

WITCH BORN

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For Mum and Dad

ALYCE'S
LONDON
1578

- CITY GATES:
1. LUDGATE
 2. NEWGATE
 3. ALDERSGATE
 4. CRIPPLEGATE
 5. MOORGATE
 6. BISHOPSGATE
 7. ALDGATE



FINSBURY FIELDS

MOORFIELDS

HOLBORN HILL
SMITH-FIELD



BEDLAM

GUILDHALLS



ST. PAUL'S

LUDDGATE HILL



TO WHITEHALL



THE SWAN INN

RIVER THAMES

THE HANGMAN



LEGAL QUAYS

LONDON BRIDGE



THE TOWER



BEAR-BAITING



TO MORTLAKE

The Witch's MOMMET is a most cunning Piece of Sympathetick Magick, by which She may both harme and heal. With such materialls as her Craft allowes, the Witch shall make a figure in the shape of Man or Woman, and thence shall binde it to a livinge Soul through some vitall Matter; that being, some Hair, or Skin, or Spittel, or Blood, &c. In such wyse, whatsoever the Witch may perform upon the MOMMET, this will also bee performed upon the Soul to which it is bounde.

Full many a Witch may choose to craft a MOMMET in her very own Liknesse, and take such Care of this as to safeguard her own Life.

The Arcana, 'On Sympathie'

F O R D H A M , E S S E X

20 November 1577

The knocking came harder this time. Ellen could clearly hear two voices just outside the cottage's window, and behind them a low sea-swell of agitated muttering. It sounded like they had brought the whole village with them.

The house shuddered. She looked at the door, then down at the cooking pot slung over the fire in front of her, and then back to the door again. It wouldn't take much for them to break it down, but it might buy her a little time while they tried.

Hastily, Ellen gathered up the last remaining objects from around the hearth – dried herbs, stones, figures of straw and bone – and threw them all into the pot, poking each one under the surface of the broth with a wooden spoon as she went. Then she heaved the whole concoction out of the fire and left it steaming on the earthen floor.

'OPEN THE DOOR, CRONE!'

Again, the frame of the tiny cottage shook. Ellen sighed.

'Crone?' she murmured to herself, fishing a bonnet from the back of a chair, and stuffing her masses of brown curls underneath. 'I don't look *that* old . . .'

She stood up straight, smoothed out her smock and roughly tightened the laces in her bodice. Her appearance

probably wouldn't count for much once she had opened the door to her visitors, but she wasn't going to make their job easier for them. She glanced at the two beds in the corner of the room, one so small it could have been a cot, and a shadow passed over her face.

I hope she remembers what to do.

More pounding. The door seemed to be coming off its hinges.

I hope she'll be safe.

Ellen took a deep breath, and went to open it. Pale light and cold air, rich with the damp smells of late autumn, flooded the cottage.

The sight that greeted her on the other side gave her a thrill of surprise more than fear. The man in front of her had a quite impossibly handsome face. His high cheekbones, arched eyebrows and pointed beard gave him a slightly devilish aspect that Ellen found rather appealing. Those features were framed by a vast ruff and tall black hat, its huge feathers nodding like the plume of some Greek warrior. And at the centre of it all were his eyes – the kind of eyes that seemed to be all pupil, cold and black as forest pools. He smiled at her.

'Good day, sirs,' said Ellen calmly. At the shoulder of the handsome man stood a taller, thinner companion. In one hand he was clutching a Bible. In the other a noose. Behind them both were the dirty, ugly, absurd faces of the villagers, pressed in a ring around her cottage.

The handsome man cleared his throat and spoke. His voice sounded like a hammer striking an anvil.

‘Ellen Greenlief. By the authority of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, you stand accused of the practice of witchcraft, denying Almighty God and his son Jesus Christ, of sealing a covenant with the Devil, and performing diverse crimes of sorcery and necromancy with which you have cursed and afflicted the good villagers of Fordham.’

There were subdued noises of agreement from the onlookers. Ellen did her best to look underwhelmed, and smiled back at the man.

‘Forgive me, gentlemen, but I suspect you’ve had a wasted journey. I am a poor housewife, no more. I spin. I weave.’ She gestured to a broken spinning wheel that was leant against the outside wall of the cottage.

The handsome man laughed. ‘Ay, I can believe that. It is a web of *lies* and *deceit* that you have been weaving, and most subtly too.’

His smugness showed so plainly on his face, Ellen thought for a moment he might take a bow. A couple of villagers took heart from his reply and cried their approval.

‘She ain’t never been to church!’

‘She turned all our milk sour!’

Ellen sighed, and replied over the handsome man’s shoulder. ‘That’s a matter you should discuss with your cows, Master Garrard, not me.’ There was a titter from one of the children in the crowd. ‘Come, sirs, it is a long journey back to London. Stay awhile and have something to eat, and I’ll see you on your way. I have just made a fresh stew.’

‘She’s lying!’ shouted another of the peasants. ‘It’s *poison*!’

‘I’ll admit I’m not the most talented cook, but that’s a little unkind . . . At least come inside and rest your feet.’

The handsome man continued to smile, although one of his eyes twitched with impatience. He waited for the villagers’ baiting to die down.

‘How very gracious of you,’ he said quietly, his eyes now a pair of black storms. ‘We will be coming into your house, but that is not to say we will be accepting your hospitality.’

Ellen’s face hardened. ‘If it’s evidence of witchcraft you are looking for, I am afraid you will be disappointed.’

‘Yes, of course,’ said the man, drawing close to her. His eyes roamed greedily over her, as though searching for something on her person. ‘No doubt the Devil has taught you most cunning ways of concealing your art.’

Ellen let out a cold laugh. ‘So, if you find what you are looking for, I am damned. And if you don’t find it, I am damned for concealing it? How clever! And I thought I was meant to be the tricky one.’

The handsome man’s face split into a grin, revealing a set of perfectly white teeth. He was inches away now. He smelt of iron and woodsmoke. ‘You may be able to conceal your apparatus, witch, but you cannot conceal your own body.’ Suddenly he grabbed her wrist in a gloved hand, pulled her on to the doorstep, and tore a sleeve from her arm. Her skin prickled in the cold breeze. The crowd gasped.

‘Look upon this, gentlefolk!’ crowed the handsome man, dragging her from the doorway and thrusting her arm up

into the air. 'The witch's poisonous teat, with which she has been feeding her familiar! Who is to say how many more of these she has upon her vile body?'

Ellen looked at the two little pink lumps a few inches up from her wrist. They still hadn't healed after an accident with a toasting fork. Searching the faces of the villagers she found nothing but hatred and ignorance, and she turned back to the man who held her.

'This is madness! That's a *burn*, you fool, can't you see? Show me a wife in this village who doesn't have any imperfections like this!'

'Still she denies it, when the evidence is clear as day! Lies, wicked lies!'

The villagers roared. Some began to pelt Ellen and her house with stones and mud and manure. The handsome man basked in their wild indignation, and spoke to the man at his shoulder.

'Master Caxton, bind her while I search her lodgings.' Then he turned to address his frenzied audience. 'There are yet more unholy discoveries within, too foul for your eyes to look upon.'

'The girl!' a woman screeched. 'She's hiding the girl!'

Ellen stared at the handsome man, whose back was to her now. The noise of the crowd had become overwhelming, and seemed to suck her underneath it like the waves of an incoming tide. Even while he faced away, she still heard his words. They seemed to blossom from inside her own head.

'Yes,' he said. 'The girl.'

Then, without looking at her, he disappeared into the darkness of the cottage.

With practised efficiency, the taller man yanked her arms behind her back and began tying them tightly together at the wrist. Ellen was thinking too hard to feel the rope bite into her flesh, to notice the hotness, the stickiness of her hands and fingers.

The taller man spun her around again, pulled her upright and attempted to force the noose down over her head. Up close she saw his features were nothing like his superior's – they were blank and sallow, expressing precisely nothing. Behind him the villagers' howling faces rippled like a mirage, and beyond them she glimpsed the cool, inviting foliage of the beech woods.

I should have run away with her, she thought. As soon as I saw them I should have run.

The witchfinder's extravagant hat bobbed and emerged into daylight again. His smile still hadn't faded, although there was something more predatory about it now as he marched towards her. His tall, blank companion tightened the noose a little.

'Where is she?' the witchfinder said.

Ellen stared at him. He took another step forward, and nodded to the man holding the noose. It pressed against her windpipe.

'Speak,' he said.

She cocked her head. Tighter still.

'Speak.'

She could feel her pulse behind her eyes.