

Scotland

1596

Even if the witch has never killed or done evil to man, or beast, or fruits, and even if he has always cured bewitched people, or driven away tempests, it is because he has renounced God and treated with Satan that he deserves to be burned alive.

- Jean Bodin, De la démonomanie des sorciers

I have no fight left in me.

I never thought there'd come the day when I'd say such a thing. Richard used to say I could fight the devil and all his minions and come back for more. He'd laugh when he said that, proud of it he was, that his wife had such spirit. But Richard is gone, dead these four years past, and I have indeed fought the devil and all his minions. Yet I have lost. What will Richard say when I tell him that? I'll know soon enough. Before the day ends, I'll be with him, telling him the story of how his wife found a battle she could not win. I hope he is proud that I fought for as long as I did, that in refusing to confess, I lost my own life, but saved that of our daughter.

I cannot think of Elspeth now. Amazing that I can think of anything at all. Yet it seems that after in breaking my body, they made my mind sharper than ever. Indeed, I have nothing to do but think. I cannot move. I'm lying on a pallet of moldering straw, dressed in a rag that only last week was my Sunday dress. Everything stinks here, of death and decay and waiting, endless waiting. Last night a rat came to investigate the open sores on my legs and all I could do was kick enough to send it skittering away for a scant moment. Twice I kicked and twice it returned and after that I could not fight any longer. I lay in the darkness and let it feed on my leg.

My arms are useless, as if someone has stolen them and left two twisted logs in their place. Yesterday, after a week of tortures, tortures I will not name, they brought out their worst. One day left, they said. Only one more chance to confess and save my immortal soul. Did they want a confession? Sometimes I must wonder. I remember the eyes of the man they brought from Glasgow, the hunger as he watched his assistants flog me, how afterwards he would send the minister and magistrate away, and together with his one favored assistant they would—oh, but I fought then, with everything I had, yet it did not matter. They did what they would do.

So it went for one endless week, me refusing to confess and the man from Glasgow bringing on greater and greater tortures. After six days I thought that I could feel no pain, that they had severed the very connection between my body and mind. I was wrong. Yesterday in their final effort, they tried most literally to wrench a confession from me. By my bound hands they hoisted my body to the rafters, then let me drop until my feet only neared the ground, wrenching my arms in an agony beyond words. Then they did this again and again, each time asking: would I confess?

Should I have confessed, Richard? I'll ask you that soon enough, but I am sure you will see it as I did. Confession would not set me free, it would only make my death more merciful. The

price of that mercy would be our daughter's life. The sins of the mother are visited upon the child. They would say she imbibed my evil with her infant milk. Yet I must wonder whether I have indeed saved Elspeth. Who will take her? Who will care for her? I cannot think of that now. I'll go mad if I do.

Of what am I accused? Why, of being a witch. Richard will laugh when he hears that. To be sure, I am headstrong and wise in the ways of healing, but a witch? When Richard laughs, I'll tell him the truth, say the words I longed to say every night of our brief life together. The very words my inquisitors could not draw from my lips. Yea, I am a witch.

I was born a witch. My mother was a witch, as was my sister . . . as is our daughter. It's nothing to fear, Richard. I had no secret side of evil, no pact with the Devil. It is a simple matter, being a witch. We are born with the power to spellcast, to make things happen that seem beyond the realm of the natural world, yet for us it is as natural as making bread rise. There is the potential for darkness there, but I never explored it. I thought that would save me. While my mother and grandmother and aunts counseled me to learn stronger magic, I refused. I speak not of evil spells, they were not witches of that sort, but of stronger magic that would have allowed me to fight off my tormentors. How many times have I cursed that decision these past weeks? The Lord himself could not count so high. I chose not to learn the stronger magic because, knowing my temper, I feared I might recklessly use it, harming an innocent in the heat of an argument. I thought if I used my powers only for good then surely no one would condemn me. How wrong I was.

Who informed on me? Truth be, I do not know. My accuser did not need present himself to me. After your death, I moved from our village. One night, I packed our things, roused Elspeth from her bed and left, fearing if I stayed one moment longer, grief would consume me and our

daughter would be without mother or father. So I settled here and settled well. I made a living with my garden of healing herbs—made more potent with spellcasting, I can admit to you now. New friends tried to warn me that my livelihood might make me a target for the witch hunters, but I put them off, laughing. I did only good. Who could find harm in that? So who accused me? I can only guess. Perhaps the local doctor, who charged more for less. Perhaps one of the proud men whose courtship advances I repulsed. Perhaps a stranger, someone I'd met only in passing, who took a dislike to my looks or my tongue. I cannot say. It does not matter.

The sun has risen. I know that only by the shadow cast across my cell floor. I cannot turn my head to look at the tiny window above my bed. My final morning. When they come, I will use my last breath to ask after Elspeth. They will pretend not to hear me, but I will ask anyway. I fear for her, Richard. I fear so much. Who will look after her? My mother left this world before you and my sister followed this past winter. When first I was taken, I presumed on friends to smuggle letters to other witches in my family, my cousins and aunts. They do not answer, refusing my pleas, out of fear for their own lives, that they may be contaminated by harboring the daughter of an accused witch. Cowards. I call them that without guilt, without fear of having been unjust. Were situations reversed, I would fly to their aid. No, Richard, I do not mean fly on my broomstick. Eyes closed, I swear I can hear you say that, trying to make me laugh. I feel the veil between us dissolving. Are you there? Yes, I am sure of it. I see you, waiting . . .

Icy water hits my face. I sputter and try to leap up, but my body only convulses and flops like a half-dead fish on land.

“Wake up, witch,” the guard says.

He dumps the rest of the bucket onto my head without waiting for a reply. As I gasp through the freezing shower, I see Reverend Kincaid move from behind the guard and take his place at my bedside. I have heard that in public executions, a man of the cloth will come to hear your last words, to ease your way into the next life. Such popery does not sit well in this part of the world. Kincaid is here only to witness my confession, should I care to give it. I have also heard that the condemned sometimes enjoy a final meal. Again, that will not happen. They have brought me no food in four days. It is God's will that I should fast, to clear my mind and prepare me for confession. Another torture tarted up with the name of God. I care not. Should they bring food, I would refuse it. Every morsel I eat is charged to my account, along with the cost of the guards and my cell and the expenses of the man from Glasgow. My estate will be sold to pay this account, leaving my daughter a pauper. Should my meager belongings fall short, my daughter will owe the remainder, as will her children after her, until it is paid. Witch trials are costly things, not a burden to be borne by the Church or state. Even if I do not eat today, there is one more expense to be added to my account. The cost of my burning. Fourteen loads of peat, plus coal and wood.

Kincaid looks down at me, making no effort to disguise his disgust, as if my dishevelment arises from personal neglect.

"I must ask again," he says. "Do ye confess?"

I say nothing.

Since I cannot move, the guard dumps my limp body into a cart stinking of horseshit and wheels me from the jail, taking great pleasure in striking each uneven cobblestone on the way. I do not care. They have done their worst and the end is coming. Though my heart breaks at the

thought of leaving Elspeth, there is no way now for it to be otherwise. I must comfort myself with the thought that my husband is waiting, and that I have done the right thing.

The guard wheels me into the courtyard. Beyond the high wooden gate, I hear children playing. The world had gone on as it should. I feel no bitterness in that, but rather the joy of knowing that life has not stopped, that outside these gates children play as they always have. I close my eyes, latch onto a young girl's voice and imagine it is Elspeth, though I know she is far from here. I imagine her playing, unaware that humans are capable of such horrors as have befallen me this past week. Then, I hear the girl call, 'when will it happen, mama? when will they burn the witch?' and my world caves around me. I hear then the cries of vendors hawking their wares, the excited buzz of speculation, the jostling and shouts of people—neighbors—vying for the best seat to witness my death. I'll say no more of this. I cannot.

"Pay heed, witch," the guard says. They have long since stopped using my name, stripping me even of that dignity. "The good reverend will give you one final chance."

Kincaid steps before me, stops and turns his head, drawing my attention to his side. I obey. Beside Kincaid, another guard appears. He pulls a black wire through his fingers, then, meeting my gaze, snaps it tight.

"Ye know the custom, witch?" Kincaid asks.

I say nothing.

"As sanctioned by King James VI we give you one final chance to avoid the agony of death by burning. Recant now and your death shall be quick and merciful, as our Lord decrees. Only your earthly remains shall be consigned to the fire. Refuse and ye shall burn now and for all time."

I say nothing.

“Once more I will ask, as mercy decrees. Do ye recant?”

“I—” My voice croaks and breaks. I force myself to swallow, sending shafts of pain through my skull. “I have done no wrong.”

The second guard steps forward, the garrote stretched between his hands. Confusion sparks within me. Had my words not been clear? His hands move toward my throat. Calling on my last reserve of strength, I fling myself back.

“No!” I croak. “I do not conf—”

The wire cinches around my throat, cutting off my words. I buck and convulse against it, my useless arms flopping and waving. The wire cuts through my skin. Pain explodes behind my eyes. I cannot breathe. I fight then. Lord how I fight, writhing and mewling as the wire constricts and my eyes bulge and my blood roars in my ears. I see my husband and I see my daughter and then, I see nothing.

I awake screaming. Smelling smoke. Feeling flames lick at my bare legs, igniting my tattered dress. In that first moment of consciousness, I think it’s a dream, wondering if we dream when we are dead and that is what I’m doing, awaking in the next life and dreaming I’d been thrown I into the fire after all. Then I open my eyes. Faces of strangers and faces of neighbors are all ringed about me, their eyes glowing with reflected flames. A great cheer goes up.

“She wakes! Look! She’s awake!”

As they shout, the truth strikes me like the blow of a cudgel. Because I did not recant, they did not strangle me to death, only to unconsciousness, so I would give no fight while they

prepared me for burning. So I would lie quiet as they lit the flames. So I would truly wake in hell.

Again, I fight. How could I but fight? The agony is unbearable and there, only yards away, lies safety. In my first flush of struggle, I realize they have not tightened my bonds, perhaps assuming I have no strength to battle. As I wriggle and twist, the crowd lets out a joyous cry, cheering me on. When the ropes fall from my wrists and waist, no guard leaps to restrain me. No one orders me to stop. Voices urge me on, to keep fighting. Ignoring the flames and the pain and the unspeakable smell of my burning flesh, I persevere until I am free. With one tremendous heave, I throw myself from the flames.

My strength gives out then and I pitch forward to the grass. A man lunges from the crowd. Then another. Together they use their hats to beat the flames from my dress. Strong hands reach down and lift me from the ground. Though my tears, I whisper my gratitude, voice shaking so badly I can scarce form words. The two men hoist me up. Then they throw me back into the fire.

Dare I describe what happened next? How twice more I struggled free and twice more onlookers extinguished the flames on my dress so they would not burn their hands throwing me back in? Unable to comprehend the truth—nay, unable to accept it—I kept fighting until I could not. Had God been merciful, He would have let my reason snap, let me tip into blind madness.

Soon I begin to burn. I do not mean that I was being burned, for that torment began as soon as the first licks of fire touched my skin. I mean that my flesh itself is ablaze, entombing me in a hell beyond imagining. I scream with strength I did not think I had. Scream until my throat is as much afire as my body. Dimly I hear an horrible keening. My tormented mind envisions demons and imps come to carry me off and I welcome them, caring only that this unspeakable

agony will end. Yet no demons come and I realized that the shrieks come from my own mouth. My dress has charred and fallen free and my naked flesh burns and I scream like a dying rabbit. Yet still my neighbors look on.

Suddenly, my body goes numb. I hear the crackle of the flames feeding off my body, yet I feel nothing. Is this death? As I think that, another thought intrudes on mine. A stranger's voice within my head.

'Open your eyes, child.'

My exhausted mind struggles to comprehend the words. As it does, I recognize the sensation, that of one witch mentally communicating with another. My eyelids flutter, then open. Faces surround me. They are all strangers now, even those I thought I knew. They watch less keenly, shuffling away into groups. Boredom has seeped into their excitement. They grow tired of the spectacle and wish me to die so they can return home before the November day grows cold.

'Ignore them', the voice whispers in my head. 'Look here.'

Though I cannot move my head, I rotate my eyes and see a woman making her way through the scattering crowd. A tall woman, dark-haired, her foreign features partially cloaked by a scarf. Her eyes meet mine and her lips curve, not in a smile, but a look of recognition, of pity.

'I have Elspeth,' she says. 'She waits for me now. Others have joined us. We leave for the New World. Away from this madness. I would that I could save you—'

'I understand.' The words float about my skull like a whisper. Does she hear them? I hope so.

'I'll tell her the truth,' she says. 'That her mother was brave.'

'Thank you.'

As I form the mental words, the air flies from my throat. I try to breathe but cannot and I realize this is a spell, the gift of a merciful death. This time, I do not fight. I close my eyes and surrender to the darkness.

The book contains dozens of such stories, some dramatized like that of Isobel Douglas, some a bare recitation of facts—name, date of arrest, charges, date of death. Always date of death. Some must have escaped, but the book tells no tales of hope, of reprieve. That's not its purpose. The Coven calls it the Book of Memory. I call it the Book of Fear.

As far as I can tell, the book's sole reason for existing is to scare us. By us, I mean witches. Real witches, like Isobel. Real witches inherit the power to cast spells from their mothers and pass them on to their daughters. Along with this power, they pass on the Book of Memory. According to Coven Law, witches are supposed to receive a copy on their fifth birthday. Still too young to read, they sit on their mother's knee and listen to stories that make the Grimm brothers sound like Walt Disney. Tales of imprisonment and torture and burning, tales made only more horrific by their veracity. See here, daughter, see this name? That was your great-great-great-great grandmother. This is what happened to her. This is what could happen to you. They don't say that last part, of course. No mother would be so cruel. Yet the message is implied. That is the purpose of the book. To remind us of what has happened to our kind, what could happen again. Once upon a time we didn't hide our powers. And they killed us for it.

My mother didn't give me my Book of Memory until I was nine, a violation of the Law that she succeeded in committing only because she was Coven Leader. By that age, I was well past sitting on my mother's knee, so I took the book into my room and spent the afternoon reading it.

Then I walked into the kitchen, where my mother was preserving tomatoes, dropped the book on the table and announced I was going outside to play.

“Wait,” my mother called before I could escape. “What did you think of the book?”

I paused, then said, “I think they should have fought back.”

I remember my mother turning, the way she looked at me, her eyes betraying nothing, not a hint of argument or agreement. I hated that look. I liked to know where I stood with people, whether or not they supported my opinions, so I could prepare to defend them. My mother rarely gave me that satisfaction, perhaps knowing her views would have too much influence on me.

“I would have fought back,” I said.

“Would you, Paige? What would you have done?”

I pretended to consider my options, as if I was a fourth-level witch with scores of spells at my disposal, instead of an uninitiated neophyte who hadn’t even mastered her first incantation.

“Fireballs,” I said, remembering a reference I’d read in one of the old books. If I noticed my mother’s instinctive blanch at the mention of fire, it only bolstered my own sense of fearlessness. “I’d use fireballs.”

“And where would you find this spell for fireballs?” she asked.

“In the grimoire, of course.”

“Go get it, then. Take it to your room and let me know when you find your fireball spell.”

I dashed off without argument, having never before been allowed to look through her grimoire unsupervised. I took it to my room and read them, deciphering bits of Latin and Greek where I could and relying on handwritten notes in English where the foreign translations eluded me. After two hours of poring over the book, I returned to the kitchen.

“I can’t find it,” I said.

“Did you find anything else you’d use? For fighting back?”

I frowned and mentally sifted through what I’d read. Spells for healing. Spells for protecting. Spells for making cakes set and roses bloom. Spells for calming a teething baby or a frightened child. Dozens of spells for making our lives easier, for making them safer.

“Nothing,” I said finally. “There was nothing for fighting back.”

My mother nodded without looking up from her steaming pot of tomato sauce.

“But that doesn’t make sense,” I said. “How can we defend ourselves if we can’t fight back?”

She never answered the question.