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Opening extract from

Burn Mark

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BURN MARK

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PROLOGUE

The walls of the Burning Court were high and white-tiled, its ceiling one giant chimney. If the young witch at the stake had been able to look up the funnel, she might have glimpsed a distant pane of sky.

Instead, she stared ahead. There was a glass panel in front of her, and the shadowy shapes of the inquisitors behind. One of them would have his hand on the switch, ready to light the fuse.

She couldn't speak or move. Her body had been frozen rigid by the drug they'd given her so that she would be numb and immobile throughout her execution. Her reflection in the glass was calm. Everything was quiet and orderly, exactly as it should be.

In which case . . . should she be aware of the coarse material of her prison shift, or sense the chill coming off the shining tiles? Propped up in the centre of the pyre, she was newly conscious of the weight of its wood.

The witch's heart began to stammer. This wasn't right. Something must have gone wrong. The drug wasn't working properly. She had to let them know before it started. She had to tell them, she had to explain –

But her tongue didn't move. Her eyes were locked open, her mouth was locked shut. The fear was suffocating, but she couldn't gasp for breath. Her face in the glass gazed peacefully back, while every nerve, every muscle, every pulse of her heart and brain screamed STOP.

The wood sparked.

N*o, wait, please wait* –

A thin yellow flame wriggled into life, then danced upwards. Smoke rose with it. Heat blossomed, intensified.

Behind the blurred glass, the unseen audience was waiting.

Somebodyhelpmeohgodpleasestopstopstop

Tendrils and coils of fire. Her eyes stung from its smoke. Her pale hair was already rippling into flames. At any second they would be eating into her flesh. She was screaming and screaming now, soundlessly –

CHAPTER 1

In bed, Glory was screaming too, her body thrashing into wakefulness in the moonlit room.

A tall shape blundered through the door. Light flooded in after him.

'It's over,' her father said, coming to the bed, wrapping her in his arms. 'Hush now. You're safe; it was just a dream.' He pushed a sweaty strand of hair off her face as she shuddered and gasped.

'Was it the Burning Court again?'

Glory nodded. She was eight years old and had been having the same nightmare for as long as she could remember. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered. Thumps and grumbles could be heard through the walls as the building's other residents resettled themselves.

'There's nothing to be sorry for, baby-girl. Nothing to be frightened of either. I'll chase the bad dream away.'

But in the end it always came back. As Glory got older, she learned to control her waking outbursts and no longer disturbed the house with her cries. The terror didn't diminish though. The dream was so vivid; immediately

afterwards, she could swear the scent of smoke clung to her hair.

Her father believed she'd grown out of it. In the early years, he tried to get her to describe it properly, and talk about what might bring it on. But even as a little girl, she was embarrassed by her weakness, refusing to revisit the panic of the night. And the Burning Court dream was bound up with two secrets that her father mustn't know.

The first was the image in the glass panel. In the dream, Glory was the witch at the stake, yet the face she saw reflected was her mother's. She recognised her from photographs, not memory, for Glory's mother, Edie, had disappeared when she was three.

Edie Starling's farewell to her husband and child had been a single line on a postcard, dropped on the doormat the morning she walked out of their lives – and perhaps her own – for ever. I *love you, but it's better if* I *go.* F*orgive me.* That was the last they or anyone else heard of her. 'She'll have run off with some fancy-man,' the neighbours speculated. 'Done herself an injury,' said others. 'Too flaky for family life,' declared the rest. Any of this could be true, but whatever else Glory's mother was, she was also a witch. The illegal kind: unregistered, unlicensed and hunted by the Inquisition.

For this was Glory's second secret fear: that the dream of her mother's burning felt so real because her mother had been caught by the Inquisition, because it was true.

Yet despite this, once the nightmare was over, after she'd been soothed and petted and her tears had dried, she'd wait until the house was quiet again. Then she would climb out of bed and go to her attic window. She would look over

London's jumbled rooftops, the ghostly glow of the street lights, the darkness above. And Gloriana Starling Wilde would lift her chin, take a deep, defiant breath, and say the same prayer she had said ever since she could remember.

Please, God . . . when I'm grown-up, make me a witch.



CHAPTER 2

The first time Lucas saw a witch burn, he was ten years old. Britain hadn't held a public burning for over three years, and the case dominated headlines for weeks on end. 'Disgusting rabble-rousing muck,' his father had muttered, sweeping yet another lurid newspaper supplement off the breakfast table.

As Chief Prosecutor for the Inquisitorial Court, Ashton Stearne had been instrumental in bringing the guilty witch to justice. Lucas had looked forward to saying at school, 'You won't see it in the news, but my dad says . . .' However, his father remained tight-lipped about the details. The case had taken its toll on everyone involved. Death by balefire was reserved for the worst witchcrimes (first-degree murder, treason, terrorism), and this was a particularly horrific one. Bernard Tynan had used witchwork to lure a young schoolgirl into his house, where he'd murdered her.

Ashton Stearne was one of the officials who would oversee the burning at a secret Inquisition prison. It would be filmed so the public could watch it live on open-air screens. Even though his father hadn't forbidden Lucas from

watching it, Lucas knew he wasn't supposed to. This wasn't because Ashton thought his son was too young or too delicate, but because he disapproved of public executions on principle. They pandered to the worst of the mob, he said.

It was true people queued for hours to get a viewing space. Balefires weren't televised and were only shown in the cities, on a limited number of screens. Their audiences were heavily policed. Of course, almost as soon as filming started, somebody would manage to upload an illegal video of it on to the web. But watching some fuzzy pirated version would be cheating, Lucas felt. If he was going to witness a balefire, he wanted it to be as part of the official event, with all the sense of occasion attached.

And when his friend Michael invited him to watch it in Trafalgar Square, in a prime spot on the roof of his father's office, the opportunity was too good to resist.

A car picked the two boys up from school on Friday afternoon. Both were excited and nervous, and trying to hide it.

Michael hadn't invited anyone else from their class. He and Lucas weren't especially close but when a secretary led them up to the insurance firm's rooftop terrace Mr Allen welcomed him like an old family friend.

'Aha! Master Lucas!' he boomed. 'Here you are!' He turned round to his assembled colleagues and guests. 'It's his father we have to thank for today's burning, y'know. This is Ashton Stearne's boy.'

The other men looked admiring. 'Your old man deserves a knighthood for this,' one said. 'You must be very proud,' said another.

Mr Allen clapped Lucas heartily on the back. 'He'll soon be following in the family footsteps, I'll be bound. Eh?'

Lucas nodded. He was going to be an inquisitor one day, just like his father and his grandfather before him, and every man in his family before that – all the way back to the seventeenth century and John Stearne the First, Cromwell's own Witchfinder General.

It was flattering how attentive they all were, these grown men with their expensive suits and important, well-fed faces. They asked Lucas questions about the case and his father's job, and although he didn't have anything new to tell them, they still seemed interested in what he had to say.

'Well, I'm sure you'll make a grand witch-burner,' said one of the few women present.

'Bloody hags,' said somebody. 'Burning's too good for them.'

'Here, here,' said somebody else, raising a glass.

This made Lucas uncomfortable. 'Hag' was a word you weren't supposed to use – like 'harpy' or 'hex'. His father got very cross if he ever heard him saying it. Lucas thought how strained and irritable his father had been the last couple of days, almost as if he wasn't looking forward to the balefire.

He left the grown-ups to it and found Michael with his twin sister, Bea, looking over the edge of the balustrade. In the late July afternoon a dull film of heat lay over the city. Lucas felt all the privilege of being up here, away from the dusty crowds and the traffic fumes. In front of them, Nelson's Column reared upwards, dizzyingly high. Nelson had used witches to fight the French; they'd learned about it in Witchkind Studies at school, and one of the square's

plinths had a statue commemorating witches in war. The abstract sculpture had only been unveiled last year, but now Lucas saw someone had daubed it with red paint, a bloody spatter across the bronze.

Every inch of steps and paving was covered with people. They were perched on the great lions beneath Nelson's monument and packed tightly along the edges of the switched-off fountains. The National Gallery, with its ranks of columns and creamy grey dome, made a stately backdrop for the screen in front of its portico. At the north-west corner of the square, close to the vandalised memorial, a little group of Witchkind Rights protesters had assembled. They were within a police cordon and carrying banners and placards: *One Law for All*, *Burning for None*, and *Ban the Balefires*. Nobody paid them much attention.

For a while, Lucas, Michael and Bea amused themselves by dropping bits of canapé on to the heads of the crowd. Bea tired of this before the boys did. She was a thin, serious-looking girl, and her eyes kept flicking restlessly towards the screen. 'I've got butterflies,' she said.

Lucas kicked at the wall. 'I wish they'd get it over with. The wait, I mean.'

At quarter to five, the countdown began. A digital clock appeared on screen to mark the fifteen minutes till burn-time. Several groups broke into the National Anthem and began waving Union Jack flags. Mr Allen's guests moved to the edge of the terrace, drinks in hand, their faces bright with anticipation. One of the secretaries was clutching a newspaper poster with a picture of the dead schoolgirl.

The singing and talk faded as the seconds blinked

away. When the clock reached the final minute, the crowd sent a collective bellow echoing round the square. 'Ten – Nine – Eight –' The party on the terrace joined in too, cheering and whistling. But when the countdown stopped, and the screen flashed up with the particulars of the condemned man and the sentence passed, the silence was absolute. Then the name of his victim appeared.

'Poor wee angel,' sighed the secretary with the poster. She wasn't the only person with tears in her eyes. Several people crossed themselves.

It was a solemn moment. But just as the waiting began to be oppressive, the screen returned to black. There was a fizz of static, and the interior of the Burning Court appeared.

The condemned witch was already in place, strapped upright on to the board that rose from the centre of the pyre. By now, Bernard Tynan's features were intimately familiar: the thinning hair, the fleshy nose, the soft pouches under his eyes. T*he Face of Evil*, the tabloid headlines had screamed, but he looked wholly unremarkable really. That was what was so frightening.

Little could be seen of his surroundings. The Burning Court was just a plain white space. Behind a glass panel in the wall facing the balefire, Ashton Stearne would be sitting with his fellow High Inquisitors, the Home Secretary, a medic and a priest. But the camera didn't show any of this. Its lens was fixed on the witch.

Bernard Tynan stared back impassively, frozen stiff by the anaesthetic they'd given him. Britain was a civilised country after all. In plenty of other nations witches were

burned alive in just the same way they'd been for the last thousand years or more.

Fat bundles of wood were neatly stacked around the man's feet and up to his calves. An electric fuse led from under the pyre back to the room where three prison guards were preparing to press three separate ignition buttons. Only one switch would light the fire, but nobody would know which of the three was responsible.

Michael pointed and giggled. There was a damp patch on the crotch of the witch's white shift; as they'd slid the needle in for his injection, or perhaps before, when they came for him in his cell, he must have wet himself. Lucas smirked dutifully. But he felt anxious somehow, breathless, and his palms were sweaty; he was worried people might know. The next moment, the unseen switch was flicked, and a spark leapt out from the wood.

The witch waited, inanimate as the poppet he'd made to bind the dead girl to his will. His eyes were wide and unblinking as the fire licked upwards. The burning wood made a muttering, scratching sound. Flames began to writhe through the man's flesh.

Beside him, Lucas could hear Bea crying softly. He didn't turn to her, he didn't look away. He stared at the screen as stiffly as Bernard Tynan stared out. The witch's anaesthetised death would be more merciful than that of his victim, he told himself. Yet though the man might feel no pain, his living mind knew his body was cracking and blistering; he would be able to smell the stench of charred meat and oily black smoke. He would hear the fatty hiss and spit of fire as his flesh melted from his bones.

In the old days of burning, it could take two or more hours for a condemned witch to die. In these enlightened times, a prisoner's clothes were treated with flammable chemicals so that they would be overwhelmed by fire in minutes. Already, billows of smoke obscured the blazing body. At six minutes past five, the show was almost over.

People began to clear their throats and fidget. For the moment, there was an embarrassed sense of relief; celebration would come later. As the screen went blank for the final time, the bells of the church of St Martin-in-the-Fields began to ring, along with all the other church bells in London.

Lucas was not the squeamish sort. He put the images of the burning man away, and if he chose to remember them, he did so slowly and carefully, like somebody examining broken glass. Afterwards, he and Michael never directly talked about the balefire. At school, they were as they'd always been: casually friendly, no more. Sometimes, at sports matches or speech days, or while waiting to be picked up from a party, Lucas would see Mr Allen. He always greeted Lucas as if they were long-lost friends. 'Aha! It's my young witch-burner!'

And Lucas would smile obediently. He couldn't account for why his stomach always clenched at the greeting. Or why the world should seem to slip, just for a second, out of joint.