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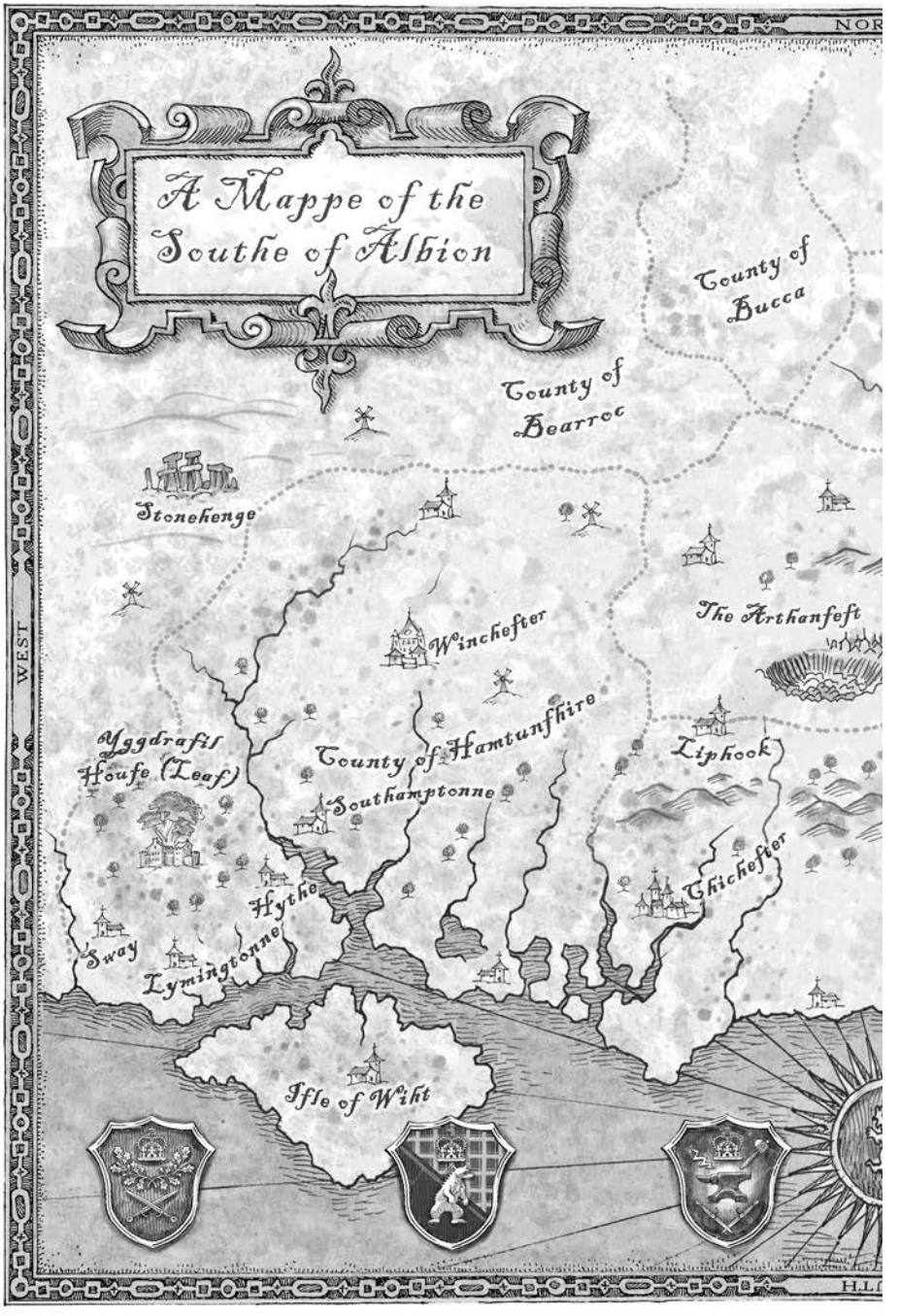
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To Roger and Judy


A Mappe of the Southe of Albion
NOR
WEST
County of Bucca
County of Bearroc
Stonehenge
Winchester
The Arthanfeft
Yggdrafils Houfe (Leaf)
County of Hamtunfhire
Southamptonne
Lipfook
Chichefter
Hythe
Sway
Lymingtonne
Iſle of Wiht
H.L.


County of
Heart Ford
Ignif Manor
(Fire)
County of East
Seaxe
London
Tower of
London (Iron)
County of Surrey
Surrey Hillf
Sevenoakf
Crawley
County of Centrice
EAST
County of Sudfex
Eaftbourne



Prologue

ST JAMES'S PALACE, LONDON, SEPTEMBER 1736

Late evening, and the last rays of sunshine creep in through the tall windows of the chamber of Queen Jane III.

A young, fair-haired woman stands beside an ornate armchair, one hand resting on its back as she looks up at a painting: a grand lady, dressed in silver silk, draped with pearls. A crown on her head, an orb and sceptre in her hands. The plaque underneath reads 'Queen Jane I, of the House of Grey'. With a shaking hand, she reaches out and presses her fingers against the words, that name.

‘How I wish I was strong, like you,’ she whispers. ‘How disappointed you must be in me . . .’

‘Your Majesty.’ A man’s voice echoes from the far end of the room. The door has silently opened and there stands Croad, her butler, along with another, taller figure. Broad and strong, he wears a wig of silver horsehair, curled and tied with black ribbon. His clothes are charcoal, and a wide grey sash pinned with medals and brooches is tied across his body.

‘Prime Minister Cromwell.’ The queen turns to him, nodding her head, her pale eyes drawn to the silver goblet he carries on its tiny tray. ‘You have chosen to visit me.’

‘I have, Your Majesty,’ he says, striding towards her. ‘Croad informs me that you haven’t been taking your medicine. I have come to see that you do. For your own good, of course.’

The queen sighs. She casts a look at Croad, who squirms beneath his white wig.

‘Must I, Cromwell?’ She takes the goblet with a trembling hand. ‘It makes me so drowsy.’

‘It’s for your health, Majesty. It will stop your headaches, your constant shaking.’ He stands,

watching with eyes that seem to glow the colour of shining steel. Waiting for her to drink.

'I bet *she* wasn't weak and ill like me,' says the queen, pointing to the portrait of the first Jane. She sinks into the armchair and takes a sip from the goblet. 'Tell me one of your stories about her, Cromwell. You know I love to hear them.'

'Again, Majesty?' Cromwell raises an eyebrow but the queen waves at him to continue as she sips once more.

'She was known as Lady Jane Grey,' he says. 'And was the cousin of Edward VI, who was the son of Henry VIII. When he died without children, he proclaimed her queen.'

'Go on.'

'Well,' Cromwell says. 'Mary, the first daughter of Henry, wasn't happy. She and all her supporters tried to have Queen Jane arrested and thrown in the Tower.'

'But Jane had a secret weapon, didn't she?' says the queen.

'She did.' Cromwell nods. 'She had a court magician. A man named Doctor John Dee. He had





recently met an Italian sorcerer and had been given six stones. After months spent studying them, he realised they were sources of strong magick. He managed to unlock their powers and had them fashioned into amulets. Each one sent waves of energy across all of Albion, gifting certain children with fabulous abilities.'

'Feather, Claw, Bone, Fire, Leaf,' whispers the Queen. 'And of course, Iron.'

'Yes, Iron,' says Cromwell. He holds up his hand and watches as liquid steel seeps from his pores, covering his palm and fingers with shining metal. It shapes itself into ornate armour, decorated in swirls and patterns that glimmer as he clenches his fist.

'Carry on, then,' says the queen. 'What did Jane do next?'

'Well, she showed the amulets to the most powerful families in the kingdom,' Cromwell says. 'She offered them the chance to form six groups, to gather the magickal children, to use their gifts for themselves. To become the Guilds of Albion. Of course, they jumped at the opportunity, and swore

to protect Queen Jane from Mary, who was forced to flee to Spain.'

'And Jane reigned in peace,' said the queen, her head beginning to droop.

'She did, Your Majesty. Her line has continued for two hundred years. Right up to you, yourself.'

'But the guilds … squabbled …' The goblet almost falls from the queen's hand, but Cromwell reaches out with his iron fingers to steady it.

'Indeed, Your Majesty,' he says. 'The six guilds discovered how to use their powers and instantly began to argue over who was the greatest, the most important. So the queen, along with Doctor Dee, created the Arthanfest. A competition held every year to find the strongest guild. The winner is then allowed to rule the country – alongside the monarch, of course.'

'And you won last year,' sighs the queen. She stops drinking the medicine and sets the goblet down. Already her eyelids have begun to slide closed, her head has started to spin. The Prime Minister quietly picks up the medicine cup and gazes down at his patient.

‘Iron won indeed,’ he says. ‘And I hope we will again in a few months’ time. Meanwhile, I just need Her Majesty’s signature on a few important documents.’

Queen Jane blinks slowly as he presses a quill into her hand. Croad holds out an inkwell for her to dip it in, and Cromwell spreads three sheets of parchment on the arm of her chair. Squinting, Jane scratches her pen nib across the bottom of each, her name blotted and wobbly but there all the same.

‘I should like to see Doctor Dee.’ The queen stifles a yawn with the back of her hand. ‘None of my family has ever even met him, did you know? And he is supposed to be the royal sorcerer. How ridiculous.’

‘He might be able to help with your illness, Majesty.’ Croad pipes up. ‘You might be able to stop taking that horrible medicine.’

Cromwell gives Croad a glare that promises a very long stay in a very deep dungeon if he opens his mouth again.

‘The medicine is good for you, Your Majesty,’ he says. ‘And Doctor Dee is very old and frail. The power of the amulets has kept him alive, but he is

much weakened. Only myself and his servants are allowed to see him. It is something he insists upon.'

'But he will be at the Arthanfest?' asks the queen as her eyelids flutter closed.

'Of course he will be there, dropping his magickal globes for the challengers to collect. The same as always.' Cromwell presses the half-empty goblet towards her lips. 'Now drink the last of your medicine, Your Majesty. Drink it all up.'

He watches as she sups the final drops and then falls into a deep, drugged sleep.

And he smiles.