

ONE

I stand at the edge of the crowded square, watching the executioners light the pyres. The two men, dressed for work in dark red cloaks and charred leather gloves, circle the narrow wooden platforms, their lit torches held high. At the top of each pyre, four witches and three wizards stand chained to a stake, bundles of wood heaped around their feet. They stare into the crowd, determined looks on their faces.

I don't know what they did; they weren't my captures. But I do know there will be no apologies from them. No last-minute pleas for mercy, no scaffold-step promises to repent. Even as the executioners touch their torches to the wood and the first of the flames leaps into the leaden sky, they remain silent. They'll stay that way, stubborn to the very end. It wasn't always like this. But the worse the

Reformist rebellions get, the more defiant the Reformists themselves become.

It doesn't matter anyway, what they did. What magic they used. Spells, familiars, potions, herbs: it's all illegal now. There was a time when those things were tolerated, encouraged even. Magic was seen as helpful – once. Then the plague came. Started by magic, spread by magic – we were almost destroyed by magic. We warned them to stop, but they didn't stop. Now here we are, standing in a dirty square under a dirty sky, forcing them to stop.

To my right, about twenty feet away, is Caleb. He stares into the fire, his blue eyes narrowed, forehead slightly creased. By his expression he could be sad, he could be bored, he could be playing against himself a game of noughts and crosses. It's hard to tell. Even I don't know what he's thinking, and I've known him longer than anyone.

He'll make his move soon, before the protests begin. I can already hear the murmuring, the shuffling feet, the odd cry or two from a family member. People raise sticks, hold up rocks. They stay their hands out of respect for the men and women on the pyre. But once they're gone, the violence will begin. Against the executioners, against the guards who line the street, against anyone who supports the justice doled out in front of us. People are frightened of magic, yes. But the consequences of magic frighten them even more.

Finally, I see it: a gentle tug on a lock of dark blond hair, a hand placed slowly in his pocket.

It's time.

I'm halfway across the square when the shouting breaks out. I feel a shove from behind, then another. I pitch forward and slam into the back of the man standing in front of me.

'Watch it, you.' He whips around, a glare on his face. It disappears as soon as he sees me. 'I'm sorry, miss. I didn't see you, and—' He stops, peering at me closely. 'My word, you're just a child. You shouldn't be here. Go on home. There's nothing here you need to see.'

I nod and back away. He's right about one thing: there's nothing here I need to see. And somewhere else I need to be.

I follow Caleb down a wide cobblestoned street, then through The Shambles, a maze of narrow, sludge-filled alleyways lined with squat, dark-timbered row houses, their pitched roofs casting a near-permanent shadow over the street. We wind through them quickly: Cow Lane, Pheasant Court, Goose Alley. All the streets in this area have funny names like this, originating from when the square at Tyburn was used for herding livestock.

Now it's used for a different kind of slaughter.

The streets are deserted, as they always are on a burning day. Those who aren't watching the burnings are at Ravenscourt Palace protesting them or at any one of Upminster's taverns trying to forget them. It's a risk, making an arrest today. We risk the crowds; we risk being

seen. If we were arresting an ordinary witch, we probably wouldn't risk it at all.

But this is no ordinary arrest.

Caleb pulls me into an empty doorway. 'Ready?'

'Of course.' I smile.

He grins back. 'Pointy things at the ready, then.'

I reach under my cloak and pull out my sword.

Caleb nods in approval. 'The guards are waiting for us down on Pheasant, and, just in case, I've got Marcus posted on Goose and Linus covering Cow.' A pause. 'God, these street names are stupid.'

I stifle a laugh. 'I know. But I won't need their help. I'll be fine.'

'If you say so.' Caleb reaches into his pocket and pulls out a single crown. He pinches the coin between his fingers and holds it in front of my face. 'Shall we say the usual then?'

I scoff. 'You wish. I've got five times the quarry, so that's five times the bounty. Plus, these are necromancers. Which means there's at least one corpse, a bunch of blood, a pile of bones...that's a sovereign at least, you cheapskate.'

Caleb laughs. 'You drive a hard bargain, Grey. Fine. Let's make it two sovereigns and drinks after. Deal?'

'Deal.' I give him my hand, but instead of shaking it, he kisses it. My stomach does a funny little tumble, and I can feel warmth rush into my cheeks. But he doesn't seem to notice. He just shoves the coin back into his pocket, then

pulls a dagger from his belt, and flips it into the air, catching it deftly.

‘Good. Now let’s get going. These necromancers aren’t going to arrest themselves, you know.’

We edge along the front of the houses, our footsteps squelching softly in the mud. Finally, we reach the one we’re looking for. It looks like all the others: a dingy white plaster thing with a wooden door covered in peeling red paint. But unlike all the others, given what’s on the other side. The wizards I usually catch are still alive, still corporeal. Not so, today. My stomach tightens in the familiar way it does before an arrest: part thrill, part nerves, part fear.

‘I’ll kick it open, but you go in first,’ Caleb tells me. ‘Take charge of it. It’s your capture. Sword up and out. Don’t lower it, not for a second. And read the arrest warrant straightaway.’

‘I know.’ I don’t know why he’s telling me this. ‘Not my first time, remember?’

‘I do. But this won’t be like the others. *They* won’t be like the others. Get in and get out. Nothing fancy. And no more mistakes, okay? I can’t keep covering for you.’

I think of all the things I’ve done wrong in the past month. The witch I chased down the alley who nearly got away. The chimney I got stuck in trying to find a hidden cache of spellbooks. The cottage I stormed that didn’t house wizards brewing potions but a pair of aged

friars brewing ale. They're just a few mistakes, true. But I don't make mistakes.

At least, I didn't used to.

'Okay.' I raise my sword, my sweaty hands slipping off the hilt. I quickly wipe them on my cloak. Caleb draws his leg back and slams his foot against the door. It smashes open, and I burst into the house.

Inside are the five necromancers I'm looking for, huddled around a fire in the centre of the room. There's a large cauldron perched above the flames, a foul-smelling pink smoke billowing from the top. Each of them wears a long, tattered brown robe, and oversized hoods conceal their faces. They stand there, moaning and chanting and holding bones – either arm bones or a very small person's leg bones – and shaking them like a bunch of damned Mongol shamans. I might laugh if I weren't so disgusted.

I circle around them, my sword pointed in their direction. 'Hermes Trismegistus. Ostanes the Persian. Olympiodorous of Thebes—'

I stop, feeling like an idiot. These necromancers and the ridiculous names they give themselves. They're always trying to outdo one another.

'You five,' I say instead. 'By the authority of King Malcolm of Anglia, I am commanded to arrest you for the crime of witchcraft.'

They continue chanting; they don't even look up. I glance at Caleb. He stands by the door, still flipping

his dagger. He almost looks amused.

‘You are hereby ordered to return with us to Fleet prison for detention and to await your trial, presided over by the Inquisitor, Lord Blackwell, Duke of Norwich. If you are found guilty, you will be executed by hanging or by burning, as is the king’s pleasure, your land and goods forfeit to the crown.’ I pause to catch my breath. ‘So help you God.’

This is usually the part where they protest, where they say they’re innocent, where they ask for proof. They always say this. I have yet to arrest a witch or wizard and have her or him say to me, ‘Why, yes, I have done illegal spellwork and read illegal books and purchased illegal herbs and thank goodness you’ve come to stop me!’ Instead, it’s always, ‘Why are you here?’ and ‘You’ve got the wrong person’ and ‘There must be some mistake!’ But it’s never a mistake. If I show up on your doorstep, it’s because you’ve done something to draw me there.

Just as these necromancers have.

I keep going. ‘Tuesday, 25th October, 1558: Ostanes the Persian purchases wolfsbane, a known poison, at the black market in Hatch End. Sunday, 13th November, 1558: Hermes Trismegistus etches the Seal of Solomon, a talisman used for summoning spirits, on Hadrian’s Wall outside the city. Friday, 18th November, 1558: all five subjects seen at the All Saints Cemetery in Fortune Green, exhuming the corpse of Pseudo-Democritus, né Daniel Smith, another known necromancer.’

Still nothing. They just drone on and on, like a hive of old bees. I clear my throat and go on, louder this time.

‘Subjects possess the following texts, each on the list of *Librorum Prohibitorum*, the king’s official list of banned books: Albertus Magnus’s *Magister Sententiarum*. Thomas Cranmer’s *New Book of Common Spells*. Desiderius’s *Handbook of a Reformist Knight*.’

Surely they’ll react to this. Wizards hate nothing more than finding out I’ve been inside their home, finding things in places they thought no one would ever look. Small hollowed-out niches under the floorboards. Beneath the chicken coop. Stuffed inside a straw mattress. There’s nothing a wizard can hide that I can’t find.

It occurs to me that it’s rather pointless to recite their crimes, considering I’ve caught them in the middle of an even bigger one. I’m not sure what to do. I don’t have all day to stand around listening to these old fools chant, and I can’t let them finish their spell. But I can’t exactly jump in and lay them out with my sword, either. We’re supposed to capture, never kill. Blackwell’s rule. And none of us would dare break it. Even still, my fingers tighten around the hilt and I’m itching to start swinging, until I see it: a shape beginning to form in the pink mist in the cauldron.

It rises into the air, swaying and undulating in a nonexistent breeze. Whatever this thing is that they’re in the middle of conjuring – my guess is that it’s Pseudo-Democritus, né Daniel Smith, who I watched them dig

up – it’s hideous. Something between a corpse and a ghost, translucent yet rotting, mossy skin, disjointed limbs, and exposed organs. There’s a strange humming noise coming from it, and I realise it’s covered in flies.

‘Elizabeth.’

Caleb’s voice startles me. He’s standing beside me now, his dagger held in front of him, staring at the thing in front of us.

‘What do you think?’ I whisper. ‘Is it a ghost?’

He shakes his head. ‘I don’t think so. It’s too, I dunno...’

‘Juicy?’

Caleb makes a face. ‘Ugh. You know I’d rather you say viscous. But, yes. And a ghost wouldn’t take five men to raise, so my guess is ghoul? Maybe a revenant. It’s hard to say. He’s not fully formed enough yet for me to tell.’

I nod.

‘We need to stop them before they finish,’ he continues. ‘You take the two on the left, I’ll take the three on the right.’

‘No way.’ I turn to face him. ‘This is my arrest. I get all five. That was the deal. You can have the viscous thing in the pot.’

‘No. You can’t take on five by yourself.’

‘Three more sovereigns say I can.’

‘Elizabeth—’

‘Don’t you *Elizabeth* me—’

‘Elizabeth!’ Caleb grips my shoulders and spins me around. The necromancers have stopped chanting, and the

room has gone silent. They're staring right at us. Instead of bones, they're clutching long, curved knives, all of them aimed in our direction.

I break free of Caleb's grasp and step towards them, my sword held high.

'What are you doing here, girl?' one of them says to me.

'I'm here to arrest you.'

'On what charges?'

I tut in irritation. If he thinks I'm going through the litany of that arrest again, he's got another thing coming.

'That thing.' I jerk my sword at the twitchy apparition. 'That's the charge.'

'*Thing?*' one of them says, looking affronted. 'That's not a *thing*. It's a ghoul.'

'Told you,' Caleb whispers behind me. I ignore him.

'And it's the last *thing* you'll ever see,' the necromancer adds.

'You wish,' I say, reaching for my handcuffs. I look down, just for a second, to unhook them from my belt. But it's enough. One of the necromancers sends his knife flying.

'Watch it!' Caleb shouts.

But it's too late. The knife lands with a sickening thump in my chest, right above my heart.