

Prologue [965]

December 1664

The squelching of wheels through mud ground to a halt. Agnes heard the crack of the traveler's whip across the horse's flanks, and watched his shoulders hunch in defeat when the animal could not move any further. The man dropped from the bench. His legs gave way under the pressure of his attempt to stand. Dark stains flowered on the knees of his trousers. He pressed his shoulder into the back of the cart, and yelled at the horse to walk on, but their combined strength was not enough to push the cart free from the mud.

Heaving breaths broke the silence of the forest. Billows of steam rose from his mare's flared nostrils then dissipated in the wet chill of December twilight. The mare's ears twitched anxiously as if she could sense they were being watched. The beast lurched forward, straining against the immobile cart. Another crack of his whip broke through the silence, startling carrion crows from their perches with a rain of rattling caws. The horse continued to pull against the harness, but she could not find purchase in the river of mud.

"God's wounds," the man cursed, accepting his journey had reached an untimely end. The traveler pushed himself up from the mud on withered limbs and took pained steps towards a derelict house off to the side of the road. She followed him from a distance, but found she could not look away. The man resigned himself to his fate as he sat amongst stones that had once been a hearth.

The stones had been worn smooth. Verdant webs of moss overtook the spaces in between. But still, she knew this hearth. Memories that were not her own drenched the scene with remnants of a forgotten life—red seeping into a pot of boiling water perched over its flames, the fragrance of incense, herbs, and decay, sickeningly sweet.

And there was the girl. She stood over the man, but she did not appear to notice her. Her blue eyes were fixed on Agnes, wide as if in silent warning. The hearth's flames danced in the blackness at their center. *Who are you?* As quickly as she had appeared, the girl was gone. So was the hearth's warm glow. It had been overtaken once more by moss.

"I'm not ready, Lord!" the man whimpered. Blood pooled on his upper lip. He raised a blackened finger to wipe it away, but revulsed at the sight of his own necrotic flesh. The mottled discoloration overtaking his body painted a picture of imminent mortality in the shades of violet and black. He unwound the fabric from around his neck. There was no point in hiding the buboes anymore. There was nobody around to see the grotesque deformities that had spurred this man's flight from London.

She wanted to reach him, to offer some comfort in what they both knew to be his final moments, but she felt as though she were moving through molasses. Her mouth opened wide, preparing to scream, but no sound came out. She heard the man's heartbeat booming in her ears despite the distance between them. It slowed, and then it stopped. She heard a scream.

Agnes gasped and felt the sudden clarity that comes with waking from a nightmare. The haze lifted, but its presence lingered. She was no longer in the house that she remembered without knowing why, but safe in her bed. Her nightgown soaked through with sweat. She wiped her brow with the damp cloth she kept in a washbasin, and let out a relieved sigh. It reassured her that this nightly flush of heat coursing through her body was natural. As natural as a woman bearing a child. It had nothing to do with the vivid terror that had held her captive in a state somewhere between sleeping and waking. These sweat-soaked nights were uncomfortable, but Agnes welcomed the changes they signaled. She would never have to bear that other burden of her sex—a child.

She slipped out from under stifling covers and relished the coolness of wooden floorboards on her feet. She crossed the room to stand beside the open window to let the cold winter air bathe her face. The fever began to subside, and Agnes wondered whose scream had penetrated through her subconsciousness. It was not an uncommon occurrence, living only two stories above the lightless, winding alleys of St. Giles Parish.

She leaned over the windowsill to gaze out across the street that had been her home since she was a child. Everything appeared as it should be. Every outline was familiar— even in the oppressive dark.

And then she saw it– the rivulet of blood that snaked from the man’s nose to his mouth, the bulging purple masses on his neck, and even the horse still tethered to its master’s burden. She slammed the shutters shut over her window with trembling hands, as if a thin panel of wood could protect her from what her vision had foretold. She remembered the girl’s pleading blue eyes and knew what they had tried to warn her of.

Death had come for London.