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Opening extract from

Fire Witch

Written by

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CONTENTS

	Prologue	1
1	Fire Magic	7
2	At the Gates	14
3	The Bannered Mare	19
4	Flask and Stubb's	27
5	A Simple Plan	34
6	A Breath of Air	40
7	The White Tower	48
8	Selection	54
9	A Risky Divulgence	59
10	The Witch Hunter General	62
11	Old Seb	68
12	A Promotion	73
13	Three Summers Old	77
14	Administrations	83
15	Hopkins Confides	90
16	A Mouse's Tale	93
17	The Grandees Gather	100
18	Thorn	106
19	Face Against the Glass	110
20	A Brief Conference	117
21	Bring Out the Dead	120
22	Splicing	124
23	Hazel Plays Her Hand	128
24	Hopkins' Brother	134

25	A Hard Won Meeting	139
26	One Way Out	144
27	House of the Plague Doctor	151
28	Plots and Plans	156
29	An Esteemed Prussian Visitor	160
30	In One Way . . .	167
31	. . . and Out the Other	171
32	Back to the Lair . . .	176
33	. . . Where the Dragons Reside	182
34	A Bird in the Hand	189
35	A Finger Beckons	193
36	The Killing Floor	197
37	Blood and Bones	204
38	A Bold Proposition	209
39	The Slaughter Room	216
40	Day of Days	221
41	The Execution Arena	227
42	The *Anesidora*	231
43	The Grand Parade	234
44	Fire from the Sky	239
45	Into the Arena	244
46	Cold Deception	247
47	The Pyre	253
48	Vengeance	258
49	A Man Alone	263
50	A New Beginning	269
	Epilogue	275
	About the Author	277
	Acknowledgements	278

PROLOGUE

London, England, 1656

Matthew Hopkins, the Witch Hunter General, offered his prisoner a friendly smile. 'Well, Nicolas?' he said. 'Don't you want to come outside? Breathe God's fresh air?'

Ragged, pale, stooped in chains, Nicolas Murrell emerged blinking on to the roof of Cromwell Tower. A warm summer breeze blew the prison shadows away, and for a heartbreaking moment he let his mind soar free.

How long have I been here? he thought. *Three days? Three weeks?*

It felt like forever.

Not long ago he had been a feared outlaw and demonologist leading a coven of witches against the Order of Witch Hunters. But now his plans were nothing but ashes in his mouth, and all he had to look forward to was a slow death at the hands of Hopkins, his bitterest enemy.

Murrell stood tall. *I am not afraid.*

'Clank, clank, clank.' Hopkins smiled, taking Murrell's



arm and leading him down the flagstone path.

Trellissed roses engorged the air with perfume; bees droned among the petals, sun-drunk and greedy for pollen.

'You've been my guest at the Tower for a month and have yet to speak a single word,' Hopkins said with a shake of his head.

As he walked Murrell stole a glance at his captor. A comfortably lived middle age had softened his face – but his eyes, oh yes, they were as hard as ever.

'Such a shame, because old acquaintances like us have so much to talk about.' Hopkins paused to pinch a rose from its stem and let it fall. 'Diseased. *Rotten.*' He crushed it under his boot. 'Like so much else in this world.'

On they went until they emerged into a perfectly manicured garden of raised flower beds basking in the sun. Sprays of poppies, bursts of marigolds, swollen, heart-shaped tulips – red everywhere Murrell looked. Red. *Blood*-red. The colour of Hopkins' murderous Order.

'Welcome to my respite,' Hopkins said. 'Beautiful, isn't it?'

Murrell hid his queasiness behind a blank stare. Far below spread London, her rooftops, towers and spires shimmering under a heat haze.

This monstrous Tower rises higher than every building in the city, he thought. *It must be visible from miles around.*

'I tend my garden and it repays me with beauty and colour.' Hopkins gestured around him. 'And in that spirit I keep you safe from those clamouring for your execution,



yet you give me nothing in return. Whatever happened to *quid pro quo*?'

The sun glowered down like a swollen eye. Murrell blinked and sweated. *I am not afraid,* he thought. *I am not . . . afraid.*

'I already know a lot,' Hopkins continued, plucking out a thorn that had embedded itself in his finger. 'David Drake, that Witch Finder's boy you tangled with, he's told us what you and your Coven were doing at Rivenpike. Tut, tut! Consorting with demons and practising black magic to try and overthrow my beloved Order? Still, old habits, eh, Nicolas?'

Murrell watched as a robin with a lame leg tucked into his feathers hopped out from a nearby hedge. Was he mistaken, or was the little bird watching him back?

'Drake is cooperating.' Hopkins licked the blood from his finger. 'If only you would do the same – it would make our lives *so* much easier.'

The robin hopped closer, head cocked, black eyes shining.

'You're probably wondering why I've not been *administering* to you in the usual ways this time,' Hopkins said with a smile. 'Well, I tried that before and it got me nowhere. Even when I –' he imitated a pair of scissors with his fingers – 'snipped bits off you. It seems like a long time ago now, doesn't it? Do you remember?'

Murrell felt an itch where his thumb used to be. He remembered. He remembered that night very well.



'So I've decided to take a more radical approach to our situation. This way, please.' Butterflies swarmed around Hopkins as he set off down another path; for a precious moment he disappeared from view.

Seizing his chance, Murrell picked the unresisting robin up and felt a warm connection between them. Giddy with relief, he recited some magic words then whispered, 'Greetings, my new friend. Will you be a quick and secret familiar for me? Will you help me escape this prison?'

'I will,' the robin replied with a soothing pulse of magic. 'My name is Thorn, and you are not alone any more.'

'Thank you,' Murrell breathed, letting the robin flutter away. 'Thank you . . .'

Hopkins was waiting for him by a low metal hatch built into the battlements. At his signal, two soldiers appeared seemingly from nowhere and grabbed Murrell's arms.

'I call this the Oven,' Hopkins said, wrenching the hatch open. 'It used to be a coal scuttle, and as you can see it's quite small.'

Quite small? Murrell thought. *It's tiny! Surely he doesn't mean* . . . Fear stole his breath as he realized what Hopkins was about to do.

Hopkins poked his head into the darkness. 'Goodness, it's like a furnace in here!' He re-emerged with a smile and nodded to the guards, who tightened their grip around Murrell's neck and thrust him through the hatch.

The confines forced him to tilt his head to one side and draw his knees up to his chin. He gasped. Where there



should have been air there was only heat, prickling his scalp and scouring his throat.

'You can cooperate,' Hopkins said, 'or you can roast. It's your choice.'

The last thing Murrell saw before the hatch clanged shut was the Witch Hunter General picking up a snail from the path and tossing it over the battlements.



1
FIRE MAGIC



Here beginneth auspiciously the second part of this work.
Malleus Maleficarum or *The Witch Hammer*
by Jacob Sprenger



Hazel opened her heart and let the magic loose. Fire washed through her, heating her blood. She breathed in brimstone, feeling powerful, feeling *dangerous*.

Titus's words echoed through her mind: *You must understand your magic, and learn how to control it*. Planting her feet further apart, she adjusted her balance as the fire inside intensified. Her heart raced, each beat booming into the next, faster and faster.

I'm a Wielder, she thought. *A Fire Witch, and I am in control*.

The moon was only a sickle in the sky, but the forest clearing lit up bright as day when Hazel engulfed herself in a blazing cocoon of magic. Firelight burnished the trees and shimmered through the leaves.

She focused on a dark figure standing twenty paces away – tall, crooked and with a swollen, misshapen head. A demon, a monster, an enemy to be burned . . . The flames roared louder as she willed them into a



swirling ball around her left fist.

Aim for the head . . .

Placing her weight on to her back foot, Hazel cocked her arm, swivelled, and with a grunt of effort hurled the fireball in one smooth motion. It raced away, a yellow comet trailing smoke, and she knew straight away that she'd got it wrong.

Too much force . . . It's going to . . .

The figure smashed backwards into a tree and exploded in an eye-scorching flash. Hazel covered her face against the blast. By the time she looked up the fire had dissipated, leaving behind the smell of smoke and a few smouldering patches of grass. She sank to her knees, shaking with exhaustion.

A man in a long black coat emerged from behind a tree and grimly surveyed the devastation. 'Oh yes,' he said. 'Well done. Very controlled.'

'I'm sure no one in a ten-mile radius saw *that* little display,' the dormouse perched on his hat added.

Hazel stood up, smoothed the wildness out of her deep red hair with all the dignity at her disposal and snapped at the mouse: 'Bramley, I'm really not in the mood for your sarcasm. And Titus, I'm doing my best, aren't I?'

'Your best isn't good enough,' the old man said as he strode up to her. His name was Titus White, and Hazel had employed him to help find her mother after she had been kidnapped by the demonologist, Nicolas Murrell. 'You've been practising wielding for weeks and you're still hopeless.'

Bramley, Hazel's closest friend and magical familiar,



jumped on to her shoulder and buried himself in her hair.

'I hit the targets now,' Hazel said hotly. 'Every time.'

'Yes, and every damn thing around them.' Titus picked up the smoking remains of the scarecrow and threw it on the pile with the others she'd immolated that night. He snapped his fingers. 'Come with me, girl.'

Hazel kicked at the ground and followed him to the edge of the clearing. Dusky fields and forests sloped down towards a vast constellation of twinkling lights.

'Look down there,' Titus said. 'That's London. We'll be there tomorrow, and if anyone gets the slightest whiff of your magic then you and me both will be arrested and sent to the pyres.'

'I never asked you to come with me,' Hazel said, folding her arms. 'You *insisted*.'

'Yes, because your mother would have wanted me to,' Titus said. 'And I'll do right by her or slit my own throat.'

'So what are you complaining about then?'

'I'm complaining because I know she'd want me to stop you from pursuing your plan to rescue her.'

'I can't leave her in Baal's clutches – who knows what torment that demon is putting her through?' A ripple of fire ran through Hazel's hair. 'I'm getting her back, Titus, and you can't stop me.'

'I can lock you in a chest,' he growled.

Hazel glared at him. 'Just you try! I'll burn my way out.'

'Damn it all, girl, can't you listen to reason? Murrell is the Order's prisoner. For all we know he might already be dead.

And even if by some miracle you do get to speak to him, why would he help you, the girl whose interference got him arrested in the first place?'

'I don't know, but I'm going to try anyway.' Hazel stomped back into the clearing. 'Stay here if you want – I don't need your help.'

'And what about Bramley?' Titus called after her. 'Does he get a choice about the peril you're dragging him into?'

Titus's huge horse Ajax was tethered to a tree. Hazel stopped to run her hand down his nose. 'I'm doing the right thing,' she murmured, and as if sensing her doubt the faithful old stallion gave her a gentle nuzzle.

Leaving him to his grass, Hazel climbed into the enclosed wagon that she and Titus called home. The one-room interior, complete with bunk beds, table and workbench, was its usual wondrous mess. Books, maps and strange mechanical devices lay scattered over every surface. A stove glowed contentedly with a pan of milk simmering on top.

Hazel breathed deeply, feeling some of her anxiety fall away; the wagon had been her home for the past few weeks and she'd grown to love it.

'You're very quiet, Bram,' she said, plucking her tiny familiar from her hair and holding him in the palm of her hand.

'I'm tired,' Bramley said irritably, trying to scrabble back up into Hazel's tangled red locks. 'I've only had three naps today.'

'You understand why I'm going to London, don't you?'



Hazel said, lifting him to eye level. 'Every second Ma spends trapped in the Underworld, it *hurts* me. I feel it in my heart, a sort of wrenching and twisting. I have to try and save her, and I need you—'

'To help,' he finished, hopping on to the table. 'It's all right, Hazel, I want to. You're my witch, so where you go, I go too.'

Before she had a chance to ask if he really meant it, Titus threw open the door and stormed inside. 'That's right, girl, keep running away. It's easy to ignore the brutal truth if you refuse to look it in the eye, isn't it?'

'The truth?' Angry magic fizzed through Hazel's hair. 'Is that what you want? Then how about this for a dose? You're a washed-up drunkard, Titus White, and it's your neglect that drove your apprentice away to side with the Witch Hunters.'

'And it was you that nearly got him killed by that spider-demon!' Titus bellowed, making a lunge for her.

Hazel darted behind the table, gathering an apple-sized ball of magic between her hands. Ensuring it was not hot enough to hurt, she threw it at Titus's chest. Surprised, he cried out and fell backwards into a chair.

Before either of them could land another blow, either verbal or physical, Bramley let out a warning flash of his own fire magic. 'Can you two please, for once, just try to get along?' he squeaked. 'Hazel – although Titus has many faults and bad habits, he's our friend and we need his help.'

'But—' Hazel began.

'Hush!' Bramley turned to Titus. 'Titus – Hazel is stubborn and will do whatever she wants no matter what we say. So we may as well rub along together and get on with it, hadn't we?' His whiskery frown deepened. 'Hadn't we?'

Hazel's anger was already slipping away. She knew blaming Titus for David's betrayal wasn't fair. After all, she was the one who had employed the two of them to help find her mother, so the trouble they had got into since was all down to her.

'You know, Hazel,' Titus said, patting himself down to check for injuries, 'I thought I'd hate it when Bramley decided he was going to talk to me as if he were my familiar, but he does occasionally speak sense.'

'I suppose he does sometimes,' Hazel admitted. She took Titus's hand and helped him up.

'Your aim's improved,' he said, brushing off his coat.

Hazel shrugged. 'I suppose it depends on how angry I am with the target.'

Titus's mouth twitched with a smile. 'And your magic – it was cold.'

'I wanted to hit you, not burn you alive.' Hazel looked away. 'Sorry,' she mumbled.

'Friends again?' Bramley said, climbing into his favourite teacup and yawning mightily. 'Good.'

Titus sat down at the table and began to clean out his pipe bowl. Hazel poured them both some warm milk from the stove and sank down on to her bunk.



'So, we'll be in London tomorrow?' she said.

'Aye. We'll leave the wagon here and ride the rest of the way on Ajax. If David really is working with the Witch Hunters he's most likely told them all about us, so we need to travel incognito.'

'Huh! David . . .' Bramley said. 'Nasty little turncoat.'

Hazel stared into the milk. David Drake, Titus's former apprentice. Brave, courteous and handsome – at least he had been until Spindle the spider-demon had poisoned him and cost him an eye. *My fault*, she thought. *Not Titus's. Mine*.

The three companions sat in silence for a while as the leaves outside hissed like shingle on a beach.

'Your mother would want me to stop you, you know,' Titus said.

'I know.'

'But I can't, can I?'

Hazel didn't look up. 'No.'

Titus sighed and put his pipe back in his pocket. 'It's no wonder I'm driven to drink.'

'I need your help,' Hazel said softly. 'I really can't do this without you.'

'I'm still here, aren't I?' Titus tossed a blanket over her head. 'Now get some sleep, you foolish witch. For who knows what tomorrow will bring?'

'Trouble, that's what,' Bramley muttered from his teacup. 'And strife.'

