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A story created for Alix

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CHAPTER I

The Book of What I Refuse to Lose

The child was burning.

Her mother had carried her up the hill after dark, wrapped in a blanket that smelled of smoke and sour milk. She had not knocked. She had simply stood in the doorway, shaking, until Alix took the bundle from her arms.

"Wait outside," Alix said. "Don't watch."

The woman crossed herself and went.

Alix laid the girl on the straw mattress. Four years old, maybe five. Lips cracked, eyes rolling under their lids. Alix knew this kind of fever. In three days the village would have dug a very small grave.

She sat down beside her and took the hot little hand in both of hers.

There was no incantation. No smoke, no light. Alix closed her eyes and simply… leaned. The way you lean into a wind. Something loosened inside her chest and flowed downward, through her palms, into the child.

It felt like pouring water from a jug she could not see the bottom of.

The girl's breathing slowed. The flush left her cheeks. Somewhere in the pouring, Alix felt a door close quietly in the back of her mind.

She stopped, and sat very still, and tried to find what was gone.

A summer. She knew it was a summer because there was a shape where it used to be, warm and long and shaped like grass. She had been small. There had been a river, or a pond. Someone had laughed. That was all that remained — the outline of a happiness, like a wet footprint drying on stone.

"Fine," she whispered. "Take it."

The child slept. Alix carried her back to the doorway.

"She'll live," she said. "Keep her warm. Give her broth."

The mother's eyes went to the sleeping face, then to Alix, and filled with something that was not quite gratitude and not quite fear. She did not thank her. She pressed a hard loaf of bread into Alix's hands, gathered her daughter, and hurried down the hill without once looking back.

Alix ate the bread standing up.

Then she knelt by the hearth, lifted the loose stone, and took out the book.

It was small, bound in scraped hide, its pages crowded with her own careful hand. She turned to the first page, as she did every time, and read it aloud to the empty room.

"My mother's name was Éléonore. She had brown eyes. I was happy when she sang."

She turned the pages. "The miller's wife lost a baby and I could not save it. I must not try to save the dead." "The baker's son survived because of me. He does not know." "I like the smell of rain on the road." "Do not trust the priest."

She dipped her quill and wrote, beneath the last line: The cooper's girl had the fever. She will live. It cost me a summer I cannot describe. I think there was a river.

She blew on the ink and hid the book again.

This was how the village knew her. Not for storms, not for curses. Only for the way people came up the hill sick and came down well, and for the way she never explained it. They called her witch when their children were healthy. They left bread on her step when their children were not.

Both were true at once, and neither was forgiven.

She had heard, from the cooper's wife, that a letter had gone to the lord's manor. Sorcery. Unnatural cures. A woman living alone, past the age when she should be alone.

She had not thought it would come to anything.

Now, at the bottom of the hill, a rider was climbing the road.

He sat straight in the saddle. Mail under his cloak, a sword at his hip, the lord's colours on his shoulder. He did not hurry. He looked, even from this distance, like a man who had already decided what he would find.

Alix stood in her doorway and watched him come.

She thought of the book beneath the stone. She thought of all the things she had already lost, and all the things she still refused to lose.

He could ask whatever he liked.

She would tell him nothing.

CHAPTER II

The Knight Who Pretends Not to Laugh

He dismounted at her gate and did not remove his helm.

"You are the woman called Alix."

"I am the woman called many things," she said. "Alix is the shortest."

"I am Gaspard, sworn to Lord Aymeric. There are accusations."

"There are always accusations. Come in or don't. The door lets the cold in either way."

He came in. The hovel was one room, a hearth, a mattress, a table with a cracked jug. No herbs hung from the rafters. No bones, no carved signs. It looked like poverty and nothing else.

"Sit," he said.

She did not sit.

"People come to you sick and leave cured."

"People also come to me for bread and leave with none. I'm told I disappoint in many ways."

He took off his helm then, perhaps to look at her properly. A weathered face, not old. Grey eyes that had expected to find something and were annoyed to find only a thin woman with ink on her fingers.

"I can have you taken to the manor tonight."

"Yes," Alix said. "You can."

She said it the way one agrees that it may rain. He disliked her immediately, and thoroughly, and went down the hill to prove himself right.

It took four days, and nothing fit.

The cooper's wife crossed herself at the mention of Alix and then would not meet his eye when he asked about her daughter. The baker swore the witch had never touched his son — his son was standing behind him, alive, broad-shouldered, and looking at the floor. The priest spoke of demons at length and could not name a single person she had harmed.

"She frightens you," Gaspard said to the miller.

"Yes."

"Has she ever hurt you?"

The miller was quiet a long time. "No," he said. "She hurt herself, I think. Once. I don't know how I know that."

Gaspard went back up the hill every evening, because his questions were not finished and because she irritated him more than anyone he had met in years. She never offered him a chair. She answered in half-sentences. Twice, when he said something dry about the priest, he caught her mouth moving before she flattened it.

"You may laugh," he said. "I won't report it."

"I wasn't laughing."

"Neither was I."

On the fifth evening she was gone when he arrived — down at the well, or wherever witches fetched water — and the hearth was cold, and one stone at its edge sat a finger's width proud of the others.

He should not have lifted it. He lifted it.

He read standing, then sat down on her mattress without noticing he had done so.

My mother's name was Éléonore. She had brown eyes. I was happy when she sang.

The baker's son survived because of me. He does not know.

The cooper's girl had the fever. She will live. It cost me a summer I cannot describe. I think there was a river.

Page after page. Small bargains, written down before they could slip away. Not a record of spells. A record of a woman making herself lighter, one memory at a time, and refusing to go quietly.

He heard her at the door and did not hide the book.

She looked at it in his hands. Then at him. Her face did something he had not seen it do — it stopped guarding.

"Well," she said. "Now you know what to tell your lord."

"I know what you are," Gaspard said. "I don't know what to tell anyone."

The wind pushed through the open door. She stood a moment longer, then crossed the room, knelt, and began to lay kindling on the cold hearth.

"Shut the door," she said. "If you're staying."

He shut it. The fire caught. Neither of them spoke, and for the first time in five days, the silence between them was not a wall.

It was, he thought, more dangerous than that.

CHAPTER III

Stories to Fill the Gaps

He came back the next evening with no questions and a pear.

"The baker's wife gave it to me," he said. "I don't like them."

"Then why take it?"

"Because she was talking. About you."

Alix took the pear. She waited.

"When you were nine," Gaspard said, "you climbed onto the church roof to fetch down a kite. Hers. She says you sat up there for an hour afterwards because you liked the view, and the priest shouted himself hoarse."

Alix turned the pear over in her hands. Nothing came. No roof, no kite, no view. Only the shape of a place where a small girl should have been.

"I don't remember that," she said.

"I know. That's why I'm telling you."

She fetched the book from beneath the stone and wrote it down, slowly, while he watched the fire. When I was nine I climbed onto the church roof. I liked the view. The priest shouted.

"Is it true?" she asked.

"It's what she remembers. That's all any of us have."

So it became a habit. He walked the village by day and asked, not about sorcery, but about her. Then he climbed the hill and gave her back to herself in pieces. The miller remembered her mother singing at the well. The cooper remembered a winter she had fixed his roof for a sack of flour and refused the second sack. An old woman remembered that Alix had once cried at a wedding and denied it.

Alix wrote all of it. Her hand was careful. Her face, less so.

One night, after he had gone, she turned a fresh page and wrote something that was not about her.

Gaspard hates pears.

She looked at it a while. Then, beneath it: Gaspard pretends not to laugh.

And beneath that, because the book was for things she refused to lose, and truth was one of them: Gaspard came here to arrest me.

She hid the book and did not sleep well.

The evenings grew longer. He mended her door. She let him sit. They argued about the priest and did not argue about anything else. Once his hand touched hers when she passed him the jug, and neither of them moved for a breath, and then both of them pretended it had been the jug.

She wrote: I think I love Gaspard.

Then she sat with the quill dripping and thought about what she was, and what her hands had cost her, and how many summers she had already poured into other people's children.

She wrote one more line, and pressed hard, so the ink went deep into the page.

If one day I don't remember him, tell me this: I chose him.

The rider from the manor came on a grey morning. He found Gaspard at the well and handed him a folded letter with the lord's seal, and waited.

Gaspard read it twice. The words did not improve.

Bring the woman. Tonight. Bound, if she resists. The priest will have his trial.

"Tell Lord Aymeric I received it," Gaspard said.

The rider left. Gaspard stood a long time by the well with the letter in his hand. Then he climbed the hill for the last time as the lord's man.

She was at her table. She saw his face and stood up.

"So," she said. "He's decided."

"Yes."

"And you?"

He set the letter on the table between them and did not look at it again.

"Get your book," he said. "Bring nothing else. My horse can carry two if we're quick, and we need to be quick."

She did not thank him. She knelt, lifted the stone, and took out the only thing she owned.

They left as the light failed. Behind them the village lay quiet, its windows warm, its people asleep on the debts they would never acknowledge. Ahead the road ran into the dark, and somewhere on it, men were already saddling horses.

Alix held the book against her chest with one hand and held on to him with the other.

She had written down everything she refused to lose.

She was beginning to understand that the list had grown longer.

CHAPTER IV

Then You'll Have to Introduce Yourself

They heard the horses before midnight.

Gaspard turned off the road into the trees, and for a while the dark hid them. Then the trees thinned, and a bowstring sang somewhere behind, and he made a small sound she had never heard from him.

He kept riding. He got them across a stream and up into a hollow of rock where the horse could not be seen from the road. Only then did he slide from the saddle, and his legs did not hold him.

The arrow was low in his side. The cloth around it was already black.

"They've lost us," he said. "For tonight."

Alix knelt in the wet leaves and put her hands over the wound, and she knew. She had felt this before, in other bodies. The tide going out.

"Don't," Gaspard said.

"Be quiet."

"Alix." His hand found her wrist. His grip was already weak. "You don't know what it will take. You said so. You've given too much already."

"I know what it will take." She did not. She said it anyway. "It will take less than this."

"I came here to arrest you," he said. It was almost a laugh. "Let that be the end of it."

She looked at him a moment longer, the grey eyes, the stubborn mouth. She looked as if she were trying to memorise something.

Then she leaned.

There was no incantation. The pouring began, and it did not feel like a jug this time. It felt like a river going out of her all at once, and doors closing along its banks, one after another after another, faster than she could count them.

She did not stop. She had made her choice at a table, in ink, weeks ago.

When it ended she was lying in the leaves. The sky above the hollow was going grey.

A man was sitting up beside her. He pulled a broken shaft from his side and there was no wound beneath it, only skin. He stared at it. Then he turned to her, and his face broke open with relief, and he said her name.

She looked at him.

There was nothing. Not a shape, not an outline. Not even the wet footprint of something drying.

"Who are you?" she said.

He did not answer. He knelt there with the arrow in his hand, and she watched a man understand what he had cost. It went across his face slowly. He tried to speak twice and did not manage it.

"I'm sorry," Alix said. She meant it, in the way one is sorry for a stranger's grief. "Did I — was it you I did this for?"

"Yes."

"Then it worked." She sat up. Her hands went automatically to her chest, and found the book there, pressed inside her clothes where she must have put it. She took it out and did not know why it mattered so much, only that it did.

She opened it. She read as she always read, from the first page. My mother's name was Éléonore. She had brown eyes.

The man did not move. He waited, the way you wait for a verdict.

She turned pages. Kites and roofs and winters. Then a page in her own hand that was not about her.

Gaspard hates pears.

Gaspard pretends not to laugh.

Gaspard came here to arrest me.

She read on. I think I love Gaspard.

And beneath it, pressed so hard the ink had gone through: If one day I don't remember him, tell me this: I chose him.

Alix read it twice. Then she closed the book and looked at the stranger in the leaves, who was crying without any sound at all.

"You're Gaspard," she said.

"Yes."

"I chose you. Apparently."

"Yes."

She considered him for a long moment — the mail, the grey eyes, the hands that did not know what to do with themselves.

"Then I suppose you'll have to introduce yourself," she said.

He laughed, once, and pretended he hadn't.

She wrote that down.

Alix lives alone in a hovel beyond the village, and everyone calls her a witch. They are not wrong — but her only gift is a quiet, terrible one: she can pull the dying back from death by paying with her own memories. A small wound costs her a morning; a saved life costs her a face she once loved. When a knight named Gaspard arrives to judge whether she should be taken away, he finds a woman who refuses to explain herself and a village that both fears and owes her. What grows between them will demand the hardest bargain of all — and force a question larger than any spell: if you forgot everything, would you choose the same love twice?

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