

Chapter 16 Witch Hazel

The patch of woods that lay before me had a mystical sense. Every morning, an early mist weaved in and out of them like wood nymphs playing tag. The scent filled my nose with an earthy freshness. Rabbits, squirrels, and foxes were in abundance, which meant fingers and toes always stayed warm in the winter. Hidden stashes of berries drew most children here. After all, who didn't like a sweet treat? But not me, not berries, but nuts, the hazelnuts. They were my lure. A loud crash rang out. Another tree felled. Agony gripped my belly. I groaned at the sight of the men who worked only feet away. They chopped and stacked wood. They were the Guard. Not their official name, just a nickname. These men of prominence tended to our small hamlet, the magistrate, our minister, and even the resident surgeon. There were others, but these were the core members. They had a purpose to our citizens and that was to protect.

"Anna," a meek voice said, "Can I get you anything?"

I twisted recognizing the voice. The man seemed unnaturally pale. But why not? He never dressed in anything but black.

"No, Bishop, I'm fine, thank you."

"Are you sure?"

My shoulders sank with my frustrated sigh.

He cautiously stepped back wiping his sweaty palms on his dark breeches. "I'll leave for now."

My attention returned to the men. I watched them strain moving all the wood. Their task troubled me. They stacked the wood in a large circle. Its purpose, to create an all-consuming fire. One that would burn long and hot.

I shook my head. I could not understand why such a fire. Why not another method. After all, the sun shone extra high today. Too hot for a fire. I gazed at the robin's egg blue skyline. The golden rays dripped like gooey molasses. I sniffed the still air. No luck today. No clouds. The air remained still. Nothing gently shook the late summer leaves. No sweet-pungent zing saturated my nostrils.

My stomach sank into a knot. I wanted rain. This fire I did not welcome. No festival or celebration had made its way on to the community calendar. But the Guard scheduled it with one swift crack of the gavel.

The sunshine beat down opening my pores. Sweat dripped down my back. My skin itched. I wiggled. The itch subsided. The shuffling of feet distracted me. Scanning the surroundings, I noticed a small crowd now appeared. Mostly men, a few wives, and some stray children.

Whispers passed through the onlookers, but none reached my ears. Just mumbled thanks and complaints of the temperature.

Dressed in a light frock and my toes digging into the cool dirt the heat bothered me little, but cider to wet my mouth would be refreshing.

Loud thumps rang out as more wood piled up. I sniffed.

Ironically, the wood they stacked smelled of my beloved hazelnut, but it lay all in one direction.

I frowned.

If it was to burn hot like they wanted then they stacked it wrong. This task would take forever.

My breath escaped from my chest. My eyes closed.

The ineptness of their thinking daunted me. How could they hold such stations in life?

I restrained my opinions of their fire building with the bite of my lip.

I lived in a small cottage on the outskirts of town that butted up against these woods. I practiced the art of fire. My location afforded one plenty opportunity for the burning of wood. I used the fire for heat and cooking, for my kettles of herbal creams and tinctures, but for the most important, the pots of sauce I brewed. A hazelnut sauce. I licked my lips as I imagined the sauce's slide into my belly.

Do they not know a fire burns long and hot with air seeping into the open spaces?

"Stack crosswise. Use kindling," I whispered.

They ignored my plea. The pile remained unchanged. Nothing but pure torture. Their task frustrated me.

I mentally slapped myself. Stop. Do not assist them. They do not want to hear anything from you. After all you're just a woman, what knowledge could you offer?

A nut bounced at my feet. I didn't pick it up. I recognized the dark brown seed. A hazel nut. My head snapped up. I glared into the crowd. No one displayed any guilt. I stretched my foot to pull it near. Luck evaded me. My shoulders fell as the nut spun backwards and disappeared underneath the wood.

"Zooterkins." I stomped my foot.

It looked perfect. Round and unblemished.

I had scoured the woods around my cottage for such nuts. Old tales spoke of their mystical qualities of knowledge and intelligence. One supposedly gained knowledge and intelligence by hanging them like grapes on a vine.

Loud thumping echoed in perfect cadence as the wood chunks continued to pile up.

"Hmm? Maybe the Guard needs a few strands of hazelnuts."

I chuckled to myself.

From the corner of the crowd, three children inched forward with whispers on their lips. I cocked my head. Only three now, not four. Thomas would no longer run in this pack of scamps. I glared at them and shook my head. They halted with wide eyes and without a word, they back peddled and disappeared.

Another nut dropped at my feet. It lay perfectly still. I attempted no retrieval of it. I shrugged my shoulders and remembered I usually searched alone, but now and then, a few curious children would appear to help. I never minded. In fact, I welcomed it. It allowed more time for my brews and stringing of the hazelnuts.

An unsolicited shout broke me out of my thoughts. "You'll not need those nuts much longer."

My heart sank. Tears filled my eyes. A thinned out grove of trees lay before me. My eyelids squeezed harder against their sockets.

A gentle hand pressed on my shoulder, "Dear, are you sure I can do nothing?"

My head lowered as a tear escaped. I sniffed, "No nothing, Bishop."

"Would you like a drink?"

My head tilted, I could see the pale of water. He lifted the ladle. Clear liquid dripped from its deep groove.

I licked my lips again, but held back from the offer. "No, please just give me time to accept this."

The ladle fell back into the bucket with a splash. "As you wish, Anna, but there's not much time.

Are you sure you want me to leave?"

I nodded. "Please it would be easier."

"Yes, child, I understand."

He stepped away. More wood hit the pile. It was knee high now.

How much were they going to use?

The thicket of trees appeared sparser. Men continued to haul the felled timber through the brush.

The lack of its thickness unsettled me. How they could destroy nature so quickly was beyond me.

And for what? To punish me?

Yes, that's what they chose to do. I closed my eyes as a tear slid down my cheek. Images of three days past haunted my thoughts. The most damned one found me in the midst of these beautiful trees pounding on the back of little Thomas. His lips colored to a dark blue as his arms flailed about. The other three scamps cried out with screams. Unknown to me, the men, the guard, spied upon our dismay. Only when the boy had spewed the nut from his throat and his body went limp to the Earthen floor did they approach. I remembered so clearly the angered voices of blame.

There accusations of witchery sparked an inextinguishable fire in their minds. Guilt surrounded me from the tinctures and potions I made to heal the ailing, but the final evidence to seal my fate sat in the pockets of my apron tied around my waist. An apron of hazelnuts.

I sniffed. More tears fell. I ducked to wipe them on my shoulder.

"Anna," Bishop said, "It's time."

I nodded.

He bowed his head and crossed his chest, "May God free you from this evil."

I gave a weak smile, "Thank you Bishop Paterson."

A light gust of wind caressed my skin as the smell of sulfur filled my nostrils. I held my head up. My back stiffened against the pole. My hands relaxed. The rope no longer cut into my skin. A handful of men stood around the stacked wood that lay at my feet. Each held a burning torch. One by one, they lowered the flames. Smoke raced upward from the sparse bits of kindling. The logs struggled to stay lit as the black ash billowed toward the sky. I breathed deeply. The bouquet of the hazel nut wood filled my nostrils. My stomach growled for one last spoonful of sauce. Visible blue-gray vapors filled my lungs. I licked my lips and choked on the fumes. "Damn those hazelnuts."