Chapter One

Light from inside the weather-beaten structure leaked out through the shutters, striping the plank of driftwood over the door in flickering bands of gold. There was no name on the sign, but most of the tavern’s clientele couldn’t read anyway. And the image it bore was really quite good enough.

The corpse-green paint was starting to peel, adding to the gruesomeness of what appeared to be a rotting body surrounded by waving tentacles. In fact, the Dead Spaniard was named after an unfortunate sailor who washed ashore while it was being built, wrapped in seaweed like a shroud. I’d always thought the name appropriate, considering the tavern’s reputation as the best place to get a knife in the back in London.

Not that anyone was likely to bother stabbing me. Two days in a stinking gaol and another three on the run had left me looking like a beggar, with the filthy gown, dirty face and staring eyes of a madwoman. Anywhere else, I’d have worried about my reception; here, I fit right in. I skirted a puddle of sick, ducked under the low hanging sign and pushed open the door.

Ahead was a small hallway that let out into a big main room dimly lit by fire and rush light. It was more crowded than usual, because a new rogue was being admitted into the company of thieves who used the tavern as their base. A young man with a thin face and bleary eyes stood on a chair, grinning gamely as his brothers in crime dumped a massive flagon over his head.

At least it might kill a few lice, I thought, and started forward--only to have a staff catch me in the belly.

“Wot’s the word?” the old man holding it demanded, while his pet monkey watched me with round, black eyes from a perch on his shoulder.

“I was in gaol last week; I don’t know the word,” I said, trying to push past.

The staff was removed from my flesh only to be slammed into the wall in front of me, hard enough to drive another dent into the pockmarked wood. “Then ye don’t get in.”

“You know me!” I said impatiently, but I didn’t attempt to remove the barrier.

Solomon le Bone didn’t look like much. His hair was a wispy yellowish gray--what little he had left of it--his hands were twisted and gnarled from age, and one of his eyes was milky white and unseeing. But his magic was as strong as ever, whereas mine was all but depleted.

“Don’t matter. Ye need the word.” He squinted at me suspiciously through his good eye. “Could be one of the demmed Circle, under a glamourie.”

He was referring to the ancient group of light magic users which had recently established themselves as the guardians of the supernatural community--whether it liked it or not. “They’re the ones who threw me in prison!” I said heatedly, pushing limp red hair out of my eyes.
“Aye. And when they take somebody, they don’t come back. Yet here ye are.” Sol said it with the air of a senior barrister making a brilliant closing argument.

Fulke, the old man’s son, shot me a sympathetic glance from behind the counter, but made no move to intervene. Clearly, I was on my own. I stood there trying not to sway on my feet, because showing weakness here was a good way to get a knife through the ribs.

Or to lose one’s purse.

I felt my belt suddenly get lighter, but before I could react, the damned monkey was back on his master’s shoulder, chattering at me in what sounded suspiciously like laughter. I made a grab for him, but missed when he performed an impossible acrobatic maneuver and ended up hanging by his tail from a rafter. He managed to twist his neck so that his head was upright, allowing him to watch me smugly while dangling my purse just out of reach.

“Give that back!” I ordered. His only response was to show me a withered arse before beginning to paw through his prize.

I glared at him, wishing I had enough strength left for one good immolate. He’d always been a flea-ridden, smelly, evil creature with a habit of throwing feces at anyone who displeased him. Everyone had breathed a sigh of relief when he finally died three years ago. The relief hadn’t lasted long. Old Solomon had just enough necromancy to bring the little horror back, but not enough to make him look like anything more than what he was—an animated sack of fur and bones with, if possible, even more of a bad temper than before.

That was demonstrated when he managed to get the purse strings untied. He stared at the pebbles in his paw for a moment, before chucking them contemptuously at my head. I lifted my staff—I might not be able to throw a spell, but I could at least club him with it—but he flipped back onto the beam, skittered along its length and leapt onto a table, upsetting a patron’s trencher as he made his escape.

The man mostly looked relieved, as anyone who had ever tasted the tavern’s fish stew could understand, and the miscreant vanished into the shadows at the back of the pub. “Useless thing,” Sol said, frowning. “I’ve trained him better than that.”

“I should damned well hope so,” I said, surprised to get even that much of an apology out of the old man.

“He ought to know the difference by now between a purse o’t coin and a bag of rocks,” he finished tetchily. “Where do y’keep the real one?”

“I don’t. Thanks to the Circle, I don’t have a penny for a pint right now!”

“Another reason not t’let ye in,” he said complacently, tipping his stool back against the wall.

I fished a ring out of my real purse, a pocket sewed inside my kirtle. It was set with a large square cut ruby of a deep blood red hue, a good stone. It should be enough for what I wanted.

“Not a penny,” Sol mocked, as I handed it over.

“Not in coin, no. I took that off a vampire.”

“Best be careful, girl,” he told me, fishing a jeweler’s loupe off a string around his neck. “Stealing from their kind is a dicey business.”

“That’s the only good thing about being locked up,” I said bitterly. “There’s not much more can be done to you.”

Sol cackled delightedly. “Ye stole it off him while in gaol?”

“I needed travelling money.”
“And what was a vampire doin’ in a mage’s prison? I thought they policed their own.”

“He wasn’t a prisoner,” I said shortly, wanting to hurry this up. I could almost feel the Circle’s noose closing in. And considering how many people they’d lost in the escape, a noose is exactly what it would be as soon as they caught me.

But Sol didn’t appear to feel the same. Usually terse to the point of rudeness, he must have had a pint or three before I arrived, because tonight he was almost chatty. “Then what was he doin’ there?” he asked again, taking his time examining the jewel.

“I don’t know. Some damn fool story about working for the queen and wanting my help.”

“Wanting ter help himself to dinner, more like.”

I didn’t reply. I also didn’t touch the spot on my throat, under my shift, where he’d bitten me. The interlude had been a strange one, and I wasn’t sure what I felt about it. Not that it mattered; I’d never see him again.

If I was lucky, I’d never see anyone in England again.

The thought sent an unexpected pang through me, but I shoved it away. “You’ve seen it,” I said impatiently. “What’ll you give?”

But Sol’s beady eye was no longer fixed on the ring. The legs on his stool hit the floor with a thump and he wheezed out a breath through his missing front teeth. “Where did ye get that?”

He was staring in disbelief at the staff in my hand. The long piece of wood was ebony dark, cured by centuries of careful handling. It felt satiny smooth under my touch, with a faint tingle where my fingers rested. I couldn’t blame him for his surprise; it wasn’t every day that an ancient Druid weapon was spotted in the hand of a dirty thief.

Of course, until a few days ago, it had been in worse ones. One of the mages serving as gaolers had taken it from its rightful owner, a leader of one of the great covens. He had died soon thereafter, in the fighting that had led to my escape, and I’d somehow ended up with it. I was a thief, but this I would have returned, had there been anyone left with a right to it. But the Old Mother had died in gaol, and the covens were scattered and broken, their leaders dead or in hiding.

Like the staff, coven witches were becoming a rarity in England.

“The Circle confiscated it from one of their prisoners,” I said tersely. “I confiscated it from them.”

As usual, Sol didn’t ask for specifics. “What’re ye wanting for it?”

“I’m here to trade for the ring.”

“I c’n buy rings anywhere. I want the staff.”

“You’ll take the ring or nothing.”

“Nothing then.” He carelessly tossed the ring back at me.

“I’ll go elsewhere,” I warned. “It’s a good quality stone, no visible flaws. Plenty of people—”

“Will turn ye into the Circle and collect the reward, which is more than the ring is worth,” he finished for me. “Ye’re a wanted woman, Gillian. Not one ter be making threats.”

And they called me the thief.

The staff was a treasure of my people; it deserved a better fate than this. But I didn’t have a people anymore, nor a family, save one. And her safety was worth any price.
“What’ll you give?” I asked harshly.

“What’ll ye take?”

I’d have preferred to discuss that somewhere other than the doorway, but the ribald party going on inside made that impossible. I waited while a couple of men came in. One was promptly allowed inside; the other, a curly-haired sailor type, paused just beyond the threshold, cursing and wiping the remains of someone’s dinner off his boot.

“A license to travel, for me and Elinor,” I said quickly, referring to my daughter. “Money—enough to make a decent start elsewhere. And safe passage to the continent.”

The wily old man contemplated this for a minute, while I watched the patterns the firelight painted on the floor and tried not to look as desperate as I felt. Despite what he seemed to think, this wasn’t the only place in town to make a sale. But I didn’t know how many of those establishments the Circle’s men might be watching.

“The money’s no problem; safe passage neither,” he mused, lighting up a long pipe. “But the license, that’s another thing. We don’t need ’em.”

“But humans do. And that is what I must appear to be. I was almost recaptured twice on the way here.”

I glanced over my shoulder, but all I saw was the sailor who’d stepped in the puddle of sick. It had somehow smeared onto his hose, too, which he’d stripped off a hairy leg. Now he was balancing precariously on one foot, hose in one hand and boot in the other, looking bemused. It looked like he’d started the night’s revelry a little early.

“Aye. ’Tis the way of the world, lass,” Sol said, with the air of someone imparting great wisdom. “Power shifts and we have to shift with it, if we want to keep our heads.”

“Thank you for that,” I said, through gritted teeth. “Now can you get me a license or not?”

“I can. But I’m thinking ye’ll not be needing it where ye’re going.”

It took my tired brain a vital few seconds to catch up. Then I glanced at the counter, where Fulke should have been, and found it empty.

Goddess teeth!

I sprang for the door, cursing Solomon’s filthy hide, only to have it slam open and a group of mages rush in. Fulke’s traitorous hulk was visible just behind them and there was no question where he’d been—or why. The Circle’s men would have had me before I could turn around, but the sailor took that moment to pass out on the lintel, causing the mage in front to trip. And the others ran into him in their eagerness to get at me.

The accident bought me a precious moment and I turned toward the main room, intending to run out the back. I might have made it, if Solomon hadn’t kicked my legs out from under me. I rolled and brought the staff up, only to have Fulke leap from the doorway and make a grab for it.

“No!” Sol screeched. “Don’t touch it, ye idle-headed lout!”

Fulke was not the swiftest thinker, but he’d spent years suffering under his father’s lash for the smallest infraction. He jerked his hand back as if burned and I whirled on Sol, who dove for the door in a move that belied his age. He scuttled behind one of the mages, a young sandy-haired blond, who surged back to his feet and grabbed the staff.

I hadn’t uttered a spell, hadn’t even formed one in my mind, yet power pulsed under my fingertips before spilling down the wood like liquid. The mage froze as it flowed onto his hand, spread up his arm and covered his body. And then he started screaming.

I jerked back, but he didn’t let go. Instead, his hand came away with the staff, in a stringy, gooey mess that in no way resembled flesh any longer. The small, pale finger bones melted through the slimy mess and rattled against the floor. I stared in horror from the shining arm bone hanging out the end of his flapping sleeve to his face,
where round eyeballs lolled in fleshless sockets as the skin dripped down his bones.

He stopped screaming about the time he collapsed into a heap of clothes and spreading ooze. But I could still hear it in my head, a high-pitched, half-hysterical sound that I vaguely realized was in my own voice, and then someone grabbed me. I looked up to see the sailor, who had apparently sobered up quickly.

“Run!”

Sage advice, had there been anywhere to go. But the appalled silence of a moment before had disintegrated into utter chaos, as the drunken patrons of the bar met the small contingent of mages in a tangle of thrashing limbs, shrieks and curses. One of the latter shot by my face, close enough to singe my hair, and caused the sailor to jerk back with an oath.

Having been in more tavern brawls than I cared to recall, I hit the ground and started crawling. The Spaniard was built on a slant to match the bank of the Thames, with an extra story on the river side. The lower level was used for storing whatever illicit merchandise Sol was dealing in this month, and had a convenient ramp leading down to the water. If I could get to the staircase, there was a chance I could get out before the Circle noticed I was—

A curse sizzled over my head before exploding against the wall in a shower of sparks. It looked like they’d noticed. I picked up the pace, only to catch sight of Fulke waving his arms and looking panicked.

“No! No fire spells, no fire spells!” he bellowed, loudly enough to be heard over the din. No one else paid him any attention, but then, they didn’t know what Sol had downstairs. I didn’t, either, but when Fulke picked up the monkey and ran for the entrance, leaving the till behind, I decided I didn’t want to find out.

I reversed course, hoping to slip out the front door in the chaos. But my hair had come loose from its fastenings and someone stepped on it, slamming my head down into the rough hewn boards and making my ears ring. And then someone else’s boot made contact with my ribs, hard enough to knock the wind out of me. Worse, it jolted the staff out of my fingers. I scrambled after it, through a forest of legs and spilled ale, and managed to get my hand on it—

And looked up to see a mage leveling a flintlock at my head.

I stared at it stupidly, still stunned and breathless. I had the staff, but didn’t have the energy left to use it. And this man was either better versed in Druid magic than the other, or he’d seen what had happened to him. Because he carefully kept out of reach as he prepared to blow my head off.

But then his face paled and the gun dropped from his fingers, his eyes going dead before he hit the floor. I stared past him at the sailor, whose hand was outstretched but didn’t hold a weapon. And then he grabbed me around the waist and hurled us at one of the windows.

“No,” I gasped, “there’s no—”

I cut off as we crashed through the old wooden shutters and out into thin air. A few dizzying seconds later, we landed hard on the ramp Sol used to roll barrels up from the water. Only we rolled down it, straight into the slimy waves lapping at the bottom.

That turned out to be fortunate. The side of the tavern blew out a moment later, in a rush of heat and noise that sent blazing boards scattering far into the night. The sailor cursed and ducked under water, although most of the pieces went flying over our heads to flame out against the Thames.

“—land down there,” I finished. I gazed numbly at the merrily burning building—-for a brief moment, until a heavy hand grabbed the back of my neck and I was jerked to within an inch of the sailor’s face.

But it wasn’t his any longer. It suddenly smeared, like someone had taken a cloth to a dirty window. Parts of it became streaked and blurry, while others went missing entirely. In their place were bits and pieces of another picture: the jaw line became stronger, the cheekbones became more pronounced, and the unkempt beard was
replaced by a neatly trimmed goatee. But the cap of dark curls and the outraged expression remained the same.

“You,” the vampire told me viciously. “Had best be worth this kind of trouble.”

Chapter Two

An hour later, I was in hot water again, but this time, I was enjoying it. The vampire had a small ship, the Bonny Lass, which had been anchored not far from the tavern. We’d swum out to it in order to avoid any of the Circle’s men who had survived the explosion, and were now in the process of washing off the river stench.

At least, I was. I doubted that even someone as wealthy as the vampire appeared to be had another luxury like this aboard. I leaned over to refill my wine glass, then settled back against the soft sheets cushioning the wooden tub. And sighed.

The sigh soon turned into a yawn, the hot water lulling me into sleep I couldn’t afford. I had somehow kept hold of the staff in the confusion, but I’d lost the ring. I needed to find some other source of funds and do it quickly. Elinor was safe with friends, but she wouldn’t stay that way for long. Neither of us would, as long as we remained within the Circle’s reach.

The question was: where to go?

Being a witch in her majesty’s most Protestant England had once been considerably easier than life on the Continent, where the Inquisition had been joined in its efforts to wipe out magic users by a group of dark mages known as the Black Circle. Having been excluded from the magical community for years, they lusted after its demise and their own subsequent rise to power. And their magic combined with the Inquisition’s numbers had insured that the number of real witches meeting a fiery end had recently shown a dramatic increase.

As a result, a flood of magical refugees had started arriving in England, determined to rebuild their power and retake the continent. Anyone who resisted the new order imposed by this “Silver Circle” was suspect. But members of the once powerful, independent covens or — worse — outlaws who refused to abide by anyone’s rules but their own, were anathema.

I was the Circle’s worst nightmare, for I was both.

No, neither the continent nor England was safe for a coven witch these days. I’d heard the Circle had few allies to the East, where the Asian covens paid them little respect and no heed. Of course, they might have no more for a couple of penniless refugees, but I could try.

It was a sound plan, I decided, even as the thought of leaving for good caused another pang. It wasn’t sadness, wasn’t even anger, although both of those were present. It was more of a soul deep feeling of wrongness. England was home; England was ours.

I pushed the thought angrily away. I couldn’t fight these kinds of odds; no one could. But I could live. I could see to it that my daughter lived. Against the Circle, that was the only kind of victory anyone could expect.

“You are supposed to be relaxing, yet you look as though you’re planning another battle.”

My eyes flew open to see the vampire standing beside the tub, watching me with faint amusement. He caught the hand I raised to slap him, which I belatedly noticed was holding my wine glass. He refilled it as I stared at it, wondering how it had ended up empty again.

No wonder I was tired.

“A gentleman would have announced himself!” I told him, pressing against the side of the tub.
“And a scoundrel would have joined you.”

I started to make the kind of reply that deserved when I caught sight of his right hand. The ruby gleamed black in the low light, but with glints of red fire. It seemed I wasn’t the only one who had rescued something from the evening.

“Then what does that make you?” I asked instead, moderating my tone.

“As with most of us, it depends on the circumstance.”

I stood up, running a soapy hand up his chest as I did so. There was muscle, firm and warm, under the loose shirt. “And which way are you leaning?”

I didn’t get an answer that time, at least not in words.

He had amazing hands, I discovered, slightly coarse in texture, but warm and skilled. Later, I’d be able to remember each movement, each individual touch, but at the moment it all washed over me in a jolt of sensation. Warm: hand at the nape of my neck, chest hard against my own, palm smoothing down my back; hot: mouth against mine, tongue stroking in; sharp: teeth nipping at my lower lip. Rough here, smooth there, hard and solid everywhere.

It had been seven years since my husband died; almost two since I’d lost my last lover in a robbery gone wrong. And there had been no one since, the never ending struggle to survive precluding everything else. I’d forgotten how good it felt, another’s hands on my body, another’s breath in my mouth—

He suddenly pulled me hard against him, and that answered one question about vampires, at least. He was still in his disguise as a sailor, wearing the usual loose-fitting breeches. It was easy to slip a hand below the slack waste band, to smooth down over soft skin and hard muscle, to find the source of his desire.

I wrapped my free hand around him and heard him draw in his breath sharply. His own hand moved abruptly lower, clenching well below my waist, causing me to moan softly. For a moment, I almost forgot what I had been doing.

Hot, moist breath stirred my hair. “Mistress Urswick--”

“Gillian.” Formality seemed somewhat superfluous now.

“Gillian, then,” he said, sounding a bit strained. “I believe I need to make something clear.”

“And what is that?”

He caught my other hand and brought it up to his lips, before forcing the palm open. “I am not a fool,” he said, and retrieved his ring for the second time.

Devil take him!

I broke away and he let me go, casually stripping off his soaked shirt and going to a chest to fetch a dry one. I glared at the long line of his back for a moment, then climbed out of the tub and wrapped myself in one of the spare sheets. I turned, a suitable comment on my lips—and stopped dead.

He hadn’t been going to fetch a shirt, after all, and the view was undeniably attractive. But that wasn’t what had my breath catching in my throat. That was reserved for the small chest in his hands.

“If you are so fond of jewelry,” he said wryly, “perhaps you can tell me what you think of these.”

I tucked in the top of the sheet and quickly took him up on his offer. He sat the little chest down on the table with the wine and I started pawing through it. There was gold in abundance—chains, rings, bracelets and trinkets. But the majority of the chest held more precious contents still: jewels in every color and cut gleamed, sparkled and
glimmered in the lantern’s soft glow.

And there were no commoners here, no jaspers or moss agate, no chalcedony or onyx. No, spread out before me was the royal court of jewels, diamond and ruby, emerald and sapphire. And pearls, ropes and ropes of precious, precious pearls. I picked up a strand of black ones, my breath catching in awe. They were the size of large grapes and almost the same color, a dark, rich plum that shone with an iridescent luster.

The most sought after of gems, pearls were prized by every lady from the queen to the fishmonger’s wife, to the point that laws had had to be passed limiting their wearing to the upper classes lest the supply run out. One rope of these would solve my need for coin for many a year to come. Two might well do so permanently.

I looked up, smiling brilliantly, and he laughed. “I am glad to see that something I have pleases you.”

I blinked in surprise. I had actually been thinking that this might be one of the more pleasant challenges I’d had in a while. But before I could frame a response, he stepped out of the wet breeches and into the bath, giving me a brief view of the lamplight playing over smooth skin and hard male strength. And the words dried up in my throat.

“This lot was confiscated from a house in Portsmouth a fortnight ago,” he told me, soaping up. “Three men and a woman are suspected of plotting against the queen. Two of the men were killed in the raid, and the Circle picked up the woman, Lady Isabel Tapley, yesterday. I was at the gaol to question her.”

“And did you?” I asked, a little hoarsely.

“It is difficult to question a corpse, which is what she was after ingesting some kind of poison,” he said dryly. “And we have yet to locate the third man, leaving us with little to go on, other than what they left behind.”

I glanced from him to the jewels, torn between two very attractive options. Greed won. “I take it she was fond of jewelry,” I said, idly picking up a ring set with a large rectangular emerald.

His lips twisted. “I know the contents of that chest by rote. If anything goes missing, I will have to search you for it.”

“I’ll try to put it somewhere interesting,” I murmured, examining the stone. It was cut in the new hog back manner, with a flat top and beveled sides. I’d only seen a few done in that fashion, which increased the jewel’s natural fire. But in this case, it wasn’t the cut that interested me.

“The coffer didn’t belong to the witch,” he said, scrubbing his hair. “We found it in the house owned by the two men. As neither was wealthy, nor part of the local guild, it made us think that the jewels might be important.”

“Who is ‘we,’ Master--” I stopped, realizing that I’d forgotten his name. “You said you work for the queen,” I finished awkwardly.

“I said that I work on her behalf,” he corrected, before ducking under the water. He came back up, dark hair curling around his face and water dripping off his lashes, and grinned at me through the wet strands. “I am Kit Marlowe, by the way, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“I hadn’t,” I lied. The name didn’t suit him, but then again, I wasn’t sure what would. Most men I could size up in a matter of moments, but this one was an odd combination of wit and deadly danger, and it was throwing me. The monsters weren’t supposed to have a sense of humor.

They weren’t supposed to kiss that well, either, but I pushed that thought away.

“You never explained why a vampire should care who is queen in England, Master Marlowe.”

He settled comfortably back against the tub, arms spread along either side, wine glass dangling from one pale hand. “We have a government as well; it is called the Senate.”

“I know that.”
“Then perhaps you also know that their only real rivals for power are the mages. As long as the magical community remains as it is, divided and quarrelling among itself, they are no real threat. Allowing any one group to gain supremacy, on the other hand—”

“Might lead to more competition,” I finished for him.

“Yes. At the moment, the haven provided in this country for the Silver Circle has allowed it to rebuild its strength. Should that haven be removed, it might well be overcome and the mages united under the Black. The Senate has every reason to wish the queen well.”

“Unlike the covens,” I said bitterly. “She has been a party to everything that was done to us. She let this happen—to her own people!”

“It is difficult these days to know who one’s enemies are,” he shrugged. “She was informed that many of the covens on the continent had joined the Black Circle, and some of their leaders work closely with the Spanish—”

“They aren’t dark,” I said tightly. “They’re trying to survive! After the Circles began their war, the covens on the continent were told the same thing we were—give up your traditions, your leaders, your power to protect your people, and bow to our rule. Or we’ll destroy you before you can ally with our enemies!”

“I heard that the covens didn’t make things any easier on themselves,” he said, sipping his wine. “That they refused any compromise.”

“Why should we compromise?” I demanded. “We are English, and have been these many centuries! They are nothing more than foreign refugees. They need to bow to our leaders’ authority, not the other way around!”

“It seems a middle ground must be found, if both are to survive.”

“We haven’t survived!” I hissed. “Or did your eyes fail you at the prison?”

“Yes, I saw.” For the first time, he looked serious. “And that is precisely why you must help me. If we can find out what this group is planning, if we can stop it, it may prove to the queen that—”

“She isn’t my queen,” I said, low and even.

“Very well. Help me for your own sake, then. I overheard what you said to that old villain at the tavern. I can get you the passage abroad you desire, as well as money, papers, whatever else you need. Assist me in this and I will see you and your daughter safely away from these shores.”

I crossed my arms, struggling to get my temper back under control, to remember the main concern here. “What do you want?”

“To start with, I was hoping you could tell me something about this lot,” he gestured at the jewels. “The Circle’s agents at court could only say that neither the coffer nor its contents were cursed.”

“And what makes you think I can do better?”

“As you demonstrated at the prison, the coven’s magic differs from the Circle’s.”

“Ours is based on that of the fey,” I said, going back to examining the jewel. “Or it once was. It’s a bit of an amalgamation of human and fey these days, which is one reason the Circle doesn’t trust it.”

“And I thought that was due to the fact that the covens are run exclusively by women.”

“They’re not,” I said, frowning at the ring. Its setting was loose, having been damaged on one side, and I didn’t like what it showed me. “That’s another of the Circle’s lies.”

“And yet I’ve never heard of one lead by a man.”
“It’s rare,” I admitted. “Our particular brand of magic is often stronger in women. But it does happen.”

“Do you sense anything amiss with that, then?”

“No.” I tossed the ring back on the pile with a grimace. “It’s harmless enough. They all are, for that matter.”

He picked it up, looking frustrated. Apparently, that hadn’t been the answer he’d wanted. “You’re sure?”

“If they were cursed, I’d have felt it before I ever touched them.”

He scowled and twisted the emerald around so that it caught the light. “My lady’s favorite,” he said sourly. “I suppose I could make her a gift.”

“Your lady?”

“She who made me vampire. She came from the desert, and says the color reminds her of growing things.”

“Well, I wouldn’t give her that one,” I said wryly. “Unless she’s fond of fakes.”

He looked up. “I beg your pardon?”

“It’s counterfeit. A good one, I grant you, but—”

“How do you know?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Do you have a knife?”

“There’s one in my boot.”

I leaned back in the chair, giving in to temptation. “Can you get it for me?”

He looked surprised for a moment, and then his lips twitched. He slowly stood up, the lantern light shining on wet curls and water slick skin. He didn’t bother to dry off before climbing out of the bath and walking to the door, giving me a view of the flex and roll of sleek muscle. He bent over and retrieved the knife from his boot, then returned, standing in front of me with a dark smile.

“You enjoy living dangerously.”

I licked my lips. “Is there any other way, these days?”

The stone was already loose, and came out easily. I handed it to him and he leaned over to hold it closer to the lantern. “It looks genuine.”

“It is. But submerge it in your wine glass for an hour. You’ll find you don’t have one stone but two. They glued a thin upper layer of poor-quality emerald to a lower one of dark green glass. The glass makes the emerald look darker, and therefore more expensive, as well as making it appear to be a larger stone.”

“How can you tell?”

“Out of the setting, you can see the difference in color along the side,” I said, pointing out the thin line with a fingernail. “Where the layers come together.”

He picked up a beautiful carconet of sapphires and moved behind me, pushing my wet hair aside in order to drape them around my neck. “And this?”

“The stones are genuine,” I said, leaning back into the feel of those strong hands. “But of low quality. They’ve been backed by colored foil to make them appear to be more expensive, brilliant blue ones.”
“How did you know?” he asked, his hands smoothing over my bare shoulders.

“I’ve learned to check for such things. You’d be surprised how many times we relieved a fine lady or gentleman of their jewels only to discover when we went to sell them that they were paste. Or to have a buyer tell us they were paste, when they were the real thing.”

“No honor among thieves?”

“Not the thieves I know,” I said, thinking of Sol. “After a few such times, I found someone to teach me the difference.”

“Then these are all cheap imitations?” he asked, as those hands moved lower.

“But sapphires—even poor quality ones—and gold are expensive. Why pay good coin for fakes?”

“I am not interested in counterfeiters,” he told me, resting a chin on my shoulder. “Even good ones. I need to know if these pose a threat to her majesty.”

“Only to her purse, if she bought them.”

“I am not interested in counterfeiters,” he told me, resting a chin on my shoulder. “Even good ones. I need to know if these pose a threat to her majesty.”

“He sighed, his breath hot against my throat. “The meetings may have meant nothing; merely rogues running with rogues. But I must be sure. We’re going to have to do this the hard way.”

I blinked and twisted my neck around to look at him. “The hard way? And that would be?”

He smiled slowly. “The reason I need you.”

Chapter Three

Ten minutes later, I was face down on the vampire’s bed, wondering how I managed to get talked into these things. “I’m beginning to think this is a bad idea,” I panted.

“It isn’t my fault,” he complained, with a move that had my breath catching. “It simply won’t fit.”
“You’re not really trying.”
“I assure you, I am.”
“Are you certain you’ve done this before?”
“I do seem to recall,” he grunted, “a few occasions.”
“Well, were you paying attention?”

He did something that felt like it permanently rearranged my insides. “Was that better?” he asked sweetly.

“You’re learning,” I gasped, rolling over and snatching the dress off the end of the bed. “Now, let’s see if this miserable thing fits.”

Kit let go of my stays and stepped back. “I don’t know why noble women’s clothes are so demmed complicated,” he complained. “With peasant girls, it’s a shift and a kirtle and done.”

“And your experience with peasant girls is extensive, is it?”

He crossed his arms. “There’s no reason to be short with me, simply because the woman was a few inches —”

“She was not thinner than me,” I said, gritting my teeth as I adjusted the tight bodice enough that I could breathe. “You didn’t lace me correctly the first time.”

“My apologies. I thought this would go more smoothly if you did not pass out on the lintel.”

I glared at him, temper high, until I found myself stuck in the folds of the cursed woman’s farthingale. “She must have been built like a boy,” I complained, and he sighed and came over to rescue me.

“I admit to not paying close attention at the time. I was more concerned with not allowing her to murder me.”

He was talking about the witch who had been working with the counterfeiter. She’d been from one of the English covens which had apparently decided that, if their own country didn’t want them, perhaps they would throw in their lot with its enemies. Almost the only thing he’d discovered from questioning her servants was that she was supposed to meet with a member of the Black Circle tonight.

The idea, of course, was for me to replace her.

Kit stepped back, eyeing me up and down, while I tried not to fidget. The low-cut French gown of deep red velvet was fit for a queen—a very small one. I was glad I’d put her stockings on before we started, because bending over was no longer an option. But the size wasn’t the main reason the get up was making me uncomfortable.

“I make a credible lady’s maid,” he said, breaking into a smile.

I didn’t smile back. “I’m not a lady.”

“You speak as one.”

“My mother was one of our healers; she saw to it that I received an education,” I said, sitting at the small table where I’d spread out the woman’s toiletries. “But my skills are not those needed to impersonate someone used to fine company.”

“What type of education?” Kit settled himself beside the table, chin in hand.

“I was a wardsmith,” I told him, sorting through the little pots. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d worn paint, but the dress looked strange without it. I pushed the one containing ceruse away; one of the advantages of
being a redhead was that my skin was pale enough.

“And yet you turned to thievery?”

I looked up, bristling. “After the Circle convinced the queen to give them monopolies over our traditional livelihoods, yes! I can’t create wards or even sell the charms I’ve already constructed without paying them for the privilege. And I would rather starve!”

“I meant no offense,” he said, passing me a pot of something. “I find your solution… enterprising.”

My eyes narrowed, but he looked sincere. And he didn’t strike me as someone who worried overmuch about the law, if it inconvenienced him. He had helped me escape from prison, after all.

I opened the pot and took a sniff, before recoiling at the stench of sulfur. Vermilion. “Returning to the point,” I said. “Lady Isabel was of noble birth. How do you know I won’t give myself away in the first five minutes?”

“Because I will be standing at your side, playing the part of your nefarious vampire lover.”

I looked him over. He had donned a black leather jerkin over a doublet of blood red samite and black slops. He looked sleek, dark and dangerous—until he smiled as if this were all a huge joke, and ruined the effect.

“You could at least look a little nervous!” I said, setting aside the stinking rouge. “If we’re found out—”

“If I looked uneasy, it would only help to insure that,” he said mildly. “Take it from an old hand—a little bravado goes a long way. Act as if you belong and no one will question it.”

“They will if they’ve heard of the witch’s capture,” I pointed out. The closer it came to time to leave, the more I was regretting agreeing to this. Having the wherewithal to get Elinor away would do me little good if I didn’t live long enough to use it.

“The Circle kept that very quiet, at our request,” he assured me. “But if challenged point blank, you can always say you escaped.” His lips twisted. “It will even be true.”

“And if this man has met her?” I demanded, trying to darken my lashes with the woman’s expensive imported kohl. It was worse than the vermilion, I thought darkly, as it smeared everywhere.

He laughed and wiped a thumb across my cheek. “You look like a painted Indian.”

“I cannot believe women wear this every day,” I said, scowling. “It’s vile!”

“T’is the fashion. They all wish to look like the queen—pale skin, red hair, black teeth—”

I put the pot down. “She does not.”

“Oh, I assure you, she does. It’s become quite the thing, to blacken one’s smile before going to court. In sympathy, as it were.”

“I’m not doing that.”

“And plucking one’s hairline back several inches,” he teased, as I reached for the brush. “To get a proper high forehead—”

“I’m not doing that, either!”

“Clear skin, natural blush, and white teeth—I shall be ashamed to be seen with you.”

“Just answer the question!”
He grinned at me, unrepentant. “He hasn’t met her. Angus Trevelyan is Cornish, but he hasn’t set foot on English soil since the late queen was on the throne. He was banished by the covens for dealing in banned substances in Queen Mary’s reign.”

“What kind of banned substances?” I asked warily.

He shrugged. “Poisons, mostly. He fled to the continent, and the Black Circle soon enough found a use for his talents. The rumor is that he’s risen quite far in their ranks.”

“We’re visiting a notorious poiser?” I asked, putting the brush down abruptly.

“The best, from what I hear.”

“I trust he isn’t serving dinner!”

“Oh, I shouldn’t worry about that. His weren’t the kind you ingested. He typically fused them with an object, something worn against the skin. T’was said some of the more virulent needed only a touch to have a man screaming in—”

He cut off when I suddenly bolted for the door. “He’ll have no reason to poison an ally,” he told me, suddenly appearing between me and the only way out.

“I’m not an ally,” I said heatedly.

“He won’t know that—”

“He doesn’t have to! You want me to play the part of a coven witch—when he hates the covens!”

“That was a long time ago,” Kit said soothingly.

“What if he has a long memory?”

“Gillian.” Kit let his forehead fall against mine. It shouldn’t have been comforting, but for some reason, it was. “What more could he do to the covens?” he asked simply.

I swallowed. There was that. Whatever revenge this Trevelyan might have wanted, the Circle had already done for him. I didn’t agree with what Lady Isabel had been doing, but I understood it, understood the impotent rage behind it. The urge to strike out, to do something—

“He was banished before she was even born,” Kit said softly. “And her family played no part in it. He has no cause to wish her ill.”

“I know nothing about why they’re meeting,” I pointed out. “If they ask me any questions—”

“I’ll handle them.”

I stared at him, wanting to believe him—needing to. But I didn’t trust people easily, and that went double for strange vampires. “You’d better!”

“I shall,” he said easily, leading me back to the table. “Your role is merely to get me in. As soon as we find out what they’re after, my people will do the rest.”

“I don’t know why your people can’t do all of it,” I said, snatching up the hood that matched the gown.

“We tried that in Portsmouth. It netted us a cask of fake jewels and two dead bodies, nothing more. I won’t risk that again.”

“Let us hope there are not two more dead bodies tonight,” I said darkly, settling the awkward thing in place.
“You look lovely,” he assured me. “They won’t suspect a thing.” I shot him a look he didn’t see because he’d gone to rummage through the witch’s trunk.

“At least everything fits now,” I said, twisting about. The dress was stiff with embroidery and heavy from more yards of fabric than were in my whole wardrobe. But the ramrod stiff posture required by the bodice and the glittering, elegant folds of the skirt combined to lend me an odd sort of grace. I looked in the mirror and, for a moment, I didn’t recognize myself.

“So it does,” he said, rejoining me with a suspiciously innocent look. I belatedly noticed that he was holding something wrapped in linen.

“What is that?” I asked warily.

“Her shoes.”

I said something extremely unladylike, and he laughed.

* * *

Getting in didn’t prove to be the problem. A portly butler with a comically self-important expression took one look at the staff and became positively obsequious. He stepped back to let us through the door of a fine, half-timbered house along the Thames, not far from the ruined hulk of the Spaniard.

It looked like the Black Circle paid well, I thought, gazing about at gleaming plate, fine Turkey carpets and vast, echoing rooms. But they were all dark, lit only by the circle of light thrown off by the gleaming silver candelabra in the butler’s hand, and the place was as silent as a tomb. The analogy did not improve my mood, and neither did the fact that we did not stop at a receiving room, as I’d expected. Instead, we were led straight to the master’s chambers.

As with most of the upper classes, Trevelyan used his bedroom as a place for intimate gatherings of friends. And with only four people, we certainly qualified. So much for losing myself in the crowd, I thought grimly.

But as it turned out, it didn’t matter. The faint iridescence of a ward shimmered in the air above a table draped by a fine cloth, its contents throwing off a thousand prisms of light as it slowly revolved. And no one had eyes for anything else.

“Lovely, isn’t it?” Trevelyan asked, leaning over my shoulder, close enough that I could smell the brandy on his breath. He looked more like a tradesman—beefy arms, too-pronounced jowl and scattering of gray stubble—than the fearsome dark mage I’d been expecting. But there was an oily, slick feel about him that made my skin crawl.

But I couldn’t argue with the sentiment. “It’s magnificent,” I said fervently.

Suspended in the air behind the almost invisible ward was the most spectacular jewel I had ever seen. At the center was a gold mounted, square cut table diamond, easily half the size of my closed fist. Sparkling like fire in the candlelight above it was another the size of a quail’s egg. But neither held my eyes, because neither was the real showpiece.

Of all the jewels, pearls brought the greatest price because they were the rarest. And of all the pearls, the one most prized by ladies of the court was the large, single teardrop that occurs so rarely in nature, but hangs so beautifully from a pendant. Hanging below the center stone of this necklace was the single largest pearl I had ever seen, easily the size of my thumb, pure as new fallen snow and perfectly pear-shaped.

I’d never seen anything remotely like it.

Kit squeezed my thigh under the table, I don’t know why. Perhaps I was drooling. But Trevelyan seemed pleased.
“It quite took me that way, as well, when first I saw it,” he said. “Still does in truth. But then, they only managed to pry it out of the king’s hands a fortnight ago. Blasted man owns half the world, but do ye think he’d turn loose of the one thing likely to give him the rest of it?”

“He was wise to be cautious,” the handsome Spaniard to his left said. He’d been introduced simply as ‘Señor Garza.’ Judging by the size of his ruff and the small fortune in jewels he wore, that was almost certainly false. But then, no one had questioned my introduction of Kit as George Dunn, so I couldn’t really complain.

“His father wouldn’a been so timid.”

“His father lost the Armada,” Garza said sharply. “His son would prefer not to lose anything else in these isles. And La joyel de los Austrias is a great prize.”

“It’s nothing next to the prize to be won!”

“Which is why you now have it.”

Trevelyan shook his head. “T’wasn’t so easy,” he told me. “We had t’show him those demmed Venetian doodads that your lot intended t’use before he’d see reason.”

For a minute, I had no idea what he meant. And then a vague memory stirred. “Murano,” I said, glancing at Kit. The island off the coast of Venice was famous for the quality of its fake pearls. They were so good that the penalty for selling them as real was the loss of a hand and a ten year exile. But Trevelyan didn’t seem to agree.

“Glass pearls,” he snorted. “No disrespect meant to yer ladyship, but those scoundrels sold you a bill ‘o goods. You would need a glass eye not to know they was fake.”

“I thought they were credible,” I said, remembering the ropes of black beauties in Kit’s little chest.

“To the layman, perhaps,” the Spaniard said condescendingly. “But not, I think, to the queen.”

“Aye. If there’s one thing the old harridan knows, it’s pearls,” Trevelyan said, getting up to refill my glass himself, as the servants appeared to have been banished for the night. “Particularly those. She paid three thousand pound for ‘em, back when the Queen o’ Scots needed some quick coin.”

“I’m surprised she’d part with so much,” Kit commented mildly.

Trevelyan shook his head. “Bargain ‘o the century it was; not even half their value.”

“Nonetheless, when you consider how tight she is—”

“But they’re unique,” Trevelyn interrupted eagerly. “Something that no one else has. That’s what hooked her before, and it’s what’ll do her again!”

“But we cannot risk a substitution,” Garzas said, looking from me to Kit and back again. “After so long, I am willing to bet she could tell in the dark whether they were hers or no.”

“Aye,” Trevelyan said amiably. “T’is better this way.”

“And what way would that be?” Kit asked casually.

“The joyel de los Austrias contains two named stones, La Estanque and La Peregrina,” Garzas said, gesturing at the gleaming jewel behind the ward. “The first is the large center diamond and the second is the pearl—believed to be the largest in the world. His Majesty’s father gave it to the late queen when he came to England to marry her, and she wore it almost constantly thereafter. Naturally, the present queen assumed it would be hers upon her sister’s death, only to find that it had been quite properly returned to the prince in Queen Mary’s will.”

“Rumor was, she was furious,” Trevelyan added, grinning. “But she was also new ter the throne and couldn’t
risk makin’ an enemy over something as trivial as a jewel. But she’ll not let it slip away a second time.”

“I am not sure I’m following you,” I said, actually afraid that I was.

“La joyel de los Austrias will be presented to the queen in open court, as a peace offering from his Majesty,” Garzas said, with a twist to his lips. “And if her people manage to so much as see it before she snatches it out of the ambassador’s hand, I will be shocked.”

Kit’s hand clenched on my leg, hard enough to make me wince. I didn’t need the hint; it was clear enough what they planned. People had been trying to assassinate the queen since before she even took office. There had been numerous plots to shoot her, stab her or foment rebellion against her; it wasn’t a great leap to imagine one to poison her.

“You seem to have it all arranged,” I said, sinking my own nails into Kit’s silk-covered thigh.

“Aye,” Trevelyan said, shrewd brown eyes narrowing. “But the question is, will the covens rise, once the deed is done?”

“I…will need to discuss that with the elders,” I temporized, only to have him scowl.

“None of that, now. You wanted proof that we can do as we say, well here it is. The ambassador will be here in an hour to pick it up, and tomorrow he’ll present it. A day after that, the country’ll spiral into chaos while the privy council scrambles to find an heir. She’s never named one—”

“It is assumed by most at court that the king of the Scots will succeed,” Kit broke in.

“But he’s in Edinburgh, in’t he?” Trevelyan shot back. “An’ like as not, he won’t risk starting for London only to have someone else named while he’s still on the road. He’ll wait to be invited, and while the court squabbles an’ he paces in his castle, we’ll have our chance!”

“And once England has been added to the empire, I assure you, the covens will find themselves in a much more advantageous position,” Garzas informed me, leaning over the table. “We have seen how you are treated here, your skills devalued, your ancient knowledge wasted. But we will restore you to your past greatness. We will give you back that which is lost.”

They were both staring at me, obviously expecting a decision. “I believe I’ve seen enough,” I said, my head reeling. “If the curse works as you say, my coven will be ready.”

“And the others?” Trevelyn said sharply. “Ye promised at least three.”

I hadn’t thought there were three intact covens in England, other than those which had buckled under the Circle’s demands. Or had seemed to do so.

“Yes, well, where ours leads, the others will follow.”

“You must be sure,” Garzas told me. “We cannot do this by magic alone. We need men, if we are to hold this land. But most of those loyal to our cause are in the north and will need time to shift their armies here. Just as we need it to transport ours across the channel. You must buy us that!”

“You’ll have our aid,” I said evenly. “As soon as you keep your side of the bargain.”

“Then we will have it tomorrow,” the Spaniard told me. “And tomorrow, we will have England.”

Chapter Four
It took another ten minutes of drinking and well wishing before we could finally make our escape. The river’s stench had never smelt so good, I thought fervently, leaning against the side of a building down the street, heedless of the fine fabric of the witch’s cloak. My insides felt like someone had stirred them with a stick, but it was over. It was over and we’d done it.

I didn’t quite believe it.

“You were right,” I told Kit, feeling a little giddy. “That wasn’t so bad. There were a few rough moments, I grant you, but all in all—”

“Return to the ship and give this to my man,” he said, cutting me off and pressing something into my hand. “Tell him what passed this night, and the danger in which the queen lies. He will see to it that you receive what I promised you.”

He strode off back the way we’d come as I stared in confusion at my palm, where his signet ring gleamed softly in the dim light. And then I picked up my skirts and chased after him. “What are you talking about?” I asked, catching him up. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going back.”

“Back?” I stared at him, wishing I could see his expression. But the only light came from a few weak moonbeams that had managed to fight their way through the clouds, and the pinprick of a lantern in the Spaniard’s blackened guts, doubtless from some scavenger. Still, the features I could make out looked serious. “Back where?” I asked, hoping I had misunderstood his meaning.

“You heard the mage. The ambassador will be here in half an hour. I must get the jewel before then.”

He started off again, but I grabbed his arm. “Why?” I asked incredulously. “Simply tell the queen to refuse the gift. Now that you know the plan—”

“It is not so simple.”

“And why not?” I demanded.

“Because they chose the bait too well,” he said, sounding aggrieved. “If the queen has a weakness, it is for pearls. She wears seven strands of them on a daily basis, and more on state occasions. They are the symbol of virginity, and she is the virgin queen. She identifies with them closely.”

“Why does that matter?” I asked heatedly. My initial elation had evaporated, leaving me angry and confused. We were out; we were free. We needed to get as far away from this place as possible, not talk of going back!

“It matters because she has what may be the finest collection in Europe. She has given explicit instructions to her sea captains to seize pearls for her whenever they have cause to raid another ship. Drake once told me he thought they would win a man a knighthood faster than any amount of gold.”

“Then surely she has enough!”

“There is no such thing,” he said dryly. “She once forced one of her ladies-in-waiting to present her a magnificent black velvet, pearl-embroidered gown as a gift—and the woman was wearing it at the time! White and black are the queen’s favorite colors, and pearls her favorite adornment, and no one is allowed to outshine her in her own court. Or anywhere else.”

“You cannot believe she’d risk her life for a single jewel!”

“Not just any jewel, no. But for La Peregrina—”

“But it’s cursed.”
“Yes, but it will not appear to be so,” he said impatiently. “Trevelyan was a coven mage before he was banished. If he’s cursed the stone using earth magic, the Circle won’t detect it. Their advisors at court will tell her that there’s nothing wrong with it.”

“But you can tell her differently. You can—”

“I do not have direct access to her Majesty,” he said, starting back for the house and forcing me to jog alongside. “My lord Walsingham did, but since his death it has been far more difficult to gain her ear.”

“You must have some way—”

“Yes, but the queen may well choose to believe those who tell her what she wishes to hear, or pick up the king’s gift before anyone can tell her anything at all!”

Suddenly, I could see it—the jewel in a beautiful presentation box, the ambassador opening it before the throne, the queen’s astonishment. My own fingers had itched to touch it, to feel the pearl’s glossy perfection and prove to myself that it was real. Anyone’s first impulse would be to pick it up.

And even if her mages stopped her, if they made her wait while they inspected it, they would find nothing wrong. Only a coven witch might detect whatever malediction Trevelyan had used. And the Circle had insured that there were none of those at court.

We reached the mage’s house and I dug in my heels. “You can’t go in there!”

Kit shot me an exasperated look. “I have explained why I must.”

“But you’ll die!”

His lips quirked. “In case you failed to notice—”

“Make a joke now,” I told him seriously, “and by the Goddess—”

I cut off as someone threw open a window above us. Kit snatched me back into the shadow of the house as a single candle was thrust out into the night, shining bright as a beacon in the darkness. It highlighted Trevelyn’s stubble as he peered up and down the street.

I held my breath, pressed hard against Kit’s chest, as the candlelight struck glints off the gold in the witch’s gown and a few drops of hot wax splattered the street in front of her dainty shoes. But the mage never looked down. I finally realized that he hadn’t heard us; he was looking for his guest, who was due any minute now. After a long moment, he closed the shutters once more and I let out a shaky breath.

“You must go,” Kit whispered.

“And you must listen,” I said, in a furious undertone. “That isn’t an ordinary ward in there—it’s a mortuus field. Any living flesh that passes through it dies.”

“Which should prove no hindrance for me.”

I rounded on him. “You may not be alive in the human sense, but your body is animated by living energy—energy that the field will suck right out of you. It might not kill you, but it will drain you dry, thus leaving you at Trevelyan’s mercy—or lack of it!”

That wiped the perpetual smirk off his face, at least. “How can you be certain?”

“Because I was a wardsmith. And that’s a Druid ward.”

He was silent for a moment. “Then I’ll hook it with something and pull the jewel out.”

I shook my head. “Nothing but flesh can pass through the field, but only the caster’s is immune. He can
reach safely through; you can’t.”

Kit’s eyes narrowed as he stared up at the window. “Does he have to be alive at the time?”

I glared at him. “You do not want to take on a dark mage on his own territory!”

“I will do what I must,” he told me, with a stubborn glint in his eye.

“Listen to me,” I said, resisting a strong urge to shake him. “Trevelyn is a Black Circle mage with the added benefit of earth magic. He’s also an expert poisoner, who has littered Goddess only knows how many traps around the place. I’m telling you plainly: go in there and you will not come out.”

“And yet I must have it, Gillian.” And I finally found out what he looked like when he wasn’t joking. I decided I preferred the jovial mask to this glitter-eyed stranger.

I stared at him, angry and confused. “If this is about your lady, surely she will—”

“This is about my queen,” he said furiously. “She may not be yours, but she is mine. And I will not fail her in this!”

He started to climb up, but I held on. “But…but you mocked her,” I said, in disbelief. “She’s old, her teeth are bad, she’s cheap—”

“She is all of those things, as well as stubborn and vain and childish and mercurial and a thousand others. She is England,” he hissed, gesturing sharply. “With all its faults and frailties, its pettiness and posturing, and its stubborn will to survive. She should have been dead a thousand times by now, we all should—when Rome invited most of Europe to invade, when the Queen of Scots fomented rebellion within her very borders, when the Armada came. And yet she lives, and so do we, Protestant and free in spite of it all, because of that willful, stubborn, impossible, indomitable woman!”

I blinked, finally catching up. “You’re not doing this because you were ordered to at all, are you?”

He drew himself up. “My lady instructed me—”

I crossed my arms and just looked at him.

He scowled. “Go and do as I asked. Tell my man what you heard and then depart this country as quickly as you can. If this fails, you need to be far away from here before Trevelyn and his ilk come to power.”

He grasped hold of the lower story, preparing to lever himself up. Preparing to die, if necessary, for the country he loved and the woman who embodied it—for all of us. He was completely mad, but I was no better. England was mine. It might have forsaken me, but nothing changed that. And I couldn’t watch its ruin any more than he could.

Goddess’ teeth.


“But you said—”

“I know what I said! But despite everything, I do not believe we would be better off under foreign rule.” I crossed my arms. “There’s a damn sight too many foreigners here already, if you ask me.”

“Help me how?” he demanded. “You said the ward is impenetrable.”

“It is.” I stared past him into the dark, where the lantern was still bobbing here and there amid the wreckage of the Spaniard. We were closer now, allowing me to pick out Fulke’s hulking shape in the shadows. And something more besides. “But I think I might have an idea.”
Twenty minutes later, my idea was sitting on Trevelyn’s table, scratching its arse.

“What is it doing?” Kit asked, hanging off the roof to peer into the window.

“What does it look like?” I asked crossly, trying to keep a tenuous grip on the mage’s wet shingles. On top of everything, it had started to rain, and the gown was taking on water at an alarming rate. Any minute it was going to drag me off the roof to my doom.

“Why?” he asked incredulously. “It cannot possibly have fleas. What would they live on?”

“Vitriol,” I said sourly, glaring at the disgusting lump.

Sol’s moth-eaten pet had been clinging like a limpet to Fulke’s sweaty neck as he sifted through the burnt out hulk of the tavern, looking for the till he’d left behind. In return for not beating him into a pulp, he had loaned the thing to us. Not that it had done a damn bit of good, so far.

“Are you certain he can penetrate the field?” Kit demanded.

“Yes! At least…fairly certain.”

“Fairly certain?”

I transferred my glare to him. “I haven’t had cause to try this before! But it should work. Zombies are controlled by magic, not living energy. As flesh, he should be able to pass through the field; but with no life to drain, the ward can’t hurt him.”

“More’s the pity,” Kit muttered, as I glanced nervously behind me.

The main entrance to the house was around the corner, but the light spilling from the open front door was casting wavering shadows into the road. There were three of them, the two mages and—I assumed—the butler who had greeted us. But they wouldn’t be there for long. I’d cast a spell imitating the sound of horses’ hooves to get them out of the room, but when they didn’t find their illustrious guest waiting on the doorstep, they’d be back.

And our one chance would be lost.

I looked back to find that the creature had transferred his attentions to his armpit. He was less than four feet from the slowly revolving necklace, but was paying it no attention whatsoever. Perverse damn thing. Any other time, he would have been all about a bit of shine, but because for once I wanted him to steal something, he wasn’t interested.

“The wretched thing hasn’t been the same since his death,” I said, wishing he was still alive so I could choke the life out of him.

“It does take it out of one,” Kit agreed, letting himself down through the open window.

“What are you doing?” I whispered. “Get out of there!”

“Nothing bothered him,” he pointed out, disappearing inside.

“He’s already dead!”

A curly head poked back out briefly. “As am I, and we’re out of time. Stay here.”

I cursed, thinking of the few hundred snares Trevelyn could have placed around the room. And then I
“You’re lucky,” I panted, as the creature scampered up the bed curtains. “At least he doesn’t throw excrement anymore.”

“Only because he doesn’t make any,” Kit said, shooting me a glance. “And I thought I told you to stay put.”

“And I thought I told you not to come in here!”

“We don’t have time for—” his head jerked up at the sound of horses’ hooves on the street—real ones this time. “—anything,” he finished, jumping up and grabbing for the monkey.

He moved almost too fast to see, just a blur against the pale walls, but the monkey moved faster. It had the liquid speed of the undead, too, and the added advantage of a tiny, compact little body. With a derisive clucking of his tongue, he ducked under Kit’s hands and jumped to the rafters, skittering along a beam with his shadow rippling grotesquely along the wall.

I turned to the window in time to see no fewer than five cloaked figures clatter past on horses. I didn’t get a power reading off the one in front—the ambassador, I assumed. But the other four were practically glowing against the night. I didn’t know what the Black Circle’s equivalent of war mages were, but I had a feeling we were about to meet them. Briefly.

“We have to go,” I told Kit, spinning around. “Now!”

“Thank you for that,” he said, from atop the large, center beam bisecting the room. He made another grab for the monkey, just as the thing jumped for a different rafter. The creature somehow reversed course mid-air, ending up back where he’d started, but Kit didn’t. He did manage to land on his feet—mostly—and glared up at the thing. “Get down here!”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes. That’ll work.”

“Do you have a better idea?”

I stared up at the little horror, which was currently showing us his withered bits. He wasn’t my zombie; I couldn’t control him. And Sol was who knew where right now, not that the bastard was likely to have helped in any case. And his creature was no better, as conniving, contrary and obstinate as his owner, always doing exactly the opposite of what was—

I blinked, and then quickly decided that it couldn’t hurt. I limped over to the table and placed my nose close enough to the ward to feel the slippery static of its surface. “What a beauty,” I cooed.

“He can’t understand you,” Kit said, looking at me strangely.

“He understands the general idea,” I said, as the monkey turned his tiny face toward me. I ignored him, concentrating on the ward. “Such a pretty, pretty thing,” I breathed. “Must be worth a fortune. I’m glad it’s so well protected.”

“Unlike us,” Kit said grimly, staring at the door.

“What is it?”

“They’re coming up the stairs.”

I stared in desperation at the necklace, so temptingly close, so impossibly far away. My fingernails made a whispering across the outer membrane of the ward as I curled my hands into fists. I could practically feel it, the smooth contours of the golden rose that formed the setting, the cool, slippery gleam of the jewels. But it might as well be on the moon.
And then I blinked and it was gone—and so was the monkey.

“Grab him!” Kit said, jumping for the window.

I turned in time to see a furry blur making a break for freedom, and then the door slammed opened and things became a little confused. Someone shouted and someone else leaped for us, a curse flying out in front of him. I spun, acting before I thought, and lashed out with a decline that flung the mage’s spell right back at him. Whatever he’d cast must have been pretty brutal, because it caught him in the middle of his leap and sent him crashing back into his party.

“Caught him!” Kit crowed, from somewhere behind me and I didn’t hesitate.

“Then catch this!” I told him, throwing a leg over the staff. He grabbed me around the waist and swung on behind me as I flung us into space, using the staff as a platform for a levitation spell in lieu of a broom.

It worked—a little too well.

I’d forgotten that the staff multiplied my power considerably. Instead of merely flying out the window as I’d planned, we burst through in an explosion of wooden slats, taking one of the shutters along with us. To make matters worse, the voluminous skirts flew up in my face, insuring that I couldn’t see anything as we hurtled into the air.

For a very long moment, there was nothing but the monkey’s angry chatter and Kit’s curses as I fought with seemingly unending yards of fabric. And then the velvet cloud parted and I stared around, to find us pelting through the air above London at an unbelievable speed. I stared around in awe. I’d never been so high before.

Then I remembered that we weren’t the only ones who could fly. I glanced behind us, half expecting to see the Black Circle’s mages gaining fast. But there was nothing besides dark blue clouds stacked high above skirts of rain, lightning flashing bright in their bellies.

“What are you doing?” Kit shouted in my ear.

“Getting us out of trouble!” I said, my face cracking into a grin.

“And into worse one?” Judging by his expression, I’d finally found something that he didn’t find amusing. “Get us down from here!”

I laughed, exhilaration rushing through my veins. “As you like!”

I pointed the staff’s nose downward and we plunged back toward the ground, Kit’s arm tight around my waist, his scream ringing in my ears. We skimmed along above the Thames close enough to smell it, until the ship rose up ahead, like a leviathan out of the mist. The moon hung behind the sail, illuminating it so that the seams stood out like the intricate veins of a leaf. Beautiful.

Several sailors were on deck, having a late night drink, until they saw us and dropped the bottle, their mouths hanging open in shock. We landed nearby, as unsteady on our legs as two drunks, with me laughing like a child. Kit thrust the smelly monkey at one of them, pushed me into the side of the cabin and kissed me, heedless of the staring men.

“What’s!” he gasped, when we finally broke for air. “You’re all completely mad!”

“It does help,” I murmured, collapsing against him in a fit of helpless giggles. “And at least they didn’t follow us.”

“Follow us? I doubt they so much as saw us!”

I grinned. I doubted they had, either.
“It isn’t funny!”

I grinned wider and tried to rearrange his wayward curls. They were everywhere. “Yes, it is.”

“Sir?” One of the sailors approached tentatively.

“What is it, man?” Kit demanded, his eyes never leaving mine.

“Beggin’ yer pardon, sir,” the sailor held up the monkey. “But what were ye wantin’ me ter do with this?”

“Take it below. And don’t touch the necklace.”

“Yes, sir. As you say, sir.” But the man just stood there.

Kit was looking at me with a strange expression on his face. “What is it?” I asked.

“I am trying to decide whether to kiss you again, or to throw you over my knee!”

“Let me know when you make up your mind,” I told him. I thought both had possibilities.

Kit glanced at the sailor, who was still just standing there. “Well, what are you waiting for? You have your orders.”

“Yes, sir.” The sailor shifted from foot to foot, but didn’t go anywhere. “There’s just one thing, sir.”

“God’s bones, man! Spit it out.”

The man held up the monkey, whose little hands, I finally noticed, were empty. “What necklace?”

**Conclusion**

The next morning, I was in the witch’s gown again. An hour of hard work had made it presentable, if not precisely wrinkle-free. That was fortunate, because there was nothing else in my possession fit for an audience at court.

Not that I’d had one, so far.

A vase came flying out of the door beside me like a cylindrical bird and crashed against the far wall, scattering shards everywhere and making several passing courtiers jump.

And not that I was all that eager.

Kit followed quickly on the heels of the vase, hugging the wall beside me. “There are days I truly miss Lord Walsingham,” he told me fervently.

“I told you not to mention the necklace.”

“I didn’t have a choice! If we’d lost it near Trevelyn’s house, and he’d been able to trace it—”

“How do you know he didn’t?”

“The several thousand dead fish washed ashore this morning would suggest otherwise,” he told me dryly.

“The vindictive little bastard,” I said, in disbelief. “He dropped it in the river rather than let us have it.”
“So it would appear.”

“Are they going to try to recover it?”

Kit suddenly grinned. “Do you know, that was Her Majesty’s question.”

I looked at him warily. “Why is that amusing?”

“Because a number of the lofty leaders of the Circle are down at the riverbank right now, knee deep in slime and rotting fish, attempting to do just that. And that was after having to admit that they were not entirely certain that they could detect a coven ward.”

My lips twitched for a moment, until I made the obvious connection. “You never promised that I would do it!” I said, panicking. “The curse will have worn off by now, even assuming I could—”

“It’s worn off?” Kit’s grin widened. “That’s even better.”

I grabbed his shoulders. “Did you tell her?”

He laughed and settled his hands on my waist. “No. But I did point out that this incident has demonstrated that there is more to magic than the Circle knows.”

“What?” I asked warily.

“That they might overlook threats that come from magic unlike their own.”

“But the Circle has a coven wizard at court,” I protested.

John Dee had long been their link to the queen, the filthy bastard. He was English, although you would never know it considering how he had immediately chosen the Circle over the covens. Perhaps because his magic was second rate, insuring he’d had little power within the old hierarchy. But the Circle valued him for his connection to the queen, and with their backing, he’d gone far.

“Yes, but he doesn’t appear to be able to help in this instance,” Kit said, innocently. “I pointed out to Her Majesty that coven magic usually flows easier through the veins of women, much to Master Dee’s annoyance.”

I stared at him a moment, and then felt a grin split my face. Now that was funny.

“It was therefore decided,” he continued, “that while the queen may have a wizard, she needs also a witch.”

It took me a moment to understand what he was saying, as I was still enjoying the mental image of Dee humiliated before the court. And then my eyes widened and I tried to jerk away. “No. I’m leaving England, that was our agreement!”

Kit’s hands tightened, refusing to let me flee. “And it stands,” he told me quickly. “I will provide what I promised, if that is what you wish. But I thought there was a chance you might prefer to stay and fight.”

“No one can fight the Circle,” I said, before I even thought. And then was appalled to realize how quickly that sentiment had sprung to my lips, how thoroughly I had come to believe it.

“Not outright, perhaps,” he agreed. “But there are other ways to obtain your desires. The Circle did not rise to ascendancy in England by combat, but by influence. There is a chance, should you prove of service to Her Majesty, that the same could prove true for the covens.”

I stared at him, my immediate response anger at the thought that we should have to compete for what was rightfully ours. But I never uttered the words. That was the sort of attitude that had come close to destroying us.

“It isn’t fair,” Kit said, reading my face. “But we live in this world as it is, not as we would necessarily like it to be. Isn’t that how you’ve survived, Gillian? Making the best of a bad set of circumstances? Now you have the
chance to do the same for your people.”

“And what does the Circle think about this?” I asked, stalling for time.

His eyebrow went up. “As they do not yet know about it? Nothing.”

“And when they do?”

“The Circle does not control the queen,” Kit said flatly. “It is by her sufferance that they are allowed to remain. Should they challenge her, their counterparts abroad would be only too pleased to help her rid herself of them. They may have the magic, but she holds the power in this land. And rarely are they allowed to forget it!”

I stared over his shoulder for a moment, out one of the long set of windows running down the hall. The rain of the previous evening had vanished, leaving behind a perfectly clear, pale blue sky. It contrasted nicely with the red stone of the palace, the green of the fields spreading out in every direction and the distant ribbon of river snaking its way through a land my people had protected from time out of mind.

The thought of leaving it forever had felt like it ripped a hole in my very soul. The thought of staying…. Not that Kit’s plan was a certainty, but in life, what was certain? It was a chance, which was more than I had ever thought we would have.

He must have read my face again, because his hands tightened on my waist. I looked at him, and felt my face break into another smile. “Master Marlowe, I do believe the queen just bought herself a witch.”

The End

Notes

I don’t normally do story notes, but then, I don’t normally do historicals, either. And I thought it might help to clarify a few things.

First: As I’m sure you noticed, this was set in Shakespeare’s time, but was not written in Shakespearian English. It’s an issue anyone writing a historical piece has to address—how much of the original language to keep and how much to throw out. Like most authors, I decided that something written entirely in the language of the Bard would be damn hard for most readers to enjoy—or even to understand, considering that a lot of Elizabethan slang has been out of use for four centuries. I therefore chose to include a little here and there for color and to chuck the rest.

Second: The “current queen” referred to in the story is, of course, Elizabeth I. The “former queen” was Mary I, Elizabeth’s older half-sister who married Philip II of Spain. The story takes place in the 1590s, in the final decade of Elizabeth’s life, but refers to the previous reign occasionally.

Third: The story concerns the mystery surrounding La Peregrina (The Wanderer), one of the world’s most famous jewels. The 58½ carat pear-shaped pearl was supposedly discovered in the Gulf of Panama by a slave in the early 1500s and carried to Spain by the conquistador Victor Nunez de Balboa, who made a gift of it to King Ferdinand V. According to legend, it stayed in Spain until Philip II gave the jewel to his bride, Mary Tudor, as a wedding gift and was later returned to him in her will.

However, there has been some controversy over whether the jewel currently known as La Peregrina was the pearl Mary I wore in almost all of her portraits. Elizabeth Taylor owns it now, a gift from Richard Burton, and part of the
exorbitant price he paid was due to its supposed pedigree. But some Spanish records state that the gem was not
found until after Mary’s death, and the paintings of her wearing it do show it to be somewhat different in shape than
the pearl owned by Ms. Taylor. That has led some to believe that there were actually two great pearls, which for
some reason were given the same name. This is my answer as to why.
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