

‘An utterly riveting tale
of magic ... that grips
you by the throat and
won’t let go.’

KATE FORSYTH

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LAST
BALFOUR

Magic and fire are kindred things

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Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street, Sydney NSW 2000, Australia
Unit D1, 63 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
A 53, Sector 57, Noida, UP, India
1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF, United Kingdom
2 Bloor Street East, 20th floor, Toronto, Ontario M4W 1A8, Canada
195 Broadway, New York NY 10007, USA

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For Andrew

GRIZEL'S GIFT

Grizel once told me that magic and fire are kindred things. If you understand how to work with fire it will warm your home, cook your porridge and chase away the shadows at night. But if you fail to heed its power, well ... it only takes one spark to burn down the thatch.

Her words echo in my mind as I watch Gregor standing by the hearth fire, rubbing its warmth into his hands. Those hands have never kindled a flame.

He's dressed in a long black coat and breeks, impatient to leave. He looks me up and down with his lizard eyes and tells me to stop tarrying if I wish to ride with him to Strathcraig.

Just you try leaving without me, I want to say to him, but stop myself. I'd only get the back of his hand across my cheek. Worse than that, he'd have a reason to leave me behind. And I can't let that happen, not today. I need to find a way to see Grizel, to speak to her one last time.

'Iona!' My sister Ishbel calls me into the sleeping chamber she shares with her husband. There, she helps

me into my Sunday raiment: a bodice and skirt made of coarse black wool that scratches my skin through my petticoats and linen shift. I squirm as she ties the laces of my bodice too tight, but she chides me that lasses of fourteen shouldn't complain about such things. She combs my long hair and braids it with a silk ribbon. I turn and she inspects her work, slicking down a curl with her spit. Our hair is auburn and wavy, like our mother's was, and we both have her slight frame and heart-shaped face. But it's our green eyes that mark us as our father's daughters. Bright green, like the first shoots of spring. *Uncanny Balfour eyes*, the folk in Heatherbrae call them.

'We must away,' Gregor barks at Ishbel. 'I've pressing business in Strathcraig.' He pulls on his cloak and walks out the door without waiting for us. Ishbel's cheeks flush but she says nothing. Not to *him*, anyway. For the hundredth time this week she tells me not to upset her husband.

Ishbel and I climb into the cart that's harnessed to Gregor's bay mare. The old cuddy loathes pulling the cart and we know it will be a slow journey; about a half-day ride from Heatherbrae. We wrap ourselves in blankets to protect us from the winter chill. As we ride through the clachan, nobody comes out to greet us or pay their respects. Folk stay hidden behind locked doors, pretending they don't see us. Only Malcolm Calder is out, standing at his doorstane to glare at us as we ride past. I glare right back at him until Ishbel pokes me in the ribs. Despite my boldness, my stomach tightens when I sense his eyes fall upon me.

‘A braw morn, Malcolm,’ Gregor calls, but Calder doesn’t reply. He turns on his heel and goes inside, slamming the door behind him.

Gregor lied to Calder, for there is nothing good about this morning. The clouds hang low and a light rain falls, covering our blankets with silver beads. For most of the journey there is no sound except for the creaking wheels of the cart and the icy winds whipping through the long grasses. Ishbel reaches for my hand but I pull it away, lost in my own thoughts.

* * *

As we approach Strathcraig, the road becomes crowded, teeming with carts and folk travelling on foot. Today is Candlemas Eve; one of the quarter days when tenant famers like Gregor must pay their rents to the laird. And if that weren’t a good enough reason to come to town, they hold executions on the quarter days.

My nose wrinkles from the stench of the midden heap just outside the town walls. Once through the gates, we alight from the cart and wait for Gregor to make arrangements with the stableman. Then he leads the way into the town square.

All around the square, merchants have set up makeshift stalls to sell their wares; two of them are squabbling over a stance near the kirk steps. Gregor sidesteps the quarrelling merchants with a scowl. Then, in his highhanded way, he gives Ishbel a few coins and tells her to buy linen for a new sark. I frown at him,

incredulous. Does he think this a day to run errands? My gaze falls on Ishbel, willing her to say something to her husband. But, as always, she holds her tongue and watches in silence as Gregor stalks off to the Tolbooth to meet with the town officials, the burgh councillors.

In the middle of the square, near the mercat cross, stands a gibbet, the wood freshly hewn. Next to the gibbet is a post surrounded by bundles of wood. I stare at them, my blood quickening, until Ishbel pulls her arm through mine and forces me to walk with her to the webster's stall.

The rain falls heavy now, making the cobblestones slick and greasy. Folk huddle under shopowners' eaves until they are shooed away. The dreich weather will not stop the hordes pouring into the town. Executions are the main attraction on quarter days. And today there is a witch burning, the first one ever in Strathcraig.

Across the square I see a familiar face coming out of the inn. My dark mood lifts a little. While Ishbel haggles with the webster over the price of French linen, I slip away from her side to approach him. But as I draw near, he ducks behind a group of men drinking in front of the alehouse. It's all I can do to catch him before he disappears into the crowd.

'Dalziel, wait!'

'Iona.' He greets me without a smile, smoothing the elbow of his coat sleeve where I grabbed it.

'Did you not see me running towards you?'

'Nae, I did not. Well now, here you are.' He nods solemnly, then looks over my head, gazing across the

crowd as if searching for someone. In the few moments of silence that follow, I can't help but sneak a look at him. It's been a twelvemonth since I saw Dalziel last, since he left Heatherbrae to read theology at the university in Aberdeen. He is still tall and slender, but his jawline is more defined and his shoulders broader. He looks like a man now.

'What are you doing here?' I ask him.

'I'm meeting my father. You've not seen him, have you?' He continues to study the crowd. Dalziel's father, Dougal Rennie, has the landholding next to Gregor. It seems strange that Dougal didn't arrange for us to ride here together.

I shake my head. 'Did you hear? About what happened?'

He lowers his eyes. Dalziel has the longest eyelashes of anyone I've ever known. They make a girlish frame for his dark blue eyes.

'Aye,' he says softly.

'Why did you not call on me?'

'I'm not visiting Heatherbrae. That's why Father's coming here. To see me.'

I've never known Dougal Rennie to put himself out for anybody and consider saying so to Dalziel, but then think the better of it. There's something about the way he's behaving that makes the tight feeling in my stomach return. This is not the Dalziel I know. There has never been any awkwardness between us.

'Did you ride here all alone?'

He shakes his head. 'They asked me to accompany a professor from the university. Eberhard Finster. A

renowned scholar and cleric. From *Saxony*,' he adds, puffing out his chest.

I've no idea where Saxony is, but I'll not give Dalziel the satisfaction of asking. 'What's he doing here, then?'

'He knows more about witches than anybody in Aberdeen. Probably the whole of Scotland. They say he even has King Jamie's ear!' Dalziel's eyes glimmer with excitement.

My heart stops for a moment. 'You mean, you brought him here for *this*?'

His cheeks redden and he kicks at an invisible stone on the ground. 'Nae,' he says, his shoulders curling. For a moment he looks like a boy again. 'Just showed him the way, that's all.'

But I know Dalziel better than anybody, and I can tell when he's hiding something.

'You know where she is? Take me to her!'

He shakes his head. 'I — I can't.'

Won't, more like. '*Please*, Dalziel.'

He stares at his boots.

'Is she in the Tolbooth?' I press him.

He responds with a slight nod of the head.

'Show me — I don't know the way,' I lie.

For the first time, Dalziel's eyes meet mine. I'm astonished by how cold they are.

'I must go,' he says. 'Give my regards to Ishbel.' Then he strides off towards the square without a backward glance.

'Dalziel!' I call after him.

He doesn't stop, but several of the young men standing outside the alehouse turn to stare at me.

‘Never mind, lassie, I’ll be your sweetheart,’ says one of them. His companions join with him in mocking laughter.

As Dalziel disappears into the crowd, my cheeks burn as if they’d been slapped. Dalziel is my oldest friend. It’s true, we haven’t spoken in the last year, but he can’t have changed so much in that time. It’s one thing to be reviled by Malcolm Calder — I was expecting that — but I can’t believe Dalziel could treat me this way. Or that he could harbour any ill feelings about Grizel, not after all she’s done for him.

‘What say you have a drink with us, lassie?’ asks one of the men, leering at me.

I shoot him a poisonous look but there’s no time to waste. The only thing that matters now is that I see Grizel, so I ignore the men and push the thoughts of Dalziel to the back of my mind.

Grizel is the only parent I can remember having. My mother died in childbed giving birth to me. My father Fingal disappeared when I was a wean, no more than a few months old. Grizel, his sister, was living in Edinburgh at the time and she returned to Heatherbrae to raise Ishbel and me. My aunt told me Fingal drowned while crossing the river during a storm, his body swept away by the current. But Ishbel had it from the old folk in the clachan that our father had abandoned us, unable to cope with his grief and the responsibility of raising two small bairns. I never blamed Grizel for the lie. I knew she was only trying to protect us.

The Tolbooth is at the end of the main street and I head in that direction. There are a few stragglers still trickling out of the surrounding tenements; they pass me on their way to the square. I do what I can to make myself invisible, the way Grizel showed me: no eye contact, shoulders hunched, disappearing into the shadows. Nobody seems to notice me, or care that I'm walking against the flow.

'Wee lassie, where are you? Where'd she go — this way?' The men from the alehouse stagger up the street behind me, laughing and jostling one another drunkenly. I duck behind a wall until they pass, pressing my back against the cold granite. Silently, I curse Dalziel for deserting me.

Once the men have passed, I dash down the street that runs parallel to the town square, until I reach the back of a building with iron bars on a small window just higher than my head. At the front of it there is the pointed spire of the clock tower. The Tolbooth. Gregor is inside somewhere, meeting with the burgh councillors. He'd flog me senseless if he caught me here.

My heart pounds in my chest as if it would burst through my ribcage.

'Grizel?' My voice quavering, I call as loud as I dare.

A soft rasp replies, 'Iona? That you, lass?'

'Aye! I'm here.' A nearby wooden bench gives me just enough height to reach through the bars. Just enough height to grasp her fingers. Two of her fingernails are

missing and her right thumb is swaddled in a dirty bandage. ‘Oh, Grizel! What’ve they done to you?’

My aunt struggles for the breath to form each word. ‘Cushie doo, I knew you’d come. You must listen. Take Ishbel and leave Heatherbrae. Make haste.’

‘Where shall we go?’

‘To Edinburgh. Angus Ancroft. You must find him. At home, in the byre, you’ll find a stone —’

‘Wait, slow down!’ The words are pouring out of her in desperation, but her voice is hoarse and I’m struggling to understand her. ‘There’s a man in Edinburgh — Angus something?’

‘Ancroft.’

‘And there’s a stone in the cow byre?’

‘Bloodstone.’ The word comes out in a chilling whisper, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

‘What’s a bloodstone?’ I ask in a low voice.

‘Above the door. You’re the guardian now. Take it to Ancroft. Tell nobody you have it, not even Ishbel. Nobody.’

Grizel’s never mentioned either the bloodstone or this Angus Ancroft before. Besides, it’s the season of the wolf and the roads aren’t safe for travel. She can’t really mean for us to leave Heatherbrae. It doesn’t make any sense.

‘Edinburgh is a long way,’ I say, but feel a pang of shame as soon as the words leave my lips.

‘Promise me. You *must* promise ...’ Grizel starts to cough, a phlegmy, wretched sound. ‘You’re stronger than

you know. So is Ishbel, though she chooses to forget. Take the stone to Edinburgh, to Ancroft. Promise me!

‘But why? I don’t understand. What does it *do*?’

‘It’s our birthright; it carries the magic of our bloodline. A Balfour must always be the guardian. Protect it with your life. Mark me, child, there are folk who would kill for the stone. Make haste to Edinburgh, to Ancroft ...’ Her weak voice trails away.

My head spins as I try to make sense of Grizel’s words. ‘But why can’t I tell Ishbel about it? Why’s she not the guardian? She’s older, and ...’ I don’t bother to finish. We both know Ishbel’s magic is far stronger than mine will ever be. Not one spell I’ve forged has ever worked. Although she has never said so, I’m sure Grizel often wonders why I’m not more like my sister.

‘You’re the guardian. The portents point to you. But take Ishbel with you. It’s not safe in Heatherbrae. A witch finder is come.’

I try to swallow, my mouth suddenly dry. ‘A witch finder?’

‘*Finster*.’ The word comes out in a ragged wheeze.

The man from Saxony. My mind races, trying to remember what Dalziel said. Does he know Finster is a witch finder? Is that why —

‘Listen!’ Grizel interrupts my thoughts. ‘Find the bloodstone. Then hasten to the capital. There’s not a moment to waste.’

‘But ... Ishbel won’t want to leave Gregor.’

‘Leave her behind if you have to. Guild of the Green Lion — that’s where you’ll find Ancroft. Stay away from

the towns and villages, as the witch finder will look there for you.'

'Leave Ishbel behind?' I say. 'You can't really mean —'

'She turned her back on us!' Grizel can't hide the anger in her voice. 'Protect the bloodstone. But don't use magic, not until you're certain it's safe. Finish your apprenticeship. Ancroft will see to it. Green Lion — remember. Now, take my hand. It's time to say farewell.'

There are a hundred things I need to ask her before these few precious moments are over. We need more time. 'Grizel, you can stop this. *Please!*'

Gently she squeezes my fingers. My eyes sting with tears as I feel her deep and abiding love in the gesture. 'Cushie doo, you know I can't. That's not what magic is for.'

'Aye, but you haven't done anything wrong! And you don't know how hard it's been without you. Everyone's sided with Malcolm Calder and even Dalziel hates me now.' I shouldn't be burdening Grizel with my troubles but I can't seem to stop the words rushing out of me. 'And living with Ishbel and Gregor has been horrible and she never listens to me and she won't leave him, I know she won't. And I can't make it all the way to Edinburgh on my own. *Please*, Grizel, I don't want to be alone. I don't want to be the guardian, I don't know how, please don't make me.'

'Enough now,' she scolds me as tears stream down my cheeks. 'I need you to be strong. My time is come, child. Everything that lives must also die. Promise me you'll take the bloodstone to Edinburgh. Without Ishbel, if you have to. Say the words!'

I lick my lips. 'I promise, Grizel. I'll take the stone to Edinburgh. To Ancroft.'

A loud metallic *clank* echoes from behind Grizel. 'They're coming,' she whispers.

Grizel grips my left hand tight in hers and pulls me closer. I gasp with surprise and pain as she nicks the end of my thumb with something sharp and squeezes out a drop of blood, rubbing our thumbs together.

Then she lets go of my hand. 'Be brave, cushie doo. I'll see you once more in the Summerlands. Don't let them see you cry. Now, go. Go!'

* * *

As I run back towards the square, tears still running down my cheeks, my heart feels as though it will break apart. Two small lads playing in the dirt laugh at me, mimicking my weeping. One of them drops his breeks and shows me his dirty behind. I quickly wipe my face on my sleeve as the boys scamper off, sniggering. I need to be strong, just like I promised Grizel.

The square is heaving with people now. The rain has stopped and a festival atmosphere has taken hold. Folk chatter and laugh together in small groups while bairns run underfoot.

Ishbel is still standing near the webster's stall on the other side of the square. She's looking around, probably wondering where I am. As I push my way through the crowd I consider what to say to her. Witch finder or no, my sister won't readily leave her husband.

There was once a time when Ishbel could do no wrong in Grizel's eyes. It was astonishing how quickly she came into her magic when she reached womanhood. Grizel would only have to tell her once and Ishbel would know; she'd nod and they'd laugh and whisper together, sharing their secrets. I was resentful, my heart black with bitter envy, but Grizel reassured me that it would be my turn soon enough. Ishbel didn't care that my feelings were hurt; she lorded it over me, so proud was she of her newfound power. She could have done anything, could have been anyone — but then, in the blink of an eye, everything changed.

Four years ago Gregor arrived in Heatherbrae with little more than the clothes on his back and a dog-eared Bible, having inherited a small landholding in Heatherbrae after his uncle died. Back then nobody knew what sort of man he was, but he was of marriageable age and had all his teeth. Inevitably, all the maidens in the clachan vied for his attention.

At first Ishbel mocked the dour young man who walked with a stoop and never smiled. But she was competitive and hated the idea that one of the other lassies would win his affection. Before sunrise on Midsummer's morn she woke and pulled up a cluster of marigolds by the roots. Then she hiked to Gregor's farm. As dawn broke, she planted the flowers in the imprint that one of his boots had made in the earth. A simple spell: once the Midsummer sun's rays reached the petals, Gregor's heart would be hers.

Before that day, Gregor had never shown my sister any favour. By the afternoon he was at the door, begging Grizel for Ishbel's hand. Our aunt quickly guessed what had happened. She'd told us to stay away from love spells, warning that any magic that bends the will of another is dishonourable. Worse than that, it's dangerous. She was furious with Ishbel and refused Gregor, but that night Ishbel ran away. A few days later we found out they'd gone to Strathcraig and had wed in secret.

It was only supposed to be sport. What Ishbel didn't reckon on was that her love spell would ensnare the forger just as much as her target. Now, neither of them can escape the union. Ishbel and Gregor are thirled together until the spell is broken. I begged Grizel to intervene but she said she wouldn't. 'It's Ishbel's spell; she must be the one to undo it,' was all my aunt would say about it. Things were never the same between them after that.

* * *

Just as I reach my sister's side at the stall, a voice rings out.

'Make way, make way for the burgh councillors!'

Ishbel and I watch in silence as the town officials file into the square in all their finery, taking their seats on the podium. My sister lets out a gasp. Following her gaze, I watch in disbelief as Gregor follows the last councillor onto the podium and takes a seat. Whether by design

or accident, he avoids looking in our direction. There is another man on the podium, someone I don't recognise, but I know him at once. A thickset fellow with wheaten hair, dressed all in black. Finster. He doesn't take his seat like the others, but walks to the edge of the platform, scanning the sea of people as if searching for something. Or someone.

'Yon body there, he's a witch finder.' I point to Finster but Ishbel shushes me, grabbing my hand and pressing it down. Her face is ashen. She keeps hold of my hand and this time I don't pull it away.

The prisoners are transported from the Tolbooth in a covered wooden cart. The black-hooded executioner appears and leads a man dressed in filthy rags to the gibbet. He fastens a rope around the prisoner's neck.

The bailie stands to read the charges. The prisoner is a highwayman who robbed a nobleman of his purse. The crowd becomes rowdy, booing and hissing.

A large man standing next to Ishbel leans over to me. 'You mark him, lass, he's about to learn how to fly!' He cackles, revealing a cavernous mouth sparsely filled with blackened teeth. Ishbel pulls me away from him. I shiver, but it's not from the icy February air.

The executioner lifts the end of the rope and the man flails, his feet kicking the wind. It takes a long time for his spirit to leave his body, but eventually the kicking stops. The executioner secures the rope so that the body stays suspended. It will hang there for days. The mob bellows its approval, but its lust for blood is not yet sated.

‘We need to get to the front,’ I whisper to Ishbel. She shoots a fearful glance towards the podium. ‘Come *on*,’ I say.

Ishbel grabs the back of my cloak as I elbow my way through the surging mob.

Then an uneasy hush falls over the crowd. Two guards lead a frail woman from the cart. She’s dressed in a tattered gown and her silver-streaked black hair has been shaved off. It takes me a moment to recognise her, she looks so small and brittle. Her wrists are blistered and raw from the chains that bind them in front of her. The guards remove the chains, then secure her hands, feet and torso to the wooden post with thick rope.

It’s been three weeks since they arrested my aunt. In that time her cheeks have grown hollow and her eyes have dropped deep into their sockets. Those eyes search the crowd until I wave my arm and then they rest on Ishbel and me. Gregor almost jumps out of his seat and stares daggers of rage at us. Ishbel shrinks under her husband’s gaze.

‘Don’t look at him, look at Grizel — it’s the least you can do!’ I hiss.

Ishbel puts her arms around my shoulders and holds me close, chin resting on the top of my head.

Somebody else has seen us, too. Finster’s eyes turn to Ishbel and me in a way that makes my knees buckle. I feel myself starting to wither and it’s all I can do to stop myself from running away and finding somewhere to hide. But I promised Grizel that I’d be strong. I do my

best to ignore the witch finder and keep my eyes trained on my aunt.

A lone voice cries out, soon followed by another, and then another.

Witch, they say. *Witch*.

The crowd pushes forwards again and I struggle to hold on to Ishbel. My feet lift off the ground.

The bailie unfurls a scroll of parchment. ‘Grizel Balfour, you were accused of murdering Mary Calder and her unborn son in childbed. You were found guilty by a lawfully convened court of working malefice, against the laws of Scotland. On this day, the first of February in the year of Our Lord 1597, you have been sentenced to die. Here, at this place, you will be strangled to death and your body burned to ashes. Have you anything to say?’

‘Stop!’ Minister Gourlay leaps up from his seat and rushes over to the bailie.

‘What’s happening?’ I turn to Ishbel, who looks so pale she might swoon at any moment.

‘Witches aren’t permitted last words,’ she whispers. ‘They fear she’ll use them to curse her accusers.’

The councillors huddle to discuss the situation for a few moments. The bailie then nods to the executioner, who moves into position behind Grizel. He takes a leather strap and loops it around Grizel’s neck. The mob falls silent as the executioner pulls back the cord.

Oh, Grizel! What will become of us when you’re gone?

A strangled cry escapes Grizel’s crushed throat; it is the last sound she’ll ever make in this world. But it’s

as though *I* can't breathe. My head spins and I grab at Ishbel's cloak.

* * *

Ishbel taps my cheek with cold fingers. We're away from the crowd now, sitting on the wet cobblestones behind the webster's stall.

'Grizel?' I whisper, hoping that by some miracle she has been saved.

My sister's eyes brim with tears and she shakes her head. She hugs me so close that I can feel her body racking with silent sobs.

A dense, sweet smoke blankets the town square. The crowd is already starting to melt away. I try to stand but a wave of dizziness overwhelms me. Ishbel offers me a sip of usky but I shake my head. The smell of it makes me want to retch.

We watch the fire in silence. It burns bright and fierce, the way Grizel lived her life. Witches don't get a proper burial, so we honour her this way: bearing witness as her ashes take flight on the winter wind.