

A Discovery of Witches
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The leather-bound volume was nothing remarkable. To an ordinary historian, it would have looked no different from hundreds of other manuscripts in Oxford's Bodleian Library, ancient and worn. But I knew there was something odd about it from the moment I collected it.

Duke Humfrey's Reading Room was deserted on this late-September afternoon, and requests for library materials were filled quickly now that the summer crush of visiting scholars was over and the madness of the fall term had not yet begun. Even so, I was surprised when Sean stopped me at the call desk.

"Dr. Bishop, your manuscripts are up," he whispered, voice tinged with a touch of mischief. The front of his argyle sweater was streaked with the rusty traces of old leather bindings, and he brushed at it self-consciously. A lock of sandy hair tumbled over his forehead when he did.

"Thanks," I said, flashing him a grateful smile. I was flagrantly disregarding the rules limiting the number of books a scholar could call in a single day. Sean, who'd shared many a drink with me in the pink-stuccoed pub across the street in our graduate-student days, had been filling my requests without complaint for more than a week. "And stop calling me Dr. Bishop. I always think you're talking to someone else."

He grinned back and slid the manuscripts—all containing fine examples of alchemical illustrations from the Bodleian's collections—over his battered oak desk, each one tucked into a protective gray cardboard box. "Oh, there's one more." Sean disappeared into the cage for a moment and returned with a thick, quarto-size manuscript bound simply in mottled calfskin. He laid it on top of the pile and stooped to inspect it. The thin gold rims of his glasses sparked in the

dim light provided by the old bronze reading lamp that was attached to a shelf. “This one’s not been called up for a while. I’ll make a note that it needs to be boxed after you return it.”

“Do you want me to remind you?”

“No. Already made a note here.” Sean tapped his head with his fingertips.

“Your mind must be better organized than mine.” My smile widened.

Sean looked at me shyly and tugged on the call slip, but it remained where it was, lodged between the cover and the first pages. “This one doesn’t want to let go,” he commented.

Muffled voices chattered in my ear, intruding on the familiar hush of the room.

“Did you hear that?” I looked around, puzzled by the strange sounds.

“What?” Sean replied, looking up from the manuscript.

Traces of gilt shone along its edges and caught my eye. But those faded touches of gold could not account for a faint, iridescent shimmer that seemed to be escaping from between the pages. I blinked.

“Nothing.” I hastily drew the manuscript toward me, my skin prickling when it made contact with the leather. Sean’s fingers were still holding the call slip, and now it slid easily out of the binding’s grasp. I hoisted the volumes into my arms and tucked them under my chin, assailed by a whiff of the uncanny that drove away the library’s familiar smell of pencil shavings and floor wax.

“Diana? Are you okay?” Sean asked with a concerned frown.

“Fine. Just a bit tired,” I replied, lowering the books away from my nose.

I walked quickly through the original, fifteenth-century part of the library, past the rows of Elizabethan reading desks with their three ascending bookshelves and scarred writing surfaces. Between them, Gothic windows directed the reader’s attention up to the coffered

ceilings, where bright paint and gilding picked out the details of the university's crest of three crowns and open book and where its motto, "God is my illumination," was proclaimed repeatedly from on high.

Another American academic, Gillian Chamberlain, was my sole companion in the library on this Friday night. A classicist who taught at Bryn Mawr, Gillian spent her time poring over scraps of papyrus sandwiched between sheets of glass. I sped past her, trying to avoid eye contact, but the creaking of the old floor gave me away.

My skin tingled as it always did when another witch looked at me.

"Diana?" she called from the gloom. I smothered a sigh and stopped.

"Hi, Gillian." Unaccountably possessive of my hoard of manuscripts, I remained as far from the witch as possible and angled my body so they weren't in her line of sight.

"What are you doing for Mabon?" Gillian was always stopping by my desk to ask me to spend time with my "sisters" while I was in town. With the Wiccan celebrations of the autumn equinox just days away, she was redoubling her efforts to bring me into the Oxford coven.

"Working," I said promptly.

"There are some very nice witches here, you know," Gillian said with prim disapproval. "You really should join us on Monday."

"Thanks. I'll think about it," I said, already moving in the direction of the Selden End, the airy seventeenth-century addition that ran perpendicular to main axis of Duke Humfrey's. "I'm working on a conference paper, though, so don't count on it." My aunt Sarah had always warned me it wasn't possible for one witch to lie to another, but that hadn't stopped me from trying.

Gillian made a sympathetic noise, but her eyes followed me.

Back at my familiar seat facing the arched, leaded windows, I resisted the temptation to dump the manuscripts on the table and wipe my hands. Instead, mindful of their age, I lowered the stack carefully.

The manuscript that had appeared to tug on its call slip lay on top of the pile. Stamped in gilt on the spine was a coat of arms belonging to Elias Ashmole, a seventeenth-century book collector and alchemist whose books and papers had come to the Bodleian from the Ashmolean Museum in the nineteenth century, along with the number 782. I reached out, touching the brown leather.

A mild shock made me withdraw my fingers quickly, but not quickly enough. The tingling traveled up my arms, lifting my skin into tiny goose pimples, then spread across my shoulders, tensing the muscles in my back and neck. These sensations quickly receded, but they left behind a hollow feeling of unmet desire. Shaken, I stepped away from the library table.

Even at a safe distance, this manuscript was challenging me— threatening the walls I'd erected to separate my career as a scholar from my birthright as the last of the Bishop witches.

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