



ChAPter Seven

ALTHA

The guards took me down a cramped stone staircase to the dungeon. If the castle had swallowed me, now it had me in its bowels; for here it was even darker than where they'd held me in the village.

My gut churned between hunger and sickness, thirst clawing at my throat. My heart hammered at the sight of the heavy wooden door. I was already so weak. I did not know how much longer I would last.

But they gave me provisions, this time, before they locked me away—a thin blanket, a pot, and a pitcher of water. And an old hunk of bread, which I ate slowly, biting off tiny amounts and chewing until the saliva flooded my mouth.

I only took note of my surroundings once I had eaten my fill, my shrunken stomach cramping. They had given me no candle, but there was a small grate set high in the wall, letting in the last embers of the day.

The stone walls felt cold to the touch, and when I took my fingers away, they were damp. A dripping sound came from somewhere, echoing like a warning.

The straw beneath my feet was sodden, moldering; the sweet rot mingling with the reek of old piss. There was another smell, too. I thought of all who had been held there before me, growing pale as

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mushrooms in the dark, awaiting their fate. It was their fear I could smell, as if it had bled into the air, seeped into the stone.

The fear hummed within me, gave me strength for what I had to do.

I pulled up my shift so that my belly met with the chill air. Then, gritting my teeth I began to scratch, fingernails tearing at the tiny bauble of flesh below my rib cage. Below my heart.

Just when I was sure that I could bear the pain no longer, I felt flesh come away, then the thick wetness of blood, its sweet tang filling the air. I wished that I had honey, or some thyme, to make a poultice for the wound; instead, I made do with some water from the pitcher. When I had cleaned it as best I could, I lay down and drew the blanket over me. The straw did little against the stone floor, and my bones rang with the cold.

Only then did I allow myself to think of home: my little rooms, neat and bright with jars and vials; the moths that danced round my candles at night. And outside, my garden. My heart ached at the thought of my plants and flowers, my dear nanny goat who kept me in milk and comfort, the sycamore that sheltered me with its boughs. For the first time since they'd torn me from my pallet, I let myself sob. I wondered if I would die of the loneliness before they had the chance to hang me. But at that moment, something brushed my skin, as delicate as a kiss. It was a spider, its legs and pincers blue with moonlight. My new friend crawled into the hollow between my neck and shoulder, clinging to my hair. I thanked it for its presence, which did more to lift my spirit than even the bread and water.

As I watched a moonbeam dance through the grate, I wondered who would give testimony against me the next day. Then I thought of Grace.

I was sure I would never sleep. But it seemed the thought had barely left my mind when I was woken by the creak of the door swinging

Emilia Hart

open. The spider scuttled away at the burn of torchlight, and my heart lurched at the sight of a man in Lancaster livery. Court would begin shortly, he said. I was to make myself presentable.

He gave me a kirtle, spun of rough cloth and smelling of sweat. I did not like to think who had worn it before me, where they were now. I winced at the feel of the cloth against my wound, but when the man returned, I was glad that I had on a proper dress, even if it was crudely made. I wished I had a cap, or something to neaten my hair with, for it hung about my face in rags. Adding to my shame.

My mother always taught me that cleanliness commands respect, and that respect was worth more than all the king's gold—to us, especially, seeing as we often had little of either. We had washed every week. No smell of curdled sweat hung around the Weyward women, not even in high summer. Instead, we smelled of lavender, for protection. I wished I had some lavender now. But all I had were my wits, dulled as they were by lack of proper food and sleep.

The man shackled me for the short walk from the dungeon to the courtroom. I stopped myself from flinching at the shock of the cold metal on my skin and held my head high as we walked up the stairs and into the courtroom.

The prosecutor rose from his seat and walked towards the bench, where the judges sat. His footsteps on the boards drove fear into my heart, and I shook in the awful silence before his speech.

Still, I was unprepared for the horror of his words. His pale eyes burned as he denounced me as a dangerous, malicious witch, in thrall to Satan himself. I had, he said, engaged in the most hellish practice of witchcraft and sorcery, to take the life of Master John Milburn, him being an innocent and God-fearing yeoman. His voice grew louder as he spoke, until it rang like a death knell in my skull.

He turned and spat the closing words at me. "I have confidence," he said, "that the gentlemen of this jury of life and death shall find you as you are. Guilty."

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And then, to the court:

“I call the first examinee to give evidence against the accused.”

The blood rushed in my ears when I saw who the guards escorted to the box.

Grace Milburn.