANCES HARDINGE

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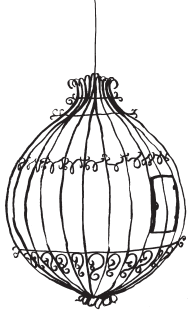
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To my one-year-old nephew Isaac, in whose eyes I see the world reflected, and find it to be wondrous and full of surprises

PROLOGUE: THE CHILD IN THE CURDS



One dark season, Grandible became certain that there was something living in his domain within the cheese tunnels. To judge by the scuffles, it was larger than a rat, and smaller than a horse. On nights when hard rain beat the mountainside high above, and filled Caverna's vast labyrinth of tunnels with the music of ticks and trickles and drips, the intruding creature sang to itself, perhaps thinking that nobody could hear.

Grandible immediately suspected foul play. His private tunnels were protected from the rest of the underground city by dozens of locks and bars. It should have been impossible for anything to get in. However, his cheesemaker rivals were diabolical and ingenious. No doubt one of them had managed to smuggle in some malignant animal to destroy him, or worse still his cheeses. Or perhaps this was some ploy of the notorious and mysterious Kleptomancer, who always seemed determined to steal whatever would cause the most chaos, regardless of any personal gain.

Grandible painted the cold ceiling pipes with Merring's Peril, thinking that the unseen creature must be licking the condensation off the metal to stay alive. Every day he patrolled his tunnels expecting to find some animal curled comatose beneath the pipes with froth in its whiskers. Every day he was disappointed. He laid traps with sugared wire and scorpion barbs, but the creature was too cunning for them.

Grandible knew that the beast would not last long in the

tunnels for nothing did, but the animal's presence gnawed at his thoughts just as its teeth gnawed at his precious cheeses. He was not accustomed to the presence of another living thing, nor did he welcome it. Most of those who lived in the sunless city of Caverna had given up on the outside world, but Grandible had even given up on the rest of Caverna. Over his fifty years of life he had grown ever more reclusive, and now he barely ventured out of his private tunnels or saw a human face. The cheeses were Grandible's only friends and family, their scents and textures taking the place of conversation. They were his children, waiting moon-faced on their shelves for him to bathe them, turn them and tend to them.

Nonetheless, there came a day when Grandible found something that made him sigh deeply, and clear away all his traps and poisons.

A broad wheel of Withercream had been left to ripen, the pockmarked skin of the cheese painted with wax to protect it. This soft wax had been broken, letting the air into the secret heart of the cheese and spoiling it. Yet it was not the ruined cheese which weighed Grandible's spirits to the ground. The mark set in the wax was a print from the foot of a human child.

A human child it was, therefore, that was trying to subsist entirely on the extraordinary cheeses produced by Grandible's refined and peculiar arts. Even nobility risked only the most delicate slivers of such dangerous richness. Without as much as a morsel of bread or a splash of water to protect its tender stomach from the onslaught of such luxury, the unknown child might as well have been crunching on rubies and washing them down with molten gold. Grandible took to leaving out bowls of water and half-loaves of bread, but they were never touched. Clearly his traps had taught the child to be suspicious.

Weeks passed. There were periods during which Grandible could find no trace of the child, and would conclude with a ruffled brow that it must have perished. But then a few days later he would find a little heap of nibbled rinds in another under-alley, and realize that the child had just roamed to a new hiding place. Eventually the impossible fact dawned upon him. The child was not dying. The child was not sickening. The child was thriving on the perilous splendours of the cheese kingdom.

At night Grandible would sometimes wake from superstitious dreams in which a whey-coloured imp with tiny feet pranced ahead of him, leaving tiny weightless footprints in the Stiltons and sage-creams. Another month of this and Grandible would have declared himself bewitched. However, before he could do so the child proved itself quite mortal by falling into a vat of curdling Neverfell milk.

Grandible had heard nothing untoward, for the creamy 'junket' was already set enough to muffle the sound of the splash. Even when he was stooping over the vast vat, admiring the fine, slight gloss on the setting curds, and the way they split cleanly like crème caramel when he pushed his finger in to the knuckle, he noticed nothing. Only when he was leaning over with his long curd-knife, ready to start slicing the soft curds, did Grandible suddenly see a long, ragged rupture in their surface, filling with cloudy, greenish whey. It was roughly in the shape of a small, spreadeagled human figure, and a row of thick, fat bubbles was squirming to the surface and bursting with a sag.

He blinked at this strange phenomenon for several seconds before realizing what it had to mean. He cast aside his knife, snatched up a great wooden paddle and pushed it deep into

the pale ooze, then scooped and slopped the curds and whey this way and that until he felt a weight on the end. Bracing his knees against the vat, he heaved back on the handle like a fisherman hauling in a baby whale. The weight strained every joint in his body, but at last a figure appeared above the surface, shapeless and clotted with curds, and clinging to the paddle with all the limbs at its disposal.

It tumbled out, sneezing, spluttering and coughing a fine milky spray, while he collapsed beside it with a huff, breathless with the unexpected exertion. Six or seven years old to judge by the height, but skinny as a whip.

'How did you get in here?' he growled, once he had recovered his breath.

It did not answer, but sat quivering like a guilty blancmange and staring from under pale soupy eyelashes.

He was an alarming enough sight for any child, he supposed. Grandible had long since abandoned any attempt to make himself fair and presentable in a way of which the Court would approve. In fact, he had rebelled. He had deliberately forgotten most of the two hundred Faces he had been taught in infancy with everybody else. In his stubborn solitude he wore the same expression day in and out like a slovenly overall, and never bothered to change it. Face 41, the Badger in Hibernation, a look of gruff interest that suited most situations well enough. He had worn that one expression so long that it had carved its lines into his features. His hair was grizzled and ragged. The hands that gripped the paddle were darkened and toughened by wax and oils, as if he were growing his own rind.

Yes, there was reason enough for a child to look at him with fear, and perhaps it really was afraid. But this was probably nothing but an act. It had decided that terror was more likely

to win him round. It would have chosen a suitable Face from its supply, like a card from a deck. In Caverna lies were an art and everybody was an artist, even young children.

I wonder which Face it will be, Grandible thought, reaching for a bucket of water. *No. 29 – Uncomprehending Fawn before Hound? No. 64 – Violet Trembling in Sudden Shower?*

'Let's see you, then,' he muttered, and before the curled figure could react he had thrown the water across its face to wash away the worst of the curds. Long, braided hair showed through the ooze. A girl, then? She made a panicky attempt to bite him, showing a full set of milk teeth with no gaps. Younger than he had thought at first, then. Five years old at the most, but tall for her age.

While she sneezed, spluttered and coughed, he grabbed her small chin and with a heavy rind-brush began clearing the rest of the clogging Neverfell curds from her features. Then he snatched up a trap-lantern and held it close to the small face.

However, it was Grandible, not the child, who gave a noise of fear when at last he saw the countenance of his captive. He released her chin abruptly, and recoiled until his back halted with a clunk against the vat from which he had saved her. The hand holding up his trap-lantern shook violently, causing the little glowing 'flytrap' within the lamp to snap its fine teeth fretfully. There was silence, but for the tallowy drip of curds from the child's long, clogged braids, and her muted snuffles.

He had forgotten how to look surprised. He was out of practice in changing his expression. But he could still feel that emotion, he discovered. Surprise, incredulity, a sort of horrified fascination . . . and then the heavy onslaught of pity.

'Thunder above,' he muttered under his breath. For a moment more he could only stare at the face his brush had

revealed, then he cleared his throat and tried to speak gently, or at least softly. 'What is your name?'

The child sucked her fingers warily, and said nothing.

'Where are your family? Father? Mother?'

His words had as much effect as coins dropped in mud. She stared and stared and shivered and stared.

'Where did you come from?'

Only when he had asked her a hundred such questions did she offer a whispered, hesitant response that was almost a sob.

'I . . . I don't know.'

And that was the only answer he could get from her. *How did you get in? Who sent you? Who do you belong to?*

I don't know.

He believed her.

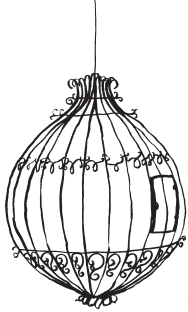
She was alone, this child. This odd and terrible child. She was as alone as he was. More so than he, in fact, despite all his attempts to hide away. More so than a child that age could possibly realize.

Suddenly it came to Grandible that he would adopt her. The decision seemed to make itself without asking him. For long years he had refused to take an apprentice, knowing that any underling would only seek to betray and replace him. This child, however, was a different matter.

Tomorrow, he would organize a ceremony of apprenticeship with his strange, young captive. He would invent a parentage for her. He would explain that she had been scarred during a cheese-baking and had to keep her face bandaged. He would guide her pen to enter her name as 'Neverfell Grandible' on the documents.

But today, before anything else, he would send out for a small, velvet mask.

DEFACED



On a certain murky hour about seven years after that fateful day, a skinny figure could be seen capering sideways beside Grandible as he growled and slouched his way through the tunnels with a great white loop of braided rope-cheese over one shoulder, and a ring of keys bristling in his fist.

She was no longer the little cheese-clotted scrap of life that blinked white lashes at Cheesemaster Grandible and so terrified him. Nor was she like her master, grim-jowled, solemn and taciturn, dogged and careful in word and action. No, despite her best efforts she was a skinny, long-boned tangle of fidget and frisk, with feet that would not stay still, and elbows made to knock things off shelves. Her hair was twisted into a mass of short, twiggy red pigtails to keep it out of her face, the cheese and everything else.

Seven years had passed. Seven years in the cheese tunnels, struggling after Grandible's round-shouldered rolling gait with pails of milk or pots of hot wax. Seven years turning cheeses on to their bellies, cheddaring, clambering up the wide wooden shelves like a monkey, sniffing scoops of cheese-paste for ripeness. Seven years learning to follow her nose through the darkened tunnels, for Cheesemaster Grandible was stingy with the trap-lanterns. Seven years of sleeping in a hammock strung between the shelves, her only lullaby the fluting of the Whitwhistle cheese as its emerald rind heaved and settled. Seven years of helping Grandible defend his territory from

the murderous attempts of other cheesemakers. Seven years of tinkering and taking things apart to fill the unyielding hours, inventing curd-shredders and triple-whisks, and learning the pleasure of seeing cog obey cog.

Seven years in which Grandible never permitted her to step out of his private tunnels, even for a moment, and never let her meet anybody without wearing a mask.

And what of those five years that had been hers before she was apprenticed? She could recall almost nothing of them. She tried a thousand times, but for the greater part that section of her memory was as smooth and numb as scar tissue. Sometimes, just sometimes, she convinced herself that she could remember stray images or impressions, but she could not describe them properly or make sense of them.

Darkness. A luminous coil of purple smoke rising around her and upward. A bitterness on her tongue. These were her only memories of her lost past, if memories they truly were.

Nobody's mind ever remains a blank page, however carefully they are locked away from the world. In the case of Neverfell, she had made her mind into a scrapbook, busy filling it with the fragments, stories, rumours and reports she could scavenge from talking to the delivery boys who came to pick up cheeses or drop off milk and supplies, and failing that the wild scribblings of her own imagination.

By the time she had reached the giddy age of twelve-probably, she knew everything about Caverna that could be learned through nothing more than sharp ears, a good memory, tireless questioning and an overactive imagination. She knew of the glittering Court, teetering always on the tightrope of the Grand Steward's whims. She knew of the great ceaseless camel trains that crossed the desert to bring wagonloads of

provisions to Caverna, and carry away tiny portions of luxuries created by Caverna's master Craftsmen, each worth more than their weight in diamonds. The overground had its own makers of delicacies, but only in Caverna were there masters of the Craft, capable of making wines that rewrote the subtle book of memory, cheeses that brought visions, spices that sharpened the senses, perfumes that ensnared the mind and balms that slowed ageing to a crawl.

Hearsay, however, was no substitute for a real live visitor.

'When is she coming? Can I make the tea? Did you see I swept the floors and fed grubs to all the lanterns? I can serve the tea, can't I? Shall I fetch the dates?' Questions were too big and wild for Neverfell's mind to rein, and they always escaped her, usually in packs of six. Questions annoyed Master Grandible, and she could feel them annoying him, but somehow she could never help it. Even his grim, warning silences just filled her with a desperate urge to fill them. 'Can I—'

'No!'

Neverfell flinched back. She lived in a quiet, pragmatic terror of those rare times when her persistence or puppy-clumsiness pushed Master Grandible into true anger. Though she had developed something of an instinct for his moods, nothing ever showed in his face, which remained grimly static and weatherworn like a door knocker. When his temper snapped it did so in an instant, and did not right itself for days.

'Not for this visitor. I want you hidden away in the lofts until she is gone.'

The news hit Neverfell like a physical blow. In the drab and pungent calendar of her life, a visitor was more than a holiday – it was a blessed intrusion of light, life, air, colour and *news*. For days before such a visit her excitement would be

almost painful, her mind a hornets' nest of anticipation. For days afterwards her lungs filled more easily, and her mind had new memories and thoughts to turn over and play with, like a child with freshly unwrapped gifts.

To find herself denied contact with any guest at the last moment was agony, but to be denied a chance to meet this particular visitor was beyond bearing.

'I . . . I swept all the floors . . .' It came out as a pathetic, broken little mewl. Neverfell had spent the last two days taking especial care to fulfil all her duties, and find yet more to complete so that Master Grandible would have no reason to lock her out of sight before the visitor arrived.

She felt her throat tighten, and had to blink back the blur of tears. Master Grandible stared at her and nothing changed in his face. No light moved in his eyes. Perhaps he was going to strike her. Or for all she knew perhaps he was just thinking of Cheddar.

'Go and put your mask on, then,' he growled, and scowled away down the corridor. 'And no gabbling when she arrives.'

Neverfell did not waste an instant wondering at his change of heart, but scampered away to extricate her black mask from the heap of tools, ragged catalogues and disembowelled clocks under her hammock. The pile of the velvet was now rough and flattened by years of greasy handling.

It was a full-face mask with silver brows and a silver mouth closed in a polite smile. It had painted eyes, each with a little hole in the centre for her to peer through. She pushed her pigtails back, and tied the mask in place with its frayed black ribbon.

Once, many years before, she had dared to ask why she had to wear a mask when visitors came. Grandible's

response had been blunt and searing.

For the same reason that a sore wears a scab.

In that moment she had realized that she must be hideous. She had never asked again. From then on she had lived in dread of her own blurry reflection in the copper pots, flinched from the pale and wobbly visage that greeted her indistinctly in the whey pails. She was a horror. She must be. She was too horrible to be allowed out of Grandible's tunnels.

However, deep in Neverfell's tangle of a mind there was a curious little knot of stubbornness. In truth, she had never resigned herself to the idea of a life spent cloistered away among Stiltons. Thus when she had discovered the identity of the woman who had so confidently invited herself to tea a small bubble of hope had formed in Neverfell's mind.

Neverfell flung off her leather apron, and hurried on the jacket with all the buttons or near enough. She had barely had time to make herself presentable when she heard the door's string of bells ring to announce the arrival of Madame Vesperta Appeline, the celebrated Facesmith.

Facesmiths could only be found in Caverna. The outer world had no need of them. It was only in the labyrinthine underground city of Caverna that babies did not smile.

In the overground world, babies that stared up at their mother's faces gradually started to work out that the two bright stars they could see above them were eyes like their own, and that the broad curve was a mouth like theirs. Without even thinking about it, they would curve their mouths the same way, mirroring their mothers' smiles in miniature. When they were frightened or unhappy, they would know at once how to screw up their faces and bawl.Caverna babies never did

this, and nobody knew why. They looked solemnly at the face above them, and saw eyes, nose, mouth, but they did not copy its expressions. There was nothing wrong with their features, but somehow one of the tiny silver links in the chain of their souls was missing. They had to be forced to learn expressions one at a time, slowly and painfully, otherwise they remained blank as eggs.

These carefully taught expressions were the Faces. Those at the cheapest crèches learned only a handful of Faces, all suitable for their station, for what need had they of more? Richer families sent their children to better nurseries where they would learn two or three hundred Faces. Most Cavernans spent their lives making do with the Faces they had learned in infancy, but the affluent elite sometimes hired Facesmiths, specialist Face-designers, to teach them new expressions. Among the fashionable elite, a new, beautiful or interesting Face could cause more of a stir than a string of black pearls or a daring hat.

This was Neverfell's first opportunity to meet a Facesmith, and her heart was punching against her ribs with excitement as she sprinted back to her master.

'Can I be the one to unlock the door?' she asked, aware that she might be pushing her luck.

Cheesemaster Grandible was always careful to hide his front door keys away from Neverfell's curious grasp, and only dug them out when a visitor was imminent. On this occasion he tossed her the great ring without a word, and she ran back to the door, her fingers thrilled by the cold weight of the keys.

'Only let her in if she's alone – and take a sniff before you open that door!' barked Grandible from down the corridor. Cheesemaster Grandible always responded to any outside

intrusion as a potential invasion, even when the visitors were nothing but delivery boys.

Her fingers clumsy with excitement, Neverfell pulled out the waxed cloth that plugged each of the locks to keep out poison gas and glisserblinds, the tiny sightless snakes that sometimes slithered through rocky fissures using their uncanny sense of smell to search for something to bite. She unlocked the seven locks, pulled back thirty-four of the thirty-five bolts, then obediently halted, and stood on tiptoe to look through the goggle-glass spyhole set in the door.

In the little passageway beyond was the figure of a solitary woman. Her waist was so slender it looked as though it might snap. She was dressed in a dark green gown with a silver-beaded stomacher, and a lace-adorned standing collar. Her mahogany-coloured hair was all but lost amid a forest of feathers, most iridescent green and black, which made her look taller than she was. Neverfell's first thought was that the lady must have come straight from some wonderful party.

A black silk kerchief was wrapped around Madame Appeline's throat, so that her pale face was thrown into relief. Neverfell decided instantly that it was the most beautiful face she had ever seen. It was heart-shaped and perfectly smooth. As the lady waited, various expressions twinkled in and out of existence, a strange and charming change from Grandible's perpetual glower. Her eyes were long, slanted and green, her brows utterly black. Only a little cleft in the chin prevented her face from being perfectly regular.

Remembering Grandible's instructions, Neverfell opened a small hidden hatch, and took a quick careful sniff of the air. Her sharp cheesemaker's nose picked up only hair powder, haste and a hint of violets. The lady was wearing perfume,

but not Perfume; a pleasing scent but not one that could be used to enslave minds.

Neverfell dragged back the last bolt, heaved on the great iron ring and pulled the door open. Upon seeing her, the woman hesitated, and then softened slightly into a look of politely amused surprise, tinged with kindness.

'Can I speak to Cheesemaster Moormoth Grandible? I believe he is expecting me?'

Neverfell had never been looked at quite so gently before, and her mouth dried up instantly.

'Yes . . . I . . . He . . . he's in the reception room.' This was her golden moment to steal a few words with the Facesmith, and apparently she had forgotten how to form sentences. She felt her face grow hot under the mask as she glanced furtively about her. 'I . . . I wanted to ask you something—'

'Neverfell!' came the gruff bark from the reception room.

Neverfell abruptly remembered her master's instructions. *No gabbling*. That probably meant he did not want her talking at all.

She hesitated, then bent a neat little bow, and stepped back, miming an invitation to enter. No friendly chatter today. This was a guest to treat well and attentively, but not one to make too comfortable or welcome. So Neverfell waited for Madame Appeline to enter, fastened the door behind her and then showed her towards the reception room, a dapper little mannequin with white eyes and a silver smile.

The light in the passage was dim, a sure sign of a shortage of people. Just as people counted upon the little carnivorous flytrap plants in the trap-lanterns to draw in stale, breathed air and turn it into fresh, breathable air, so the traps needed people to provide a supply of stale air for them to breathe. If

there were not enough people around, they ran out of stale air, turned off their glow and went to sleep. The little flytraps themselves had the blind, dappled, pallid look of toadstools, and seemed to be yawning their blind mouths out of boredom rather than the hope of luring in fat cave moths with their murky, yellowish light.

Fortunately Madame Appeline followed neatly behind Neverfell, without showing any temptation to wander off or touch anything. Grandible distrusted visitors, so by now all his booby-traps would have been set. Doors would be locked and their handles smeared with a paralysing veneer of Poric Hare-Stilton just in case. Besides such precautions, there were also the ordinary hazards of a cheesemaker's domain. Open the wrong door and you might find yourself faced with shelves of Spitting Jesses, rattling on their dove-feather beds and sending up a fine spray of acid through the pores in their rinds, or some great mossy round of Croakspeckle, the very fumes of which could melt a man's brain like so much butter.

The cosy antechamber that Grandible used as a reception room was the only place into which visitors were ever permitted. Here at least the reek of cheese was slightly fainter than in the rest of Grandible's domain. As Neverfell showed her in, the Facesmith drew herself up and changed manner completely. Suddenly she was grandiose and glittering, and seemed to have gained a few inches in height.

'Cheesemaster! I had heard rumours that you were still alive. How delightful to be able to confirm them!' The Facesmith swept delicately into the room, the longest feathers of her headdress kissing the roof of the antechamber. Peeling off her yellow gloves, she settled herself on the appointed guest chair, a carefully judged eight sword-lengths from

Grandible's great wooden seat. 'After such a dramatic and complete disappearance, half my friends were convinced you had despaired of life and done something ghastly to yourself.'

Grandible examined the cuff of his long, grey greeting-visitors coat. His expression did not change, but perhaps for a second it deepened a little.

'Tea,' was all he said. The cuffs did not respond, but presumably they knew the instruction was meant for Neverfell.

It was agony leaving the conversation at such a moment, just as it seemed Neverfell might finally learn something of Grandible's reasons for withdrawing from Court. The only aristocracy of Caverna were the Craft, the makers of true delicacies that crossed the invisible line between the mind-blowing and the miraculous. As a maker of True Cheeses, Grandible was a member of the Craft class, but he had never told Neverfell why he chose not to take up his rightful place at Court.

In their rocky little kitchen, Neverfell hauled on a wall lever to summon hot water. Somewhere far above in the furnace caverns a little bell would be ringing. After a minute or two the water pipes started to hum, whine and judder. Neverfell tugged on her protective gloves and turned the grey and scaly tap, releasing a torrent of steaming water into the teapot.

Neverfell made tea, scalding herself in her haste, and by the time she re-emerged guest and host were mid-conversation. When Neverfell placed a cup of peppermint tea and a plate of dates on the table beside Madame Appeline, the latter paused mid-flow to flash Neverfell a small, sweet 'thank you' smile.

'. . . an extremely good customer,' the Facesmith went on, 'but also a close friend, which is why I promised to try to help him. You can understand his worry, surely? This is such an

important diplomatic occasion, and the poor young man does not want to disgrace himself in front of the Grand Steward and the rest of the Court. Can you blame my friend for wanting to make sure that he has all the right Faces prepared?'

'Yes.' Grandible's blunt nails tapped at the arm of his chair, near the catch for the hidden compartment. 'I can. Fools like that keep the Face market running, even though everybody knows that two hundred Faces are enough for anybody. Damn it, *ten* would do.'

'Or . . . two?' Madame Appeline narrowed her long slanting eyes. Her smile was knowing, but there was a hint of warmth and sympathy beneath the mockery. 'Cheesemaster, I know that it is almost a matter of principle with you, but you should actually be careful wearing the same Face day in and day out. It marks the countenance. Some day you may want to use one of your other Faces and suddenly realize that your face muscles can no longer remember them.'

Grandible stared at her, his face dour as a gibbet. 'I find this one very suitable for most situations and people I encounter.' He sighed. 'I fail to see why you want to talk to me, Facesmith. If this whelp wants a hundred new expressions so he can react differently to every shade of green he sees, then go ahead and sell them to him.'

'If it was a matter of shades of green, then, yes, that would be an easy matter. Mock all you like, but In Contemplation of Verdigris and An Apprehension of Apple Boughs are very popular right now. No, the problem is the banquet. If he wants to prove he is a true judge of all that is fine, he must be able to react the right way to every dish. Are you getting a glimmer of my motives now, dear Cheesemaster?'

'More of a glint.'

'I already have him primed with the right Faces for all four Wines, the songbird jelly, the soup, the pie, the cordial, the ices and each of the sugared fruits. But your Stackfalter Sturton will be making its *debut*. How can I devise the right Face for something that I have never experienced?'

'That particular cheese was commissioned by the Grand Steward. It is his property.'

'But there are always broken cheeses?' persisted Madame Appelline. 'Failed cheeses? Scraps? Spills? Crumbs? My friend would only need the tiniest crumb. Would you not be willing to spare even that? He would be most grateful.'

'No.' The answer was very soft and final, like a candle dying. Madame Appeline was very quiet for a long time, and when she spoke again she sounded very serious. Her smile was melancholy.

'Dear Cheesemaster, has it never occurred to you that some day – however improbable it may seem to you – you might wish to return to Court? That you might *need* to come back to Court? Hiding out here may feel safe, but it is not. It offers your enemies a thousand chances to move against you, whisper in the right ears. It makes you vulnerable, and if you lose your standing some dark hour you will not be safe even here. And you have posterity –' she directed a fleeting glance at Neverfell – 'to consider.'

'I'm sure you mean something by that.' Grandible's hands were fidgeting on the arms of his chair, and Neverfell suddenly realized that he was nervous, more nervous than she had ever seen him.

'I mean that sooner or later you and your protégée are going to need allies, and for years you have been doing your best to push away everybody who tries to make friendly overtures.

What if you have to deal with the Court again? How will you manage with no friends and two Faces?'

'I survived last time,' muttered Grandible.

'And perhaps you could again,' Madame Appeline continued quite calmly, 'or you could let me help you. I know a lot of people, and could make introductions. I could even make a "new look" for you, to make the whole thing easier.' She put her heart-shaped head on one side, and scrutinized Grandible through her long, green eyes. 'Yes, I think a touch of Twinkle or Wry Charm would suit you very well. Or perhaps World Weary, with a Hint of Sadness and a Core of Basic Integrity. Perhaps even Amused Shrewdness, with a Well of Deeper Wisdom? Cheesemaster, I know that you have a prejudice against my trade, but the truth is I can be a good friend, and I am really quite a useful person to know.'

'Biscuits,' said Grandible with venom.

In the kitchen, Neverfell's haste tripped her on a rug-edge, sprawled her over a chair and forced her to spend maddening extra minutes picking the spilt biscuits up from the floor and flicking the specks off them. She arrived back in the antechamber just in time to see that the conversation was over. With a sting of desperation she observed the Facesmith gliding back towards the great door with its thirty-five bolts, her expression a mild glow of wry amusement, regret, sympathy and resolution.

Breathless, Neverfell ran to catch up with her, then dropped her deepest bow. She felt the Facesmith's smile tickle over her as gently and iridescently as the headdress feathers had touched the ceiling. Neverfell's heart lurched at the thought of breaking her orders from Master Grandible, but there would never be another chance to speak with a Facesmith, and this chance was slipping away.

'My lady!' she whispered urgently. 'Wait! Please! I . . . you said you could make Faces that would make Master Grandible look good, and I just wanted to know . . .' She took a deep breath, and asked the question that had been buzzing around in her mind for months. 'Could . . . could you make a Face for somebody that has none worth the name? I mean . . . someone so ugly they must be hid?'

For a few seconds the Facesmith regarded Neverfell's mask, her expression perfectly motionless. Then it softened into a gleaming sweetness, like a droplet welling at the tip of a thawing icicle. She reached out a hand towards the mask, apparently intending to remove it, but Neverfell flinched back. She was not yet ready for this beautiful woman to see whatever lay beneath.

'You really won't let me see?' whispered Madame Appeline. 'Very well, then – I have no intention of upsetting you.' She glanced up the corridor, then leaned forward to whisper.

'I have had many people come to me who were called ugly, and every single time I have been able to design them a Face that makes them pleasant to the eye. It is never hopeless. Whatever you may have been told, nobody *needs* to be ugly.'

Neverfell felt her eyes tingle, and had to swallow hard. 'I'm sorry Master Grandible was so rude. If it had been up to me . . .'

'Thank you.' There were peacock-coloured flecks in Madame Appeline's eyes, as if two green gems had been carefully fractured a hundred times. 'I believe you. What was your name again – did Master Grandible call you Neverfell?'

Neverfell nodded.

'Good to meet you, Neverfell. Well, I shall remember that I may have one young friend in these cheese tunnels, even if

your master is determined to distrust everyone that belongs to the Court.' Madame Appeline glanced back towards the reception room. 'Look after him well. He is more vulnerable than he thinks. It is dangerous to lock oneself away and lose track of what is happening outside.'

'I wish I could go out into the city and discover things for him,' whispered Neverfell. Her reasons were not completely unselfish, though, and she knew the yearning in her voice had betrayed her.

'Do you never leave your master's tunnels?' Madame Appeline's black eyebrows rose gracefully as Neverfell shook her head. Her tone was slightly scandalized. 'Never? But why on earth not?'

Neverfell's hands moved defensively back to her mask, and the unloved face it hid.

'Oh.' Madame Appeline gave a soft sigh of realization. 'Do you really mean to say that he keeps you locked up in here because of your looks? But that is terrible! No wonder you want a new Face!' She reached out one yellow-gloved hand and gently stroked the cheek of Neverfell's mask with a faint rasp of velvet. 'Poor child. Well, do not despair. Perhaps you and I will turn out to be friends, and if so perhaps some day I will have a chance to make a Face for you. Would that make you happy?'

Neverfell nodded mutely, her chest full to bursting.

'In the meanwhile,' the Facesmith went on, 'you can always send a message to me. My tunnels are not far from the Samphire District, where Tytheman's Slink meets the Hurtles.'

A bell rang in the reception room, and Neverfell knew that Grandible was becoming impatient. Reluctantly, she unbolted the door again and heaved it open, so that Madame Appeline could drift out.

'Goodbye, Neverfell.'

In the fleeting second before the door closed between them, Neverfell glimpsed something that made her heart stumble in its pace. Madame Appeline was watching her with a Face she had never seen before. It was unlike anything from the many Facesmith catalogues Neverfell had treasured over the years, nor was it smooth and beautiful like the other Faces Madame Appeline had worn during her visit. It contained a smile, but one with a world of weariness behind the brightness, and sadness beyond the kindness. There was something a little haggard around the eyes as well, that spoke of sleeplessness, patience and pain.

Next instant the image was gone, and Neverfell was left staring at the door as it clicked to. Her mind was crazed with colour and jumbled thoughts. It took her a moment or two before she remembered that she should be throwing all the bolts.

That last extraordinary Face had sent a throb through her very soul, like a breeze shivering the string of a harp, and she could not account for it. Something in her heart cried out that it was familiar. Without knowing why, Neverfell had come very close to flinging the door open again, throwing her arms around the visitor and bursting into tears.