

LIBRIS

We know
books

A

HARVEST OF HEARTS

ANDREA EAMES



HARPER
Voyager

CHAPTER
1

They said that magic, real magic, not the shite that the hedge-witches peddled with all their little bags of powders and herbs, could only be performed in exchange for a human heart.

That's why all the sorceresses who passed through our village—the ones in the big carriages with the gold scrollwork and velvet curtains—were all so pretty. The sort of pretty that broke hearts, men's and, I'm sure, some women's as well, although, in general, the women seemed to be better at hiding it.

When they visited, the sorceresses made a show of going into the market and buying the herbs we grew, as if they made potions like any old hedge-witch. Really, though, they were sucking bits of heart out of everyone around them, and we all knew it. Yet we gathered around them rather than shutting ourselves away indoors as we should have.

That was their purpose in coming to the villages: gathering bits of heart—second-rate, hayseed hearts, little smears of heart, but enough for small spells. Each smitten man or woman gave a little bit of their heart when they saw one of these ladies,

it was said, and she would pocket their devotion to use for a cantrip or a hex.

They rarely took a whole heart, which would involve luring a person away, or so we believed; they seemed to gather enough of what they needed by gradual winnowing during each visit.

I don't know how we knew about the hearts. It was just something we seemed to be born knowing. I suppose our parents told us the story in our cradles, but I do not remember hearing it for the first time.

We knew that hearts were the only source of magic that really worked, although the odd charlatan could get away with tea leaves and herbs for a little while if their luck held; we knew a heart could be taken in bits and pieces, with the victim barely noticing, or all at once, prized from a chest like an oyster from a shell; and we knew the sorceresses got those hearts from us, those who lived in villages far from the city and the king's palace.

And what did they do with all that magic? No one knew for sure, and no one much cared. Whatever they did, they did in the city, and they didn't concern themselves with our affairs, so we didn't concern ourselves with theirs. The ladies probably used their magicks for murdering and all such, we speculated—killing people the king wanted dead. Big, political things.

Our kingdom was never at war and had not been for hundreds of years, as far as anyone knew, and perhaps the ladies and their magicks had something to do with that.

They didn't take enough from us to be a bother, and any inconvenience caused by the gradual stealing of hearts was more than made up for by the excitement of their visits, or so everyone seemed to believe.

That acceptance of what amounted to a slow mutilation seemed strange to me later, but at the time, I was as complacent

as the rest of them. So long as they kept to their city most of the time, we could cheerfully ignore them.

Only one man in our village had ever actually been to the city: Goodman Whelk. (Well, one other had gone involuntarily, but more on that in a moment.) But Whelk had visited over thirty years ago, and his mind was almost gone, so he wasn't much help.

None of us traveled away from the village, if we could help it, and certainly never away from the kingdom. Occasionally travelers passed through on their way to Somewhere Else, but more often than not, we would see them again on their way back. They always seemed befuddled at their failure to stay gone. We were remarkably incurious, it seemed to me later, but at the time, we rarely questioned it.

For the most part, in our kingdom, you probably lived out your life and died in the village where you were born. What was the point of leaving? All villages were much like ours; beyond the borders of the kingdom lay nothing but war and danger, from what we heard. And the city held its own horrors besides the sorceresses and their hearts.

We heard stories about children in the city abandoned by their parents—or lost, perhaps—who traveled in gangs of pickpockets. Or who simply vanished. If we were bad, the adults would threaten us with a cart ride to the city, to join them. Not Da, of course, but other parents.

The wives and sweethearts didn't like it when the sorceresses visited—and some of the husbands, presumably, the ones who saw the longing glances their ladyfolk gave, although, being men, they would never admit it.

The women scowled and glowered and stood with their arms crossed, watching as the beautiful ladies sucked up the hearts that belonged to the womenfolk, by rights. At least, so they believed.

I quite enjoyed seeing the men squirm under the sorceresses' gaze and the womenfolk's fear and anger. The women would come into the shop after one of the ladies had visited and tut their tongues, complaining about the weakness of men, and I would listen stolidly as I wrapped their meat, gleeful on the inside.

I think I liked hearing of their resentment because it meant they knew what it felt like to be me, even for just a moment. Even the prettiest of them couldn't hold a candle to the sorceresses, and I always felt like the plainest girl in the village by a long way.

I knew I would never be one of the young women with a babe on her hip, or even one of the settled matrons in a floury apron. I told myself I was at peace with it, but, as I said, seeing the women's jealousy of the sorceresses gave me a kind of satisfaction. I couldn't find it in myself to feel too sorry for them.

The sorceresses were charming, though. Even I couldn't deny that. I had caught the eye of one once, as she climbed down from her carriage, and she had smiled at me as if I were someone who interested her very much, and whom she might want to learn more about, had she the time. Then I had the inkling of how they might have broken hearts, those ladies.



We had only known one person to be taken by the sorceresses, properly taken. Mostly the ladies just sucked enough heart out of enough idiots to serve their purposes on their rare visits, and then left, like picking the best fruits for the harvest.

Eventually they would run out, I supposed, but perhaps not—the ladies seemed never to age, and maybe they were content to wait till more idiots spawned and grew old enough to

leer and yearn after the beautiful city sorceresses. Our village certainly birthed its fair share of idiots.

Perhaps the ladies that visited us were the same ladies who had always visited, back before the memories of even our oldest citizen.

One was taken, though, as I said, to the city. He wasn't anything special—neither handsome nor not-handsome, not young, and not old. Far enough past the usual marrying age for most girls to forget about him, but not so far that they didn't wink at him from time to time.

I could never quite remember his name before that, although I knew it began with a D—Dom? Denys? But after he was taken, everyone knew his name, and it became a name like one in a story, that you whisper, that has its own music to it: *Dav. Dav Mallet.*

A sorceress came to town as usual that day and stepped down from her carriage with a pretty white foot. Some were slim, some ripe and full, but all had faces so fine they could stop your breath; they had skin of all shades, from white to coal dark; and their hair, whatever the texture, was always lustrous, as if lit from within.

You could tell someone had fussed about with it, from all the braids and sparklies hanging off at all angles. They'd stick a jewel wherever a jewel would stick, those ladies, on fingers and wrists and ankles, and some even had their noses pierced.

They wore dresses in all colors, with skirts as big around as four of Goodman Wick's beer barrels, held out with wires to keep them stiff.

Young Sam Stebbin swore he got a look underneath one once, as the lady was stepping up the little ladder into her carriage. He said he was on the ground trying to find something he'd dropped (bollocks), and he looked up and caught a glance of the underskirt, past those jingling ankle bracelets and right

up that luscious leg. The lads made him tell this story over and over.

The sorceresses always kept those carriage curtains drawn right till the last moment, keeping everyone on tiptoes and straining to see; the menfolk's trousers bulging out at the seams, no doubt, as if their little fellows could stand on tiptoe as well and get a quiz at the fine city ladies.

Dav worked in the fish market back then. He went out on the river enough days to bring heaps of the stinking things back, dangling from poles. He always smelled a little like fish, did Dav. That was the only memorable thing about him, before that day.

This particular sorceress, the one who took Dav, was golden-haired under her black veil, the gold glinting through the lace like daisies in the grass.

She did not even make the usual pretense of going to the herbalist's that day, but instead stepped her dainty feet in their buttoned boots onto our dirty village ground and looked boldly about her. If she had been a goodwife at the fruit stand, she would have been squeezing melons and measuring the weight of apples; that's the kind of look she had as she eyed the staring crowd with her yellow-green eyes.

She saw Dav standing at his fish stall, with his big tub of brine and his dried fish dangling from his pole like a fringe about him, and pointed one long finger at him.

Dav looked about himself gormlessly, to either side and then behind, then realized to whom she was pointing and poked his eyebrows up so high that they disappeared into his hair.

And then she smiled, and he lurched forward, almost over-tipping his tub of salted water, and made his stumbling way through the silent, watching crowd.

They stepped aside for him as they would step aside for

Goodman Trew, the village drunk, but with none of the laughter and ribald comments. There was just a sense that he should be left to go his way, with no interference.

The sorceress kept her hand outstretched and her finger crooked for all the time he took to wobble up, with nary a tremor in her well-shaped arm. When he reached her, he stood, swaying on his feet, staring into her perfect face. We all stared with him.

She smiled, and all our hearts leaped like Dav's dying fish. Then she opened the door to her carriage and stepped up and inside. He followed, stumbling up the steps, looking like the bumpkin he was. We saw an elegant hand reach from the darkness inside and close the door, and we heard the small *snick* of a lock.

None of us went about our business. None of us spoke. We all waited. Not much time passed—four minutes, maybe five? It was hard to tell. And then the carriage started to rumble, the wheels sucked themselves out of the dirt, and the whole mess of it started to drive back the way it had come.

When it was out of sight, the chatter started. Low-voiced at first, and then louder. Speculation. Lewd suggestions as to what Dav was doing in there with the sorceress. Calls for the guardsmen—she can't just *take* him! Who knows what she's going to do with him? It must be against some law, surely?

And the men looked yearningly after, all wishing it had been them. Maybe they imagined that one day a carriage would stop, and a lady would hold out a hand and take them into the city with her, to be used as she saw fit, and maybe they wouldn't care if she wizened them out like an old fruit. Maybe they imagined the sorceresses were magic all up in their quaints, too. That they had cunnies that glowed, maybe, or shot sparks, or opened up like flowers.

No one called the guardsmen. After all, Dav might have

been taken, but he went willingly. We had all seen it. Besides, the guardsmen were as ineffective as the holy men when it came to sorceresses. Why did we need the law, or even gods, when we lived under the sorceresses' all-powerful protection? Their authority trumped all.

Dav's mother cried. There were half-hearted attempts to contact the city, send letters, but no one knew exactly where to send them.

When Dav came back—must have been a week, maybe ten days later?—he came back alone. They found him lying in his fish stall in the early hours of the morning, when the first market-keepers were trundling in their barrows of produce and flowers.

He was snoring, head on the ground and feet dangling over and into his tin tub of stale, briny water, which no one had bothered to empty. And he was naked with, some said, a great bruise on his chest. I never saw him without a shirt after this, so I can't confirm the truth of it.

They shook him awake, splashed the souring water on his face, slapped him about a bit, and draped him with enough cloth to make him decent. They asked him what had happened. He seemed dazed, looking over their shoulders as if searching for someone else. He looked like a child hunting for his mother in a crowd, on the verge of tears. His great, rough, dry lip wobbled.

Dav's mother kept him out of sight for a while. She kept her curtains closed, too, so none of the village nosy-parkers could peek in.

When he finally emerged, he looked like a man recovering from a long illness. He even walked with a cane, for shite's sake, which I thought was probably for show. After all, his legs weren't what the sorceress had been interested in, presumably.

“Poor fellow,” Da said once, shaking his head, as we watched Dav pass by.

“Weak fellow, to be so easily dazzled,” I said, blowing a strand of damp hair out of my face. It had been an unusually warm and busy day in the shop, and I was more irritable than usual, and perhaps less generous of spirit. Da shot me a look.

“Don’t be so quick to judgment, Foss,” he said, but gently. “We don’t know what manner of magicks she used on him, nor how we would have behaved in his place.”

“I wouldn’t have fallen for it, I can tell you that,” I said. “No matter how pretty she was.”

Da smiled—the same smile he got when he talked about my mam, sad and happy all at once. “We’ll see,” he said. “You’re young yet. There’s more than magic that can make a person foolish—or weak, as you call it. Stronger men than Dav have succumbed to it.”

I snorted, but I was laughing. He had a way of making me soften up, did Da.

There had been much speculation about Dav’s adventures with the sorceress, naturally. Most of it was shouted in the pub or muttered between men on the street and kept away from the womenfolk, but no one really considered me womenfolk, and so I got to hear a lot of it.

It was what you would expect. Talk of dungeons with all kinds of instruments for inducing dark pleasures. Enslavement, Dav in a collar, forced to feed his lady grapes—or, in the gorier versions, little pieces of his own heart, wrapped as elegantly as hors d’oeuvres, perhaps stuffed with pitless olives and silky cream cheeses.

Everyone was eager to hear the musk and moisture of Dav’s stories—or, failing that, the blood and horrors. Perhaps a mixture of both.

But Dav said nothing. Whenever he was asked—and he was, subtly at first and then more insistently when he vouchsafed no details—he started to cry like a child, his face open and loose and wet, so that the other men looked away in embarrassment.

He would cry for hours into his ale, himself as free of shame as a baby, but it made everyone else sit at the edges of the room and eye him sideways. After a while, they stopped asking.

Dav never spoke about his time with the sorceress. Nor did he ever marry, nor have a sweetheart. I heard the rumors and saw him often as he passed before the shop window, looking lost and bereft, searching the crowd as if looking for someone.

I didn't think to talk to him myself about the sorceress or ask him about his time under her spell. Back then, I thought I would have nothing to do with the magic ladies besides watching them pass through—more fool me, as it turned out.

CHAPTER
2

Da and I lived right in town, behind our shop, in the mess and bustle of it all. Da was a butcher, and a good one, with arms that looked like legs of lamb themselves, and a way with a cleaver that could make a carcass grateful to be boned.

I worked in the shop with him. It suited me all right. I liked being behind the counter, able to watch the happenings of the village square through the big window while being partly hidden myself, and I liked the work itself.

Most of the running of the place fell to me. Da did the butchering, while I took the orders and the money. Every day, I stood beneath the disapproving portrait of the king that hung on our back wall—every business had to have one, by law—and counted up our coins, doing all the calculating in my head, which I liked, because I took pride in my skill with numbers and the quickness of my mind.

As I've said, our village was pretty much like any other. A few shops, including our butcher shop and the smithy, clustered around a market square where smaller vendors set up