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Fire and Fury
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(First 15 pages)

CHAPTER ONE

It rained the day Amelia treated the boy with the plague.

The boy's mother almost broke the door of Amelia and her brother Tomas's shop. She carried her ailing son in her arms. His face was pale and covered in blisters.

At first, Amelia hesitated. She applied a layer of wax on her leather boots, lost in thought while finding calm from the sound of rain trickling against her shop's windows.

The dying boy and his crying mother had appeared suddenly. Their panicked world colliding with hers.

Her brother Tomas reacted first, rushing across the counter of their leatherworking shop and helped the mother carry her child. Tomas was always quick to help and adjust to sudden changes in circumstances. One of Tomas's qualities Amelia loved and envied. She also envied his chestnut curled hair and brown, kind eyes. She had often wondered, because of her own copper-red hair and sky-blue eyes, if they were really related.

Of course, those were questions she would have asked a parent or guardian if they existed.

"Amelia," Tomas said with a strange calm in his voice. He carried the brunt of the weight from the boy's torso, struggling towards the back of the shop. "Can you get the back door?"

Amelia rose, opened and held the door for them while Tomas and the dying boy's mother walked inside. The mother wept and stumbled and rambled. Amelia could only discern a few words in her panicked pleading.

"Please," and "dying."

The backroom of their shop was closed off from their usual customers. Inside, shelves lined the walls with herbs and rare materials for many alchemical purposes. Between the shelves stood a wide table with alchemical glassware. A labyrinth of tubes, boilers and oil burners.

Tomas, being the minimalist, only asked for a corner to keep his bow and arrows, which Amelia bought a year past when he turned twelve. They both agreed it was time he learned how to defend himself.

“Here,” Tomas said, and lifted the boy on to a clear, white linen-covered, wooden table in the center of the room.

The boy’s body contorted as they laid him down, and he groaned through gritted teeth.

“It’s okay, baby,” his mother said. “It’s okay. They’ll help you. It’s okay.”

The boy winced again. He was young, Amelia thought. No more than ten. His thin arms grasped for his mother and his eyes were wide and darting in terror.

If not for the blisters, he looked like a perfectly ordinary boy.

“Mom,” the boy with the plague said. “Mom, I’m scared. It hurts.”

His mother took his hand and whispered him words of encouragement.

Tomas pulled Amelia to the side. “Are you okay?” he said.

“Yea,” Amelia lied. The thought of failure was heavy on her mind. She had helped men and women before. Adults in the early stages of infection. Never a child, least of all one dying in front of his mother.

But the plague, nor death, never cared much for age or a person’s quality, or the audience.

“*Moringan Essence*,” Amelia said. Child or not, the process was the same. Her mind raced and before she knew it, she was leaning over the boy and inspecting the severity of his illness.

The red blisters were the size of small coins. Amelia counted thirteen on his face, then felt dizzy at the thought of how many more were on his body.

She ripped his thin shirt open.

“What are you doing?” the boy cried.

“It’s okay, honey,” his mother said. “She can help you.”

“It hurts,” the boy said. “Please! it hurts so much!” His body contorted again, and Amelia’s finger caught a blister on his chest, puncturing it.

Yellow puss spilled from it. Being in a hurry, Amelia wiped her fingers on her pants and continued counting.

Tomas returned with a corked glass vial. Inside was a clear liquid with faint sparkles of emerald green. The label on the vial read: ‘*Ess. Moringa.*’

She took the bottle and uncorked it. “What’s your name?” Amelia said.

“Please,” he begged. “It hurts, please.”

“I know it hurts, but you have to be brave. What’s your name?”

“A-a-a, Arthur,” the boy said with a staggered breath.

“Arthur,” Amelia repeated. “A kingly name. Reminds me of those stories. Do you think you can be brave like them?”

Arthur nodded.

She held up the bottle. “This will help you, Arthur—but it’s going to hurt more for a short while.”

Arthur looked at his mother for help, perhaps hoping she would stop Amelia or offer a different, less frightening, solution to make his pain go away

“She can help you,” the mother said and wiped her eyes. She was helpless to ease her child’s pains. “Be brave for me.”

Amelia caught Arthur’s eyes again. “Arthur the brave,” she said. “Can you be that for me?”

For a moment, it looked as if the boy would burst into tears and panic, instead; he swallowed his pain, sniffled once and put on a brave a face as he could muster. Squinting eyes and gritted teeth. His knuckles turned white as he squeezed his mother’s hand.

Amelia uncorked the bottle and dripped the clear, emerald sparkling liquid on one blister at a time. Each drop sizzled after landing on a blister, letting out a stinging and putrid scent while it burned away the infection.

The boy groaned behind closed lips. He shook and clenched his mother's hands.

"You're doing good," Amelia said, and continued, one drop at a time, counting down each blister. "We're almost there."

Tomas stood by the boy's head and placed a soft hand on Arthur's head. Amelia continued the treatment one drop at a time, sizzling and burning the blisters away, one by one. After a minute, Arthur's muscles relaxed and his groaning stopped.

"Arthur?" his mother said and shook his hand. "Arthur? Arthur, wake up!"

"He passed out," Amelia said and figured it was for the better.

The mother clutched her son's hand in both of hers and rested her head against it.

Amelia treated the boy for another half hour, systematically burning away every blister. The treatment had proven effective before, but Arthur's case had advanced beyond critical.

After the treatment, they covered Arthur with a blanket and placed a pillow under his head. He was running a fever and, Amelia guessed, dehydrated.

"Here," Amelia said and passed a pitcher of water to Arthur's mother. "Make sure he drinks when he wakes up. A couple of sips every few minutes."

She nodded.

"What's your name?"

"Sabine," Sabine said.

"There's nothing more we can do but wait," Amelia added. "He did good. You have a brave boy."

And they waited. Amelia and Tomas sitting by Arthur and Sabine at her son's side. The heavy rain on her roof and windows made for an odd quiet. It drowned out the usual noise of

the capital Verdinnes. Amelia's hand trembled. She wanted to flee the shop. Disappear and pretend the treatment was successful instead of waiting to find out.

He was just a kid. A child close to death in her shop. In her home.

Sabine lets go of Arthur's hand and places it on his chest. She put her hands through her black and unkempt hair. "I didn't know where else to go," she said. "The doctors wouldn't help. They said it was too—"

"We'll do everything we can," Tomas said, to interrupt her dark thoughts.

Sabine nodded. "I was scared to come here. With all the things they are saying."

Amelia picked at her nails and fingers.

"For what it's worth," Sabine continued. "I don't believe them. I don't think it's your fault."

"People say awful things when they are scared," Tomas said. "I can see why it's easier to believe than the truth."

"What truth?" the mother said.

"The plague is a force of nature. No one is at fault, least of all sorcerers."

If only the clergy believed it, Amelia thought. Instead, it had been months of blame and hate against anything deemed unnatural. If Amelia and Tomas displayed their potions and services on the storefront, fanatics would ransack it like they did all the others who were too late to hide.

"They took my neighbor." Sabine shook her head and rubbed her forehead. "He was always so kind, even for a Toldarian. I don't know what happened to him. I reported him missing, but the city guard laughed it off. They didn't want to waste time on missing Toldarians."

"Or dying kids," Amelia blurted out.

"Amelia..."

"She's right," Sabine continued. "Instead of helping the smitten, they'd rather harass anyone 'unnatural.' Bryggjans, Toldarians, sorcerers or anything else different." Sabine

sighed. “Still, I was afraid to come here. Part of me was scared they might be right, but I didn’t know what else to do.”

Amelia let her words hang in the air. She was tired of hearing it. How virtuous a patient was for not blaming the plague on her. Did they want a pat on the back? Assurances that they are special for not turning to hate and evil?

Their guilty conscience was not her responsibility.

Amelia and Tomas let Sabine stay with her son, and they returned to the storefront, continuing their work in silence.

But Arthur’s illness was advanced. Deep down, Amelia knew Moringan Essence might not be enough.

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The boy screamed, and Amelia woke in her upstairs bed.

Slowly regaining her senses from the deep sleep, she saw Tomas already pulling his white shirt over his head. His chestnut curls stuck out from the collar before he pulled his head through.

“The essence didn’t work,” he said and looked at Amelia. “You have to try.”

He pulled his boots over his feet.

Try. It was easy for Tomas to say. Easy for anyone who never felt the fickle and chaotic nature of magic surging through their body. Amelia was just as like to blow up their house as she was healing him. A momentary loss of control, a wavering confidence or sudden fear was all it took.

Another agonizing scream came from downstairs. Tomas was right. She *had* to try. Arthur was just a child. Doing nothing was not an option.

Amelia threw on the clothes she had left on the floor and followed Tomas out of their small upstairs bedroom, then hurried down the wooden stairs leading into the shop. They pushed through the door and entered the backroom.

It was dark. Amelia guessed it was between late evening or early morning. An oil lamp stood on a stool by Arthur, who twitched and screamed in every thirty seconds. His mother rambled helplessly, trying but failing to root out the source of her son's pain.

Amelia hurried to Arthur's side. "Give me some space." She pushed Sabine away. A cold gesture, but time did not allow for kindness.

Arthur's face grimaced from his ailments, and tears drew wet streaks down his cheeks. "Mom?" he pleaded. "Am I dying? Please help me."

"Help him, please!" Sabine's shrill voice cut through Amelia's heart. She had to ignore it. Must ignore it. Magic is fickle.

Before closing her eyes, Amelia placed a hand on Arthur's chest, and another on his stomach. She counted her breaths. She emptied her mind. Desperate cries from Sabine disappeared, along with Arthur's pained pleading. All she felt was his moving body and his fear.

Something dark moved inside him, filling his heart and spreading to his fingertips, destroying everything in its path. A dark infection devouring him from the inside.

Another deep breath. She wanted to save him. She cared for the child.

The infection in his veins stirred and pulsed. Each beat delivered a wave of fear to Amelia. *Ignore it*, she thought and breathed deep again. Arthur the Brave. If she could focus, if she could care for him, feel for him.

Her hands felt warm. A faint light glowed, and the dark infection shriveled and retracted. It was working. The infection burned away in her hands.

Arthur contorted again, this time screaming loud enough to shake Amelia from her meditative state. The plague rushed from her hands and back into the child.

“Be brave,” Amelia said. “Keep still.”

Her impatient words did nothing to calm Arthur—they only made him afraid.

Again, she counted her breaths and closed her eyes, but she was afraid. It had happened before. She was losing him. Right here on the table in her shop. A young child she could do nothing for. Again, she could do nothing. She was nothing and her powers nothing and...

Amelia felt a hand rest on top of hers. Tomas’s hand.

“Together,” he said. “We’ll do it together.”

Tomas was lucky, born free of the affinity for magic. He possessed another, more valuable, quality. More valuable than any spell Amelia had tried to teach herself.

A brother’s love.

Amelia focused on his gentle touch and felt the illness rush back into her hands. There, it burned away. It hurt, but it was still only a fraction of Arthur’s pains.

“He’s healing,” Tomas smiled. “You’re saving him.”

Every speck of the plague rushed through her hands, burning away until she felt dizzy, tired and lightheaded.

Her knees buckled, and she felt Tomas’s arm guide her to the cool floor while her vision tunneled. She blacked out.

CHAPTER TWO

The caravan left a trail of upturned dirt and dust, pricking at the throats of the refugees.

An arduous week of walking fifteen miles each day, scrounging for food and keeping a low profile, had passed for Amelia and her brother Tomas. They traveled close with a kindred group of *undesirables*. All of them suddenly outlawed. Tomas, of course, was still welcome in the Kingdom of Tourain, but Amelia was not.

On the King's orders, the first witch was burned. His own wife and the mother of his son, Queen Marie.

The Queen's final screaming moments delivered a simple message to all the sorcerers and sorceresses of Tourain. Status and nobility meant little to the Inquisition. Toldarian ambassadors and courtiers were soon after deported or imprisoned, all of them pressured to renounce their pagan god for safe passage home.

Amelia and Tomas walked alongside a wagon with a red and white striped canvas somewhere in the back third of the caravan. Amelia had counted fifty wagons when they made camp, along with countless refugees, mules and children.

Joan, a sorceress like Amelia, sat at the reins of the multi-colored wagon. Joan had, contrary to many others, Amelia had approached, welcomed her and Tomas to travel with her. Being an 'undesirable' herself, Joan made certain her wagon had space for all who sought to find safety in the north.

Joan hunched forward, the reins held loosely in one hand, and looked at the sky. "It'll rain this afternoon." Joan's ashen hair was unkempt and dry, wiry and puffy. Amelia reckoned it was like that even before she become a refugee.

"It's good—the rains," Joan continued and looked at Amelia and Tomas. "It's been dry for weeks."

At a glance, Joan appeared like every witch caricature and description—looking as if she had lived in the woods for centuries. However, her friendly auburn eyes and warm smile put all fears of dark magic to rest.

Amelia spat out the dust which coalesced in her mouth. “Maybe it’ll settle this dust a little.”

“That too,” Joan said. “But the earth is thirsty and the plants are weak. Can’t you feel it?”

She could not.

“You’re a druid,” Tomas said with excitement. “Right?”

Joan smiled. “Not anymore I think. I used to be. I took care of the woods surrounding Verdinnes. Sometimes I even advised the King on proper use of natural resources, much to the builders’ guild’s chagrin.” She let out a longing sigh. “But I guess, with all that’s happening, I’m nothing more than a witch.”

“An *undesirable* one,” Amelia said. “We have that in common.”

Behind them, a family from Bryggja rode on a small wagon drawn by a tired mule. The family patriarch, Klaus, had a habit of listening in and joining their conversations.

“Aye,” Klaus said. A large braided beard held by silver rings hid his mouth. “Witches, Bryggjans and Toldarians. I guess we all burn the same.”

“Out of sight, out of mind,” Tomas added. “Albeit shortsightedly out of sight and out of mind.”

“What’re ye’ blabbering about?” Klaus said.

“They’ll realize the plague didn’t stop,” Tomas said. “That it wasn’t some godly punishment for allowing Bryggjans and Toldarians—”

“And witches,” Klaus added.

“—and witches, into the country.”

“Your point, lad?”

“They’ll stop the Inquisition.”

Amelia took a swig from her waterskin, then wiped her mouth. “Always the optimist. Even now.”

“Optimism is a good thing,” Joan said. “It keeps you moving forward when all else fails. Just be careful you don’t hope for the impossible.”

“Impossible?” Tomas asked.

“As long as Charles wears the Tourainian crown, he will never see reason.” Joan paused. “He executed his own wife. Seeing reason would mean admitting he murdered her.”

Tomas threw his arms up in a helpless gesture. “So, it’s hopeless, then?”

Amelia often forgot he was only twelve; a child forced into a bad situation because of her defects. Because of her burden.

“I hope,” Amelia said. “That we will make port in Falkenberg, where the Bryggjans welcome all nationalities and manners of magic. I hope the two of us will scale Jettetind and together peer at the Bryggjan mountain ranges from its peak.” She wrapped an arm around Tomas and pulled him close. “I also hope you’ll stop being an annoying little brother!”

Tomas laughed and wrestled free of her arm. Joan smiled, then clicked at her horses.

Hearing Tomas laugh reminded Amelia it had been a week since they shared a laugh. Since the orders, there had been scarce time for moments of merry. Amelia’s concerns were of his safety, and her own fear of the pyres.

She was ashamed. Tomas still followed her, despite her neglect. Amelia knew she was the reason they had to flee. If he wanted, he could have left her and stayed safe in Verdinnes.

“What do you hope for?” Tomas said and looked up at Joan.

Joan scratched her head through her frizzy, ashen hair. “I hope to do good and to do what’s right. No matter the costs.”

Tomas was silent for a moment, digesting her words. “I hope that too,” he said with conviction. “That’s a good hope. I’m stealing it.”

“Well, now I feel like shit,” Amelia added. “With you two being all benevolent.”

Klaus let out a loud laugh. “It’s about time. Lass haven’t had a shower in a week, pissin’ and shittin’ in the forest. Hells, Amelia, you’re hardier than myself. I’ve been feeling like shit ever since we set off.”

The group shared a laugh, sharing and easing their burdens and making the day a little brighter. It also reminded them why they were in the caravan and what they were running from. That, at all costs, they would continue to live and find strength in every moment they could.

The rains came, as Joan predicted, in the afternoon. Thin drops showered the caravan and pinned the upturned dust to the ground. The wind blew the rains sideways, and Amelia and Tomas found some shelter walking close to the wagon. Afternoon turned to evening and the rear guard of the caravan struggled to walk and draw their wagons through the muddied road, which had softened from the thirty wagons passing before them.

Amelia noticed their pace had slowed, and the caravan was still far from reaching the desired fifteen miles they tried for each day. The caravan leader, a retired mercenary, had walked to the back and resorted to shouting and berating the rear guard for slowing the caravan. When Klaus’s wagon was stuck, he turned his berating to him. After keeping his temper for almost an hour, Klaus decided he had enough of being berated by a stuck up Touranian.

“Maybe I oughta strap you in front of the wagon if you’re in such a damned hurry. Seeing an uppity Touranian do some bloody hard work for once might do us all some good!”

Amelia could see the fire in Klaus’s eyes, standing just a few yards from the two men’s confrontation.

“With a thick head like that, I’m sure you can fit the tackle.” He spat at the mercenary’s feet. “A horse’s bit in your mouth might give us some damn quiet. Perhaps I’ll use the whip on your arse when you slow down. Perhaps then we can cover fifteen and a half mile.”

The mercenary fumed and, to Amelia, looked almost as if the rain bursting on his bald head turned to steam.

“God damn Bryggjan,” he said. “Impossible to reason with you people. Stubborn and primitive.”

“The back wagons are feeding two thirds of the caravan, you hairless rat. And maybe you’re unaware of it in the vanguard, but the rest of us are up to our balls in mud.”

“Just admit you’re slowing us all down.” The caravan leader stood firm in the mud, reaching his knees. “Admit it, and I’ll sent you some help. Actual help.”

“Touranian help?” Klaus said. “Before I know it, you’ll decide the wagon belongs to you because you dragged it an inch through the mud.”

“Nay. You people ain’t worth trusting, that’s what I say. Fuck you and your mother who shat you out.” Klaus made a crude gesture to his privates. “Fuck off to the front. We’re starting to run low of your piss and shit to wade through while you lazying about down here.”

The bald man cursed and trudged off through the mud. “Bryggjans,” he muttered. “Thick bellies and even thicker heads.”

Klaus stood in the rain, hair sticking to his face and beard hanging heavy and wet. He watched his aggressor walk off, then turned back to his wagon. The left wheel was half-submerged in the mud. In front, the tired mule struggled for a foothold. Its fur and hair clung to its skin, ears drooped and looked as if it wished for the day to be over.

“If we could get some branches,” Klaus muttered. “Some sticks.” He avoided eye contact, addressing only the wheel. “Some branches under the wheel and we can pull it free. If someone...” He sighed. “If...”

Joan dropped from the wagon and into the mud which trickled down through the top of her boots while she trudged towards him.

The back of the caravan was, even before the rains, the most wretched. Working class Bryggjans, blasphemous artist and alchemists, and Amelia and Tomas and Joan. All of them standing exposed to the hard rain, shivering and waiting for a solution to present itself so they could move forward.

“We need a rest,” Joan said. “We should turn off the road and make camp for the night. I doubt we will get any further today.”

Klaus looked at the wheel, resting one hand on its top, pretending like he was still trying to come up with a solution.

“We’ll get your wagon free,” Joan said. “But we can’t force these people to walk any further. Don’t you agree?”

“Aye,” Klaus said, not looking up.

Wanting to help, Amelia trudged towards Klaus’s wagon.

“Stay here,” she said to Tomas.

“Amelia and I will get it free,” Joan continued. “And we’ll swear to baldie that you did it alone.”

Klaus nodded. “You’re very kind.” His words were barely loud enough to hear over the shower of rain. “I don’t have much to offer you. Perhaps you can eat for free. Not the shite I sell to the others, but the stew my wife makes me and mine in the evening.”

“We’d be delighted.”

Klaus stepped back and shook Joan’s hand before walking further down the rear guard. He raised his voice and proclaimed the end of the day. A sea of voices and movement began soon after. The tail of the caravan moved off the road and begun making camp. Seeing this, the front mimicked and once the caravan leader would notice, it would be too late to pack up again.

“It looks heavy,” Amelia said, looking at the small wagon with a lifetime of possessions aboard. “You sure you can do this?”

“Together, we can do this.” Joan held out a hand.

“Together?”

“I’ll pass out if I do it myself. With your spirit-magic, it’ll be a breeze.”

Amelia took her hand and send her a curious look. “Spirit magic?”

Suddenly, a surge of energy rushed through Amelia’s hand, darting up her arm and through her body. The surge struck downwards through both her legs, rooting her with the mud, with the earth.

Something moved. Amelia felt the rain sinking downwards, drunk by the underground roots. Another surge of energy, this one spreading through the earth, through a web of connected life.

Life and decay.

Worms burrowed, grass grew and fungus ate, recycling death and fostering life.

Amelia felt all of it. Joan’s magic rushing through her.

Another surge. This one from Amelia’s heart, going outwards to her hand, tinkling as it surged into Joan. Amelia’s hairs stood up on her arm and a shiver ran down her spine.

Amelia could feel her. Joan’s fear. Her love and her hope. The love Joan felt for all things that grew. How she worried for the children in the caravan and wanted them to have one short day, even if it was in the rain. Amelia knew it was felt both ways. In that moment, she was naked, all of her being, her own fear and hope, exposed to Joan.

They were connected. Amelia with the earth, and Joan with Amelia.

Then, the earth moved. Invisible at first, but not to Joan and Amelia. She felt it move as naturally as moving her own arm. Earth and mud rushed towards the sunken wheel, folding and wrapping itself underneath until the wheel rose and unstuck.

Joan exhaled and let go of Amelia's hand, severing their connection. Suddenly, Amelia felt drenched by the rain and sunken in mud. Reality returned, and the wagon stood free from the mud, a dry spot of dirt underneath the previously stuck wheel.