

Prologue

BATTLE ABBEY, SUSSEX

HE SHOULD HAVE turned back before the blood-red sun began to sink. He should have hurried away before the rooks descended like ragged witches upon their night roost. He'd been a fool to walk all the way out there to the holy spring at that hour and he would live long enough to curse himself for it . . . *just* long enough. We fret and sweat over the choices that seem certain to tip the balance of our fortunes, but in truth it's not the crossroads of our lives that determine their lengths. It is the unseen thorn which poisons our finger, the forgotten key we turn back for, the single careless step. It is these tiny pismires in our fragile lives that will ultimately cut them dead.

The bitter cold had savaged every field and forest, byre and barn. The wolf's bite they called it, for the beast had sunk its sharp teeth deep into the heart of the land and nothing would make it relinquish its prey. As the cold sun sank behind the black bones of leafless trees, the man could feel the breath of the ice wolf on his skin. He stamped his feet as he trudged over the frozen leaf mould, trying to force feeling back into numbed toes. He had stuffed his boots with raw sheep's wool, torn from the hedges, but the frosted air sucked every last drop of heat from his limbs.

A crack echoed through the wood. He spun round, but nothing was stirring, not even the withered brown bracken, each frond encased in its own ice coffin. Sense told him he should be

holding his staff at the ready, for darkness was closing in and with it the foul creatures of the night, both animal and human. But he had tied his staff to the pack on his back for it was more of a hindrance than a help on the iron-hard ground. Now he was too weary and stiff to wrestle the pack to the ground. Besides, all he wanted to do was to reach the blessed heat of a warm room and a blazing fire as quickly as his frozen legs would carry him.

With clumsy fingers, he pushed the scarf he'd tied around his face higher up his nose, breathing hard through the cloth, though that was now stiff with ice from his breath. He quickened his pace. For the second time that evening, he cursed himself for not having started back an hour since. If he had, he'd already be warming his numb feet at the hearth, his belly full of hot mutton stew, his fingers wrapped around a steaming beaker of mulled ale. He slipped in one of the ice-filled ruts on the path and his shoulder crashed into a tree trunk. He growled in pain and annoyance.

He stood for a moment, trying to regain his breath. It was almost dark now. Only a faint grey breath of light ghosted between the black trunks. The first stars glittered in the devil-dark sky. No animals scuttled through the crust of fallen leaves; not even the owls called to one another. The only sounds in the stillness were the crackles, like ice popping in water; the branches were splintering in the cold.

He strode forward again, suddenly aware now of the echo of his own footfalls as his thick boots crunched over the frozen ground. He had never heard an echo in woods. The icy air must be playing tricks on his ears, just as it was on his eyes, making the stars seem to creep between the tangled branches. He stopped, but the echo did not. It quickened. It was no longer an echo of his footsteps, for his own feet had taken root in the earth. He sensed, rather than saw, the movement behind him, felt, but did not hear, the great crack on his skull. He fell to his knees and was already insensible before his face crashed down on to the glass-sharp leaves.

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He thought he was lying in a deep well, fighting up through the heavy, back water, struggling to reach the light and air above. Only the sudden explosion of pain in his head convinced him that he wasn't trapped in a dream. He tried to open his eyes and thought for a moment that his lids had frozen shut, until he painfully twisted his head and glimpsed three needlepoints of silver light that he realised must be stars far above him and by their faint light he saw the jagged spars of a broken roof.

It was only as he tried to move that he understood that his numb and gloveless hands were bound tightly behind him. His legs . . . did he have legs? The searing pain in his bare feet told him they must still be attached to him. The throbbing of his head and limbs was so all-consuming that it was only as he tried to cry out that he found he could barely draw breath. The cloth which he had used to mask his face from the cold had been tied tightly across his mouth, smothering any sound. He was cold, so cold. His coat was gone. He lay on the icy earth, clad only in his shirt and breeches.

He heard footsteps crunching over the leaves, ponderous, heavy, coming closer and closer. He turned his head. Someone was standing over him, staring down. Relief flooded through him. He wriggled and mewed through the gag, trying to show his rescuer he was alive but bound. It was too dark to see the figure's face, only a shadowy mass, a smudged outline, the whites of eyes shining in the starlight that pierced the broken roof. He caught the smell of tobacco and a sickly, fetid stench. He knew that foul odour. He had smelled it before. But his head was aching so much, the cold gnawing so deep into his thoughts, that he was struggling to put a name to it.

The figure heaved up something large and heavy, holding it in both hands, seeming to take aim at the helpless man lying trussed beneath him. Relief turned instantly to terror. The man tried frantically to roll away. He was pleading, praying, calling out to Christ to save him, but his desperate words were smothered by the thick gag. A shock of icy water cascaded down on his head

and back, snatching the breath from his lungs and momentarily arresting his heart so that he feared it might never beat again. He lay shaking violently, jerking back and forth, as if he was in the grip of the falling sickness.

For a long moment, the figure stood over him, watching him silently, then it turned and trudged away without word. The man on the ground was dimly aware of the footsteps fading away into silence in the woods beyond the hut. They did not return.

He had gone beyond shivering. His sodden shirt had frozen to his skin and to the hard earth beneath him, but the agony in his hands and feet had melted away. He felt hot now. He was at home, sitting far too close to the fire. The air was stifling. He couldn't breathe. He was burning up. He was dragging off his clothes, running out through the door, trying to reach the pump or the river, desperate for cold water.

But as quickly as he'd grown hot, he was suddenly chilled to the marrow of his bones again. It was dark, so dark. Where was he? What was he doing out here? How had he got there? He was sure he could remember if he tried, but he was too tired to think now. He was sinking down and down into the soft oozing mud of sleep. Briefly he turned his face towards the jagged hole above. Three eyes were peering down at him, glittering like little fish in a brook, or were they candles? Had they come to light his way home?

The pale pink light of dawn washed through the trees, sending sparks of light shivering across the frost that lay thick on the broken spars of the old hut. A spider's web hung from the corner, each hair-thin thread gilded in silver and spangled with a thousand tiny diamonds. The black spider who had spun this exquisitely lethal trap lay as dead as the husks of the flies beneath it.

A hungry rat, driven by desperation from its hole beneath the ruined hut, gnawed on a blackened fingertip of the corpse. Why should worms feast while rats starve? The trees beyond did

not hear the scrabble of sharp claws on the man's frozen skin or the rasp of yellow teeth on bone. They stood peering down in wonder at the rust-red puddles and the scarlet pools frozen at their feet, red as the blood of the ten thousand men once slaughtered in this place. Proof, they say, that the earth rejects the blood of the innocents, as water rejects the bones of a witch. Our corpse will not want for company among that great army of the dead.