

PROLOGUE

England, 1544

The earl gazed dispassionately at the anxious physician. "If you speak true . . . then by all means save my heir."

An eerie silence enveloped the hot, crowded chamber. Unnoticed in the human turmoil, a black cat flicked its tail, biding its time. With yellow eyes gleaming in the shadows of twilight, the patient feline watched as burning incense and peat soundlessly spun their fumes into a smoky nightmare.

The greenish haze rose to shroud the vaulted ceiling and tapestried walls. Then slowly wafting down, it hovered over the stately testered bed to wreath the occupant and her silent witnesses with its essence. The air turned cloyingly sweet and barely breathable. But the straining woman, arched on the sweat-coated mattress, took no notice.

Her luxuriant ebony hair, normally her pride and glory, clung to her perspiring face like a clump of leeches fat with blood. Her delicate lips, once a deep vermilion, were curled into a feral snarl, baring her teeth like venomous fangs. Hands, which used to be soft and graceful, were now clenched into tight, unforgiving fists. And eyes, no longer glowing with the light of passion, became hate-filled black orbs glaring at the departing back of the man she had called husband.

Ignoring the gape-mouthed idiots hanging about her, she bitterly cursed her own stupidity and blindness. The cards and crystal had spoken true, yet she had scoffed at their deadly warnings. Too enthralled by the seductive powers of her beauty to heed the omens, she had merely tossed her head and laughed.

Now she would pay the ultimate price.

Gritting her teeth as another lancing pain ripped through her abdomen, she conceived her unborn son's legacy. The earl had hurled a gauntlet in her face, turning their petty skirmishes over supremacy into a showdown over choice and power. He had made his choice, now she would beget hers. An exchange: a life, for a life.

Annoyed by the fumbling physician groping between her thighs, she kicked him aside.

"Leave me, charlatan," she croaked, yanking the clammy sheets up to her neck. Her voice, strained by countless hours of suppressed agony, cracked when she spoke. "I have no need of your services at the moment. The babe is secure, and his lordship will have his all-too-precious heir soon enough. Now fetch me the scribe, bloodletter," she commanded hoarsely, her forefinger leveling at his groin, "or I'll turn your cods into useless mush." Punctuating her threat with a catlike hiss, the woman curled her lip and lay back when the frantic physician stumbled over his long dark robes in his haste to obey her.

All she needed was a little more time. After laboring with this babe for three interminably torturous days, she'd ruefully concluded that her powers were fading. Just one more hour and she would ensure the descendants of her cocksure consort experienced the gamut of her displeasure. With a throat wearied by stoic efforts that had merely drained her of strength, she ordered one of her tiring women to fetch her box.

Once the small jewel-encrusted casket was lovingly placed on her lap, she dismissed her gawking spectators with a slice of her hand. They scurried about, tripping over each other in their desperation to be gone, but the woman was too involved with her thoughts to be amused.

Closing her eyes, she skimmed her fingers over the costly gems. They were cold, lacking the fire of life, as also shortly would she. She opened the velvet lined box and thoughtfully sifted through its contents.

When the harried scribe entered, she pinned him to a sudden standstill with her dissecting gaze. He fluttered like a helpless butterfly for a moment, then, with a shuddering sigh, resigned himself to her will.

Her long, black lashes lowered slowly over eyes glowing with malignant purpose. All she had was this final chance for revenge before her life was stolen from her. Time was of the essence, yet she had to proceed with delicacy if her plan was to succeed.

"I realize, most acutely, that you subsist in my husband's employ, scribe," she murmured in a whisper as soft as a mother's lullaby. Then her sinister eyes opened, and piercing hatred penetrated the quaking man's soul. "But if you fail me in the request I'm about to make--you will suffer the tortures of the damned," she prophesied, twisting the final pin of her resentment deep into the pith of her prey.

The terrified clerk crumpled to his knees. "I would never fail you, my lady," he cried, crossing himself several times to ward off her malevolence. "On the honor of my holy sainted mother's grave!"

"See that you don't. My powers are far reaching, so I advise you not to test them. For if you do, I shall track you down, even after my death." He crossed himself again, then meekly bowed his head to await her further instructions.

Reluctant to release the powers from her grasp, she extended hands still clenched over her most treasured possessions. Then, turning her fists wrist-side up, she unfolded her fingers. Cupped in her palms were a gem studded amulet inscribed with the ancient, mystical symbols of a long-forgotten cult, and a matching ruby ring. She squeezed her eyes shut and thrust the talismans toward the open-mouthed scribe.

"Take these," she whispered in a voice laden with pain. "Give them to my son on his thirteenth birthday. Tell him they are a gift from me to use as he chooses until *his* son reaches his thirteenth birthday, when the gifts must be passed on."

The scribe hesitantly accepted the fetishes, which radiated unnaturally in his hands. He inspected them cautiously, afraid the objects might erupt into flames while he held them. When convinced they intended him no harm, he returned his gaze to his mistress.

"But, my lady," he protested, "how will your son know what to do with them?"

The countess curled her finely chiseled lip at the man's fawning stupidity. Taking an uneven breath, she handed him a small leather bound volume embossed with the same gold symbols adorning the amulet and ring. He carefully pocketed the sacred objects in his robe, then accepted the book from her claw-like grip.

"All will be revealed in good time, sirrah," she answered, her contempt more obvious than her private struggle to master the agony gripping at her vitals. "Interrupt me again, however, and it will mean the loss of your tongue."

The scribe's mouth thinned to a taut line, while his eyes widened with dread. The woman flicked a lean finger against the gilded manuscript's worn binding. "I presume you can read, fool. So save me any more wasted breath and do so. Now!"

The elderly man obeyed by leafing nervously through the yellowed pages. After a moment his breath caught in his throat. "My lady . . ." His voice wavered with awe and unspoken terror as he stabbed an ink-stained forefinger at the opened page. "This is an impossibility!"

Pulling herself to her elbows, the countess stared at the obsequious hireling with whom she'd been reduced to sharing her life's secrets. "I thought I had already taught you that nothing is impossible. I assure you the traveler functions without flaw. The only things it will not allow are for its possessor to change history, or leap about like some stumbling lackwit through his own lifetime. It is a learning tool, no more." She drew air between clenched teeth as another contraction tore through her like a searing knife. When she recovered, her mood turned quietly pensive.

"Death is the great equalizer of us all, Anthony. But as I am powerless to prevent mine, Pendrake's heirs will quickly discover the traveler is quite useless in preventing their deaths or another's. They may take their journeys in increments of a hundred and fifty years either way--no less, no more."

Fearful the book might suddenly take wing, the scribe held the Latin missive at a safe

distance--prepared to flee at the slightest flutter. But the volume remained as still as a gravedigger's charge. Concluding the book contained nothing more sinister than leather, ink and paper, he gingerly placed it inside his portfolio.

"It shall be as you wish, my lady," he assured her in a voice as calm as he could manage.

"I know." She lay back against the sweat-darkened bolster and let out a low, pain-filled moan. A rush of warm fluid flowed from between her legs and she closed her eyes. Alert to the nearly imperceptible change in sound and smell, the cat leaped lightly onto the bed and nudged its velvety black head against her hand. Absently stroking her purring ally, the woman laid out her instructions.

"My time is near, so do as you are told and take down my words. Be exact. A mistake on your part could cost many enamored young virgins their lives."

Then, like a spider intricately weaving its web of destruction, she began chanting her Latin litany of death.

England, 1767

The sun strove to fill every corner of the meadow with its brilliance, while birds sang their song of appreciation and bees paid court to flowers. It was the sort of July morning that set chambermaids to humming ditties of love, and filled boys of all ages with randy thoughts of pursuit. A maiden had to be careful on days such as this, if she did not wish a hasty lesson in the art of horizontal dancing.

Nature's pull was strong, but she might as well have been deep in winter's sleep for all the effect she had on the man and boy lost in conversation at the far end of the manor's topiary maze.

The puzzled boy carefully examined the objects his father's secretary had handed him. The story he had just heard was too ghastly to be true; yet, it provided explanations to several questions he had been secretly harboring, afraid of the answers he might receive.

The pages of the small book were crinkled and fragile with age, but he could tell they had been assiduously guarded for centuries. He was certainly not the first to be let in on this macabre secret.

Running his finger along a rippled edge, he asked, "Was my father also advised of this prophecy on his thirteenth birthday?"

The man, who appeared several years older today than he had yesterday, simply nodded. With a questioning plea in his eyes, the boy searched his advisor's face. "You're positive there is no mistake, then? There is no chance this ancestress of mine intended other than what you've told me?"

"I am certain, my lord." Though the man had expected the query, it still pained him to shatter the lad's last grasp at hope.

He knew the solemn young earl standing before him had seen more than one of his tender years should, but he refrained from saying more. The rest would have to wait until later. Perhaps a few years later, when the child might better comprehend the needs and desires of the man.

"Thank you for clarifying things, Palmer." The boy's eyes were hollowed with a despair too deep for one of his tender years; his voice quavered slightly. "I realize this is difficult for you, too."

The man placed his hand on the boy's slumping shoulders. "Though it is my sworn duty, this task is not an easy one to perform, my lord. My family has faithfully served yours since Anthony attended the Lady Morgana. And as cruel as her legacy seems, it is, unfortunately, a necessary tale to impart, else many lives could suffer."

The boy clenched the jewel studded amulet in his fist and nodded. Then pursing his lips together, he gazed at the dew-kissed hedges surrounding him. "If there is nothing else you need tell me, Palmer, I would like to be alone awhile, I think."

The man hesitated, then pulled a crackling piece of parchment from an inside coat pocket. "These were the countess's last words. They were originally written in Latin, and later translated into French. Your father ordered they be changed again, into English, for you and your descendants." He handed the yellowed parchment to the boy. "They may have lost something in the numerous transcriptions. If you wish, I can show you the originals."

The boy placed the amulet and ring in his pocket, then reached for this new disclosure with a steady hand. He read the words, feeling the chill of death cloak about him like a shroud. Refolding the parchment, he turned a pale face to the secretary, grateful the older man had insisted they speak alone.

"Thank you anyway, Palmer, but I believe her ladyship's wishes are plain enough in English." He understood many things now, and the knowledge filled him with dread. Making an effort to swallow the knot that had abruptly lodged in his throat, he asked once again to be left alone.

Palmer complied. He knew many questions remained unasked and many fears still waited to be addressed, but the youth had digested enough for one morning, and a father's heart ached for the innocent lad trapped in an embittered woman's web of hate.

Though he had always treated the boy like one of his own, he also realized the time had come for the child to acknowledge his heritage and accept it. For there was nothing anyone could do to alter his future.

Still, as he stood witness to the torment etched on the young face, Palmer yearned to pull the youth into his arms and deny all he had told him, but he did not. A clean cut healed quickest, he reasoned. So, briskly offering the lordling his bow of respect, Palmer left the somber young heir alone to battle his demons in solitude.

The boy unfolded the parchment and read the damning words for a second time.

In this, the hour of my final breath,
I bequeath to you my gift of death.
In your hands rest all you require
to heal or destroy with a touch of fire.

In pain, this gift is received and proffered,
for you and your heirs to use as offered.
The choice is yours, for better or worse,
for with this blessing there comes a curse.

Since I must labor to bring you life,
so another shall toil if you take to wife.
Your son, if born, will know no mother.
As you lost me, so your child shall suffer.

Yet should you hold your mate above all,
your bough shall break and the tree will fall.
Thus, to still your doubts I will ease your plight,
for the next generation shall be spared this rite.

A son and two daughters shall be their lot.
The youth will be fertile, but the maids will not.
The chain is forged with my blood and your tears
to link us together through Time's deathless years.

Since the die is cast 'ere the seeds are sown,
but one son to a virgin will ever be known.
Then 'tis each second son who hereafter will choose,
is it wife or heir he'd prefer to lose.

Morgana
Countess of Pendrake
anno Domini 1544

The young earl carefully folded the stiff material along its well-worn creases. He now understood the haunted look of terror and resigned look of inevitability that had so frequently masked his parent's faces.

With a shudder that touched the edges of his soul, the newly-created man dropped to his knees--and prayed.

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