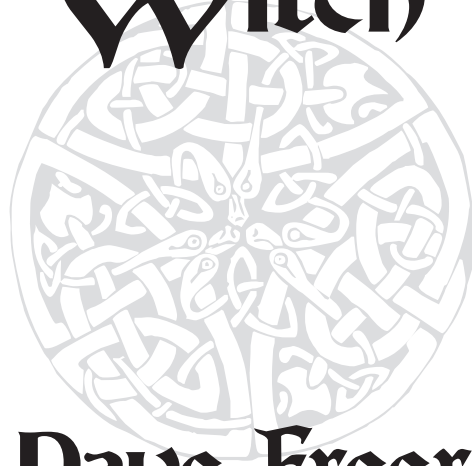


# A Mankind Witch



Dave Freer



A MANKIND WITCH

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

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## DEDICATION

To the memory of loyal companions. If there are no dogs in heaven, let me rather go to wherever they are.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

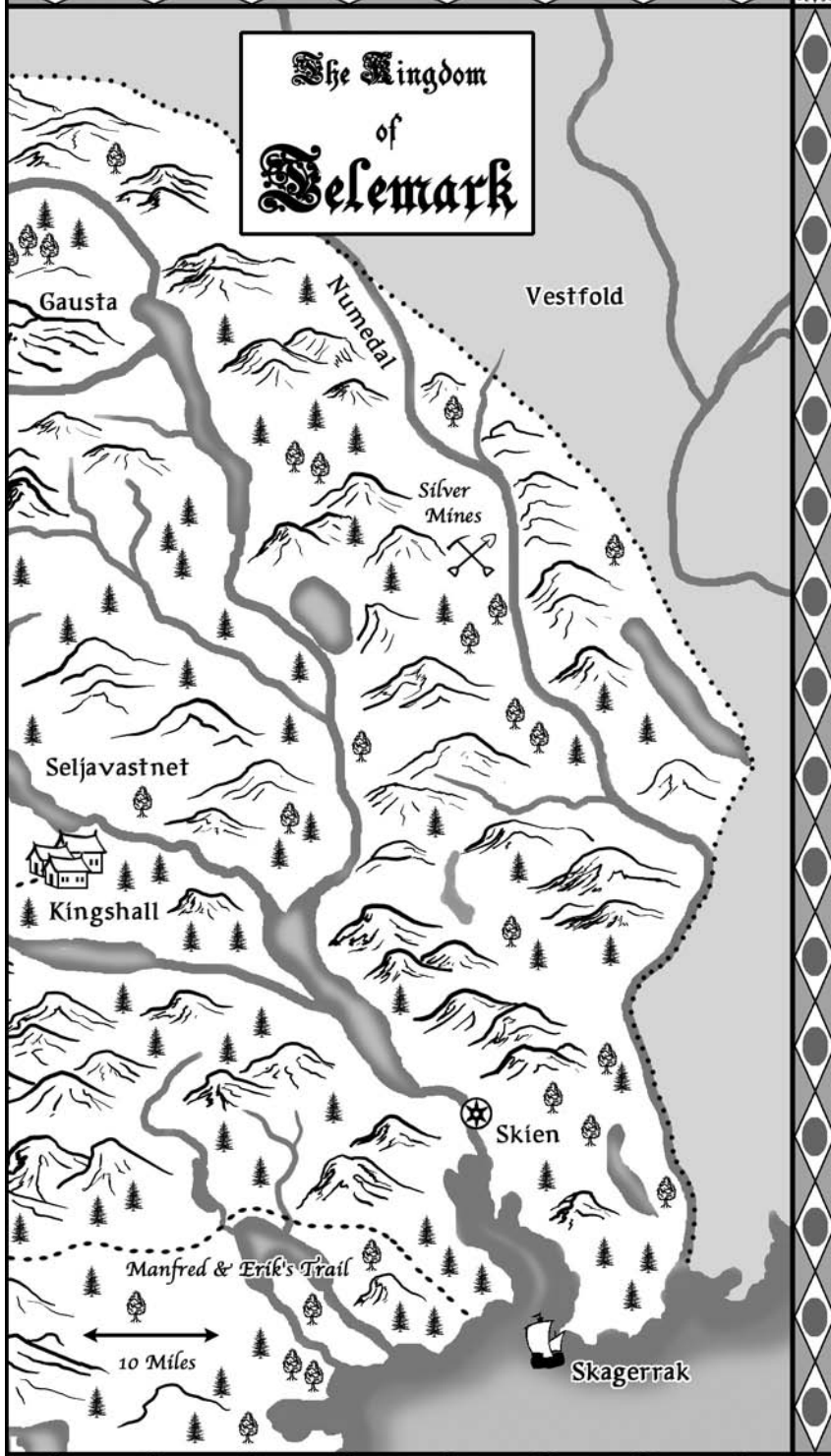
As the first solo novel I have done for some time I felt very alone doing this. Working with Eric Flint and Mercedes Lackey has been very supportive. Nonetheless, my friends and coauthors continued, kindly, to support me this time, too, with advice and encouragement if not with writing the awkward scenes.

My greatest thanks go to my wife, Barbara, who not only fixed my appalling grammar, but also tolerates a husband who has half his head inside Norse myth. I also want to thank the following people: Sioban Finlow-Bates and Dag-Harald Skutlaberg for information about the vegetation and conditions in Norway in winter; my friend Gunnar Dahlin, for help with Skåne; Annette Grahn, for names and maps of the same area; and Jody Dorsett, for some advice on explosives. Mike Kabongo, Tania Shipman, Traci Scroggins, Judith Lasker, all did a terrific job as first readers and helped me polish this tale. My thanks for their help and encouragement.

Grendel is dead.



The Kingdom  
of  
**Delemark**





## PROLOGUE: PLAYERS VARIOUS

Biscay, July 1538

Cair clung to a spar floating in the open ocean, out of sight or scent of land. The rain had stopped now, and, as the spar rose with the swells, he looked around for other wreckage. Other heads in the water.

He saw nothing but white-capped gray sea.

The loss of his crew cut more deeply than the loss of his ship.

He drifted. And clung. The cloud-tattered morning turned to a slate-skied afternoon. There was no longer hope left in him. Just relentless determination, beyond any logic or faith.

And on the wings of evening, a dragon came out of the sea mist.

Lying, bound with coarse rope, on the ribs in the bow of the longship, Cair knew that it had been no dragon. A dragon would have mercifully devoured him then and there.

“They say,” said the prisoner next to him, in broken Frankish, “That you are a man-witch. That any other would have drowned. They found no others, nor any sign of your ship.”

Cair let none of his instinctive scorn show. Primitive superstition!

Instead he said nothing, keeping as still as he possibly could in his patch of relative warmth.

He remembered little of the rest of the voyage. It was blurred with fever and exhaustion. But he was aware that the other prisoners avoided even touching him.

### Kingshall, Telemark, July 1538

“The poor girl. I feel so sorry for her. She’s stunted, you know. They say . . .” and the honeyed voice of Signy’s stepmother dropped, but not so low that it couldn’t be heard clearly through the thin wooden wall. “It’s the *dokkalfar* blood on her mother’s side . . . The woman died in bearing the girl. That’s a sure sign of the ill-fortune that goes with meddling in *seid*-magic. And only the one scrawny girl-child, Jarl. Anyway, it is not important. She is of the royal line even if she probably will never bear children. She’s far too small. She spoils her complexion with sunlight. And she has no womanly skills. I mean, look at her embroidery! It’s appalling. No, your master would be wise to look elsewhere.”

Signy’s nails dug into her palms. She dropped the frame of crooked stitchery that confirmed the truth about her skills with a needle. She knew perfectly well that she had been supposed to hear every word. That it was meant to wound. That didn’t stop it hurting. Dowager Queen Albruna seldom missed the opportunity to try and belittle her . . . And seldom failed to do so. It wasn’t hard. Signy knew that she was no one’s idea of a shield-maiden. She was too small, too wiry, and as gifted with the womanly skills of fine weaving and delicate stitchery as a boar-pig. She couldn’t even see her threads in linenwork, let alone do it. But, by Freya’s paps, she’d sooner die than let the queen mother see any sign of how her barbs stung.

She scrambled to her feet in a tangle of limbs, kicking over a footstool. That was normal, too. Her stepmother hadn’t said that Signy was as graceful as a pregnant cow on an ice patch—yet. But she would, as usual. Then the shaming, half-true stories would follow.

Albruna could enjoy needling her stepdaughter. King Hjorda

wouldn't care: he'd take her if she had two heads and tail. He wasn't interested in Signy as a woman: she was merely wanted as a claim to the throne of Telemark. As long as her brother was unwed and without heirs . . . she had value. And if that vile old goat Hjorda could get a son on her, he'd have a better claim to the throne than Vortenbras did. She was a very valuable trading piece at the moment, and Albruna was holding out for a high price. Signy knew that was why she was still here, an old maid of twenty-four. She was waiting for Hjorda to increase his offer. Albruna would go on belittling her, pretending to try and put Hjorda off, until the price went up enough.

Signy spat, trying to rid her mouth of the sour half-vomit taste that the thought of her father's old foe engendered. She touched the wire-bound hilt of the dagger in her sleeve. She'd sworn on both Odin's ring and Thor's hammer, that she'd see King Hjorda dead in his marriage bed. Her father's honor demanded that. Then she would die herself as her own honor required. But not for the first time she wished that she really was the *dokkalfar seid*-witch's daughter that Dowager Queen Mother Albruna accused her of being, every time she wanted to make sure the princess had not a friend in the royal household. If Signy had had any powers, dark or no, she'd have turned her stepmother into a rat in a nest of vipers long ago. The gods knew, she'd tried. But her participation in any charm, any piece of *galdr*, guaranteed that it wouldn't work. She could make any charm backfire, let alone fail.

"Come now, Your Highness," said Jarl Svein, his voice as smooth as oiled silk, "a princess of the blood of two ancient houses, no matter how suspect the bloodlines are, is a jewel of value."

Albruna gave her characteristic sniff of disdain. "I've always had my doubts about her blood. Seriously, King Hjorda would be wiser to look elsewhere. How can someone of our lineage be so graceless? She's as clumsy . . ."

Signy had been told to wait until she was called to meet Hjorda's emissary. But she knew what was coming next. She'd rather face the inevitable whipping than stay a moment longer. After all, what was one more whipping? They hurt less than words anyway. She could be in the friendly comfort of the stables in a hundred heartbeats. She darted out of the door of the antechamber . . .

To have her passage blocked by a large woman with thick buttermilk-blond braids. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Such an insolent question from a thrall-wench! Signy raised herself up to her full height, and did her best to look a princess in every one of those meager inches. Even as she did it, she knew she was failing. “It is none of your business, Borgny.” She hoped she’d kept the quaver out her voice.

### Mainz, late October, 1538

“It’s already snowing in the north, Uncle,” protested Manfred. “Surely it’ll wait until summer. Or at least spring.” There was not much hope in his voice. When the Holy Roman Emperor made up his mind, even Prince Manfred of Brittany obeyed. He was even learning to do it with not more than a token protest.

“You’re big enough to keep out the cold,” said Charles Fredrik, dismissively waving his own large hand at his oxlike nephew. “And I want this sorted out before spring comes and more trouble starts. You, Erik, and Francesca will travel together to Copenhagen. Francesca, it will be your unenviable task to soothe the Danes down. The Knights of the Holy Trinity are still the bulwark of our defence against the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and, with Jagellion on the throne, we need them more than ever. The last thing I need is them involved in a messy little land squabble with the Danes up in Sweden. At the moment the Knights are subdued because of the way they were used in the Venetian affair. They know they came very close to feeling the full weight of my wrath. The Abbot-General has agreed that there is a problem in Skåne. He has agreed to allow you to act in his name there, provided that we also deal with the Danes.” He grimaced. “Which may be more tricky than knocking a few Knights’ heads together, Francesca. They are stiff-necked about that independence of theirs, even if they are a vassal state. It’s not something that you would be advised to mention.”

Francesca, or, as she now styled herself, Francesca de Chevreuse, although this was not the name she’d been born to, shivered artistically. “Your wish is my command, my Emperor.” She dimpled,