

Ghost Rider

A Journey In The Crossroads Universe

Marie Brown

Smashwords Edition

©2014

Smashwords Edition License Notes

Thank you for downloading this free ebook. Although this is a free book, it remains the copyrighted property of the author, and may not be reproduced, copied, or distributed for commercial or non-commercial purposes. If you enjoyed this book, please encourage your friends to download their own copy at Smashwords.com, where they can also discover other works by this author. Thank you for your support.

Table of Contents

[Ghost Rider](#)
[Author Info](#)

Ghost Rider

The barkeep stopped him on the way upstairs at the end of another long, disheartening day of searching.

"Got a letter for you."

"A letter? Who left it?"

The barkeep shrugged. "Dunno, some kid."

"Huh." Heath accepted the rolled-up piece of vellum and went upstairs, to the room they'd shared. He sat on the bed and started picking his way through the rather ornate letters, wishing he could read better.

Over the last week, the letter began, I have grown fond of your lover.

Heath felt suddenly glad he'd sat down.

This is why I am contacting you. He has spoken of you often, and his pure faith in you deserves a reward. For as I said, I am rather fond of Marlin, and I have no wish to see him given in sacrifice to the Great Beast. If you choose to prove his faith well-placed, be at the Segorney Rocks on the night of the full moon. I shall be ready to support you magically should the need arise.

The world spun, with that feeling of vertigo Heath would never admit to getting in really high places. Like the top of Eldin's Tower. Let others admire the view from up there, he'd stay safely on the ground.

. . .sacrifice to the Great Beast. . .

Such things shouldn't happen. The Great Beast just shouldn't be real. But if someone meant to sacrifice Marlin to it, well, real or not, he'd better get moving.

"Segorney Rocks," he said aloud, as the world eased up its quivering, swooping dives. "Damn."

How in nine kinds of hell was he supposed to get there before tomorrow, which of course was the first night of the full moon? Better get moving. Screw sleep, and food, and all that other stuff normal people did at the end of the day. Marlin's life depended on him getting his ass down to the coastline before tomorrow.

Heath staggered a little as he launched himself off the bed, caught himself against the washstand. Water sloshed in the ewer. Be a damn fine situation if he managed to take himself out before he even got started.

Heath got himself sorted out and jogged through the inn. People looked at him oddly, the big fighter in a moderately impractical outfit with more leather straps and weapons than actual armor or clothing, but he paid them no mind. His getup served him well, here in this land of blazing heat.

Across the big plaza from the inn, a livery stable beckoned with open doors. Heath glanced at the setting sun and put on a bit more speed. He dodged the public water fountain and reached the stable just as the manager was about to lock up for the night.

"Wait! I need a horse," Heath blurted, reaching for the woman's arm. "You have to help me!"

"Whoa, there, big fella," the woman said, disengaging his grip and raising a calming hand.

"What's the hurry?"

"My partner's life depends on me getting to the Segorney Rocks before moonrise tomorrow. I need a horse. A fast horse."

"Goodness, you need more than a horse, you need a miracle! Segorney's a good—"

"Don't say it," he pleaded. "Please. Just don't say it."

"Fine, then. But you know how—Wait a minute."

The stable manager looked at him more closely. "Well, you're certainly big and strong enough. Look, how good a rider are you?"

"Pretty good," Heath replied cautiously.

"And how's your nerves? Can you take some truly scary shit?"

"Yes," he said with more confidence.

"Then I have a horse for you. Let me just duck inside here and grab something, then I'll take you to the field."

She didn't wait for a reply, just slipped inside the stable doors. Heath fidgeted, checking the

sun's angle frequently. It hovered just above the horizon when the stable manager returned.

"Got it," she said, patting her pocket. "Come on, then, let's get out to the field."

"It's getting late," Heath said, as he followed the small but speedy woman.

"I know. But don't worry, this horse will get you there."

The field turned out to be a fenced pasture three streets over, nestled up against the protective rimrock that formed the western wall of Engenbrook. Heath scanned it quickly, noting the presence of a glowing blue ghost horse trying to graze. Its jaws worked, but the grass remained untouched.

"Where's the horse?"

"Right there." She waved at the ghost, then opened the gate.

"Hey!" Heath stopped in his tracks. "I'm no mage! What are you trying to pull? I don't have time for this!"

"You don't have to be a mage to control him. Come here."

Warily, Heath did, watching as she pulled something out of her pocket.

"This ring belonged to his old master," she said, extending her hand. Automatically Heath accepted it. The ring felt very warm, too warm for just body heat. "As long as you wear it, you can control the horse. But be aware, he has a temper, and he can be a bit stubborn."

"What—I can't—"

"Yes, you can," she said firmly. "I won't even charge you for him. Just get him off my hands. He spooks all the living horses."

"I can see why." *Never look a gift horse in the mouth*, Heath thought, although the hoary old saying hardly applied to a ghost. "You're sure I'll be able to control him?"

"You'd better," she nodded. "Otherwise you'll never reach your destination in time."

"Good point. But I won't get there if I'm dead, either."

Heath looked at the ghost horse as it chomped away, thinking of the four day journey to the Segorney Rocks. Thinking of Marlin, chained to the rocks as a sacrifice to the Great Beast. Thinking of himself, passing up the best chance to save Marlin.

"Fine. I'll take him. Clean up the mess if he kills me, okay?"

"His name is Musafel," the woman called after him as he walked across the field.

Ghost horses. Long favored by mages, ghost horses were themselves creatures of pure magic. No one really knew where they'd come from, if they were just ghosts of ordinary horses or not. Most likely they were just creatures that had wandered through the Crossroads and decided to stay. About the only thing everyone agreed on was that a person had to be a mage to survive riding a ghost horse.

"You'd better appreciate this, Marlin," Heath muttered under his breath as he approached the translucent blue horse. He slipped the ring on his finger. It didn't make it past the first joint. So he tugged it back off and put it on his pinky instead. That worked a little better. It settled onto his finger like a band of shifting fire.

Musafel flicked an ear, stomped at an illusory fly.

Heath paused, reminded himself he'd seen people sitting on ghost horses before without falling clean through, took a deep breath, and vaulted swiftly onto the ghost horse's back, hands winding instantly into the long mane.

The world burst into flame with a roar. Blue, green, and purple flames ravened at Heath, although they didn't feel terribly hot. He could feel their touch, though, and knew without the ring he'd be dead.

He might die anyway. The fires only lasted a split second on their own. Then a tornado of wind and violence joined them.

Bucking. Kicking. Rearing. Swapping ends. Crowhopping. Sunfishing. Hammerleg. Corkscrew. All words he'd heard applied to things horses do to rid themselves of unwanted passengers. None of them adequately described the things Musafel did to him.

More than the physical violence, he felt the ghost horse in his *head*, somehow. He could feel the horse's flaming fury, its need to get the offensive thing *off* its back.

I don't have time for this, Heath thought. *Run, damn you! Fucking run!*

He tried to will the horse's head up, kicked it as hard as he could while clinging desperately to the bucking ghost. Get the horse moving, he could stick on a running horse, even a pissed off bucking horse.

Musafel snorted flame. His head lifted.

He ran.

Blazing across the countryside like a grassfire before a high wind, Musafel ran faster than any living horse ever could. Heath laughed at the sheer exultation of the speed, feeling his desperate terror shift into a fierce joy. So that was the secret, eh? No magic needed, just willpower. He thought about the horse turning east, towards the distant coastline, and he did. Heath settled down more comfortably onto the ghost horse's hot back, eased his painful grip on the fiery mane, and watched the ground speed by beneath them.

Musafel ran like the wind. Completely tireless, the horse kept up his amazing speed with no effort, blasting along the trade road in a whirlwind of speed and flickering flame.

They reached Knight's Shroud before the sun's last glow faded from the sky, a trade town at a major crossroads between north-south and east-west roads. Heath slowed the ghost horse with his mind, easing him down to a walk, then finally a stop, right in front of an apothecary.

Heath dismounted, although he kept a hand on the ghost. "You stay here," he said aloud, reinforcing the command with the thought of the horse standing patiently in place. Musafel snorted and shoved his nose into Heath's chest. Heath chuckled and rubbed the translucent head, just like he would a real horse. "You're not so bad, are you, for a ghost. Now stay here, I need to get something."

"Is that a ghost horse?"

A group of small children had materialized from somewhere, visible in the last bit of sunlight as it dipped below the horizon. The magical lanterns came to life with their usual abruptness.

"Yeah," Heath replied, even though he wanted to be sarcastic. *Isn't it obvious? The damn thing's see-through!* "Don't touch."

He ignored the curious kids and hustled into the apothecary shop. The door opened, always a good sign.

"Hello? Anyone here?"

"What—who—Oh!" A woman popped up from her position bent over behind a display counter. "I wasn't expecting anybody this late. What can I do for you?"

"I'm in a hurry, just passing through, but I really need some Viminitor. You got any of that?"

The woman snickered. "Viminitor. What a joke. No, I don't keep that pathetic solution on hand. I have something far better, that I mix up myself."

"Damn." Heath's hopes sank. Viminitor was a well-known, trustworthy potion, used by soldiers and students worldwide. It provided long-lasting energy and a boost to alertness. Who knew what this woman had mixed up instead? "Does it work?"

"I just said it was better, didn't I? Each shot is good for half a day, a full twelve hours."

"Fine. I'm desperate. Give me two."

"Well. . ." The woman looked at him. "Two can be pretty dangerous. I'll do it, but only if you absolutely promise to eat well and sleep for at least twelve hours after the second one wears off."

"Fine. Anything! I just need the energy, and I'll get out of your hair. How much?"

She named her price, and Heath made a face. Damn near all the coin he had on hand. "This stuff better be good," he said, as he handed over the money.

"Oh, it is, it is," she assured him, tucking the coins into an apron pocket. She turned to the tall shelves behind her. "You should stop back by when you're done with your quest, tell me how it went."

"I'm not on a quest."

"Right. That's why you're dressed like you are, armed heavily, and in an all-fired hurry. Ah, here we are. Two of my special blend."

She plucked two nondescript little bottles off the shelves and handed them over.

"I wish you luck," she called, as Heath departed. Rapidly.

Heath slammed down one of the potions and looked for a place to toss the bottle. No luck. So he put it in his belt pouch, along with the full bottle, and shooed the kids away. This time when he mounted Musafel, the ghost horse just shook his mane and snorted, then bucked half-heartedly.

Run!

By the time the horse launched into motion, Heath received a shocking jolt from the potion he'd downed so carelessly.

"Holy shit!" he said into the wind of Musafel's speed. "I think I'm in love!"

Blue sparks flashed as Musafel's feet pounded the road, although no sound broke the stillness of the evening as the magical lights of the town faded away behind them. The energy potion sang through Heath's body, filling him with life, without making his nerves jangle unpleasantly.

"Where was this shit when I was in the Company?" he asked the horse, who made no response, of course.

The amazing potion kept Heath awake and feeling damn fine all through the night. He didn't feel hungry, or tired, or bored. He felt amazingly alive as he rode the glowing ghost horse through the dark of night.

Sunrise found them racing along the seaside, the tireless ghost still churning along at mind-bending speed, and the juiced-up man running through scenario after scenario in his head, working out plans and contingency plans for whatever situation he might find awaiting him at the Rocks.

The sun rose over the sea, with its light magnified beyond normal beauty by the waves rippling over the vast waters. Sea birds cried, diving for fishes, and a wispy bank of clouds glowed on the horizon.

The energy potion wore off mid-morning, well past the time he expected it to fade away. It left a staggering weariness in its wake. Heath could scarcely credit how fast the potion left him bone tired. Good thing he was on the horse, otherwise he'd fall flat on his face. He fumbled at his pouch, barely strong enough and focused enough to stay on the horse and pick out the unopened potion at the same time. But he managed, and gulped the stuff down, nearly spilling it as the horse lurched on an uneven patch of road. Damn thing must have done that on purpose. So far it had flowed smoothly over bumps and potholes without a stumble. He wiped his face, desperate enough to lick his fingers and get the last few drops of blessed energy into him, rather than letting it run off his face and evaporate away.

This time, he felt the jolt of the potion kicking in with vast relief. He couldn't possibly rescue Marlin if he were too weary to stand, after all, and he'd been up for more than a day now. But the potion did its thing, the horse kept running, and Heath allowed himself some cautious hope.

By the time they reached the Segorney Rocks, Heath still felt alert and active, but his body ached from the long ride in a way that didn't bear thinking about. The sun hovered just above the horizon, turning the mottled landscape into a lurid shade of pink. And homing in on the rocks was a gigantic black shape that could only be the Great Beast itself. It had wings, and claws, and a long snaky tail.

Faster, Heath urged Musafel. Please, faster!

The horse snorted a cloud of steam and felt annoyed. Then it caught sight of something and skidded to a halt for a brief moment, shock and fury resonating through the connection he shared with the human.

Heath saw a confused jumble of images in his mind, overlaid atop his physical vision of a small figure on the Rocks with raised arms. The mage, the one he could barely see, sprang to vivid life in his mind's eye, and somehow he knew this mage was responsible for the death of the ghost horse's previous owner.

Then Musafel launched into motion again, engulfed in the flames of his fury, moving easily twice the rate he had been before he stopped. Heath hung on to the horse's mane, glad for the additional fury coursing through him from the horse. It gave him a bit more energy.

Musafel blasted up the side of the hill the Segorney Rocks perched on, and Heath swore in horror. The Great Beast was almost there now, claws outstretched. And there was Marlin, chained to the great rock wall, in the traditional bindings of sacrifice. He thrashed and struggled, trying to

break free, naked as the day he'd been born.

Musafel stopped before he overran the mage, who had shockingly green and black hair. Heath leapt off the ghost horse and staggered on landing. Musafel squealed, reared, and attacked the green-haired mage.

"Marlin!"

Heath gave the mage a look, decided it was okay to let Musafel deal with him. He wondered where the other mage was, the one that wanted to help him out. He ran towards Marlin, who finally spotted him coming up the hill. The terror on his face transformed into brilliant relief.

That only lasted a second, of course. The Great Beast roared and swept in to snatch its prey.

It got a slash across the hand with Heath's sword instead. The thing seemed to be armored, though, because the sword didn't cut into flesh. The Beast roared. It swept straight up into the air, shaking its hand like it stung.

A gout of fire shot towards Heath and he dove for the ground, rolling. Maybe leaving the mage to Musafel wasn't such a good idea. He came back up facing the conflict between mage and horse, where Musafel struck repeatedly at the mage with front legs and teeth, blue flames shooting from every contact. The mage tried to fight back, but the horse wasn't all that easy to affect, being a ghost as it was. Looked like Heath had just caught a stray blast, not anything intentional.

He heard the sound of wings in the air and got his sword up barely in time to strike at the Great Beast. Flapping wings, striking claws, flames and wind and noise. . .

Confusion. Pure chaos and confusion. Heath gave up on thinking and turned himself over to instinct, trusting that extra sense that kept him alive in battle to help him dodge attack after attack.

This isn't working, he thought at one point, as a claw ripped into his shoulder from behind.

Then he had a flash of insight, a brief moment of clarity: kill the mage, get rid of the Beast. Which, of course, was summoned here, not here of its own free will. Musafel had the mage fully occupied, the Beast was climbing high into the air for another diving attack, do it now.

Heath bolted for the conflict between mage and ghost, making sure to stay out of sight. Honor? Who gave a shit about honor in a situation like this? He charged forward and sliced into the mage from behind, nearly cutting his entire head off. The mage fell to the ground, dead, and Musafel reared. He came down on top of the mage's body, trampling it thoroughly, squealing.

Overhead, the Great Beast let loose a joyful trumpeting cry, and flew away as fast as it could flap its wings.

Heath panted, watching the Beast, letting his sword sag against the ground for a moment. Musafel quit pounding on the body, snorted, and jogged over to nuzzle Heath.

"Thanks for the help, horse," he said, then tried to find a clean bit of fabric to clean his sword with. No luck. The fallen mage wore just as little clothing as most Sefalians, and the bits of bodysuit left unbloodied and untornd just wouldn't do for cleaning a sword. So he shrugged and put the sword aside. He'd clean it later. Now, he had a key to find, because somehow during all the chaos he'd spotted big locks holding the chains shut on Marlin's wrists.

The key was right where most people would keep it, in the mage's belt pouch, along with five gold coins. Heath took those without hesitation. After all, the mage hardly had any use for them anymore. And he'd spent all his money on those fabulous energy potions.

Speaking of which. . . He glanced at the sky. Sometime during the conflict, the sun had set, and the full moon rose. Now it sailed an alarming distance above the horizon. Better get moving, before he fell flat on his face.

Heath took the key and crossed the mostly-demolished bit of flat space in front of the rock face. Marlin watched him impatiently.

"Thanks for coming after me," he called, "but would you mind letting me free?"

Heath chuckled. Right on cue, he felt the energy from the potion start to waver.

The keyhole in the lock was reassuringly large, visible in the moonlight even through the waves of weariness washing over Heath. The skin on the wrists trapped in the manacles was raw from the harsh metal.

"Here you go," Heath said, releasing first the right wrist, then the left.

Marlin fell to the ground, swearing. His arms must have been nearly torn right off. Heath sat beside him, mostly on purpose, and reached through the thick cotton wrapping around him. He saw his hand make contact with his lover, but couldn't feel it. The damn ghost horse felt more solid than the other man.

"Marlin, you real?"

"Damn, this hurts. Yes, I'm real. What's with you? You look. . . strange."

"Potion," Heath said, then passed out.

He came back to life after a period of heavy blankness that felt like death. Well, what he imagined death would feel like, at any rate.

Maybe he really was dead. That would make more sense than what he was looking at now. Pink, frilly things filled his vision. It looked like he was trapped in some little girl's dream of a Princess's bedroom.

"For fuck's sake," Heath muttered, plucking at a delicate pink lace blanket. He peeled the blanket off and got out of the bed. At least the thing was filled with proper rushes. Better than a real featherbed, which he just happened to be violently allergic to.

His sword harness lay on a round white cushion, which adorned a reassuringly common wooden chair. Heath slung his gear on with the ease of long practice and decided, when the sword smacked him on the ass as it settled, that he must be alive after all. Otherwise, wouldn't everything go perfectly in the afterlife?

Heath had one boot on and the other halfway laced when the door to the Princess room opened, showing Marlin's smiling face.

"I thought I heard you moving about."

"Marlin!"

Suddenly, nothing much mattered anymore. Heath stopped lacing his right boot and swept Marlin up in his arms.

"Where have you been? I've missed you so much!"

"I've missed you, too," Marlin said into his shoulder. "But you're strangling me. Ease off and kiss me, you fool!"

What a typically Marlin thing to say. Heath smiled, eased his grip a fraction, and kissed his lover. He tangled his fingers in Marlin's strawberry blonde curls, sliding a hand up under the strange tunic the other man wore.

"What happened?"

"You passed out," Marlin said. "I rode that crazy ghost horse of yours to find help. There's a little fishing village down at the base of the Rocks. I got someone to help me haul your ass in here, and they were kind enough to let us stay."

"Good to know, but that's not what I meant." Heath kissed his man again, savoring the feel of the gentle strength in his body. "How'd you get taken?"

"Not sure," Marlin replied. "I missed you! Forget what happened. Love me!"

"Here?" Heath glanced at the fluffy pinkness of the room. "You've got to be kidding me."

Marlin laughed and pulled away. "I see your point. Then you'd better not kiss me anymore, if you don't want to defile this temple of little girliness."

"I'd rather defile you," Heath leered. "But seriously, let me get my boots on, and tell me what happened."

"Fine. It's embarrassing, and I don't want to, but I know you'll never let me get out of it. So. You know I went to the market for a chicken."

Heath nodded. Marlin loved to cook, and had a fast friendship with the innkeeper's wife, who allowed him free run of the kitchen, as long as he bought his own food. He'd been planning something special with that chicken, but never came back.

"Well. Someone must have liked the way I looked, or something. Maybe I was just the only fool stupid enough to fall into their trap. Whatever, they got me with a puppy."

"A. . . puppy?"

"Yes." Marlin hunched up defensively. "It was a very cute puppy, okay? All white and fluffy,

and it gave a lot of kisses."

Heath laughed helplessly, caught up in the vision of Marlin cooing over a little ball of fluff with a penwiper tongue, oblivious to the bad guys sneaking up behind him.

"Someone knocked me on the head while I was distracted by the puppy. When I woke up, I was tied up and getting hauled across the countryside in a damn wagon. One of my captors, Freslan, turned out to be a decent sort, for all he worshiped the Great Beast. The other, Marcone, you met. Freslan sent you a message, I know. And when Marcone found out. . . Well, you probably noticed there wasn't a Freslan there to meet you."

"I noticed," Heath said soberly. "Now what?"

"Now, I think we need to thank our hostess, and get back home."

"Good plan. But only if there's food involved." Heath checked the knots on his boots, made sure they would hold. He loved his boots, but damn if they didn't take half an hour to get on or off. Wouldn't do to have the big bitches unlace accidentally.

"We can stop on the road. Let's go."

Out in the main room of what turned out to be a fairly typical village house, Heath sniffed longingly at a pot blipping beside the fire. Smelled like fish stew. His stomach reminded him forcefully of his promise to eat a lot after the second potion wore off.

"Look who's awake, Ali," Marlin said, to a plump housewife as she washed dishes in a big tub on the floor.

"Hello, good sir," the woman said, smiling. "Are you a mage?"

"Afraid not," Heath replied. "But I have a magic ring."

"Drat. I'd hoped you could help with a kittrign infestation." Ali sighed. "Ah well, no harm done."

"I could help indirectly," Heath offered, opening his belt pouch. "Here. Take this, with my thanks. It should cover the services of a mage handily."

He offered one of the gold pieces. Ali looked at it before taking it.

"Well, there's truly no need for that, but I'll take it all the same. Gold is hard to come by in these parts. Many thanks, traveler."

"You are most welcome."

"And now, Ali, we'll thank you for your hospitality, and be on our way."

Ali tucked the gold piece away and cocked her head at Marlin. "Sure you won't stay for nooning?"

Marlin shook his head, with a winning smile, even as Heath gave the stewpot another yearning glance. "We must be on the road. It's a long way back to Engenbrook."

"So it is, so it is. Be off with you, then, and safe journey."

"I could've gone for some of that stew," Heath said, as his guts cramped and grumbled.

"I could have, too, but I want to get moving. The sooner we're on the way, the happier I'll be, and so will these townfolk. Your horse is scaring the milk right out of all the cows."

Heath snorted. "I can see that. Hey, you said you rode him. How'd you pull that off? I still have the ring."

He fingered it, wondering why it felt cool to the touch. The fire had leached out of it, somehow.

"You know I'm good with animals. I just asked him if he'd help, he said yes, and off we went."

"Huh." Heath rubbed his back, which still felt like it'd been worked over with an iron sledgehammer. "Wish it'd been that easy for me. He half killed me before deciding to get me where I needed to go."

Musafel grazed on the village green, a rare patch of carefully maintained grass out here on the semi-arid coast. The Segorney Rocks loomed overhead. Heath whistled, and the ghost horse's head popped up. He saw the humans, whinnied, and jogged over to greet them.

"Well, Musafel? Ready to travel some more?"

Heath's stomach growled. Marlin laughed.

"The sooner we get moving, the sooner we reach the inn at Portsmouth, which is closest."

"All right, horse. You heard him. Let's get moving."

They mounted the ghost horse. Musafel barely waited for them to get settled before taking off.

Up on the ghost horse's back, with that weird connection between them working at full strength, Heath figured out why the ring felt cool now. The horse himself felt cool, all his burning anger expiated by destroying that mage. Marcone. The one who worshiped the Great Beast, who wanted to give Marlin's life as a sacrifice. The one who'd died from a massive sword wound in his neck, shoulders, and back.

Come to think of it, the one responsible for the claw gouges in Heath's own back. His sword harness rubbed against the damn things uncomfortably.

"While I'm thinking about it, was it you cleaned out these damn claw marks?"

Marlin touched his shoulder, above one of the wounds. "Yes. You had half the mountainside in there."

"Thanks. I barely feel 'em anymore, except where the harness hits."

"What did you do to yourself, to make you crash so hard? I would've liked to spend the night thanking you, not picking rocks out of your hide and listening to you snore."

"I don't snore," Heath protested automatically. He did, and he knew it, because he'd woken himself up on occasion. But he had to try. "It was a magnificent energy potion. Puts Viminators to shame. In fact, I'd like to stop at the same place and pick up more, for future use."

"Maybe you shouldn't, if it hits that hard when it wears off."

Heath snorted. "Some of that was honest tired. I was up for well over a day, after all."

"I'll keep you up for over a day," Marlin murmured into his ear, in a completely different tone. His hands slid down, from waist to hips. "I need to thank you properly."

"Yes, you do," Heath agreed, leaning back against his lover. But the back of a speeding ghost hardly made the best location for a romantic encounter. And his stomach chose that moment to remind him it was empty, and wanted *food*. Preferably an hour ago.

By the time Musafel bore them to Portsmouth, the only village with an inn before Knight's Shroud, Heath felt horrible, and all because he needed to eat. Headache, weak dizziness, and a foul temper made sticking to the back of the racing ghost pure torment. When they finally stopped, near noon, he almost collapsed on the ground upon dismount.

"Heath, are you okay? I'm sorry I made you leave without eating, I wouldn't have if I knew how badly you needed it. . ."

"What's done's done. Just get me some food now."

"Grumpy," Marlin observed, but he helped steady the larger man as they entered the inn.

Heath's head spun, and his vision greyed out around the edges. He spotted a bench and collapsed on it, dimly aware of a woman's voice making alarmed sounds and Marlin speaking urgently.

She warned me, he thought dimly, around the weird, tingling sensation in his body. *And I didn't listen. Idiot.*

But then somebody dropped a hunk of bread in front of him. He stared at it stupidly for a moment, then mustered the energy to pick it up somehow.

"There's more coming," Marlin promised, rubbing his back. He sat on the bench beside his lover, anxiously watching for signs of improvement as Heath ate the bread. "I'm sorry."

"Never mind," Heath mumbled, feeling a tiny bit better already. He would never, ever, ever disregard that woman's advice, never again.

A plump woman hustled up to the table, holding a plate filled with steaming hot meat and veggies and a mug of beer. She sat them on the table in front of Heath and gave him a worried look.

"Are you going to be all right, good sir?"

Heath made an effort to smile. "I'll be fine," he said. "Thanks for your concern. Had a mishap with a potion, that's all."

He lost whatever response she made in the beer.

After what seemed like hours, Heath finally sat back, surveying the wreckage on the table in front of him with a wry smile.

"Are you done yet?" Marlin's tone was sharp, but Heath could see the laughter in his eyes. "Or

are you going to eat the table, too?"

"I might," Heath nodded. "But not now. I'll save it for later. For now. . . you still in such an all-fired hurry to get home?"

"Maybe not as much as I was. You look tired. Are you going to pass out, now that you've eaten the entire inventory of Marta's kitchen?"

"Sounds reasonable," Heath nodded again. He could feel that bone-deep weariness returning all through his body, now that his empty stomach had finally shut up. "But would you sleep with me?"

"Only if you don't snore."

"I never snore!"

"Whatever. Give me some of that money, I'll go settle with Marta."

Heath dug the remaining gold coins out of his pouch, while Marlin waited impatiently. He was off in a flash as soon as the coins hit his palm, leaving Heath chuckling. Marlin was like a drop of quicksilver, skittering around at top speed, always lively and impatient. People never quite understood how the two of them stayed together despite their differences. What they never realized was that the differences kept them together. Not much fun in staying with someone just like yourself, after all. Better to have an adventure every day.

Although, on second thought, he could do without any more adventures that involved Marlin being in mortal danger.

Marlin returned with a key dangling from a large iron ring. "Come on, get moving. You look like you're already half asleep."

"I did it for you," Heath reminded him, as he pushed off the table and rose to his feet.

Marlin smiled. "I know. And I'm grateful. But I also want you out of this dining room before you pass out. You're too damn big for me to carry."

"Lead on, then. Don't just stand there griping."

The room wasn't upstairs, as Heath had expected. Instead, it was tucked in between the kitchen and the bathhouse, a narrow little chamber just about large enough to hold a bed.

"Don't say it," Marlin warned. "I know it's small. But it was cheap."

Rather than getting annoyed at the tiny space, barely large enough to turn around in, Heath laughed and caught Marlin in his arms. "It's so good to have you back! Penny-pinching and all."

Suddenly Marlin's facade of normalcy cracked, and he shuddered, burrowing into Heath's embrace. "I never thought I'd see you again. I was sure that damn Beast would eat me for supper."

"Not while I'm alive." Heath held him close, aware that both of them needed a bath and were much the worse for wear, not caring. "Marlin. Lay down with me, it's too damn small in here to be emotional anywhere but the bed."

Marlin chuckled as he lay down, pulling Heath with him. Then he yipped in protest. "Hey, I want you, not your sword! Get that thing off, would you?"

"I'll give you a sword," Heath mock-threatened, unbuckling his harness.

"You'd better," Marlin said, helping unbuckle bits of Heath's gear. "Unless. . . are you too tired?"

"I'm never too tired for you."

The bed was big enough. Barely. And Heath even managed to stay awake, despite the dragging weariness all through his body, long enough to welcome Marlin back properly and make sure the man was really there.

The last thing he heard before falling asleep, contented as a cat in the sunshine, was Marlin's voice.

"I love you, big man."

"Love you," Heath murmured, then sleep took him by force.

* * * *

*Visit the author online at
[the Evil Kitten Project](#)
Other titles from Marie Brown*

Luminous

The Hidden Game, Vol 1

God's War

The Hidden Game, Vol 2

With Honor

When Gods Walk

and many more