



Esmerelda the Witch
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Chapter 1

The sun dropped pink onto the barley fields. Wind disheveled the stalks. Mr McAlister ran his hands through his daughter's soft brown hair and called out to his son, Daniel, who was, as often, gazing. In fact, Daniel McAlister was looking at a seed he'd found that afternoon and dropped into his work pants pocket. There was nothing unusual about it. It was a pine seed. But the long fingers held it and pale green eyes bore into it like a high priest's into his glass chalice. That, say the believers, contains the source of the King's immortality. This, even Daniel knew, contained nothing but the mere potential for a pine tree. Yet a bird had dropped it—a golden-white hawk. Isn't it strange, Daniel thought, that birds can plant forests?

He was a thoughtful boy. Slow, but steady and determined. He did what he was told, even if at his own pace, and his work was always well-done despite his never seeming to focus on it. When he was still too young to join the rest of the family in the fields, Mr and Mrs thought him dim-witted because he appeared not to understand a word they said to him. At age five, they found him awake one night, stroking the strings of a lyre and singing. This was before he'd spoken his first word. Then his eyes paled and his hair darkened and he developed a persistent cough, like an old man who'd smoked too many pipes or worked too many forges. He started to speak well, pronounce clearly and write.

Mr McAlister called to his son again.

Daniel dropped the seed and turned his head, looking with usual inquisitive dumbness at his father. It was a look of surprise, as if taking in a new face; though, of course, it wasn't a new face at all. Mr McAlister removed his hand from his daughter's hair and, patting her on the back, set the girl off toward the family huts—windows aglow in the darkening dusk—where one or another grandmother was already releasing the scent of tonight's feast into the evening air. She was used to her brother's strangeness and paid it no attention that he was always the last one home. Mr McAlister was more aware of things, more attuned to the oddities of life. He was even distrustful of Daniel in a way he wasn't of

his other children. Just a seed's worth, but, firmly implanted, that distrust was growing. In the winter, he'd even spoken to the local priest. The boy stopped looking at him.

Daniel had forgotten about the seed, not heard his father call again and was staring out to the edge of the field. His squinting eyes were little more than slits. Horizontal, not vertical like a castle's. His neck was pushed forward and his entire body looked like it was set at an impossible forward angle, ready to topple over.

He sniffed at the wind like a squirrel.

Chapter 2

"Oi be damned, 'ese lookin' at us, tha 'lil bugga'," one woman said to another, while a third, weathered-faced and with a gnarly crooked nose, ripped a long thin weed from the ground and stuck the dirty root-end in her mouth. They sat on the edge of the forest, the three, in cloaks and the shadows of the trees, where the ground is red pine needles and the barley fades into wilderness.

The one who'd been spoken to said nothing. For a while the crooked nose'd one said nothing, either, just chewed in silence. Then, spitting out the black soil that'd been among the roots, she answered, "Can't see a thing. Doesn't have the eagle eyes, that one."

"Gives me 'em creepers just a'same."

"What's he called?" The second one asked.

Crooked Nose snorted and swallowed the root she'd been chewing. She waved her hand and the pine needles in front of her suddenly flew away as if brushed aside by an invisible broom.

"Oi know it, oi does. 'e goes by tha' name Dan'el McAlister, miss Esmerelda."

Crooked Nose waved her hand and a smaller cloud of pine needles hit the first one in the face. "Tell me, why did I do that, Veronica?" she quizzed her underling.

"Ummm..." preceded a sing-song recital, "Be cause for oi em not no longa' tha servant of any missus no longer, mhm. Now I em eee-kul to—"

"Enough. Remember your lessons."

Crooked Nose scanned the ground for an appropriately thick stick. When she found one, she directed her hand, outstretched her bony fingers and the stick rose from the ground and settled into her palm.

Daniel McAlister. Esmerelda tossed the name over in her head, trying to apply the sound to the sight of the boy who'd seconds ago been squinting and sniffing in their direction but had now turned and was walking swiftly toward the hut that he called home. It was probably the only one he'd ever known. *Daniel McAlister.* The name seemed artificial;

the boy was real. Though how real would he be and for how much longer? She wondered if the boy's face resembled her own. She often thought she had the look of an inattentive, a daydreamer. Her thoughts wandered. She was unusually calm. Her teachers had called her cold on many occasions. But, she reasoned, that was the very meaning of lacking a conscience—wasn't it?

She studied the boy's back as it disappeared into a rectangle of light emanating from the hut.

Crooked Nose broke her meditation: "Listen, sisters." The ground that she'd cleared of needles now began to glow faintly green. When she moved the stick over it, the tip left a fading trail of light. "The sun is down, the time is upon us. The plan is simple. The boy must be taken alive. The ritual must be performed tonight, under the light of the fullest moon. Veronica,"—whose eager eyes flashed "yes?" as she bit her lip and inched closer: it was only when lit by the green hue that one could tell she was young, no more than twenty—"you will follow me. You will make a... splendid destruction."

"Oh yes sister mother, yes. Destruction."

The stick weaved two glowing huts into brief existence. Crooked Nose pointed to the larger. "The boy will be found here." Then to the smaller. "But we begin here. We will use their compassion against them."

The huts faded away, replaced by a snaking symbol. "Esmerelda, do you remember: the place, the words, the signature, the act?"

"Yes, sister-mother."

The green hue betrayed Esmerelda's age, too. She was nearing thirty. Her face wasn't yet creased, but time had provided the rougher outlines. She released her grip on the stone dagger that was wedged behind her belt. Her hands were sweating. She wiped them on her cloak and felt the dagger again; even through material, it was pleasantly cool. Tonight was her first ritual—or, rather, her first as sacrificatrix—and she was nervous. If she wanted advancement, she had to perform well. She was already old for a first-timer. She looked over at Veronica and remembered the serving girl who'd arrived at the Coven in tatters, bruised and scarcely alive, with swamp water in her lungs and barely a grasp of English in her head. Would she, too, get her chance one day? Esmerelda couldn't remember her own arrival. She'd been young, younger even than Daniel McAlister. But that day was gone from her memory. Though her mind was a-whirl, her face betrayed nothing.

"Good." Crooked Nose stood up, waving her hand to brush off the pine needles that had stuck to her cloak. The other two witches followed

her lead. "All comes now is the execution. Perform admirably, my sisters. The future is with you."

And she stepped forward, one leg onto the barley field, followed by another, followed by Veronica: two female figures emerging from the forest and into the unsuspecting lives of the McAlisters and their neighbours.

Esmerelda strayed behind. She was to wait for the signal. Alone, she watched her two companions advance on the huts.

A cloud passed in front of the moon, blotting out the moonlight.

Her palms were sweating again. The stone dagger felt heavier and heavier. She imagined one of the McAlisters putting down a spoon and glancing out a window at the approaching visitors. She wondered what they would think: did they expect two harmless travellers seeking shelter for the night, perhaps a pair of nuns sent to collect the tithe by the local bishopric? But she wondered not like Mrs McAlister would soon wonder what her son must be feeling, thinking—in horror or empathy or with a mother's need to understand and make sense; no, she wondered more like a child that, leg raised above an anthill, wonders what the ants are thinking and whether they sense the foot about to come down and crush them all to death. It was a scientific fascination.

The cloud passed and the world was again in moonlight.

Crooked Nose stopped at the first hut while Veronica disappeared around the back of the second. Esmerelda watched silhouettes move behind windows. Crooked Nose knocked, the door of the first hut opened and Mr McAlister stepped out. The old witch bowed deeply and they both stepped inside. What a lie Crooked Nose must have told, Esmerelda thought, her own eyes on the sky and the moon and the clouds.

The hut door closed.

Minutes later, something rattled; another thing broke. A woman screamed from inside the second hut. A puff of red smoke came rising out of the chimney of the first. Esmerelda's lungs jumped. She cut a brisk pace—the signal had been sent—onto the barley field and toward the enemy, Daniel McAlister.

As she got closer, she started to run. Her heart thumped. The chimney was spewing violent red smoke and she felt the bloodlust rise within her. The homestead was growing with each frantic step. The stone dagger dug into her abdomen.

Veronica had set a wheelbarrow against the door of the second hut and was running circles around its walls, cackling like a hyena. As she

waved her arms, pots, pans, silverware and food crashed and splashed against the insides of the windows.

The door of the first hut suddenly flew open and noise and bodies poured out of it—some wielding shears, others shovels. Neighbours going to the aid of neighbours. Crooked Nose followed behind the angry mob, undoubtedly snickering to herself about the naivety of the common people. Hers were the only eyes to meet Esmerelda's approach.

By the time Esmerelda was within ten yards of the McAlister's hut, the commotion had twisted further away. All she could make out was a swarm of bodies punctuated by shrieks and thuds and the peculiar shape of the little dust devils that Veronica had a habit of conjuring from the ground. Esmerelda's magical skills were equal to Veronica's, but Esmerelda knew that her own magic potential was actually much less. Veronica had raw talent. But if there was a pang of jealousy, it was quickly swept aside by refocusing on the task at hand. After all, the loudness around her was mere pageantry for the true work that it was her responsibility to perform. She remembered nights spent on that side—the pageant side: the chaos and fun had always been mixed with a growing eagerness to do what she was about to do now...

She crossed the threshold of the McAlister's hut.

Inside was warm and quiet tension. Four children huddled together under a table, breathing in unison. An old woman sat limp-limbed in the corner, mouth agape but soundless. Esmerelda put her finger to her lips and the old woman nodded that yes, she would be quiet, very quiet like a good girl. The woman wouldn't be a problem; she'd learned to fear witchcraft. The children were different. They were surely just as stupid but perhaps not yet so fearful.

"Daniel McAlister," she called out.

No answer.

The four little bodies under the table stirred. Two girls and two boys. Esmerelda moved her eyes from one to the other to another. The older girl was the one Mr McAlister had sent home with a pat on the back. How father must love her, Esmerelda thought—as she grabbed a fistful of the girl's hair and pulled her out into the open space of the room. The child yelped. Esmerelda threw her down on the floor. If father, perhaps brother, too?

None of the other three siblings moved. But none of the other three siblings was the one Esmerelda wanted. She knew Daniel McAlister had entered the hut and knew he hadn't left, so it followed that he must still be here. Of course, she could search through the nooks and crannies and

under the floorboards as she pleased, no one would so much as raise a hand against her, but where was the fun in that? When she was a girl, her own mother had never accepted the righting of a wrong as a proper substitution for punishment. Punishment, her mother had said, built character.

“Where is your brother Daniel?” she asked.

The little girl started to say something, stuttered, then lowered her eyes and was silent. Esmerelda lovingly raised the drooping head by the chin, then slapped it hard on the cheek. The girl opened her mouth, again stuttering: “I-I-I...”

“Don’t speak, child. Point.”

She could see the fear welling up inside the girl. It was enjoyable to watch the suffering bubble. But time, though it was on her side, was not entirely irrelevant. Veronica would eventually tire and then Crooked Nose would whisk them both away into the forest, leaving the McAlisters and Piersons scrambling back home, excited that they’d driven away the monsters and saved their huts and children. She added, “With your finger, child. It’s not difficult.”

The girl began to raise a trembling arm. But before her elbow straightened and her damning finger uncurled, a raspy voice croaked, “There.” Esmerelda turned to see the old woman—perhaps to save the girl from the a lifetime of moral turmoil, or else simply out of terror—waving her hand at a wooden cupboard. “There,” she repeated, wheezing out the word as if it was to be her last: “There.”

Patting the girl gently on the head, Esmerelda smiled at the old woman, who quickly avoided the look, and took three steps toward the cupboard. When she was near enough, she said softly, “Daniel McAlister, come out, come out.”

Daniel coughed, but said nothing. The cupboard door didn’t as much as stir. Esmerelda remembered how she had played hide-and-seek and other games as a child. Sometimes she hid in the cupboard, too. Sometimes no one found her until it was dark and then she came out and the house was empty. Other times, the winner was the one who stayed hidden the longest. How she wanted to play a game with Daniel. The atmosphere, the cruelty, the chance for revenge. But she let her bloodlust cool.

And banged with her fist on the cupboard door.

Opening it—

Barely had time to register Daniel’s crouching body before it lunged out at her, the silvery glint of a kitchen knife in its palm; they both fell, he on top of her, and she felt the cold of the knife at her chest just as her

back hit the floor and her breath went out with the thud. She gasped. Daniel's eyes widened and she looked down: the boy's trembling hand was holding the knife handle, the blade having melted away as it came into contact with her skin. Her shirt was torn, but her body whole.

She thrust out her right hand and seized Daniel by the throat. The muscles in his neck went tense, he dropped what was left of the knife. As it clanged repeatedly against the floorboards, she screeched, "Didn't your mother teach you—metal, my dear, is ineffective against witches."

She tightened her grip, she sat up, she stood, she raised Daniel off the ground until his bare feet dangled in the air.

Behind her, one of the other children made a run for the door—which Esmerelda slammed shut with a wave of her free hand. The child stopped. Esmerelda turned. Daniel kicked his feet and grabbed at her wrist; the other was bent back menacingly, holding half a dozen forks suspended in the tense air, pointed at the attempted escapee. "Sit or die, child," she said. The child returned to the others huddling ever-tighter together under the table.

She let the forks drop.

And slapped Daniel across the face.

"Don't fight, Daniel McAlister. It is destined."

It felt good to hold a commoner child by the neck, extinguishing its life breath by breath. The more its lungs laboured, the stronger hers pumped. She felt full of oxygen and life, overcome by power and the desire to make murder. Over the years, she had seen violence among the commoners, yes, but also restraint. She had seen men sheath swords when they could have run them without consequence through the bellies of defeated adversaries. Only to then perform acts of insane brutality under the very eyes of the representatives of the King's law. She could not understand this contradiction: mercy in one hand, dangerous passion in the other. Now, looking into Daniel McAlister's eyes, she knew that this one harboured the same weakness. Power has become a question of reproduction and numbers, she remembered one of her Coven matrons saying. The commoners had started a war out of fear—an indiscriminate, stupid application of force. She looked at Daniel's dry lips. Yet conducted it without strategy, by fits merciful and self-destructive. The lips spasmed, she loosened her grip, the boy breathed. That was the difference: she would kill with no moral hesitation, but she would not be reckless or wasteful. Daniel McAlister would die, but he would die for a purpose. And for that reason the commoners would eventually lose this

war. She was confident of it. Once the numbers evened, the weak would, as always, yield to the strong.

Daniel McAlister sucked in air.

As his young siblings watched from their imaginary place of safety, Esmerelda dragged him by the hand towards the hut door. The old woman sobbed. When he put up a last stand against the open doorway, Esmerelda smacked his head against the frame until his knees wobbled and he could no longer stand on his own. She would kill him on the altar as planned, but he needn't be fully aware while she brought him there.

She shut the door behind them.

They went across the barley fields hand-in-hand, Esmerelda pulling, Daniel following numbly. In the daytime, they might have been mistaken for a mother and son; but tonight's full moon was deceitful. It gave little light and excellent cover.

Somewhere far away within the darkness Veronica howled and Esmerelda imagined what a scene she must be making. How soon, she wondered, would it end, would the McAlisters and Piersons return to their huts, assess their losses and realize that one of their offspring was missing. Would they pursue? It would make no difference, but Esmerelda was fascinated by commoner psychology. The McAlisters would surely mourn—how much? The Piersons would feel empathy—how sincere? She imagined the burden a commoner would feel in her place, the weight bearing down on her soul while she dragged an innocent boy away from his family and toward his death.

It was wonderfully theoretical.

Her own soul was light, steps nimble. As she entered into the further security of the forest, she rejoiced at the feel of the wind against her face, filling her cloak.

Her nerves slackened. "Howl," she instructed the boy trudging behind her, "Howl, Daniel McAlister!" He did. Quietly, as if to himself. And she howled, too. Louder, to the trees and the sky and the moon. They howled together, each in his own way to his own audience, two kindred lunatics escaping from some unseen asylum until one howl pierced another was itself pierced by: three short clear blows of a horn—and, just as suddenly, Esmerelda was flat on the damp ground, knees in the mud, hand across Daniel's open biting mouth, ears and brain trying desperately to locate the source of the royal horn.

She crawled forward and listened. The blows came again. From the—she swung her face to orient by the stars—west. Were they closer or

further than the first time? She settled against an upturned boulder. Daniel's teeth drew blood. She flinched, withdrew her hand, Daniel yelled "Help," she felt around for a pine cone and stuffed it into his mouth. The horn sounded for a third time. It was neither nearer nor further. She ripped off a piece of cloak and tied it round Daniel's head like a gag. They must be travelling parallel, she decided. The altar was to the east, so she still had a clear a line. Another piece of cloak torn off, she rolled Daniel onto his stomach and gathered his hands on his back, keeping him in place with her knee, and tied his wrists together. His screams continued: muffled. The distinct sound of an arquebus echoed through the forest and around her head, followed by more blasts on the horn. Perhaps they were getting closer.

She got to her feet, pulling Daniel up behind her as she pressed east toward the altar. A mile to go—two, at most. But now the boy was dragging his feet, his rawing toes hitting against every root and stone. She should have put shoes on him. She shouldn't have howled. She'd been unthinking and indiscreet. She was no better than a commoner. She was dragging Daniel like a sack, one hand shielding her face from the whipping branches, the other holding him by the clothes and pulling, willing him on. With the horn a constant companion, a second—three-note—heartbeat.

A flash: a bird passed overhead: a white hawk with golden stripes refracting moonbeams: Crooked Nose's familiar. Esmerelda felt a measure of relief. It meant she was being protected. She sped up. A branch stung her below the eye. The bird was lighting the way underfoot. Her ankles navigated between the rocky ground, landing soles on softer needles.

Rocks: she was getting closer to the altar-ground.

Another arquebus went off.

They were getting closer, too. Daniel snagged on a branch. She stopped and pulled him loose. The pink whites of his eyes bore into her. Forward, she pushed on. She cursed her luck and spat out the thick saliva building up on the surface of her tongue. How did they find her—the witchhunters? Why were they here? There was no time now for deliberations. Focus, she told herself, focus on the future.

Minute-by-minute the ground grew craggier. Her ankles wavered, slipped. The rocks became wider and wet. Daniel followed more smoothly but her own feet slid on the slick surfaces. Then, without warning and all at once, the light was gone: the hawk shrilled and cut away into the sky; the trees ended, her vision expanded to contain a small

clearing, a perfect circle of thirty-three round stones and a granite slab elevated on several freshly-felled trunks.

She burst into the stone circle and fell to her knees.

Seven nights ago, to the hour, she and Veronica and Crooked Nose had found this spot and constructed the sacrificial plot for just this occasion. Now their work was complete and hers was coming to its end.

Daniel had tumbled in with her. He was lying beside her, on his side, pine cone hanging loosely from his mouth, wrists coming unbound. She grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him onto the altar—head over chest over legs over bloody scraps of feet. The royal horn blared one, two, three, four times. They were closing in. But she still had time. She punched Daniel in the stomach to silence his voice and pulled the stone dagger out from under her belt. Dagger held between her teeth, she tore open his shirt. His glistening chest was hairless and smooth. He was still very much a boy.

The place, the words, the signature, the act. That was the order. She was in the place. Now she started reciting the words: wretched, ugly sounds like those of a woman gargling her own teeth. Daniel stirred. A large bump had grown where Esmerelda had slammed his forehead against the door frame. She stared at it as she spoke the words. Underneath a quivering brow Daniel's pupils dilated. They rolled back, then forward, then settled on her face like a pair of sharpened magnets. Esmerelda stared back but only noticed, not felt. It was the boy's last grasp at life, the pathetic coaxing of mercy. She neared the end of her incantation. The royal horn sounded five times. Deep in the woods, a hound barked. "Agenrath," she finished. To mercy, she was immune.

Human voices joined the barking hounds. Daniel closed his eyes. The signature. Esmerelda picked up the stone dagger and pressed the tip against Daniel's skin—against his warm belly. The signature: a snaking symbol. She carved it lovely and soft. Blood poured out of the lines and flowed down Daniel's sides. He had little strength left, but, summoning it all, he bit down on the pine cone until its juices exploded against the sides of his mouth and struck out at the witch, grabbing her by the throat just as she had grabbed him.

Esmerelda gasped.

He squeezed.

The dagger dropped onto his body.

"There!" A man's voice mixed with the growling of rabid, angry dogs and rebounded between the trees. "Fire!" A volley of arquebus shots exploded against the trees on the other side of the clearing.

Esmerelda snarled. Daniel's power wavered. She grabbed his hand and undid the long fingers held round her throat. Shadows flickered all around her. She outstretched his arm as another wave of shots thundered across the clearing—some connecting against her body, leaving holes in her clothes, metal melting away at the touch of her skin. Idiot soldiers firing insignificant bullets. There could be no witchhunter among them. Then: she locked Daniel's elbow and, with one strike of her other palm, broke his arm. The bone cracked. The arm fell. The boy screamed into the pine cone.

"Alive!"

Two royal soldiers erupted onto the clearing.

Esmerelda picked up the stone dagger and raised it over her head.

The act.

The soldiers broke into the stone circle. One lunged; the other inverted his arquebus and, running, swung it back in a swooshing violent arc.

She closed her eyes and brought the dagger down—hard!—into Daniel's chest.

He spasmed.

The lunging soldier flew through the spray of the boy's young blood and his shoulder crunched against Esmerelda's body.

She felt his heaviness descend on top of her.

On the altar, the dagger stuck deep in Daniel McAlister's dead chest.

The second soldier planted his boot, reversed the arc of his inverted arquebus and brought the butt-end of the rifle cracking into Esmerelda's martyr's skull.

Consciousness snapped.

Chapter 3

Gremius Orelus paced in full ceremonial battle dress across the High Council room on the seventeenth floor of the Imperial Castle. His spaulders clanked rhythmically against the silver-and-gold of a flawlessly-polished breastplate adorned with the intricately unmistakable insignia of the King's Witchhunter General: a green spearhead-leaved Demssous tree.

Although pacing here had become a well-worn ritual, an escape from the paperwork and busybodies below, it still sometimes made Gremius pause and reflect. The floor he walked on was the uppermost in all the realm open to mere mortals. Indeed, via a royal decree that he himself had endorsed, no other building or permanent structure in the kingdom could be taller than thirteen floors. Here in the Imperial Castle only High Council members were allowed past the twelfth. As for the three floors above the seventeenth: they were the private quarters of the King. No one had set foot in them in at least a thousand years.

As he paced, Gremius mused that his entire life had been a long climb from the low wooden hut in which he was born up through the ranks of the Royal service and to—well, on this particular day he was fifty-nine, still young for his position, and only three weeks shy of celebrating a decade of loyal and effective service. He had dedicated his entire adult life to the exposure, capture and execution of witches and he was proud of his achievements: thirty-seven witches captured, thirty-seven burned. It was the best rate since the time of Maliphus Prefectus (“King keep his soul close,” he whispered.)

But as Gremius turned on his heel and his boots dug into the crimson carpet before taking him obediently to the window overlooking Capital Square, he couldn't help but feel that the armor, for all its aesthetic qualities, was uncomfortable. Had the great Maliphus Prefectus worn such armor? Plainly not. He had made a point to study the history. But times and tastes change and people always demand innovation and spectacle. Far below, they were already milling around the burning stake. His first burning, he remembered with some nostalgia, had been conducted at

noon. Noon was the traditional time. Now, the sun was already on its descent and final preparations were still ongoing. Today's burning was to take place at sunset, the first of its kind. The reason: flames, as he'd had it explained to him numerous times, would look more dramatic at night. There was also a new timber ("Or was it an alchemical?" he second-guessed) that would turn the fire blue and purple. Yet the fact remained: change was suspect; change made him uneasy.

He leaned against the windowsill and watched the crowd form. Although his sword dug into his side, he refused to straighten. He wouldn't let the sword have that satisfaction. Vaunted and much-bejeweled ivory Witchkiller. It was a coarse name, he thought; not to mention that Witchkiller had never touched a witch, let alone put one to death. The only way to kill a witch was by burning. Even schoolchildren knew that. Schoolchildren and most ordinary adults didn't know that the fire had to be kindled using specific types of wood in careful proportions, or that it was the fumes that actually killed the witch, not the heat; but that knowledge wasn't necessary for the sword to be pure nonsense. The armor and insignia he could accept—the Demssous tree was the key ingredient to a successful burning, the only one that couldn't be substituted by another—but he hated the sword. He made a mental note to again bring up the issue with the Council or, if possible, the King himself.

"Any being more than a thousand years old must have some feeling for history and tradition," he thought wishfully aloud, albeit quietly and out a seventeenth story window.

He straightened.

The sword had won, for now. But he would outlast it. Of that he was certain. Tomorrow morning he would wake up having presided successfully over thirty-eight burnings. After forty he would force his catchet upon the High Council. Yes, he concluded, it was best to wait until after the fortieth. He patted the sword like a rabbit before a skinning. Yet there was an advantage to the sharp but subsisting pain in his side: it cut short his internal ruminations, which were growing more frequent with age. The secret to success, as he'd learned it, was to keep one's attention always on where it was needed most—the present.

As he strode with renewed purpose across the empty Council chambers, that secret gelled with another: trust breeds incompetence. The sun was edging ever-so closer to the horizon and he still had hadn't heard from Cudgel Thecker. Distrust compelled him down the long, winding

stairs toward the dungeons, where his second-in-command was most likely dotting the proverbial eyes and drinking green tea.

Chapter 4

Cudgel Thecker squinted. His eyes were still adjusting to the dungeon gloom. He was out of breath, but proud of having reached the dungeon from—wait, where exactly *did* he reach the dungeon from? No matter. He'd done it quickly, maybe in record time. And good, too: that shrew (He couldn't remember her name: "Matilda, Manila, Manaka? Something with an M.") had failed to wake him this morning. She promised she'd have him up on his feet by two hours after dawn. He finally awoke at noon with an eyeful of sunlight and head full of groggy panic as he slid into last night's clothes and rushed out to the castle. If he hadn't made it in time, Gremius would have demanded his hide. On the other hand, it wasn't entirely luck. Cudgel Thecker had made a decent career as assistant to the Witchhunter General by doing the bare minimum almost always just in the nick of time. Getting by was a talent, and he had it.

"The old guy would trust me with his own daughter," Cudgel chuckled while patting down his shirt looking for the little booklet—a fly buzzed by, he swiped at it: unsuccessfully; there was still plenty of time, he just needed the booklet and to assemble the burning ingredients and then go into the catacombs and prepare the prisoner. He patted the pocket again. It was a brown leather-bound book like a prayer book. The fly buzzed around his head. "Little bugger!" he muttered. But the pocket was empty.

He scratched his head.

He checked his pants, then his coat on the floor, then the rest of the floor, a glance at the tables, the chairs: nothing. He must have left it at M-whatever's apartment. "Not to worry," he told himself, there was still plenty of time, he just needed to go back, find the book, come back, mix the ingredients and get the prisoner. Easy as pie. He grabbed his coat and threw it over his shoulders.

The fly settled on his eyebrow.

Its little legs tickled.

"Aha!"

And Cudgel smacked himself in the head. Victory? He took his hand from his temples and prepared to look at the black smudge that seconds ago was an annoying winged insect. But there was just his own skin. And buzzing again, which he swore resembled laughter.

He smacked himself in the head a second time—the goal being not to kill a fly, but an idea. There was no going back to any M-whatever’s because he didn’t remember where M-whatever lived. She was probably still snoring, too, the hussy. He cursed at her for sleeping. Then for not waking him up, then for not even reminding him to pass out with his little brown booklet in-hand, ready for a quick escape in the morning. Women truly are heartless, thoughtless—

“Cudgel Thecker.”

He jumped at the sound of Gremius’ voice.

“Just the man I wanted to see,” Gremius said as he followed his own voice into the room. “The man who can reaffirm my confident hope that preparations are going to plan and carefully ahead of schedule. Yes?”

“Oh, yes. Yes, sir. I am nearly done,” Cudgel Thecker lied through his teeth.

“Excellent. It’s such a relief from my countless administrative headaches to know I can always rely on at least one man in this dreadful city,” Gremius lied through his.

Both men smiled.

Was it Apricot lane, Cudgel mused behind his fake smile, or Peach Pit Avenue, or maybe Apricot Pit, or else a vegetable of some sort—it was almost certainly a food: Cucumber Crescent? No, definitely not. It also wasn’t a carrot. No one would name anything after a carrot. Potato? Maybe. The sound was familiar. Tomato? Tomato! He nearly jumped for joy. Big fat red Tomato Heights. How obvious. M-whatever had been a redhead. Still *was* a redhead. And *would be* a redhead at least until he showed up and shaved off all her snoring unreliable hair. He was already planning the fastest route to Tomato Heights.

“Yes,” Gremius cleared his throat, “I will best leave you to it then.”

He turned to leave. Stopped halfway through the roughly cut arch; and, with his back turned added flatly: “Cudgel, since you are almost done, it will be all the same to you, I have decided that I want the prisoner brought up early. I want her outside while the sun still shines.”

With that, he disappeared, leaving only a faint echo and Cudgel Thecker again scratching his head.

Cudgel sunk backward until his haunches felt the cold rough rocks of the wall, then dropped onto his heels. He sucked in air through his teeth.

His back was tender, scratched. He stretched out his legs, slumped forward and felt like sucking his thumb. There was no going to M-whatever's now. The lucky sow would keep her red hair. But he quickly forgot about that. His own head—and precious neck—was in danger. He tried to remember other burnings. He'd already prepared the kindling for a few of them, watched someone else do it a half dozen times more. What was thrown round the burning pole? Surely, he didn't need his little brown book to do something as simple as put together a parcel of wood to choke a witch.

He racked his brain.

He pulled on the ends of his hairs.

He stroked his stubbly chin.

And, as a last resort, he pulled his eyelids closed.

Sightless, he saw: M-whatever laughing at him. She looked unambiguously insane. He growled and her face made way for an image of himself sitting on a wet dungeon floor with his back against the wall and his eyes closed. Pathetic! He concentrated harder: he was starting his apprenticeship, he was eating dinner across from his sisters and flinging soup at them when no one else was looking, he was being promoted to assistant to the Witchhunter General, he was sitting his second year witchhunting exams, he was studying for those exams—

His eyes flew open.

Of course! This was on the exams and in his notes and there was a poem. He started to recite aloud, letting intuition take over:

*Five parts oak,
Three of pine,
And never release the smoke,
Without a dash of poke,
Nor a creeper's vine.
Next one fresh green apple,
A sun-dried yew,
And please recall,
Most important of all:
The Demssous.*

He stood up triumphant, puffing out his chest like a cock of the walk, and strode across to the metal table where his work awaited. Barrels of labeled woods and other dry materials and jars of multi-coloured alchemicals lined the walls. There were also tongs, knives and painful-

looking spikes—but those were extras from the torture room next door. Sadly, he'd never been allowed to torture anyone. If only M-whatever could be the first...

Someone screamed in the catacombs below. He grunted out of his fantasy, stretched out his hand and dangled his fingers over a barrel labeled "oak". Like a naughty boy's into a cookie jar, in went his hand and he pulled out five pieces, one by one, of fresh timber. He laid them out on the table and scanned for the next label.

He found the yew. Again he dangled his fingers and—wait, but wasn't it *one cactus, too* rather than *a sun-dried yew*? Before he could decide, he was suddenly sure that *one fresh green apple* was wrong, as well. He didn't remember any apples. He liked apples. If there'd been apples he'd have eaten them. "What in the King's name rhymes with apple?" he pondered with his fingers suspended over the barrel of yew.

Come to think of it, there was an introduction to the poem:

*You need wood to burn a witch,
But you needn't remember witch,
As long as you rehearse,
The following three-part verse.*

Three-part? Great. He'd skipped the entire middle verse. Or maybe he never did memorize that stanza. His memory was fuzzy, but it did remind him that he had gotten a C+ in Introduction to Immolations. Then again it wasn't like he knew many other poems. Surely he could remember one—this one—in its blessed entirety.

[...]
*Nor a creeper's vine.
With a willow intertwine,
A goose- or wild- berry,*

No, that wasn't it.

The fly returned, buzzing. "Bugger!" he swiped at it in mid-flight.

No luck.

Does any type of tree have a *spine*, do any shrubs *shine*? He thought about M-whatever's pear-shaped *behind*. And was about to get angry with himself when he said the world aloud: "Behind."

There were five paintings hanging in this particular dungeon. Each, Cudgel remembered, placed strategically over a spot where a neck

shackle used to be back when Torture had its office here. But what suits someone from Torture is hardly what suits someone from Witchhunt. *His* department was cultured. More importantly—he took one of the paintings off the wall and peered at the back of the frame—his department made it easier—he replaced the painting and tried the next—for students—and the third—to cheat on their exams. There it was in all its carved glory:

*Four parts oak,
Three of pine,
And never start the smoke,
Without two dashes of poke,
Wrapped in one creeper's vine.
Have an evergreen in mind?
That's fine, but remember—all,
Trees that flower in the fall,
Are as a rule defined:
The Witchhunter's pitfall.
Next, add leaves from any tree that's tall,
Add bamboo,
Then finally recall,
The most important tree of all:
The exceptional Demssous.*

No yew, no apples. He studied the crooked words of the poem in detail. He would need oak (check), pine, poke, a creeper's vine, bamboo, Demssous, anything tall and whatever evergreens he could find as filler. His trees all in a row, life suddenly wasn't so bad. It was almost a barrel of monkeys. He stopped sweating. He hung the painting back on the wall and laughed: a poem scratched into a painting of a woman on a horse. He'd been saved by art. And, glancing at the painting again, not a very good example of it, either.

Buzzzz...

"Oh, for the sake of—"

He twirled and punched the air.

The fly buzzed and buzzed and avoided his slow hands. It almost seemed to be taunting him, flying close, then far, then close, inviting him to take swing after missed swing. He looked ridiculous. He soon realized he looked ridiculous. Punching a fly? Foolishness. He stopped and

looked sheepishly about the room. There was no one there except the lady on the horse in the painting. She wasn't laughing.

Buzz, buzz, BUZZ!

He swiped again. The fly flew through his pudgy fingers. He clapped at it. The fly flew under his legs. He spun, and watched his tiny enemy maneuver deftly toward the wall of alchemicals. He watched it zig and zag and prance and float and all the while he waited patiently for it to settle. One cannot box with a fly. It must be taken by ambush. He decided he'd write that down before he went to sleep.

The fly finally came to rest on the lip of a little ceramic pot.

Cudgel approached at a half-croach.

The fly shook its wings and pitter-pattered around the edge of the pot. Inside was a fine golden dust. The label said *Prunus subhirtella autumnalis*. Cudgel paid no attention to the label but plenty to the fly. It had stopped moving and was now hopping in place.

He neared, readied; and lashed out.

It wasn't a deadly blow, the fly wasn't mortally wounded, but he did manage to knock it into the pot. Or at least he caused the wind that knocked it off balance. The particulars made no difference, it wasn't going to get back out. Cudgel watched it struggle inside. There it was, his mighty adversary, buzzing, defeated, stuck, wildly flailing its little limbs to get out of the pollen dust. For a few more seconds he watched its stupid fly determination. Then, curling his fingers into a fist, he punched into the jar and brought the combat to an end.

Everything was now in order, as it should be. He removed his yellow hand from the pot and went in search of the pine barrel...

Chapter 5

Ever since she'd come to, she was alone. Her only companions were a headache and a maniacal laughter that periodically reverberated from somewhere beyond her cell, down-corridor. She remembered everything—the boy, the dagger, the army patrol—and had no illusions about where she was; she knew she was a martyr. But she had killed Daniel McAlister, that was what was important. Her duty to the Coven had been performed. It may not have been much, it certainly wasn't decisive in the greater war, but it was her contribution and if it meant that another young witch like herself or Victoria continued to have a safe place to flee and live without fear and persecution, then she was proud.

Pride, however, is no cure for the common fear of death; which meant that even now Esmerelda couldn't keep her hands still. Ever-so-gently they oscillated on her knees. She was seated. She wasn't chained or confined in any way other than being kept in a cell. It was roomy cell, too. It obviously wasn't meant to house only one prisoner. By that she concluded that either the King's subjects were suddenly obeying the law much more often than usual, the King wasn't enforcing his law as strictly and swiftly as was normal, or the other prisoners had been temporarily moved elsewhere, crammed twice as tightly into some other cell. Of the three, the last option was the likeliest—meaning: she wouldn't be here long.

There was a rustling of keys.

Somewhere, an iron door was unbolted and opened.

Esmerelda got to her feet and walked towards the vertical bars that cut her off from the sort-of freedom beyond the cell. She looked between them. A shadow flickered across a distant wall. Her hands, hanging at her sides, began to shake again. She grabbed two of the bars and steadied them. The bars were wooden, maybe maple or cherry. Or else a metal wrapped in wood. Wooden bars? She rethought her hypothesis about the other prisoners. Normal prisoners could be kept behind naked metal. She looked around: nothing in the cell was metal. She was in a cell

specially designed for keeping witches. Perhaps she would be here longer than she first imagined.

Through the bars she could see a few other cells, all empty. She focused her eyes and, through the dark dungeon haze, brought their bars into focus. Wooden, too. She remembered the last time a witch had been caught. It was at least three months ago; and the one before that another three. She did a count in her head and came up with twenty-two: the number of witches she remembered being martyred since she had turned up at the Coven as a girl. It seemed wasteful to have so many special cells for so few prisoners. But she was a witch and they were human. Rationality was not their strong point. Or else, since the castle was old—and she was sure she was in the castle—perhaps the cells had been constructed in unfulfilled anticipation; or perhaps there once was a real need for so many. That would at least mean the war was turning in the witches' favour. History, she admitted meekly to herself, was not *her* strong point.

Another shadow flickered.

This time followed by voices, which were themselves followed by an extra-eager burst of maniacal laughter. Crazy as it was, she was comforted to know that she was not totally alone in this deep pit underneath the Capital.

The laughter subdued and four men appeared at the end of the corridor—first their silhouettes, thrown flickering against the walls by torches, then their bodies. They stopped a few steps in and one of the men, presumably the leader, pointed at her. The others nodded and moved in. As they got closer she could make out their leering, doltish expressions. They were big men, muscular and fat, possibly other inmates, violent ones, used to handle and intimidate witches. Maybe other prisoners, too. Politicals or merchantmen. Maybe they even exchanged prison sentences for tours of prison duty. She didn't know and didn't care. She also wasn't intimidated. Her hands trembled fearing death, the end; not burly humans. What could they do: hit her, cause her pain? She was slated for burning anyway. She was living a suspended existence.

One of the oafs jangled a set of keys against the wooden locks that kept her cell doors closed. Another swung them open.

She remained in place, meeting their eyes with profound disinterest as they loomed over her in the entrance. They must have expected she'd either come of her own will or else panic and they would get the joy of dragging her out by the arms and legs. She imagined their brains sweating, struggling to crank out these basic thoughts under creased

foreheads. It almost made her laugh. Humans were pathetic, and human men most of all.

“Come,” one of them finally said.

“With us,” a second added—either to finish the sentence of the first or else to offer a full independent thought of his own. She half expected the third to finish (“Now.”) but he kept his mouth shut.

Although she couldn’t see because of the meat blocking her view, she heard the fourth man, who must have been of the ruling class, say, “What’s taking so long? You better not be misbehaving. Remember what I said, ‘No bruises, no breaks, no visible indiscretions.’ You don’t want to make Gremius angry, do you? Perhaps if you’re good he’ll let you have some time with her later.”

One of the oafs licked his lips as if savouring the word “later”, while the other two took her by the arms and marched her out of the cell. They led her down the corridor, neither gently nor roughly, but with giant hands wrapped tightly round her forearms until she began to lose feeling in her fingers. That stopped their shaking. She imagined those hands formed into fists and wondered if that is what gave humans such confidence in the face of obvious inferiority. Big fists and brute strength made them brave—or dumb. But what was effective against other big fists or fat, immobile and unthinking cows wasn’t as effective against witches, or even bears. Big fists also couldn’t handle packs, as of wolves, or stealth, as of snakes, or self-destruction, as of diseased rats.

As they walked down this and other corridors and up swirling flights of stairs, she noted the spacing of the torches and knew that if she managed to free even one wrist, she could smother a light source, dazzle them with primitive conjurings in the dark and kill them one-by-one with their own clothing if need be.

They passed cells in which unmoving bodies lay curled up, others in which men and women with greasy hair that clung to wild faces lunged at the bars and passers-by. No doubt such a face was responsible for the laughter that had kept her company in her own cell. They passed another torch and she returned to her previous thoughts: a human, she mused, would do that: fight pointlessly to the end to the detriment of the cause itself. But she would not. Even if she made her escape from these four, what next? There were hundreds more in the castle: guards that wouldn’t let her through, witchhunters, petty civilians on business who would drop their own affairs and wrestle her to the death at the very sound of “escaped prisoner” and “reward”. And then there was the city itself, filled with human enemies of every kind. The only chance she’d

have out there was at night, and, since she had completely lost her sense of time, daylight was just as likely as moonlight. On the other hand, in a fight she would betray secrets, abilities, tactics and valuable information that the humans might later use against her sisters. The odds didn't compute.

And so her forearm stayed put, and her fingers numb, and all the torches they passed remained unsmothered and illuminating.

As they kept going steadily upwards the air grew warmer and the oafs started to breathe heavier. Finally, they reached an open door and stopped. She felt the unmistakable coolness of fresh wind. They were above ground; there was a window nearby. The non-oaf went in through the door.

From inside the room she heard a voice say: "Thank you, Cudgel. That will be all for now... I shall see you at the burning... Yes, have the guards stay outside. I will knock when they are needed... No, no binding is necessary. I will be fine."

Cudgel Thecker stepped once again into the hallway and wiped his brow. It had been a nervous day for a while, but all was steady now. He told the oafs to toss Esmerelda into the interrogation room and reminded them to wait for a knock and further word from Gremius. From the accent of their grunts, they appeared to grasp the instructions. He ignored Esmerelda, smiled to no one but himself, and departed with time to spare before tonight's festivities.

The oafs hesitated and looked at each other slightly panicked to have been left alone—albeit with commands. Esmerelda felt a touch sorry for them, or maybe she was just annoyed, eager to get closer to the fresh air. Either way, she took a step forward and carried out their instructions for them; but no such doing: they grabbed her by the clothes and dragged her back. "Sir said 'toss'," one said. "So we toss," added the second. The third? He just did the tossing.

...Esmerelda barreled into room just managing to keep her balance by smashing against a writing desk. She felt the impact, then the hit of crisp air against her eyes, then saw the open window and just brought Gremius' outline into focus against the evening sky as, politely, he said, "Good afternoon. Please have a seat. I have subjects I wish to discuss with you."

She bit her teeth.

Gremius smiled a "very well" and leaned against the window sill. "We shall speak standing." He cleared his throat while inspecting the prisoner before him: brown haired, fairly young, stout, not exactly attractive,

short, high-cheeked and wide-stanced, determined. "You are a witch. This much you admit?" he asked.

Esmerelda sat down on a wooden chair behind the writing desk.

"Do you feel more in control when I'm sitting?" she answered without taking her eyes away from his.

"I am in control. Whether you sit or stand is down to your own comfort."

"I could kill you," she said.

"But you won't."

He turned and spread his arms against the edges of the window. He continued: "I'm not as ignorant as you think, witch. I've had enough experience with your kind to understand. You underestimate our human potential for learning and invention—"

He slammed the window shut.

The blowing air deadened.

"And you judge our passions and irrationalities to be liabilities, weaknesses. Yet are blind to your own weaknesses." He spun and slammed his palms on the writing desk. "Unpredictability, witch, is a virtue. Predictability is fatal. You won't kill me."

"But you *will* kill me," she said.

"Unpredictability frightens you. Emotions, to be overwhelmed: you think this is a flaw. Tell me about the first time someone in whom you had trust did wrong to you. Tell me how dispassionate it felt and how alone that dispassion made you. Did you crave to feel betrayed?"

She bared her teeth. "Neutrality is ecstasy, emotions as predictable as reason. But you tell me this: can the impassioned man predict reasonable actions better than the reasonable woman emotional outbursts? Stupidity boils your soul and hatred flows from your tongue, human."

"And arrogance down yours. To believe that you are dispassionate and that this dispassion sets you free...."

"You won't make me angry."

"You came in wanting silence, I conversation. We are conversing. Are you blind? Tell me about the Coven. You must see that they have fed you lies. I can help you."

Esmerelda laughed until the shutters creaked. "Only a human can be so naïve and foolish. I was slated for death the moment I was born and now you threaten me—with that? I am a witch, yes. Your laws took everything from me. Now there is nothing left to take. I will burn, you will live, your kind will slowly die out."

Greminus straightened. The sword had dug into his side again. She was partly right, he admitted to himself. Anyway, it had been a half-hearted attempt at best. No witch would ever turn against her own. It was a type of fanaticism, he supposed; a lack of individualism. War was inevitable. Number thirty-eight would be just as thirty-seven, would be just as number one: defiant and loyal till the end.

"Yes, well, I am obliged to offer," he said—politely again. "I will capture more of you whether you cooperate or not."

It was a declaration, not a threat.

He knocked on the door and waited for the oafs to respond. When they did, he instructed, "Take her to the waiting room. Put her in, close the door, lock it, then bolt it. Understand?"

The oafs nodded.

As he watched Esmerelda's emotionless face, he truly felt that to kill a witch was to put her out of her misery. It was an act of mercy. As such, it could never be properly explained—at least no more to a witch than to a rabid dog. His job, he decided, was an important one. And he was good at it.

The oafs grabbed Esmerelda and pulled her out of the interrogation room into the hallways and antechambers of the lower floors of the castle. She was surprised they knew where they were going, but perhaps they didn't; they did appear to wander aimlessly. In the meantime, she felt their thick fingers around her arms and listened to their inane chatter. Without anyone to keep watch, they talked to themselves like lobotomized housewives:

"Yah so like the grandmother died, eh?"

"I am sad. It is sad. Were you sad? When did she died?"

"Yah she died on a day in the last week. It was a sad day and I was sad. The mother visited me and she told me it. I was happy to see the mother."

"My grandmother is died, too."

"When is the grandmother's buried? Do you must stay here or can you be at the buried?"

"Oh so like the guard tell I must stay."

"It is sad."

"Yah but the grandmother's buried is in the other village, the home village. The grandmother's body is on the cart now in the church with other bodies. The mother saw it."

"The body rides to the village on the cart? I like riding on the cart."

“Yah when the burning gets done the roads will opened and the grandmother’s body will ride to the village on the cart...”

Esmerelda bore without grinning. Her own body would be burned, then the ash would be collected and stored in an urn. At least that was the rumor: that somewhere in the castle there was a roomful of witch remains. It might be true, she guessed. There wasn’t any power in witch ash as far as she knew, but the practice sounded like human superstition. Listening to these three oafs gossip made most anything seem a human possibility.

Chapter 6

A fire-juggler cartwheeled, exhaling flames, across the winding cobbled path that lead through Regent Park to the city centre and the burning spike. He spoke another flame before tumbling away into the trees to sound of teenage gasping and applause. Families came all the time in waves. Children ran and giggled and played and were overjoyed at the prospect of staying up so late. Adults spoke amongst themselves—gossip and trade talk, job promotions and the marriages of second cousins, had we met before, perhaps, you really should see my wares, my wife speaks very highly of your horse-hair brushes—while musicians with overstuffed collection bags played folk tunes on roughly made brass, string and percussion. There truly was nothing like a witch burning to bring out the giving and festive spirit in people.

Further along the path, forward-thinking merchants sold hard candies and firecrackers. Fireworks were a more complicated business. The King had a monopoly. But one just climbed up overhead, did you see it, a boy asked his mother, who paid no attention because she was flirting with a merchant. Then the firework exploded! A loud blast of cerulean and purple, with an orange ring that turned to yellow as it fell through the sky towards the earth. The mother gasped and gaped, a girl again. The merchant gave the boy a free candy.

The soldiers were out, too. In shining steel armour. More decoration than security. And even policemen wore their rarest best—ironed uniforms, polished badges, wide smiles. How do you do, Mr Pawstead, I'm sure something can be done about that ticket of yours; yes, I'm sure you didn't know your apothecary's license had expired. What good will amongst men. Perhaps it was being beaten out of the drums and blown out the trumpets of the King's Royal Cavalry Orchestra, which marched in rhythmic unison round and round the square.

Ah, the square: the city centre: the focus of it all. A flurry of activity, a tornado of noise, a hurricane of pomp, flags and patriotism. The fire-juggler did a backflip, the son pulled along his mother who was still

thinking about the merchant, as the teenagers pushed past them and into the crowd, hoping to get a better look at—

Esmerelda stood straight as the spike to which she was chained. Her wrists were tied together and aloft, her ankles held apart by a two-foot bar. Though the chains and bars were only chains and bars in part. The sections that actually bound her wrists and ankles were wrapped in oily snakeskin.

Raised on the burning mound, she was the eye of the festive storm.

She faced north, towards the Castle, her bare feet sunken slightly into the mix of woods that, when set afire, would kindle, smoke and start to choke and kill her as the mixture flowed through her nose and mouth and into her lungs. Now, on still-cold timber, she breathed deeply and easily. Her neck was unbound and she kept her head held back. It was a defiant gesture but also a practical one, for her eyes were trained not on the growing and shouting crowd below, but higher, on the Castle, on the twentieth floor balcony, upon which stood the King.

She had never seen the great enemy. She barely saw him now. He was alone and moved sometimes from one end of the balcony to the other. He wore a crown. But as she wondered if he, too, was looking at her, she felt her spine suddenly turn to ice; and shuddered. There were some in the Coven, she remembered, who thought the King was a witch himself, though that particular theory was never spoken aloud—only whispered in corridors between friends. He was no ordinary human, that was certain. But even the humans acknowledged that. *They* did it with a god cult. The Coven was more truthful and taught that it simply did not know; but it always asserted his humanity. The King may have been over a thousand years old where the Grand Matron herself was less than seven-hundred, but that, by itself, did not make the King superhuman. He was a man—a long-living man; a long-living and dangerous enemy.

More fireworks exploded in the sky.

Esmerelda lowered her head and took in the crowd. The thousands of faces were like one to her: spitting with anger and mad-browed, cursing and a curse on life, intolerable. One face, young as a newborn and old as a deathbed, both smooth and wrinkled; a human face. It was the face of her mother and her father, her teachers and her friends, the face of the priest who visited her town and the face of the King looking down from his balcony. It was the face she saw when she plunged the stone dagger into Daniel McAlister's chest.

The trumpets ceased and the orchestra increased the pace of its drumming.

The entire square was full of bodies. Only the burning spike and the thirty-yard circular space around it was empty. But now a second space opened: a passage through the bodies toward the spike. It was lined by soldiers in red helmets who held back the crowd. Traversing it was a group of nine men headed by Gremius Orelus and tailed by Cudgel Thecker.

Esmerelda knew it was almost time.

She looked up again, but the balcony was empty. Perhaps the King was making his way down to ground level, too. Her hands started to shake inside the snakeskin-bound chains. She kept her eyes up. She refused to look down at Gremius. She knew her face would instantly betray her fear. She refused to grant him that satisfaction. Instead, she scanned the city's skyline, west to east—a panorama of human settlement: tightly-packed, irregular, haphazard. Wispy smoke rose from a few chimneys, fewer still windows were lit. It was an empty city to-night. The city had come out *en masse* to watch her die.

On one of the roofs she saw a vulture. It was perched just above the jutting attic window of a two-story brick building. It hopped slowly from one side to the other, every once in a while opening its wings and letting the wind rustle its black feathers. Its beak was unpleasantly hooked. It was ugly. Esmerelda felt a kinship with the bird. She also thought about Crooked Nose's golden-white falcon; and all at once her greatest regret was that she had not discovered her own familiar, her own personal species. Perhaps it was the vulture. She hadn't heard of any other witch being familiar with vultures. Though she also realized that that meant nothing. Still, if it was the vulture to which she was closest, she was happy that it had come to say farewell. She hoped that some of her flesh would stay unburnt so that the vulture would at least have something to eat. It would come in the early morning, she imagined, when the city was asleep, and pick through the ashes. In death, she would soar with the scavengers...

Alas, as another firework exploded in the night sky, the vulture swung out its vast wings and rose from the roof. As it did, it let out a fierce screech. Meanwhile, somewhere down in the masses a soldier pulled an arrow from his sheath, tightened his bowstring; and cut the bird down in mid-flight. It fell as it was pierced. Now *it* would be scavenged. Some ragged child would discover it tomorrow and drag it home for dinner.

The red-helmeted soldiers relaxed their arms and melted back into the crowd. The passage disappeared.

Esmerelda finally looked down.

Gremius stood at the foot of the burning mound, his back to her, Witchkiller hanging imposingly at his side. Cudgel Thecker, looking neither here nor there, but seemingly over the heads of the onlookers, was to his right. He held a small box. The seven other men, their flowing black robes fluttering in the breeze—high priests of some sort, though she wasn't well acquainted enough with human religion to know what rank; the most important, probably—carried large unlit white candles. They had spaced themselves around the mound at more-or-less regular intervals.

The orchestra cut its drums. The trumpeters played a dramatic introduction. Then, too, fell silent. A hush fell over the colossal mob. After a pause, as the murmurs intensified, Gremius shouted, "Fellow countrymen, hear the words of our King!"

All eyes were immediately upon him.

He unfurled a parchment paper—and read: "The woman bound before you to be punished on this holiest of nights may cast upon you the shadow of appearance of a neighbor or friend. Be assured, she is not. She is a profanation. For years, she wore a false name and lived amongst you as a spy. By her actions, she wished to bring down the Kingdom and destroy all that you hold dear. Your homes, your families, your lives." He broke for effect as indicated on the paper. "My loyal and loving subjects, we are gathered here tonight to witness the destruction of this witch." He lowered the parchment and underscored, "Countrymen, the words of our Lord."

The people erupted: "Glory to the King!"

Esmerelda felt the hair on her neck stand and her determination bristle.

When the chanting ceased, Gremius continued, no longer reading from the parchment, "But the King's rule is a rule of law. This witch will die not for who she is, but for what she has done. She will die for the murder of Daniel McAlister, a boy of nine who committed no crime of either legal or moral dimension. He was innocent. He was pure. He did not deserve to die, and he will be revenged."

More chants and cheers.

"However, we are a compassionate people. This is our strength. And towards this witch we will show a mercy that she herself denied her victim."

Gremius turned to face Esmerelda, who saw the robed priests flick matches and light their candles. Cudgel Thecker tinkered with his box. Above them all, a golden-white falcon glided between twinkling stars.

“Witch,” he said dramatically, “you have committed a crime for which you have been found guilty before a fair and unbiased tribunal. The punishment is death. But your life can still be spared. The choice is yours. Do you show public pity for this crime, do you renounce your Coven, do you accept the wrongdoing that you have performed as an evil that must be rid from the Kingdom and the world?”

The trumpeters played a scale, the drummers drummed, a skull-and-bones firework rose and burst into a million particles. The crowd thirsted for blood. Gremius bit his lip. Yet another *touch* he bemoaned. The choice presented to the victim was traditional. It made sense—especially because the answer was never in doubt. But this deliberation time, this building-up of fake suspense. Yes, he decided, this must be discussed, too. Along with the sword. Time was up. Esmerelda answered, her voice hoarse, “I show no pity.”

Gremius unsheathed Witchkiller.

“Then you have sealed your fate. You have rejected the King’s goodwill and shown yourself to be unworthy of life.” He swung the ivory sword majestically. With its tip pointed at Esmerelda, he pronounced, “In the name of the King and his subjects, I repeat and uphold the verdict of the tribunal. Witch, you are sentenced to die. Begin!”

The crowd roared, the priests raised their lit candles. Esmerelda could hear them muttering unintelligible prayers as they circled the mound. Cudgel Thecker opened his box and extracted several small vials. He shook them: liquids. The roaring ebbed. The muttered prayers grew louder. The priests stopped circling. Cudgel Thecker unplugged the vials and poured their contents onto the foot of the mound. The priests knelt, finishing their prayers in unison: “Forever and ever, life everafter.” Gremius—his arm outstretched, Witchkiller suspended in the air—slashed symbolically at the burning spike; the priests touched their flames to the mound; Cudgel Thecker backed away; the wood kindled, smoke puffed, heat breathed.

Esmerelda felt the slickness of the snakeskin chains. But they were tightly wound. The fumes began to warm her soles, her legs, her hips, up her stomach, over her chest, and she breathed them in through her spasming nostrils. She closed her mouth and brought her feet awkwardly close to the spike. It was heating up, too. She felt the centre of morbid attention. She looked up at the Castle balcony. She wanted to see the King, look at him, show her defiance; but he wasn’t to be found. Only the gaping smiling maws of dumb humans. And Gremius. He’d sheathed Witchkiller and was watching her being enveloped by the smoky haze.

Once, when she was a little girl, her father had taken her hunting. In the morning, through a thick fog, he guided her hands while she let loose the bowstring that wounded a large buck. They tracked it by blood until the fog lifted. Then found its dying body lying on its side by a creek. She chased the memory from her mind. It was an illusion. That was not her life. Her life started later. The first tongues of fire lapped at her calves. They were bright red and orange, yellow and lavender, blue like the flames over the gas calderas at Hockenmouth.

The entire mound crackled and spat. Sparks flew. The fire raced up and down and whirled, booming with each gust of night wind. The teenagers and the mother and the son “ooh’ed”. The candy merchant had left his cart unattended and “ahh’ed.” The spectacle was weaving its secular spell.

Gremius felt sick to his stomach, as green as the dancing flames—now suddenly grey, now pink. The trumpets and drums hurt his head. Whatever alchemical had been added to the fire was causing so much smoke that it made him dizzy. He steadied himself by spreading his legs. It would be over soon, he reassured himself. The people were enjoying it but he felt old-fashioned. He wished he had been born a thousand years ago.

The show continued until the mound was fully and wildly ablaze. But by then its surging flames were barely visible through the thick smoke that was starting to spread over the square like an incoming thunderstorm. Underneath, fits of coughing came down in place of lightning.

Esmerelda felt relieved by the smokescreen. She felt the heat of the fire and the sizzle of the spike against her back and the smoke irritated her eyes, but she felt alone, in a private place, peaceful. Even the snakeskin was hot. How much longer must this last, she thought, as with every gasp and inhalation of boiling air she prepared herself to die.

Gremius could barely see the foot of the mound, let alone the spike or the witch. The smoke was viscous. He fanned at it with his hand. His armour clanged. As far as he could tell, the flames had reverted to their natural colours. The burning was surely over. The witch was surely dead. But he couldn’t see the charred body, he couldn’t make sure, and that made him nervous. “Cudgel,” he yelled out in no particular direction.

“Sir?” came the disembodied response.

“Clear the smoke!”

“Sir, it’s a side effect, sir. Sorry, unintended. I’m sure they’ll fix the formula for,” but the sentence finished in a succession of coughs.

Indeed, coughing, hacking and wheezing were everywhere. Gremius was surrounded by them. And cursing and yelling. The crowd had transformed into a mass of disorientation. First, someone screamed. Then more people screamed. Others teetered and tottered blindly, bumped into each other, fell trying to find their way to clearer air. The smoke choked at them. Gremius pushed through it. On his left, a man was sprawled on the ground, a woman over him, imploring him to breathe. From the right a soldier burst suddenly into view—and into Gremius. Who dodged and pushed the soldier aside, cutting short his apology.

“Cudgel,” he yelled, “get rid of this forsaken smoke!”

Inside the epicenter, the heat was unbearable. Esmerelda wanted to drown in her own sweat. Her eyes stung as if beset by hornets. She closed them, opened them, blinked; they teared up, she blinked again, holding her lids tightly closed. She sprung them open. She rubbed her eyeballs with her hands. *Rubbed them with her hands?* Although she couldn’t see it, she could feel it: the texture of the oily snakeskin was gone. Her hands were free! They must have burned off in the heat. Her legs—too: unbound! Then her own skin came in direct contact with the metal and it melted away like so much butter. She moved her limbs. Something had gone wrong for the humans. Someone had botched things up. Imbeciles!

She wiggled her toes, sunken into the burning mound, and took a step forward away from the spike. She remembered that she’d been facing the castle, north. Escape—she cackled—would thus be more likely to the south. As her coal-black soles carried her in that direction through the smoke and flames, down the smoldering wood, she felt the heat of the spike recede like the very hand of death.

Chapter 7

Even before reaching the bottom of the mound, Esmerelda's ears were treated to the beautiful sound of human panic; the treble of voices, the bass of colliding bodies. She giggled and stepped onto dirt. Next onto grass, which was like stepping onto soft ice. She nearly recoiled, but a dash of cool wind sharpened her senses. It also knocked drops of sweat from her brow. They hit the mound and hissed steam. Her wet clothes clung to her like leeches. Her eyes itched, but she could safely keep them closed for now—the wall of smoke was as thick down here as it had been up there. Although she could barely see her newly-freed hand in front of her smiling face, she knew that human bodies passed mere yards away, just out of sight: a stampede of blind men, women and children. Clearly, it was in everyone's best interest to keep still until the smoke thinned. Naturally, the humans did the opposite. Night, she had decided in the dungeons, gave her a chance of escape. Night and smoke were even better.

She entered the crowd between two dazed women who could just as well have been gateposts. "Why, how awful, there goes the witch," one of them could have said. "Yes, isn't it dreadful?" the other could have answered. Instead, both stood dumb as the oafs that had escorted Esmerelda to the interrogation room. She looked at them, then at herself, then decided it would be best to cover up her clothes. They could easily be recognized. One of the dumb gateposts wore a long green coat. Esmerelda slipped it off without as much as a peep or shrug. Mental paralysis. As she put her arms through the coat sleeves she thought of Gremius. For a species proud of its unpredictability, humans sure were unprepared for it.

She moved swiftly.

Until, out of nowhere—out of the smoke—a body threw itself at her. Before she could sidestep the attack, two arms were tugging at her coat, weighing her down. She pressed forward, but the figure's head pressed harder against her chest and its robed body stood like a boulder in her way. It wasn't an attack. She recognized the robes. They belonged to one

of the high priests who'd just a quarter of an hour ago set fire to the burning mound. She grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed him back into the haze. He returned like an unwanted boomerang, this time with a dreadful hitch-pitched plea, "Please, I can't breathe, please be so kind as to help me out of the smoke, please, I can pay you, don't let me suffocate, for the love of the King." He might come in handy later, she reasoned; if not, she could always dump him. So she took his hand and pulled him gratefully along. His mouth let out a stream of spittle and "thank you".

She was getting distinctly tired of dragging humans.

Together, they maneuvered through the maze more-or-less in a straight line as around them bodies went in endless circles.

Chapter 8

Gremius felt the crunch of wood under his boot and knew he'd found the burning mound. He called out to Cudgel Thecker, but again there was no response. He would have to do the deed himself. He lowered his head, shielded his face from the heat and climbed.

He didn't get far. The flames pushed him out. But it was far enough. Even through the raging fire and against the dissolving greyness he could see the thin outline of the spike. He knew immediately: the spike was empty, the chains held nothing. The witch was alive.

His skin blistered inside his boots.

But he was numb to the pain. He backed away until he felt dirt underfoot, then bellowed to the whole world, "She is alive. The witch is alive. Stop her!"

Pandemonium doubled.

Chapter 9

Esmerelda heard the call and noted where it had come from: behind. That meant she was going in the right direction. It also meant she wasn't going fast enough. The smoke was thinning. She looked back at the priest. He was wide-eyed but conscious and staring at her. If she could see him clearly, he could see her, too. He was a coward, but no fool. He was surely putting the pieces together: the clothing visible beneath her cloak, his memory of the witch tied to the spike, Gremius yelling that she was still alive and, "He—!"

Half the first syllable was all he managed before Esmerelda stopped, jerked him by the arm and struck him in the throat as he flew toward her. While he was still bent, gasping for air, she covered his mouth with her hand and brought her lips to his ear. "If you want to live," she whispered, "be quiet and do as I say." The priest nodded. Esmerelda slid her hand from his mouth—he didn't say a thing—to his neck, where his pulse was racing. "One word," she repeated her warning, "and you'll be dead before anyone lays a hand on me." He nodded again, his pulse quickened. One more human weakness, this: individualism, instinct for self-preservation. *Loyal and loving subjects*, the words went. No wonder the King spent his life shut up in a tower.

Chapter 10

Gremius stomped from one long-haired figure to the next, grabbing heads, checking faces, tossing aside each and every one. He was looking for a witch. He would find the witch. She would not—he brought another face close for inspection but it wasn't the one he wanted—escape. Thirty-seven burnings, thirty-seven charred witch corpses. There would not be an imbalance. Thirty-eight must equal thirty-eight. He threw this particularly unfortunate woman down harder than the others. She squeaked as she hit the ground. Gremius squeezed Witchkiller's hilt and roared at the night sky.

The woman got up, wobbled on unsure knees, then hobbled away in terror. Gremius watched her go. If only she knew how much of her good fortune and safety were due to his hard work, his anti-witch activities, his nights spent studying history and maps and the law books, she wouldn't hobble so eagerly.

He had turned onto one of the paths leading to and from the square. There were less people here and the smoke was lighter. He could hear a pack of teenagers behind him. Ahead was an abandoned merchant's cart. He neared and saw a boy greedily stealing hard candies from its compartments, stuffing them into his pockets. "Looting," he pronounced, "is a punishable offense." The boy turned his drooling face, saw Gremius reach for Witchkiller, dropped every candy he'd pilfered and bounded into the trees like a monkey. Gremius stopped and looked over the scene of the petty crime. The candies were individually wrapped in shiny pink wrappers. The cart had the words "Best candies in town, only 5 coppers—and official burning firecrackers!" painted on its side, next to a crude representation of a dead witch.

For a split second, Gremius despised people.

He *understood* witches.

Then the focus of his anger shifted. It's all the fault of these stupid new ideas, he grunted, raising Witchkiller above his shoulders. These primitive, classless ideas. Why does everything have to be a bloody show? The teenagers caught up with him, but decided to back away. In the old days,

this wouldn't have happened, his mind went on. We would have burnt at noon—he swung the sword at the cart, splintering it, sending candies airborne. We would have been satisfied with natural flames, none of this alchemical bamboozle—another swing, another crashing wave of splinters and candy. And we would have all been home by sundown. He switched his stance. This next swing was going to be the killer blow, oh yes. The cart would be no more. The cart was guilty. Gremius tightened his knuckles, raised Witchkiller above his head and brought the blade thundering down into his battered wooden opponent: “Maliphus Prefectus never had to deal with this garbage!”

He closed his eyes as he swung. He wanted to *feel* the impact, to pretend he was destroying an idea, an age; not a city merchant's cart. And he felt it: the cracking, the shattering, the lightness of—wait, why, what? He opened his eyes. The cart was a little worse for wear, true enough, but still whole. He blinked. He swallowed. He looked down:

...where half a shattered ivory sword rested on the grass, taunting him with its insignificance. His right hand was still holding a hilt and half a white blade. He blinked again. Then, screaming, kicked at the sword and the ground and the cart until the veins in his eyes bulged and the blisters popped and burst under his boots.

Chapter 11

On the other side of City Centre, Cudgel Thecker heard a murderous scream. For a moment his hope got the better of him and he exhaled: someone had caught the witch. Then reality intervened. It was a man's scream. If anything, it meant the witch was the one who'd done the catching. But, beyond that, he still didn't understand what had gone wrong. He picked at his own brain. The ingredients were right, the order was right. Maybe someone had mislabeled one of the barrels, written "oak" where he meant to write "cedar", or else put a birch branch among the pine. All he concluded was that this fiasco was not his fault but he would be the one taking the blame. He needed to find the witch. He could recognize her, he was sure of it. If that failed, he would avoid Gremius for as long as possible. Gremius was not a nice man when he was angry. But there were so many people, so many women, in every direction. How to find the right one?

He sighed and continued on his lookout.

Chapter 12

The smoke had lifted. What remained was but a subtle blur. Through it, Esmerelda saw bleary buildings and an occasional lit face in a window—people who had already arrived home, people who hadn't gone to the burning. She and her priest were definitely out of the square. They were somewhere in the city, on one of the main roads. She didn't know the layout well enough to know which, but that wasn't the problem. It was the faces. They disconcerted her: children, old women, degenerates. She couldn't read their expressions. She felt vulnerable in the open road. She turned into a side street.

"You won't escape," the priest hissed.

She ignored him and kept moving. They'd been travelling south, she'd turned left; they were heading east. This street, if it could be called that, was narrower than the last. There was less light and the buildings loomed close on either side, close enough to touch if she stretched out her arms. The few windows facing the street were drawn shut, fuzzy rectangles of dull gaslight. There was also no smoke. It had been thick in the square but hadn't spread this far. Still, it had given her enough cover for a head start.

Although her thoughts kept posing the question *why aren't you dead*, she pushed it away each time. She was lucky, the humans were careless. That was all the answer she allowed herself. Every other thought must be directed toward the present, to getting out of the city. If she was going to do succeed she would need to keep to side streets and alleys like a rat. Night was good cover, but would it be good enough? She knew the pursuit was on.

"They'll catch you, witch."

Daniel McAlister had dragged his feet, the priest followed obediently. His talk was cheap if his legs were moving. With every step she was closer to freedom: that's what mattered. And the priest was harmless as long as they were alone. He didn't have the courage to make a stand, to put his life where his mouth was. She thought about leaving him and continuing on her own. It would speed her up, but the trade-off wasn't

worth it. She needed supplies. He would be useful for that. Until then, she would put up with his hissings and spittings and gutless protestations.

She cut into another alley—south again.

Chapter 13

Gremius Orelus leaned over a large city plan draped haphazardly over a wooden table somewhere on the outskirts of Regent Park. His breastplate held down the map on one end, the remains of Witchkiller on the other. Charcoal bits lay scattered about the rest. Two soldiers flanked him with lanterns. When they swayed, the light flowed across the map like a tide. Several more soldiers and a handful of well-dressed civilians made up the rest of the entourage.

Around them, the general excitement had subsided. Smoke had been swallowed up by dark. Most people had gone home. They were probably cuddling together like frightened rabbits, Gremius imagined, afraid of the witch, unaware it was their own doing that she was on the loose, locking their windows and stacking furniture behind closed doors lest she want to come in for a visit. They were waiting for *him* to sort out of *their* mess.

One of the lanterns flashed pink.

"Sorry, sir," the soldier holding it whimpered. His fear jerked his arm which pushed a stream of coloured light across Gremius' squinting, angry eyes. The soldier added, "Some of the alchemicals from the burning, sir. You see, some of the other soldiers—"

"The runners. Have they returned?"

"Y-y-yes, sir," the other soldier piped up, "Just now, sir."

"The gates are..."

"Oh, closed, sir. They're very much closed."

The gates were the obvious exit points. But there were bound to be other, smaller, unknown passages out into the wilderness. Smugglers' tunnels, unrepaired breaches, even some rodent holes were big enough for a woman to squeeze through. Then there was the possibility of going over the walls. Or under. Gremius studied the grid of streets and roads, avenues and alleys, churches and neighbourhoods. There was no way to guard against all the possibilities. The city could not be locked down.

He pushed himself up from the table and limped over to try another point of view.

He might estimate how far she'd gone but he didn't know in what direction. Nevertheless—he grabbed a charcoal bit—she must be going as quickly as she can in *some* direction. It wouldn't make sense to dally. *He* wouldn't dally, put in the circumstance. He drew a rough circle round the middle of the city. "Call off the patrols from here," he said, pointing to it, "And shift that manpower to the perimeter."

No net was impenetrable, but he would do all he could to tighten the holes. If she wanted out of the city, she would have to attempt a breakthrough.

Chapter 14

“Do you know this area?”

The moonlight seemed to magnify the question.

“I won’t tell you a thing,” the priest huffed. He was out of shape and out of breath, but still acidic; and still dutifully moving his feet.

Esmerelda dug in a heel, stopped and turned to face her would-be executioner. She smiled a snake’s smile. “Then you’re no longer useful to me.”

She extended her arms just enough to remind the priest about his bare, exposed throat.

He swallowed hard.

“I may have been here once or twice,” he corrected himself.

“Would the people recognize you?”

The priest puffed out his chest. She had inadvertently hit upon a point of pride. “Of course. I’m one of the seven Prime Vicars of the Imperial City. Handpicked by the High Council. Any loyal, King-fearing commoner in the city would...”

“Good,” Esmerelda said, “I want you to knock on a door.”

The priest merely opened his mouth for a second, then closed it. He made a clucking sound.

“You’ll have us invited in and get us fed. You’ll get me a skin of water and a pair of boots. A cloak if you can manage it. If anyone asks why you’re coming so late at night, tell them the truth—to a point: the burning,” she said the word with distaste, “was a failure, there was too much smoke, you couldn’t breathe. I’m one of your parishioners and found you choking in the dark. I saved your life. You don’t think you can make it to your vicarage without rest. You’re *afraid*.”

She cherished that last word, whipping the priest into submission with it. He started to protest, but all that came out was air.

“And if you so much as hint at who I am, I will kill all of you.”

“Which door?” was all he asked.

She pointed down the street. “Whichever answers. Start with the nearest. Be discrete.”

He tried to tug his hand loose from hers but her grip was firm. She'd learned that from the oafs. The priest had never been held by fingers fat as those. She could have let him go; if he ran, she would be faster. But with doors one never knew. Slipping in was easy.

He led the way now, from backdoor to backdoor. *Knock, knock*: no answer. She studied his back. It was thin, there was barely any muscle underneath his robe. He was one of those lean but flabby humans, soft. Born in the city to a rich family, he'd proceeded through life well enough for his parents' connections to secure promotion after promotion. He had done no manual labour. *Knock, knock*: no answer. But his back was also hooked, adorned with a slight hump that pressed, visible, against the cloth as he walked. The result of hours spent bent over books. In libraries, in a personal study. He wasn't lazy, he'd been an eager pupil. His arrogance was earned. *Knock, knock*.

A door opened—but only a crack. A solitary eye peered out. "Speak. Who goes there?"

The priest moved his eye close to the other. "Blessed be the King, let him live forever and eternity."

The solitary eye blinked: "Prime Vicar Ustinov?"

"It is I, my child."

The door opened a crack more, revealing a woman's face. She was in her fifties or early sixties, dressed in a nightgown. The aftertaste of sleep was on her lips.

"May we come in?" Ustinov asked.

The woman's expanding smile froze at the sound of *we*. She peered over Ustinov's shoulder at Esmerelda, standing colourless in the shadows of the street. The door wavered.

"A faithful parishioner," Ustinov assured, "You have perhaps already heard about tonight's misfortune?"

The woman nodded.

"I took part. When the celebration went asunder, this blessed soul saved me from the smoke. I owe her my life. We have been travelling together from the square ever since, but have lost our way in the night. Please, may we come in to rest? The streets are unsafe until dawn."

Esmerelda felt the pulse in the priest's wrist slow and his tendons slacken. He was a good, experienced liar. Lying was relaxing; truth was stressful. He felt relief whenever he hooked someone with a falsity. He was relieved now. He knew the woman would let them in before she even parted her lips to say, "Of course, Prime Vicar Ustinov. It would be an honour."

Inside, the home was meager but well-kempt and clean. Possessions were few, but each had its place. She led them to the kitchen and motioned for them to sit at a small round table. There were four chairs, but only one shined from everyday use; the woman lived alone. They obliged their hostess—Esmerelda keeping hold of the priest’s wrist underneath the beige tablecloth—as the woman shuffled about the room, peering into cupboards and opening drawers until she’d taken out three plates, a loaf of bread, a fowl-smelling cheese and three porcelain cups. Into the latter, she poured water from a glass jug. Esmerelda squeezed the priest’s hand. “If it is not too much trouble,” he said, “Perhaps you could also spare some, a skin’s worth, no more, for the morning’s journey?”

The woman nodded and disappeared into another room.

Esmerelda let go of the priest’s hand. She broke off a crumble of bread and brought it hungrily to her mouth. She was famished. The priest watched with disgust. The bread was stale but edible. She had eaten far worse. Before she finished chewing, she said, “Remember, if you try anything, she dies.”

The priest sighed. Not only was their hostess alone, meaning he could count on no male help in staging a possible attack against the witch, but she was also utterly, almost painfully, pleasant and—the word stuck in his throat despite his only thinking it—*good*. Loyalty and goodness were evident. Who else would take two strangers into her home at the devil’s hour of the night? It surprised him how much that *goodness* meant. Minutes ago, he felt ashamed at caring only for his own skin. He could have raised a fuss, attracted attention. He would be dead, the witch would have spared no time, but maybe he would have caused a commotion; maybe enough of one for her to be caught? Now, his heart pained at the thought of harm coming to such a good woman as their nameless hostess. He wasn’t thinking only of himself. He felt a true priest.

Then the woman returned with a water-filled skin and the priest’s noble feelings faded. “Thank you, child,” he said.

“Isn’t the Prime Vicar going to eat?”

Esmerelda was chewing just long enough to swallow moist chunks of bread. Ustinov’s plate stood free of crumbs. He wasn’t hungry. His hands were free and the witch’s attention was partially occupied, but what could he do? The woman implored him to have a bite of cheese—“Goat’s. Not from the markets. My second is a farm labourer...”

Her attempts at small talk were genuine and lovely, but Ustinov hadn’t the mood. Boots and a cloak, if possible; that was what he was

obliged to talk out of this woman. Then he would devise some way of leaving, of letting her live in peace and out of danger. He felt he owed this to her, but he couldn't pin down why: as a human or as a priest? As the woman talked, his eyes drifted from her yellowing teeth to the yellows of Esmerelda's eyes. The witch knew exactly how to get what she wanted, she knew how his emotions worked; but no more deeply than he understood the pull of light on a wayward moth. He knew the light pulled, he could predict the moth's behavior. That was all.

A moth hit against an open flame and singed.

It was shallow knowledge.

"Your husband," Ustinov interrupted.

"Dead," the woman said, "Six years now, King rest his soul. He was a kind man, a hard worker. Loyal to the Church." She took a long drink out of her own porcelain cup. After swallowing, she added, "Still hurts sometimes, the loneliness."

Esmerelda stopped chewing and put down her bread. She hadn't eaten any cheese. The smell was more than enough. But her cup was empty, so she poured herself another from the glass jug without asking. The water gurgled in the brief silence. It was uncomfortable to be in such intimate quarters with a human.

The woman turned her attention to Esmerelda: "What about you, dear? You are a quiet one. Hungry, but with such tired eyes. My Bertolt was like that for days before he left this world. With you it must have been the smoke—you did mention smoke. Isn't it awful about that witch? Now everybody has to worry and be wary of strangers. As if this city needs more distrust. My Bertolt always said that there was no shame in being open, even if you got taken advantage of. I abide by that. I don't have much to live for these days. My children, but they're grown. My second has a wife looks just like you, dear. Except she talks more."

Ustinov wondered how long it had been since this poor woman had had a visitor—any visitor. Esmerelda said, "Boots."

"—she means for the vicarage," Ustinov cut in sheepishly, "Active in the social causes, you see, but cuts straight to the point. I admit I wouldn't have asked myself, but now, since the subject has been breached, it is true that we are conducting a collection of sorts. Old clothes, boots, cloaks, shirts. For the homeless and needy. It's almost shameful for me to ask, but if you have some articles of your late husband's to spare, we could put them to use. The King would be grateful. He believes highly in charity. And they would make a body warm."

The woman shrugged her shoulders. "Not much left at all, I'm afraid. Bertolt never had much cloth. But what the moths haven't eaten you can take if you like."

"If you would take a look, the vicarage would be forever in your debt."

"Boots," Esmerelda repeated.

"Yes, we are especially in need of solid leather boots," Ustinov clarified, "Wet feet are the ruin of far too many."

Esmerelda's own bare feet were warming in the coziness of the home. She took one from the top of the other and planted both on the wooden floor. It bothered her how safe she felt here—how removed from the danger lurking outside, just beyond the walls, a step through a single door. There was no doubt that the streets were crawling with soldiers by now. The police were probably involved, too. Maybe vigilante mobs. She was in the thick of it. Hidden, but the longest she could stay hidden was till morning, and then the sun would come up and escape would be near impossible. She shuddered at the thought of emerging from this little home onto a sunlight street.

The clang of dishes interrupted her thoughts. The woman collected them, placed them in a basin and disappeared, this time up a flight of creaky stairs. Ustinov sighed. Esmerelda picked up the water skin and placed it inside her coat. If the woman returned with a pair of boots it would be time to leave, she decided. False security was treacherous. *Where to*: that could be decided later. She leaned over and told Ustinov to devise an excuse. He couldn't hide his relief; he truly wanted this ordinary, useless human to live. They both could hear the woman digging through chests and boxes upstairs. What difference would her death make, why should a high priest worry about what was part of the natural cycle of life: another dead old woman—

"The closest church?" Esmerelda demanded.

Chapter 15

“If I was a witch, a bloody ugly one, where would I be, what would I be thinking, would I be sneaking and hiding or hoofing it?” Cudgel Thecker thought as, grinning a “jolly good, mate”, he slipped between a cluster of yawning soldiers dutifully guarding the intersection of Peppercorn and Oakfield by leaning on their spears and discussing the finer points of afterhours swordplay.

“Ain’t clear that way yet, brother. You go, it’s on your own copper,” a bearded soldier called out after he’d passed. When Cudgel paid no mind, the soldier shrugged his shoulders and forgot about it.

The wind howled. The street stood empty. Cudgel pulled his hat tighter over his ears. There was no poem to help him this time. It was just the night, the city, the witch and his oldest and most faithful friend: intuition, which is to say: luck. He forced the swirling *If I was a witch* questions from his consciousness and concentrated on the darkness ahead. Not-thinking had served him well thus far in his life. Just let it try and fail him now!

But it *was* failing him.

He’d been wandering for hours. He’d managed to avoid Gremius, all well and good; but his closest call at spotting a witch had been an excited shout at what turned out to be a foraging raccoon. The city was crawling with them these days. They came out at night and pawed through the garbage.

A rock lay on the street and Cudgel kicked at it.

It hit against a cobble stone, flew up, hit a window that didn’t shatter, ricocheted into a side street and, judging by the awful screech that assaulted Cudgel’s ears, smashed against an alley cat. Cats, too: the city had more of those than it did raccoons. Dirty, ungrateful feline beasts that still somehow carried themselves with an unshakable pride. Cudgel liked that. Cudgel liked cats.

He followed the receding sound into the side street. With no better leads—why *not* this way?

The street curved. The victimized cat sat on an overturned box. Its eyes flashed surprise, then sunk into the distance. The pitter-patter of its paws gave way to the cawing of a crow. Cudgel stuck to the inner side. A light shone intermittently ahead.

Passing under its flickering shadows, he slipped a fist into his pant pocket and fingered a glass vial. Instinct. Safety was five-sevenths preparation. Where other men carried knives or brass knuckles, Cudgel Thecker carried alchemical sleepers. One vial contained enough juice to put a man down from midday to midnight. Application: by forceful smash to face or stealthy drip into orifice, as required. Never leave home without one. He was *almost* sure it worked on witches, too.

The street widened.

He walked on. Tall buildings loomed on either side. Apartments. The area was vaguely familiar. The cat screeched—Cudgel froze and tightened his grip on the vial of alchemical sleeper—and scurried between buildings. A sign dangled, but there wasn't enough light; the painted words were faded. It was tomato-shaped. The cat screeched again. Cudgel spun, he felt the unpleasant sensation of a man watched. The stars shone in circles. He lowered his gaze. In the distance: something moved—the cat? “You lousy, no good bastard...” raspy-voiced from behind. Another *thing* moved. Not the cat: humanoid, green. “...is that you,” the voice finished. Two figures, he saw them clearly. One green, the other in a robe. “... is you think you just run out on me like that? I ain't that kind'a girlie, I ain't.”

Screech.

The first blow sent him struggling for balance, the second disappeared the ground. The green and robed figures vanished, his fingertips felt glass, grass broke his fall, a streak of red hair snapped against his face. He whipped out the alchemical but, knees spread, her thighs were already pinning him to the ground. His teeth cut into his tongue as the sweet young face of M-something said, “Lover ain't ya heard, them's dangerous streets tonight.”

Cudgel tasted his own blood. “You idiot shrew,” he tried to say, “You didn't wake me up in time!” But all that came out was a muffled *thuthuthinthekmehupenthem*. The blood tasted like sucking on a rusted iron broadsword.

“Cat got your tongue?” she purred, forcing two fingers past his lips.

He swung at her with his free hand, but she dodged. So he spat a fountain of saliva-and-blood at her face instead.

“Nah poor bouy,” she pulled her fingers out, “I gots it.”

She dangled half his severed tongue in front of his face. Then chucked it fifteen yards yonder. It landed with a plop. The alley cat pounced on it, grabbed it and scampered off, its new-found tongue wagging.

"Don't gots it anymore."

She leaned in and kissed him. He tried to push her out but his mouth felt like a swollen pillow. When she pulled away, the vial caught her attention. He tried to hide it in his fist. "And what's this? What's lover gots? Has lover been holding out on us?"

The loss of blood was making him woozy.

She uncurled his fingers and held the vial against the moonlight. The liquid sparkled when shaken.

"More of the good kind, Cudgie? I *like* it. Fierce kicker. Took you places yesterday, it did."

She slid the cork stopper out of the vial.

The sleeper bubbled. It mixed with air, expanded. Its hue intensified. A drop crept toward the edge of the glass. Cudgel hurt. He wasn't fighting anymore. His mouth was numb. Something was painfully wrong with his back. He saw the drop slip, but didn't feel it land on the leftovers of his tongue. The alchemical mixed with blood.

He swallowed.

The hit was near-instant. The world receded. The tomato-shaped sign swung without wind. He felt M-something's breath against his cheek. "For lover, and now a-half for me," he heard her say and then the breath stopped and the buildings seemed to tumble and disintegrate at the same time. Her warmth was beside him. She was on her back, too. *One dose twelve hours, half-dose six.* They lay like that together on the grass in the courtyard of Tomato Heights barely clinging to alertness, eyes on the heavens above. She squeezed his hand. There was a witch, which was to be found? But there wasn't any which; Matilda, that was her name. He remembered...

Chapter 16

Boots crunched against gravel, the butt ends of spears clicked against cobblestone. Esmerelda held her hand over Ustinov's mouth until the patrol passed. They were becoming less frequent. Progress was speeding up. She removed her hand and asked, "How much further?"

"Not far."

There was a troubling calmness to Ustinov's voice—a resignation or else a plan hatched somewhere along their way. Regret crept over her. It had been a mistake to stop at the old woman's. Then she wiggled her toes, snug in leather, and knew it hadn't. The water skin felt like an extra life, the cloak would make suitable cover once she was out of the city. She wasn't used to uncertainty. They'd covered substantial ground, shadow to shadow, backs to walls, away from lit windows, but her terror-grip was loosening from the priest's neck by the step, she could feel it. Yet he led her almost willingly now. Why? Or perhaps the better question *where?*

They stopped at a well-lit intersection. Again there was the sound of crunching boots, but receding. Her own boots pressed against the ground silently. There wasn't a moving body in sight, only the shape of a stray cat. It darted across the intersection. When it was safely on the other side it turned its head and hissed and between its little white teeth hung a red human tongue. Ustinov muttered a prayer. The cat fled. Esmerelda grabbed Ustinov's hand and they ran from alley to alley.

Under lights she felt exposed. If the priest was planning something, why was he waiting? His hand was dry, his breath heavy but rhythmic. If he had nerves, they were under complete control. They entered shadows once more. There had been a dozen chances, a dozen patrols had passed by. She'd taken precautions: a hand tight over his mouth, constant threats; but there was no precaution against a sudden bite, a lunge into the light, a scream for help.

The priest stopped and pointed.

"There," he said.

She followed his outstretched hand to the where the alley swerved. A tall building faded in-and-out of the nighttime.

He whispered, "Church of the King Conqueror."

It was constructed from a light-coloured stone that seemed to swallow ambient light. The effect was of a building nestled in a cloud of perpetual gloom pierced only by the small blue flame flickering atop its steeple. A gas of some kind, Esmerelda mused, probably to awe the faithful—who, incidentally, would have entered from the opposite side. The church fronted on another street. Esmerelda and Ustinov had come upon it from the back.

"There's a rear entrance," Ustinov explained, running ahead, hands searching through his robes. Before Esmerelda caught up, he'd already dug out a key-ring.

The keys jangled against the lock.

"An unfortunate necessity, but in this uncertain age one never knows. The low steal even from the Houses of the King."

The lock clicked, Ustinov swung open the door.

Esmerelda let him enter first. Following, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was being led into a trap, lured into some divine artifice. But inside there was no one. No detachment of soldiers, no mob of incensed commoners, no second spike surrounded by praying Prime Vicars. Just majestic empty space supported by thick columns, lined by rows of wooden pews and surrounded by heavy walls punctuated by soaring stained-glass windows. The only light was candlelight. The quiet was overwhelming.

Ustinov's voice filled the whole of the interior: "Marvelous, is it not? Imagine the times before the doors closed, when believers came and went as they liked and emptiness was unknown. It was a true living building. Now it sleeps," he exhaled, "I spent much time here when I was young, as a child, as a student. The neighbourhood was better then, of course. Violence wasn't as common."

Esmerelda wondered if she had misjudged. Maybe the priest wasn't planning anything. Maybe he'd simply taken a devastating spill off his rocker. Madness could snuff out fear well as anything. Maybe he was even trying to convert her.

"Dearest Vicar, are you—" she asked.

"Hardly. Whatever you were going to ask, the answer is *hardly*." He suddenly laughed so hard the candles shook. "You must think me odd. You must. But let me show you something. Come, follow me."

Ustinov *the Ingenious*? Ustinov *the Brave*? Ustinov *the Witch-Deceiver*? The names cycled through his head. He almost tripped over his own feet as he considered the merits of each. Ultimately, it would be history that chose, but he was sure she would choose well. He supposed it was pride to aspire to such names, but if pride was a vice, truth was a virtue and he was truthfully ingenious.

“You will defile this holy ground once we are done? Oh, what nonsense. I am sure of it. I cannot ask you to do otherwise. But if you will, please do grant me one small favour...”

He was a bad priest. He knew it. He was also an able administrator and the church gained from his ascension to Prime Vicarship, but as a holyman he was ordinary. He had never had a rapport with the poor. His sermons weren't arousing, only sometimes intellectually stimulating. When he had a parish, his parishioners became bored. Their attendance dropped. His language was always high-born, he didn't make an effort to communicate. And whose intellect was it that he most interested in stimulating? He was a man of books, not souls—not directly, at least. Thus it had been healthy to visit the parishioner tonight. He hadn't paid such a visit in years. He couldn't remember the last. He was fully aware of the irony of the circumstance, make no mistake, but one often makes great discoveries in odd situations. The King himself discovered immortality by chance. And she was a lovely woman. She gave him faith in the future. People like her deserved a peaceful world.

“...When you take my life, take it cleanly, so that my blood, too, does not stain these holy floors.”

They passed a stained-glass dragon and a stained-glass battle-axe and Ustinov turned into a deep alcove in which a bejeweled map of the Imperial City had been sunk into a wall: “Four hundred and thirty seven years old, a relic from the old Church of King Pacifier. The names of streets have changed, but they are mere details. What is importance is that we are here.”

What joy he felt, pointing to a glowing sapphire on the map so near the very centre of the city.

He felt like shouting it repeatedly: *here, here, here.*

Outside, the sun was circling the world. In less than two hours it would rise and burn its glorious light equally upon the good and the evil. It would fall upon his dead body peacefully in the colours of the stained glass and it would coat the still-living witch in the bright morning dread of imminent capture. Even if she started now—even if she didn't spare the time to kill him—she could not reach the city walls

before sunlight. It was too far. And if she stayed hidden, they would find her. Where else would they start looking but in the very heart of the city? She had asked him to take her to the nearest church. He taken her to the only one from which escape was impossible. He had tricked her. He had won.

Ustinov pointed again.

Here.

Esmerelda watched his long finger with its trimmed fingernail tap against the map. She compared it to the dirty euphoria on his face. Madness beyond doubt.

"There," the addition of the *t* overjoyed him, "beneath the sacred shield from Ozenkierk," his fingernail pointed at a studded circular shield with short sword, "A relic, too, but sharp, undoubtedly sharp—they sharpen it monthly," his joy fell by an ounce, "Or did, when I was a boy. Take it, check it. *Check it.* What are you waiting for? I will lead you no further. I have tricked you, you witch. You must kill me. *Kill me!*"

He was the spitting image of the mad happy martyr. What fantasy his confused mind had mistaken for reality, Esmerelda couldn't guess, but she hadn't the inclination to bring him back—if that was even possible. Let him believe he had outsmarted her. There was no harm. There was also the gentle but gnawing realization that he was not so different from herself. Hadn't she, too, dared the King's men to burn her, hadn't she just as single-mindedly plunged the dagger into Daniel McAlister's chest oblivious to the approaching consequences, blind to her own survival, feeling the martyr's exaltation at helping the greater cause?

She undid her cloak, wrapped her hand in it and slid the sword out from under its shield.

Reason allowed that Ustinov could die, but she felt no bloodlust. If she ran the sword through his belly, there would be no one to interfere with her escape. Yet she knew she could also incapacitate him, gag him, stow him in a storeroom where he wouldn't be found until it no longer mattered. She didn't want to kill him; he wanted to die. If she let him live, the King's law would find him guilty. The punishment for helping a witch was death. The crime was indefensible. Before the execution was carried out, he would be tortured. Because he had nothing to tell, no secrets to reveal, the torture would be senseless pain.

Ustinov undid the belt around his robe, then disrobed, explaining, "for the blood." He laid the robe on the floor. And knelt.

Again the feeling of entrapment came over her, but weakly. The priest in all his madness was sincere. She remembered his contorted face materializing out of the smoke, the harsh sounds of his prayers at the base of the burning mound, just before he touched his candle to the wood. She wanted to want vengeance. She envied the human capacity for retaliation for its own sake. But as she raised the sword and held it over the kneeling priest, she felt nothing other than a slight consolation. Incapacitated, he might free himself; dead, his passivity was certain.

"Neck or stomach?" she asked, touching the blade gently to his body.

"Stomach," he replied.

"Maybe—I can...—if you'd prefer..."

He shook his head and closed his eyes, "It is a sin to do it by one's own hand." Deep within his skull *Ustinov the Brave* distilled itself into the coda: the witch must do it, they must find me murdered.

It was the last thought he ever had. Before he had time to take another breath, Esmerelda pushed the sword through his pale skin and deep into his naked flesh.

He gasped. His eyes shot open and palms grasped, slicing themselves on the protruding blade, sliding over it, pulling, holding it in. Warm blood flowed onto the robes. She let go of the hilt and he tumbled onto his back, still breathing.

She broke his neck to end his life.

She removed the sword from Ustinov's body and placed it carefully back beneath the shield—uncleaned, to rule out suicide. Next she pressed the robes to his wound until the blood coagulated; then wrapped his body in them as best she could. She tied the belt round his chest to keep the robes in place and used it to pull his corpse across the church, to a musky side room. She was unfamiliar with human rituals but knew that particular attention was paid to the dead-but-still-unburied, sometimes more than to the bodies while they were alive. At least to her sensibilities, the room was sufficiently respectful.

Now it was time to find dead bodies that were of more pressing interest.

Chapter 17

“Whadya mean I gotta wait?” a pudgy merchant towered over a much-smaller Imperial soldier. Harsh morning light hit against the folds of angered skin on his bald head. “You tellin’ me I got up bright ‘n early to make it out of the city first thing the gates open and now me and all of them got to wait ‘cause some wise guy’s got it into his skull to check us all fer stashed witches?”

The lineup of carts and wagons stretched two miles from the main city gates. Impatient passengers and drivers—most as angry, if not quite as pudgy, as this particular merchant—paced beside their stopped vehicles. There was a constant neighing of horses.

One of the windows of one of the buildings overlooking the street opened and a boy looked out. He spat at the unlucky souls underneath, then slammed the shutters as fast as he could. Someone threw a rock.

“Not willingly, sir, King forbid,” the soldier was explaining, “But we thought, maybe, that the witch, you understand...”

The merchant stomped his feet.

“*Understand?* I have a load of silks I have to get to port by tomorrow. That’s a strict day and night’s travel no stops. Do *you* understand? Got me a man on the docks there buys my silks fer a good price. If I ain’t there by the morrow he ain’t there after that and then I don’t got anyone to buy my silks. Will *you* buy ‘em!”

“But, sir, on account of the witch, surely...”

“It’s a shame she didn’t burn up good and charcoal, don’t go thinkin’ I’m a sympathizer, but business is business. Windows are tight, you know how it is.” His voice turned suddenly pleasant, nudge-nudge, wink-wink, one in-guy to another. “Listen, you’ve all got a good reason for all this, I know that. All I’m asking for is a little prioritization. You know that half them peoples up there they just wanna get outta the city till the storm passes. That ain’t right, it ain’t noble. Turncoats the lot of ‘em. So let *them* wait till afternoon. Fellas like me, though, we ain’t runnin’, we just got honest-to-Kingdom dealings. Have you seen my silk—what am I sayin’, have you *felt* my silks? I got me some extras, I’m

sure we could come to a mutual understanding that would satisfy—you married, buck?”

The soldier gulped.

The merchant stared pleasantly for a few more seconds before his forehead folds returned more thickly ferocious than before.

“For the love of the King, man, just let me through!”

And he pushed the soldier aside and whipped his pair of donkeys and jumped onto his cart, which picked up speed as it weaved and skidded between the other impatient toward the gate. As it sped, he raised himself onto his knees, then up onto stumpy legs and stood heroically astride the cart with the wind and filthy curses blowing back his hair.

At the gate, someone said, “Incoming,” and two yawning border guards stretched a wet rope across the street. “First one this morning,” Gremius noted.

He took a drink of coffee and put down his cup.

He raised a lethargic hand. The guards fixed their grips. The cart barreled forward. They turned their heads and waited for the signal. It neared. It was almost there. Cart close, cart closer, cart closest, cart mere yards from the gate—its rider hee-hawing like a man free and clear—and Gremius spun a finger and chopped that rider down.

The guards pulled; the rope, tightening, leapt from the ground. The merchant never stood stand a chance.

It got him square in the paunch.

Incredibly, he stayed like that, suspended against the rope, for a few seconds while making a popping red balloon-like face and bug-eyed witnessing his cart (“My silks!”) continue barreling through the gate and down the street and into the soft, rolling green hills...

He hit the ground and curled up trying to hug his lungs. A few soldiers went to collect him.

“Into the general holding cell,” Gremius ordered.

Some in the line-up clapped, others cheered. All retook their positions. Excitement over, work and waiting resumed. The next in line rolled obediently up to the makeshift inspection station.

It was a funeral wagon.

A small mound of bodies had been stacked on its deck and covered with a thick linen blanket. Flies buzzed. From his chair, Gremius reflected on the sad fact that funeral wagons were always fuller after a witch burning, successful or not. The border guards approached. Close the city for a few days and the dead accumulated. It was a visual reminder of

just how many deaths there were in this city. Gremius waved them away.

“That won’t be necessary,” was all he said.

Progressive thinking had done enough damage. Too much entertainment, too much in the public eye, too little respect for tradition and privacy and simple human decency. He waved to the funeral wagon master, who waved back and said “a mighty thanks, sir” and set his wheels rolling. Gremius smiled. He couldn’t stem the tide of vulgarity sweeping away all he held dear, but he could push back symbolically. If not to change the outcome then to at least show his disapproval. Maybe there were others like him. Maybe they would find confidence in his example. Even his own guards—they looked at him with slight but tactful displeasure—would have ripped off the linen and subjected the bodies to one extra indecency.

People, he concluded, have lost their sense of shame.

It was still possible to do one’s duty while maintaining honour and pride.

He took a drink of coffee.

The witch would be found and she would be burned again. Of that, he was certain. He watched the guards have a go at checking every nook and cranny of the next wagon that had rolled up to the station. A family of nobles stood and watched. Nobody would get through his net.

Nobody.

The funeral wagon cleared the main gate with a bounce and spun its way out of the city toward the further reaches of the kingdom.

Chapter 18

The sun climbed above the horizon. Its light softened. The clouds dissipated as sunny morning turned to hot afternoon. Buried beneath the bodies on the wagon, Esmerelda stirred. Some time after leaving the city, sleep had taken her places. Bad places, bad dreams. She shuddered. She pushed her head out from under a lifeless arm.

The linen made the heat worse. The humidity was making the bodies smell. She had lost track of time but the sun's faint outline through the thick material multiplied by an estimate of the current speed of the wagon gave her enough to guess how far she'd travelled. She assumed that that was also how much ground she'd put between herself and the city, give or take a few miles; there'd been no bends in the road, the driver hadn't made any turns. At least none that she remembered. She wished she also knew how long she'd been asleep, but there was no estimate for that. Her aches and tiredness revealed little.

She breathed in the spoiled air and maneuvered up through the pile of corpses until her whole body was free. It was cooler out there, but not by much. The corpses made an uncomfortable bed but were otherwise quiet, respectful fellow travellers. It didn't bother her to look at their faces. They were no more living than milk. Neither did the flies bother her, although she was surprised at how many there were buzzing round. She supposed that given the situation they had plenty else to occupy their attentions. She was the least of their prey.

She pulled back a linen edge and filled the gap with her face and let the fresh moving air flow across her cheeks. It had been dark underneath and the light hurt her eyes, so she closed them. The bouncing of the wagon was hypnotic.

When she opened her eyes, the sun had moved. For how long had she kept them closed? Perhaps she had fallen asleep again. Sleep was a priority. But she could afford it. The pursuit was not off, the witchhunters would come, but not now; not for a while. They were still threshing the city. They would scour it, they would wait for days for her to attempt an

escape. That gave her time. Immediate danger had passed. She was in the wilderness. She was safe.

She felt the water skin inside her coat and slid it out. The water was warm but agreeable against her lips all the way down her throat. Shelter, sleep and more water: those were the priorities. Then food. And all the time progress toward the swamps, toward the Coven.

Through the space between the pulled-back linen and the wagon she watched the landscape slither past. Green, hilly terrain spotted by forests. It was good terrain for disembarking.

She moved her boot, slipping the linen aside even more, then hoisted herself over the edge of the wagon, making sure not to disrupt its balance. She counted to three and with one push disattached herself from the last vestige of city captivity.

She hit the hard dirt rolling.

The impact hurt, but the pain dissolved the moment her momentum spun her off the beaten path and into the tall wild grasses. They consumed her. She flipped onto her back and spread her limbs. She saw: neverending sky and twirling spores. She heard: the clicks of insects, the warbles of reptiles, the chirps of birds, the ancient rustling wind. Liberty was as sweet as the grass was bitter—a stalk had crept its way into her mouth. Another tickled up her nose. She laughed, arms and legs beating the happiness into the ground. It had been years since she felt this much joy. She thought she would never feel it again.

A cricket soared over her chest and landed on her thigh. She crushed it and licked the nutrients off her fingers. They no longer vibrated. She no longer feared.

Then it all fell over like a stack of bricks onto a careless mason. The feeling first in the gut, the hunger, then in the shoulders and knees, the muscle soreness, and finally down the long cracks on her parched lips, thirst. She stood and grabbed the water skin and drank until there was nearly nothing left. As she gulped, her eyes darted uncontrollably from one end of the road to the other and across the vast natural emptiness all around. There was too much to take in at once. She was out in the open, vulnerable. The road was empty and nature not a traitor, but suddenly danger felt like it was crouching on all sides.

The gemstone map in the church: the main city gates were on the west city limit, the road likely continued in that direction. The wagon had been going: South was—she spun and saw bare hills. North was—a ninety-degree turn and the sight of more hills, distant forests, more-distant mountains. The swamps were to the north.

She put back the water skin, tightened her boots and walked through the tall stalks away from the road, leaving only a trail of bent, slowly rebounding grasses.

Some were green, others yellow, some brown with purplish wart-like dots or without. The red ones broke. The blue ones were rare and fell before she even touched them, like sycophants before the King. Her favourite were the off-white thin reeds with bushy heads that released their airborne seeds at the slightest of touches. Such delicate plants, she wondered, in such a hard world.

When she heard two horses beating their hooves against the road, she knelt and the vegetation rose above her forehead. It was like descending into a cloud, nothing like being in a dungeon. Perhaps the difference was the sky, always visible, always changing. From her hiding place, she heard the hooves beat nearer, beat past and then fade out into the west. When she stood, she saw that her own path through the grass had disappeared. All that was left of the riders was a light, falling dust.

She reached the foothills soon and before the fall of evening the first trees. Wide, comforting spruces. By then, the road was but a thin auburn line in an expanse of green and she had stopped expecting to see pursuit branching off its vector. The mountains seemed no closer than they had been from the road, and dimmer. The clouds were coming back. The sun nestled in behind them and a light mist appeared. The night would be cool. She was glad for her coat and her cloak. She thought of Ustinov. His body must have already been discovered. Who found it; who would be blamed?

The spruces swelled and calmness started coming in with the dusk. It was the strange time between day and night when squirrels stop bounding through branches and owls open their eyes for the first time. As she walked, the spruce branches felt soft against her arms. She closed her eyes and let the needles brush her face.

She made her sleeping place where a dozen trees grew together like a family. Before it was completely dark, she broke off the lowest branches of the biggest tree and nestled underneath. The ground was hard but there weren't any stones. She didn't make a fire. She undid her cloak and wrapped herself in it like in a cocoon. She was thirsty but fell asleep without drinking, to the pleasantly repetitive hooting of an owl.

Chapter 19

First light broke through the branches and fell upon her face. She awoke: her body ached and her waking thoughts were the viscosity of honey. She rolled out from under her spruce, stretched and fastened her cloak. The water skin weighed little and she drank what remained of the water. There were large cones pulling down on the spruce branches and she broke one off. She hesitated, turning it in her hands, but it seemed too oily, indigestible. She placed it on the ground where she had slept. For a second she considered hunting insects, but distance was more important than food. Today, there would be no breakfast. Today, her goal was to find fresh water.

She found north and set off, spitting in her hands and rubbing them against her face to wash out the sleep. Wooziness stayed with her, despite. She had not slept well. She could not remember her dreams. The northern wind was cold and carried on it the scent of animals. She hadn't washed in days. She must smell like an animal, too.

The first hour felt longest, then routine began. Navigation was by the sun, which moved steadily across the sky. Sometimes the thickening trees obscured her view and the light cut through their branches in lines painting the undergrowth in blocks of colour. Spruces were soon joined by other conifers, which were themselves joined by big and small-leaved deciduous trees from which she sometimes licked stray drops of water. The forest filled out. Despite the naked sun, this day was colder than the last.

Her route was due north, she would deviate only to find water. That was her plan. Yet peeping mushrooms and other fungi and the edible-looking fruits of unidentified plants drew her eye and enticed her hunger. Berries called out sweetly, apples tartly. She listened and imagined her teeth piercing their flesh but didn't reach out to pick and taste and swallow. Her hands became fists and her head stared at the invisible target ahead. She hadn't survived a burning to foolishly poison herself on false fruits. Animals were safer, but she heard more than she saw and though her stomach grumbled after the frolicking squirrels and

chirruping birds, she knew that the energy expended would not be worth that consumed. For now, food was a luxury. It was water that was necessary.

Once, she passed under a large bird's nest. It was too high to reach with her hands and psychokinesis worked only in the presence of two other witches, but she knocked it down more mundanely, with a well-placed rock. The mud holding it together turned instantly to powder but the eggs were large and lavender. She cracked one greedily against her teeth and sucked on—nothing: the insides were empty, dry. The nest had been abandoned. All of the eggs were old.

By the time night fell she had found neither water nor food. She lay herself down in a clearing on soft grass and let saliva flow along the sides of her mouth and gather under her tongue. It was hard not to swallow, but once enough had pooled it was a reward to let it into her throat all at once. That night she had trouble falling asleep. She couldn't stop her mind from wandering. Where was it going? If she knew she might put it to some use. Instead, her mind was like a machine that runs, consuming fuel but producing no meaningful output, just excess heat. Too much heat ruins the gears. She slipped in and out of consciousness until in the morning the sky turned grey and it began to drizzle, then made a slope of sticks and leaves to capture rainwater, but didn't drink the capture. Instead, she poured it through a leaf-funnel into her water skin. She also squeezed out whatever her cloak had sponged.

She set out early—earlier than yesterday—before the clouds cleared but after the drizzle stopped. She altered her plan: north, but if she'd found no fresh water by midday she would branch off in the direction likeliest to yield a stream, river or lake.

The further north she went, the wetter the ground became. Her boots stuck and plopped. But overhead the clouds seemed to be always out of reach. They teased and receded and she stopped hoping she would catch their rain. After noon, the hills returned. The last hours of travel had been over flatland. Now, she crested one and looked out over the living landscape. She could feel the thirst in her lungs. She drank the rainwater she'd collected. It tasted faintly of leather. She shielded her eyes from the sun and searched for signs of watering holes. To the east she saw circling birds. That, she decided, must suffice. She scrambled down the rocky hillside and turned off her northward path.

They'd been perhaps three miles away, the birds, but travel was suddenly hard and slow. The ground was littered with deadwood and other decaying matter and there were treacherously covered crevices. She

stepped carefully so as not to sprain an ankle or break bones. The trees, though not taller, grew different here. The species were the same but their lowest branches jutted out higher up on trunks and then spread wide, intertwining, weaving themselves into a ceiling. The feeling was of being in an overgrown amphitheater.

When she began to think the birds had been only a wishful thought, she found other evidence: the wet ground sloping downward, paw prints in the dirt, small sprouting plants in the most vibrant shades of green.

She heard the river before she saw it, the beautiful gurgle-gargle of moving water pulling her until her eyes finally fell upon its shimmering face flowing like ruffled satin over the sand and the rocks. The final distance was conquered at a run, carefulness giving way to desire, but she didn't slip or fall or injure her ankles; no, she came to the water's edge safely and fell to her knees and spread her hands on the shore and pushed her face into liquid.

She drank with eyes open. The water was clear. Underwater, little fishes swam away from her, surprised at their sudden visitor. She sucked in water and tried to suck them in, too, but they were good swimmers and evaded her mouth-made currents. When she'd had enough water and not enough air, she whipped her head out of the river—spray shooting off her hair in a thousand tiny streams—took a breath, and dove back in. Underwater, there were plants and vines, too. They were tiny and floated as if unaffected by gravity. All tickled her face with their tentacle-tips. When her belly was finally full, she undressed and bathed. The water was lukewarm and felt against her skin like cleanliness itself.

She relaxed against a tree until dry, then clothed and found a flaw in the leaf-ceiling through which she found the sun and knew that the river ran northwest. She decided to follow it. It was worth the delay in reaching the Coven to travel, at least for a day or two, alongside a water supply. She started to daydream, happiness came. It felt good to be clean and not smell wild. She walked confidently, her boots leaving deep marks in the dirt that mixed with the marks of other creatures and mammals. The branches thinned even more. They were now far above, wet-leaved and sun-specked like organic chandeliers.

Something splashed in the river.

She stopped and scrambled back into the cover of the tree trunks. She peeked out and it splashed again. She discerned scales and a tail. It was small, the size of a rodent. It wouldn't be a danger. She picked up a

sturdy piece of deadwood and approached. Although she wasn't scared, the splashes were so sudden and unevenly spaced that she felt each echo within her own heart. When she was close enough she saw the dark shape of a fish. It was near her edge of the river, but the water wasn't shallow as it had been before. The river must run underground, she thought, and made sure to step lightly lest the soil give way.

The fish splashed once more, then rose and settled just above the surface. Its shape and trout colours were visible as it waded in place. Part of its body appeared to be tangled in the underwater foliage, which was thick and mature. Saliva nearly dripped from Esmerelda's mouth as she watched the fish that nature had caught for her. She imagined a fire, a meal and a long night undisturbed by an angry stomach. She licked her lips and remembered reading in the Coven library about an ancient race of humans who even ate fish raw. It was the various culinary possibilities that ran through her mind as she felt the sharpness of her own teeth and dipped her hand into the river.

But just as quickly as her fingers had closed on the fish, it slipped loose and swam away. She grunted and redrew her hand—

She *tried* to redraw her hand.

One of the vines had curled itself softly round her wrist. Pulling helped naught, so she reached into the water with her other hand—and the other vines pounced: dozens of them grabbing and holding her like so many sudden sea fingers. They cuffed her wrists together and held her captive.

The muscles in Esmerelda's legs tightened as her legs pushed her feet against the shoreline. She strained to pull herself out. But the vines held. They even seemed to be pulling her in. She pulled harder; they held harder.

Her soles buried themselves in the sand, more and more until—the dirt caved and her ankles disappeared below its surface. She felt water against her toes. And a vine. She pulled one foot out but before she could pull the other a vine had wound its tube-like body round a toe, then around the width of her foot, and then more vines came digging through the sand and her ankle was as immobile as her wrists.

It was the sensation, *that* sensation. Of being held against her will, of fear and the need to get free and run forever without stopping that brought back the memory. It wasn't her memory; it was: nighttime and the smell of chewed fish mixing with alcohol and the dirty fingers of the men dragging her away from the village, into the forest. The vines pulled her closer, held her tighter. Holding her down, touching her, their sooty

fingers leaving imperfect black trails across her dress, across her skin. Her forearms felt the coolness of the river. The men slurring things she didn't understand and laughing. Then one of them kissed her. The ground cracked, eroded into the water and her knee was wet. She had peed herself, that's why they laughed. That's why she cried. She rubbed her eyes with wet palms and one of the men kissed her and she felt like she was drowning. The water was nearing her elbows, her other leg was spent, she was half-kneeling. She didn't want to drown but she could barely scream and when she did it was into his mouth and made no sound at all. She remembered her father and she remembered his name and how she had suddenly called out his name because it was the only word she could say and she had screamed it again and again. She was so young, then. Younger than Daniel McAlister had been. Coolness pricked past her elbow, at her bicep. But she pulled and the vines gave a little. The men had recoiled at the sound of the name. But then they swarmed tighter and she tasted their dirty fingers. The vines pulled, too. She bit: the finger then, herself now. And screamed. Her father's name over and over until he came and the men scattered and she was safe and daddy held her in his arms and she cried into his shoulder as he carried her home through the lit streets. She no longer had a father. She could no longer scream his name. But the instinct—to call for *help*. In hopelessness to call out, it was a human instinct. She screamed again, and again, and then realized her screams weren't meaningless, they were forming a sound, rough but audible, unmistakable: "Help!" she cried. "Help me!"

When the response came she didn't hear it:

"Hold steady," a man's voice said.

She cried out again and the voice responded again. But she was panicking, the frustration and fear were coming out. On the burning mound she'd kept her calm. Here, by the side of a river, her nerves exploded. Perhaps it was that the burning meant death. There was a preordained end. These vines, snaking and tugging, wouldn't kill her. She was a witch; she couldn't be drowned. They would drag her into the water and she would stay there, struggling and wading like the fish, as the plants loosened and tightened—permitted: a lifetime of drowning without drowning. Then there was the gentle factor of importance. If she burned, she would burn as a witch who had successfully carried out a mission for the benefit of the Coven. Here, she would be pulled underwater forever for what—a fish that she didn't even catch? She cursed her own hungry foolishness.

"Hold steady, do you hear? I'm coming."

This time she heard the voice. She stopped pulling, she stopped calling for the help. The vines relaxed momentarily, too. It was as if she and plant were equally surprised to hear the incoming stranger. But only she saw him, his boyish face and smile and his short disheveled hair. The vines pulled again. There was armour on his chest and a shield on his back. At his side hung a small sword. Instinct caused her to shudder at the very thought of a human man-at-arms.

"You'll be alright," he assured as he came closer, slowing so as not to seem a threat.

She expected him to next reach for his sword and cut her loose, but, instead, he kneeled beside her. His clothes were handmade, rough. The sword was shoddy. Responding to her gaze, he said, "It's only wood, not sharp enough." The irony was beautiful: what to him was a useless weapon was to her a blade that could actually cause pain.

When his hands neared the surface of the water she started to protest, but he cut her off, explaining, "Dunnigan's Fingers, lady, or at least that's what we call them up north." His hands went through the surface and almost instantly she felt the vines loosen. As he did his work, he talked to her, another explanation, but an explanation, she knew, meant to relax rather than inform. She reasoned: he did say "the north" and he had come from the north and word could not have gotten out so quickly and on appearance alone she could not be identified as a witch. She reasoned: she was safe.

"Dunnigan's," the man said, "because of Nate Dunnigan, a local boy who fell in the river up near Djurdan's Falls. About a half-year later these critters started popping up from the sides of the riverbed all along this waterway. Trick is," he grunted, "not to try and force them off, but to rub them a little, like cats. They don't purr as nice but they let go. I think it's the oils in our hands they like. Can't rub them good in gloves. That's why they catch you, too. They don't want to eat you or anything that sinister. Not man-eating. Dangerous all the same though."

And then her hands were free and she pulled them quickly out of the river and wrapped them around her shoulders. The man stuck his hands into the dirt on both sides of her captured ankle and did the same trick. She felt the tentacles loosen, then finally give. When she was completely free she froze up and shivered. The man just stuck out his hand. Little drops of water slid off the tips of his fingers. Reason, she reminded herself; *reasonably* the human is safe. She took his hand in hers and shook it.

"Word," he said with a laugh, "Word Longfellow. From up near Gustaffson's Bluff. Small town, bit of mining, bit of farming. It's no

disrespect if you haven't heard of it. Wouldn't be much reason to have heard." He wiggled his fingers as best as he could. "Got a strong grip on you, there."

She'd unconsciously been squeezing his hand as she talked. She released her hold and quickly unscrambled, "Thank you."

Not only were they hard words to say to a human, but she was also in shock at her own behavior, her own devolution into the human pity-mechanic. She had called for *help*. She hadn't expected any to come, but that wasn't the point. She had called. The instinct was still there. She felt close to what the humans must describe as sinful.

"You're welcome, lady."

Her sincerity was mixed with suspicion. Why was this human traveling along the same river as she? It was a coincidence, luck. But luck didn't exist, so it must be something else, another purpose or another trap. "Where are you going?" she asked.

Word chuckled, happy that the frightened saved woman was regaining her composure as quickly as that. The question itself was mere afterthought. His answer: "Headed south to the Capital. I want to soldier, if they'll have me. Even brought my own weapons. For practice. I know they aren't Imperial grade. All the same, I'm able with a sword. Not much use at anything else. And I've got two sisters and a mother up in the Bluff. I want to send pay if I make it, help support the farmstead, maybe help buy more land."

Her eyes narrowed.

He smelled her suspicion.

"Highways don't stretch up that far north, if you're wondering why we're on the same river," he said. "Besides, King's highways aren't safe for lone travellers like myself. Too many bandits. Most northerners stick to wild routes. Just take this here river, goes all the way up into the swamps and mountains. Makes a better road than a road. Only danger is natural, but I can contend with that. Don't trust men because I don't understand them. With wolves and Dunnigan's Fingers, at least I know what they want." His eyes seemed to throw her suspicion back at her. He said, "But, lady, I could ask you the same question."

"I only asked where you were going."

"Hoo, hoo!" he chuckled and stomped his foot. "That's the only question you spoke out loud, lady, but hardly the only one you asked."

"Thank you once more for your help," Esmerelda said, more formally but also more convincingly this time, ending the conversation. As grateful as she was for the man's help, she wanted to be rid of him. It wasn't

just his presence and his soldiering that scared her; it was also her shame at having needed him. Taking advantage of humans by preying on their compassion was acceptable. Actually needing that compassion was not. She knew her rightful place was under that river.

As she turned her back, Word opened his pack and the most wonderful smell wafted into her nostrils. Temptation once again. Before taking three steps she turned back.

Word smiled from behind a sausage.

"Listen, lady," he said, holding out the sausage, "I know you're probably scared of me, thinking maybe I'm a bad man. It's sound thinking for such as yourself. But since I haven't seen me a living soul for days and companionship is important for a man's sanity, and because I can tell by the spit on your lips you're hungrier than a Dyer Ox, I propose we spend this evening together. And not how you may be thinking it. I've only been with one woman my life and I don't propose to be with any more. All I want is a fire and some decent talk and in exchange I'll share these rations with you. It's good sausage, and I got buns, too. In the morning, since we're headed in opposite directions we'll say goodbye the better for the time and not having wasted too much of it."

Esmerelda's stomach grumbled. The smell had hooked itself into her nose and was pulling her in. She *was* a fish. Sometimes reason is used inferiorly: to justify a decision already taken or to defend an easier course of action. That, she'd learned in the Coven, was how humans perverted it. She knew the better decision would be to decline and continue on her way till nightfall. But she reasoned that the man couldn't know she was a witch because he came from the north and reasoned that if she didn't accept his offer she might eventually become so exhausted by hunger that her stomach would crumple and she would fall over and be no better than if she'd stayed tentacle in the water.

"But in the morning we say goodbye," she repeated.

Chapter 20

Esmerelda gathered fallen branches, Word flint-sparked the fire. First the leaves curled away into ash, then the thin sticks started to kindle and finally the thicker branches heated up and blackened, reddened. Once the sap and moisture turned to gas, the flames settled. The initial smoke blew away. Then dark came and they sat on two sides of the fire and listened to it crackle. Word shivered sometimes from the cold wind that fed the blaze. Esmerelda shivered from too-recent memories. She'd been close to death on that mound. It meant more to a witch than to a human. Witches were harder to kill.

They both held sausages over the fire on sharpened sticks.

Fat dripped and exploded.

Neither said a word.

When the sausages were done, they set them aside and Word unpouched a pipe. He stuffed it with dry herbs. "Do you want?" he asked.

"How many northerners travel this river?" she asked back.

Word held the pipe to the fire until the herbs began to sizzle, then brought the pipe to his lips and sucked its smoke into his lungs. He closed his eyes, letting the smoke drift out his nostrils. A few wisps, Esmerelda noticed, seemed to come out of his ears. She took a bite of hot sausage and chewed.

"Depends on the season and the times. Now times are dangerous, so less of us travel, but if we dally it's more along roads nature herself set down. I reckon you might see three or four bodies along a route like this here. A day, I mean. You haven't been on this river long."

She wanted to answer, but he said, "Wasn't a question, lady," then hooted and puffed on his pipe. "But do not you worry, I'm not one to pry. You've done the courtesy of company, myself of rations, and it's good like that. No need for one to know more about the other than the first willing to tell. I don't have to know as much as your name. You can just be my lady by the river."

"Do you think they'll see the fire?"

She took another bite of sausage. It was good. She had missed the taste of meat.

"Northerners don't intrude on fires, lady. We stay away—out of hospitality. Fires are homes. Don't come in less you're invited. So even if we do get spy eyed, northener'll do the decent and circle round. Not that much walking is done by night. Mostly sleeping, eating time." When he looked across at her, his dark eyes were like reflecting pools afire; and he finished, "Not much walking done by women alone, either."

Before she could say anything, he tut-tut-tutted her into silence.

"Lady, it isn't prying to just say a thing, and I'm just saying. You are walking north but you are no northerner. Don't deny, I can tell a northerner woman real quick. But I do want to say another thing which you may do well to take as advice: isn't much up north way at all. You have the mountains, which are impassable, and the swamps, which are empty. Both have their dangers and none offer none reward. But I can also tell you're not an ignorant, so I understand you have your reasons for your direction. Still, I feel it is my duty to warn about the blankness of where you are headed. He is not a coward who turns back for good reasons."

The fire and voice were lulling her into a dream. Perhaps she was tired, perhaps it was the sweet-smelling aroma of the burning herbs. Whatever the reason, the fire shrank and the environment changed. She was in a hut, there was a stove, flames, a black pot. A woman said, "...and when the stew bubbles, take it off and douse the heat." The woman wasn't there but she was older. Esmerelda was a child. The woman was gone and so was her voice and the stew bubbled. Esmerelda touched her finger to the pot and held it there. The woman was watching, unknown, through a window. Her face was garbled. Esmerelda lifted the pot and placed it on a stone on the ground, then stared at the flame. She felt her courage rise. She put her finger, her hand, her wrist over the flame and held it there. Her skin didn't burn, there was no pain. The woman's face faded. A log under the fire cracked, Esmerelda spun and saw: "Mother," she said, but the face was as gone. Her hand felt cool and healthy. She was afraid and out of breath.

A log cracked—and Esmerelda pulled a hand back from the fire.

Had she put it in?

"Careful," Word said. His pipe was no longer in his grasp. She asked, "Why do you want to be a soldier?"

"Simple reasons. Won't find me a woman who can coax a child out of me, and what good is a homestead can't be passed on? But I live to help. My mother, sister and their kin. Farmwork doesn't pay well and they

have ample hands. Soldiering is hard but I know a sword and if I don't have any children, I don't have a wife, which means I can come south down this river and earn a wage."

The words caught Esmerelda's attention. She was used to infertility, witches couldn't bear children. But an infertile human man was an oddity. She looked him over for defects. He didn't look any different from normal men. Her thoughts wandered back to the balcony and the shape of the King, another man who didn't have children. Though perhaps he could and chose otherwise. Heirs can be dangerous. Unnecessarily so in the case of immortals; if that was, in fact, what the King was.

"There was a girl once when I was a boy up in the Bluff who was real strange and not like the other girls," Word spoke, "I don't remember her name. She stopped using it one day. But you remind me of that girl. You're strange, too, lady."

Esmerelda finished the last bits of sausage.

He waited through her silence, then continued, "People weren't much understanding of her but no one could tell another what it was that made her different. Maybe it was that she didn't take a special liking to boys when she come of age. To girls, neither—just to nothing in particular. People were of mean spirit, anyway. She bundled her things into a pack one night and disappeared from her mother's house. Townsfolk went tracking her in the morning when they'd discovered and followed her prints for days to the swamps and miles in before they lost the track. Didn't find any body, but I suppose it could have sunk. She never did return far as I can recall."

"It's a good time to kill the fire and sleep," was all Esmerelda said.

Word nodded and poured water on the black branches till they were cold. The smoke smell strayed in the air and Esmerelda slept with her hand half-holding deadwood. Every time she stirred, she squeezed it and looked at Word, who didn't stir at all.

When she awoke and it was early morning light through the branches, she thought about slipping silently away. But Word had saved her. As much as she wished it to be otherwise, it was undeniable. So she poked at his shoulders with the deadwood until he unstuck his lids. She looked into his face. In the morning, with dreams still stuck in the corners of his eyes, he looked younger, less wise, more innocent. He wasn't older than she was; he was probably a few years younger. He rubbed his eyes and she saw the callouses on his palms, where the fingers branch out. His armour and weapons, if they could be called that, lay beside him in a pile.

All wooden, like yet another fire waiting to be lit. He smiled at her: "Good morning, lady. You up soundlessly."

"Goodbye," she said.

"Please, the city's not far and I have rings of sausage to spare. Take a pair from my pack. Do you have a water skin?"

She nodded.

"Follow the river till you see farmland, then fill it and avoid people. Head," his voice trailed away, he cleared his throat, "where you will. You have my prayers."

The phrase was becoming too common: "Thank you."

Word propped himself up on an elbow. He was at ease with her, or at least gave that impression. Esmerelda's anxiety was sinking away, too—she would be free of him soon. He said, "In the pack there is also a map. Imperial, bartered off a retired land surveyor for a few bottles of sheep's milk. It might prove useful to a traveller such as yourself, lady."

She laid her cloak on the ground and pawed through Word's pack like a city raccoon. She extracted the sausage, which she rolled into her cloak, tying it together at the top to make a sack, then the map, which, folded, she slid into her green coat.

Word was still on his elbow as Esmerelda tightened her boots, nodded another "thank you" and turned her back. She expected him to say something more, he was a talkative human, and had prepared herself to ignore him, but all that greeted her ears as she strode away was the sound of the burbling river.

Word said nothing.

Chapter 21

The seventeenth floor was abuzz. The High Council room was full. Men's voices filled the chamber past the chandeliered ceiling and out through the open windows in layers: nasally whispers, whines, baritone accusations, booming retorts about finances and business, health and safety, internal security, taxation, the state of the kingdom, the upkeep of roads, port levies, grain transport, the price of cod, the need to update this codex or replace that judge, the restructuring of the school system, propositions to introduce mandatory retirement for holymen or the introduction of a self-reporting pole weapon registry.

Gremius Orelus sat unlistening. His mind was on none of what was being said. Seven days and the witch still hadn't been found. He was not satisfied. He tapped his fingers on the ebony table and waited for the Speaker-of-the-Chambers to bang his gavel and return a semblance of order to proceedings. Though he operated in the highest political sphere, Gremius was not a politician. He was a soldier. The gavel banged. The voices died.

"Gentlemen, *gentlemen*. Thank you. If I may, I would now like to turn our attention to the next item on this afternoon's agenda." He flipped through some papers and fixed his glasses. "Which is," he peered, "the issue of—ah, yes—last week's failed witch burning. Gremius, perhaps you would like to take it from here?"

Gremius cleared his throat. All sets of eyes narrowed on him. *Ah, yes*, he repeated the Speaker's words in his head, they all blame me for the failure. And he blamed them, so all was fair. "As you know, gentlemen, searches continue, as does the perimeter. Access to and from the city is restricted,"—*slow*, a man coughed—"and," Gremius continued slightly louder, "I am confident the witch will surface eventually. There aren't many places to hide and even witches need the basic necessities: food, water. They may not die without them, but their bodies will start to break down no different from ours. As I am sure you gentlemen know. In the city she can't hunt, she can only scavenge, but she's one among enemies. Someone will see, someone will report."

A Councilman spoke up: "And this perimeter, this chokehold on inter-city commerce, when will this end?"

"When the witch is caught."

"It is a trade-off, perhaps we should consider—"

"It's a necessity, Councilman."

"Perhaps. And only perhaps *if* we know the witch is still in the city. She could very well be outside the walls by now. As the days go by, that must at least be a viable hypothetical."

"She's still here," Gremius growled, "These hypotheticals are what she's counting on. I know witches, gentlemen. I know how they think. I have caught thirty seven of them. If we scale back the searches or loosen the net, she will slip by. It's her only chance. She knows it, I know it, you should know it. If trade suffers for two weeks, King forbid a whole month, then so be it. It's a price we should gladly pay."

He knew the room was against him. Witches didn't kill or harass their homes or families, meaning: the honest ones didn't understand the danger; the majority simply didn't care. They cared more about silk profits and corruption and—

"With all due respect, it's not a price *we* pay. It's not a price you pay, either, Gremius. We have enough coppers to last us years. But there's an entire class of city-dwellers whose lives depend on moving wares on a weekly, if not daily, basis. There are inherent dangers about which we can do little: price fluctuations, demand. There is also highwaymanship, which has been rising in tune with the northerner rumblings."

Another cut in, "Just days ago, my men found a merchant's cart, broken and looted, horses gone, not five miles from the city gates. We live in troubled times."

What endless demagoguery, Gremius thought, listening with a smile. Politics had taught him as much. Smile always, even when you're about to shiv someone in the spine, even when you're about to get shived, and no matter how insincere you look or how painful it is to keep those corners of one's mouth raised for entire minutes at a time.

"... our people eat grain, which, even if it can enter the city on time and without undue harassment," the first Councilman was continuing, "they will not be able to afford if they can't sell their wares. And if we limit the outgoing as well as the ingoing trade, then grain quantities will fall, demand, we may assume, will remain the same, causing the price per unit of grain to rise, and our hypothetical merchantman will not only have less coppers due to lost income but will also need to spend more coppers to buy the same amount of grain..."

Greminus wished he could rub his eyes; or, better yet, his brain. He was amazed at the ability of each Councilman to repeat the same slogans over and over and in response to whatever question was posed or issue tabled. Then, after all the talk, everyone would smile, a vague consensus would sometimes be reached and, in practice, nothing would change. The Speaker banged his gavel. "Gentlemen, *gentlemen*. Thank you. If I may, I would now like to turn our attention to the next item on this afternoon's agenda: the funeral for the slain Prime Vicar Ustinov."

"I'm glad they caught the bastard," someone muttered.

Yes, he would need to see the King. Only the King properly knew the gravity of the situation. What the Councilmen, elected for five-year terms, failed to grasp—or, more accurately, didn't care to grasp—was that a burden on trade for one month or three months or five was a short-term problem. Witches were long-term. There was a war going on that was far older than anyone in this room. Only the King remembered its beginning. Only Greminus had studied its history. What was the loss of one-third of one month's textile profits in contrast? Witches posed an existential threat to humanity. No expense could be spared. No witch could be overlooked. He suddenly felt the weight of his job settle squarely on his broad shoulders. Maliphus Prefectus, he remembered, had faced crises, too.

Chapter 22

The sausages lasted for days, water was not a problem. Esmerelda pushed onward, toward the north and swamps and Coven. She strayed from the river only to sleep. By sunlight, it was her constant companion. But all companions die, and when the first signs of human habitation came into view, creeping up from over a rolling hill as the end of trees and the semi-flats of sparse crops grown on hard, rocky land, Esmerelda followed Word's advice and turned east. Northerners were not welcoming of strangers. She respected their sense of suspicion. She bade the river farewell, knowing that she had been lucky—it was the closest term she could find, however little she believed in it: she could have been spending the rest of her eternal life beneath its serenely mirrory surface. She took one final skin-full of water; and *so long*, and the river was at her back.

She skirted the rough fields, keeping out of sight. Humans, too, were neither seen nor heard, but their labours made for a new companion, and useful. Nightly excursions into the growth rewarded Esmerelda with fresh food: deep red tomatoes, thin carrot and pale yellow lettuce—less nourishing than meat, but nutrition nonetheless.

In these outlying homesteads the ground was rocky. The crops grew sparse and weak. She scrounged sometimes for half an hour before her fingertips squeezed into tomato flesh or felt carrot leaf. Perhaps it was the night: darker here than in the south. Perhaps the rocks, or else neglect. The stone cottages were never lit, the humans might have been gone. Esmerelda did not check. With every bite and swallow, she was thankful for what they might have left behind.

But as the land turned from rough to barren, even these maybe-homesteads eventually became mere piles of rubble. Fields ended. Wilderness returned. The wind lost its predictability and blew colder, there was a sickly moisture in the air. Esmerelda drank little and ate small portions of vegetables that had kept. In the evenings she looked for nuts and insects. Companionless, her sleep was more troubled even as fear of pursuit lessened. Her escape must have been noted by now, she told herself

before she closed her eyes each night to keep sharp, but reason always added, whispering, that her chance of being caught was slim. Still, sometimes the wind blew hard through an oddly-shaped rock crevice and whistled a sound that sounded like the royal horn and Esmerelda felt her skin bump and bristle. She awoke once clutching at the screaming mouth of Daniel McAlister. Daniel McAlister, of course, was dead.

The closer she came to the swamps the stranger she felt. The swampy climate bred surreality and bad dreams as much as insects, which seemingly multiplied by the step: bad insects—edible beetles giving way to mosquitoes and other stingers. Clouds of them nested above never-drying puddles of putrid water and attached themselves to her as she passed. They liked the smell of the sweat that soaked into her clothes. Her instinct was to swat at them, but that was both ineffective and too energy-consuming. She merely sweated more; more clouds came. She gave up. After a time, the stings and bites stopped. A swarm of fat black flies buzzed around her neck and in front of her face. They chased the smaller ones away, or maybe ate them.

As night fell, it became a chore to find a dry spot to sleep. Even high ground was spongy. She looked for thick trees and solid roots. Most were reptile-trunked with skinny, water-sucking spider-roots. Travel among them—their touch—brought back memories. She'd been a girl then, afraid, barefoot and in ragged clothes that stuck to her body, exposing how delicate and unprepared it was. The sound she remembered loudest was of her own breath: pulsating and violent in light, hushed in the dark. Her feet had been bloody; now, her boots were warm. Now, she had a clear destination; then, there had only been the indescribable *pull*, the feeling of unbelievability and wait-for-death coupled with a hope that through the extinction of one life another would begin. It was exhilarating and insanity, and dangerous: not every young witch who let herself be taken by the pull made it to the Coven, survived. Exhaustion stopped the bodies of some, the swamp itself sucked in those of others. Before, during her first flight, she'd not known any this. But as her boots now squished and squashed into the ground and mud, Esmerelda felt unease at the thought that her way took her undoubtedly over numbers of still-living, though immobilized and overgrown and covered by water and dirt and mossy things, witches who would remain like that, parts of the swamp, until forever. Maybe they could hear the thud of her footfall pass overhead. More probably, their sense of hearing had gone out a long time ago. Why was there not more help, more guidance? The

answer was the core of reality: “The weak die, the strong survive—even among the Sisters,” a Coven mother had explained.

It is difficult to describe where the swamp begins. It is only possible to know once one is inside it. To a human, who seldom ventures this way at all, this feeling means retreat, backtrack. To a witch, it is being close to home—a concept that finally makes sense. One morning Esmerelda awoke in the swamp and knew she was close to the Coven. It was an aftertaste of the pull, which never truly fades away.

She came upon its entrance at dusk, unexpectedly as always. The sensation was as unassuming and unreal as it had been the first time. A sudden softness of the ground, the increased elasticity of long branches, feet sinking into bog, and the small windowless wooden shack as natural-looking in the middle of the vast, uninhabited swamp as a turtle in the sky with birds. She fell to her knees and wept.

The Coven is a huge underground ship suspended by psychokinesis just below the surface of a section of the swamp that, legend says, reaches to the very core of the planet. The core heats the water and sometimes even the surface bubbles. That much Esmerelda knew. The heat was a ready source of power, that she was taught; and she herself had done several tours of suspension duty—dreary, tiring work that requires both coordination and concentration. The shack is the Coven’s uppermost compartment, one of its few entrances and exits. On its own it doesn’t look like much. But that’s by design. Always there is a single witch on sentry duty inside. Esmerelda had done that duty, too. It was preferable to the other. She liked being alone. Now, she rapped her tired knuckles against the door of the shack and waited for a response and the comfort of friendly company.

She knew from experience that the sentry-sister would be expecting a new face. Witches left the Coven and returned, of course, but those trips were planned. An unplanned knock meant fresh blood. Moments later something stirred, the door opened, and Esmerelda smiled at the smiling face that greeted her. It was young, it was pretty, it was Veronica’s.

Esmerelda recognized her friend before her friend recognized her, which wasn’t surprising given what she must look like, she thought: dirty, tired, presumed dead. “Veronica,” she said in a hoarse voice that hadn’t spoken for weeks, not even to herself, as the young witch’s eyes narrowed in anticipated recognition. It was good to be *home*. Except that when the friendly eyes widened again, they disappeared the smile from Veronica’s face. *Shock?* Esmerelda wondered; it must be shocking to see

the dead walk. But where she next expected the return of brightness, followed by a hug, warmth, she received a stinging slap to the cheek.

"You done be traitor us!" Veronica hissed.

Before Esmerelda could say a word, the hissing continued, gaining in pain and rage: "I saw ogled with own ones the paper, how could you do it to us?"

"Sister Veronica..." Esmerelda said.

"None sister! No more sister. Enemy betrayer and fiend. You are the marked now. I seen ogled the paper with my own ones!"

Again Veronica struck her. This time with a fist to the stomach. Esmerelda stumbled backward. All will and energy seemed to flow out of her body in one sweat. She lost her balance and fell onto the spongy ground. She hadn't the strength to get up. The swamp—it was sucking her in. Veronica came forward out of the shack and raised her arms and all manner of crooked, broken branches rose from the swampland around them both and hung in the air like daggers. Esmerelda closed her eyes and concentrated, pushing against them, holding them in place, keeping them from converging on her. Fat black flies swarmed around her face and beat their wings against her closed eyelids.

For weeks the Coven had been the destination, been salvation. That evening chained to the burning spike when escape was only a lost hope, she had craved the Coven, felt its magnetism. When death rose around her as fingers of flame she felt fulfillment for having performed her duty, felt a part of the sisterhood. When dry throat and hunger belly growled and she ingested dry tomato seeds in the damp, she knew that safety was almost within reach. She drove herself on toward this shack, toward her only true family, and now here she was and there was Veronica's jaw, her slightly yellowed teeth grinding against each other. Veronica's power was stronger than Esmerelda remembered. And Esmerelda was tired. The branches inched closer, she knew. Was it simply a misunderstanding? Esmerelda opened her eyes and the world was darker. Night was falling, fireflylight dotted the greyness. Flies buzzed. Veronica the maid, Veronica the broken girl whom she'd helped nurse back to health, with whom she'd hunted Daniel McAlister, there was madness in her now, bloodlust against a fellow sister.

"There's been a terrible mistake," a human would say. "Please," she would beg, "if only you would check to make sure." But witches did not make these kinds of mistakes. One did not turn on a friend by mistake. Everything was pondered over and decided. Girls like Veronica neither set the agenda nor had a say in the execution, but they carried out what

they were told with obedience and a precision that made misunderstandings impossible. Where was the broken girl? Gone; but she'd been gone for years now. This is the Veronica that Esmerelda knew, the one with whom she'd hunted and who she trusted. Personal bonds were fickle. All relationships were triangular. Esmerelda bound to the Coven, Veronica bound to the Coven, Esmerelda bound to Veronica. But snap one string and the whole lost its shape.

Concentrate, Esmerelda heard.

But Veronica's teeth didn't loosen. Her mouth hadn't opened. Esmerelda looked around but all she saw were wobbling sticks and fireflies. There was nobody else.

Concentrate.

Veronica didn't as much as flinch. Did she hear this voice, too? Esmerelda shut her own mouth. Maybe the voice was her own, maybe she was talking to herself. Too much time alone could do that, even to a witch.

She is stronger, but you will have your chance. You must take it and run. Concentrate.

Esmerelda's mouth remained closed, too. She *wasn't* talking to herself. What was it that Word has said: companionship is important for a man's sanity? Voices in one's head. The demons had taken her, the commoners would say. Insanity, a witch doctor would diagnose. Some of the girls come through the swamp suffered from it. Some temporarily, others forever. Imagine hearing voices forever. Imagine—

Now!

It was many things at once. The disappearance of the flies and the concentration on the sticks and it was Veronica coughing and waving her arms and then the sticks felt light and Esmerelda slammed them against Veronica's body, which crumpled to the floor, screaming, "Traitor! Traitor at top, come, catch, traitor at top!" before the scream was muffled and and the flies flew down the young witch's pulsating throat.

Run!

And Esmerelda pushed herself to her feet. Half-pushed—she was half lifted onto them. She turned and felt the pull of the Coven clutch at her cloak but fought against it and ran, step after step pounding against the swamp ground, away from the Coven, from life. How much she wanted to stop and turn and give herself in. She *was* a traitor. The Coven could not be wrong. In some way in which she did not understand, she had betrayed them—she was sure. Her boots carried her away, toward the fireflies. She felt both pulled and pushed. Her duty was to give herself up.

She was one, but she was also one of many and the many was more important than the one. The many saved her and accepted her and taught her strength. Yet there was the push. *Away* from the many. Toward? She didn't know and couldn't feel. Could someone feel pushed away from betrayal? Her breath grew louder and mixed with the same sound from memories. Only the direction of flight was reversed. Esmerelda passed her own young self and neither looked back at the other. She knew she hadn't betrayed. She was no traitor. The many was wrong, the one was right. Impossible but true. Truth: the pinnacle of virtue; and then more screams in many voices—"Traitor witch!", "Abomination!", "Sister Esmerelda the fiend!"—cut into her thoughts and when she looked back the fireflies were torches and fluttering as black female figures poured out of the shack and spread throughout the night like a million-fingered leather glove.

Forward, she heard, but you must trust us.

Who are you, she thought.

You will not outrun them, you must trust us to live. We are familiar to you.

She lowered her head and passed just underneath an overhanging vine. It grazed against the top of her hair. She was too tired. One slip and a vine would wrap itself round her neck and the witches would find her strung up and helpless. She was too afraid to survive, too alone to escape. There was nowhere to go, no hope.

You are not alone, we are familiar to you. You must trust us to live. You will not outrun them. You must let the swamp take you.

She lowered her foot and shifted her weight and felt swamp water cool against her knee and flow into her boot. She stopped. Behind her, the yelling witch voices merged into one ominous whisper.

Into the deep. Descend. Trust us.

So it would end like this. *Why not?* she supposed. Witches didn't kill witches, even renegade ones, even traitorous ones. If caught, she would be kept alive, imprisoned in a cell like others she'd heard about but never seen. She thought about Ustinov, dead and peaceful, and the bodies with whom she'd made her way out of the city. They must have been buried by now. That's what the commoners did: buried their dead. She could be buried, but she would never be at peace. Her chance had come and gone by the imperfect hand of an erring human. If only she had burned properly.

She stepped with her other foot into the swamp.

Descend, she heard.

The torches were sparks—but where was the fire?

The swamp pulled her in, its coolness reaching her thighs, her waist, her stomach. Weeks ago in the river she had been terrified of being drowned alive. Now the fear was so much greater but the will to fight so much less. The flies buzzed, drowning out all sounds, and settled on her head, her shoulders, helping her down, feeding her to the swamp. She let it. She let them. *Trust us*, she heard. The water reached her neck, then her ears and the world went silent; then black when it reached her eyes and when it was over her head she knew she would never see again. But her mind kept working. And she could still move her limbs, however heavily in the thick liquid. In time, her body would stop functioning, she would become weak, motionless, but life would continue, thinking would always continue. In time, girls and women would trudge overhead, pulled by the Coven, saved by the Coven, obedient and accepted willing new witches. The swamp water flowed into Esmerelda's mouth and filled her lungs. She drowned; like any commoner, she drowned. But like a witch she didn't die. Would she hear their footfall—the new fleeing ones? Would they make her smile?

Chapter 23

It was like falling through vegetable stew, like drowning in a puddle of molasses. Except for the taste. The taste was of rotten eggs marinated in stale saliva. Esmerelda tightened her jaws and kept her lips shut but, still, somehow the taste got in. She couldn't spit it out.

Calmness, she heard repeated.

How long did the descent last: half an hour, half a day? Eventually she realized she was no longer falling, but suspended—her feet feeling nothing solid against which to push. She was helpless. Once the novelty of perpetually ineffectual drowning wore off, her heart settled and she noted that the water was warmer than at the surface. Not hot, but pleasant. And the only true sound was the periodic gurgle-and-burst of what she imagined were swamp bubbles. All things considered, this was not a bad place to spend the rest of one's neverending life. It was a good place for thinking.

Calmness, you must wait, you should rest, you are a tired. We will care for you. We are familiar to you.

The voice, whatever it was, was partly right. She was tired. She should sleep. As for waiting: for what? There was precisely nothing to wait for. Her life was as set as ever a life could be. Today would be the same as tomorrow would be the same as the day after tomorrow would be the same as the day after the day after tomorrow would be...

She was shaken awake by an upward motion. Gentle, but determined. She was falling *up* through the egg-tasting swamp stew. The water was gradually cooling. She felt a thousand nips against her cloak, on her shoulders, grabbing at her collar—they were raising her, the nips. Her body tensed with realization; the nips tightened, her ascent continued.

Hello? She thought.

Yes, she heard, it is safe now, they have gone. They have failed in finding you. You slept. It is good that you slept. Now you must flee.

And then her head turned to ice. First the very top, wind blowing against wet hair that clung to the skin on her skull, followed by her forehead; then her eyes opened and the light was bright against them so she

blinked until the whiteness became the world. It was morning. Next came her chin and neck, and slowly she had her waist above the swamp and crawled onto solid ground. The witches were gone. The flies continued to buzz. The same big black flies that had been with her on the cemetery wagon, on her entry into the swamp, the same ones that had saved her from Veronica. The swamp water flowed down and dripped off her clothes. She shivered. She looked at the spot where she had drowned and from which she had been resurrected. It was ordinary. The only oddity: the dozens of black specks floating on its surface: casualties of her rescue.

Now you must flee.

Esmerelda looked around, searching for the voice. *Where are you?* she thought.

We are all around you. We are not a singular.

And finally she realized: they were familiar to her. Flies were her familiar. Not vultures nor mammals nor golden-white hawks, but these tiny winged insects that lived short, detested lives. They were pests. Everyone hated them. *She* hated them. Except now that they had saved her and were a part of her—and she of them—no more could she hate them than she could hate herself.

I am you! her mind shouted as she fell to her knees, clawing at the insides of her coat, the flies' buzzing growing thicker and intense.

Now you must flee.

Her fingers felt the edge of something wet and solid and she pulled out the map she had gotten from Word. Hoping that the ink hadn't run, that the paper hadn't turned to pulp, she unfolded it carefully on the ground.

It hadn't.

The creases held. The cities and the roads and the rivers were still visible. The map was plainly old, though of a good, waxy quality.

She radiated excitement.

But the exhilaration of discovering her familiar was short-lived.

Reality hit.

Her muscles loosened and she nearly fell on top of the map. She was alone and being twice hunted. Weeks ago, she'd performed a successful killing and been caught by humans. She'd prepared for death, but managed to escape. For weeks in the wild, the question was never where to flee; safety was obvious. The only question was how to survive long enough to get there. Now that she was *there*, that she'd succeeded, she'd failed. She was a traitor. That humans would come after her was natural.

But the Coven? Everything she'd ever known had turned against her in one instant, one twitch of Veronica's eye.

She pushed herself up.

They have gone. They will come. You must flee.

And forced herself to subdue all doubt about the future and the past. Only the present was real. Only the present mattered. The present was survival. The rest would be dealt with in time, later, in safety. But where was safety?

She traced her fingertips against the smoothness of the map.

It was a simple problem. The Capital, from which the humans would come, was X. The Coven, from which the witches would come, was Y. Therefore, she must flee to Z, where Z is a point furthest from both X and Y.

That point was now the physical focus of two of her index fingers. It was in the mountains at the northwest corner of the map. It was a place she'd never visited and of which she'd never even heard.

That point was a city called Cedar Perch.

Esmeralda folded the map, replaced it beneath her coat and stood. *We will flee*, she thought. And the buzzing stopped. The flies dispersed—perhaps scouting ahead, perhaps relieved of any immediate duties.

All that was left was the sudden silence of the swamp.

When she turned her back on the Coven, it felt different than when she'd turned her back on her village and humanity. Then, she'd at least hoped that somewhere there was a better place for her. Now, she was sure there wasn't. The world was a menace populated by enemies who left no room for hope. Humans, witches: she could trust no one. So she would stay hidden from all.

If she wanted a home, it would have to be made; but nothing could be constructed from desire and hope alone. She must walk. She must hunt. She must think and reason. Solitude and self-sufficiency were frightening, but they were also honest. With no one to follow and no one to appease, there was no more room for lies, illusion and betrayal. Let truth do as it will, sting or salvation.

She strode forward.

Doubt would come often, panic would strike hard—that much Esmeralda knew. She would deal with it then. Today, she felt neither. Today, she was tiny and alone in the vastness of a hopeless world and *they will come* and, she thought, *Let them.*

I will survive.

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