

CHAPTER 1

1349 AD, England. A little bit before.

When the first star falls – and I don't mean the really big one that changes everything, but the *first* one – Wolf and I are too busy arguing over the last scraps of our food supplies to pay attention.

There's just – *pfft* – something flickering out of the corner of my eye, and a bright light trails across the night sky for a moment. Then the first star is gone.

"See this meat? Not much left, is there? You have it, Astra. That's an order."

I'd laugh in Wolf's face, but he sits in front of me as he twitches the horse's reins to guide it through the forest and he wouldn't see. "I don't think much of your orders. You're hungrier than I am. It doesn't make any sense."

"Think about filling your belly, then. Whatever works."

We've been sharing this horse for the last few days, and Wolf isn't always mindful of his strength. When he shoves the sack of stolen venison back in my direction and I push it back, it's all I can do to stay in the saddle. Even his kindness is touched with something brutal.

"Skinny thing like you," he mutters. "Even less flesh on you than this saint-tainted old mare. And she struggles to carry the sky, let alone us two."

"You know you could always walk beside her, if you wanted to?"

"Aye. As could you." He doesn't mention that the horse is also bearing the extra burden of the iron sword Wolf keeps strapped over his fur cloak. It's big, that sword. Heavy with it. While Wolf was snoring away beneath the trees a few nights back, I dragged it from its sheath and tried but failed to swing it.

"Skinny doesn't have to mean weak," I point out. "What's more, I've had my fill of meat. *You're* the one trying to survive by nibbling wayside sorrel like a two-legged sheep..."

I'm about to make a possibly very amusing joke about how Wolf should change his name to Lamb when

Pfft. Something flickers. The night sky is seared with light.

A star falls from the sky, a flaming trail behind it.

Another star.

Wolf doesn't even see it, and it's so quick that I don't think to say anything, not quite understanding what I've seen, even.

A star falls, and we see nothing. Do nothing. Think nothing.

Mea culpa, as we say in Church. *Mea maxima culpa*.

My fault. My very great fault.

When it comes to the big things, it nearly always is.

"Fine, then. *I'll* take the meat," says Wolf, finally realising I mean it when I say I've had my fill. "Let's not make a Christ-rended war of it. Best leave that to kings, and may they choke on our generosity."

He rips open the mouth of the sack and seems impressed by its contents. He brings the meat halfway to his mouth, then stops. Shifting in the saddle, he leans his good ear towards the undergrowth. When he speaks, it's in a voice so low it can barely be heard above the growing of the trees.

"Girl? Shush, now. Put your ears to work."

I wasn't saying anything, but I listen closely for the sounds of anything we don't need in our lives right now. Like brigands, or the King's men hunting us down for the stolen venison in our sack. I listen for what feels like forever, my entire body straining with the effort until my legs and shoulders ache, but hear only the sounds of the forest. No danger nearby.

Apart from wolves and boar and snakes, of course.

"Is someone else there?" Wolf's frown creases the scar that lines his face from brow to jaw in a river of torrents and rapids.

"No."

"What?" Wolf looks round. He must have not heard me.

I shake my head *no* for emphasis, and my long braids whip me in the face. Briefly I consider switching to a grown woman's style, one more befitting my sixteen years, then tuck the thought away.

"*Wearing a maiden's hair, still? At your age?*" I've heard it too many times on the road from travellers keen to mind someone else's business. That's their cue to stare at Wolf, trying and failing to picture him as a husband, a father or indeed any kind of protector at all. They see only the predator he's named himself after. How

those busybodies long to know what Wolf and I are to each other. It vexes them like a gulp of sweet wine, held in the mouth and never swallowed.

It doesn't matter. What matters is that when I close my eyes and braid my hair each morning I get to imagine, just for a moment, that it's my mother's hands. I get a little peace. For one golden moment I think back to how it was to sit on my very own tree-trunk stool every morning back home, sipping goat milk as the loose strands of my hair were tucked into braids by hands that teased and shaped but never forced. With every silent stroke, my mother let me know she'd always take care of me.

It's just a waking dream. Yet, for one brief moment, I can *believe*.

Anyway, it's important to have tidy hair. Braids are excellent, whatever anyone else thinks. There is little enough order in this pestilence-ridden world as it is.

"You're sure you hear nothing? No catcalls? Arrows? Hooves?"

I listen again for Wolf's benefit. One of his ears is scarred and molten. As though it got burned long ago in

The fire the fire my hut burning down mere weeks ago, my mother laid out on the table, sewn up and ready for the ground, the villagers cursing her name for bringing the sickness to our village, for being the first to sicken oh oh their flung stones hurt my back oh

I shake the vile memories away and listen, but hear nothing. No jeers from the King's men, no hooves hitting the ground with purpose, no *zing* of an arrow flying through the air.

"It's fine, Wolf. We've lost them."

He *harrumphs*. "Let's not let stolen meat go to spoil, then." He tears into the venison, his teeth yellowed but sharp and whole. The horse's saddle creaks under his weight as he growls and eats and eyes the forest as if the trees mean to reach out with gnarled fingers and steal the deer-flesh from his mouth.

"If the King's men catch us for poaching, say you were my prisoner," he spits through a fatty mouthful. "Tell them I said I'd hurt you if you fled. They'll believe it, a fresh-faced girl like you. Then run."

"You're joking, surely?" I shake my head in disbelief. "Firstly, we won't get caught. Secondly, I'll explain how you saved me from death at the hands of hate-filled villagers. You stole to put food in our bellies."

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“Is telling them the truth wise, girl?” He spits out a gob of gristle. “Is it ever?”

“The truth is what I’ll say. I promise.”

“*Hrrm*. Promising a thing isn’t the same as doing it. We’ll see.” But he looks pleased enough and says no more. We ride on, him picking meat out of his teeth and me enjoying my own thoughts for a while. As the horse ambles through the forest, the sky’s night-jewels twinkle above like the Virgin’s crown.

When a third star falls from the sky, I flinch.

This time, I pay attention.

“Um. Wolf?”

A fourth star tears free of the Heavens, leaving a blaze of golden white behind it.

“Wolf.” I tug at his arm. “The stars!”

“Oh, very pretty. How I do love the stars,” he mutters, not even looking up.

“No, *look*. They’re falling out of the sky...”

I pluck at his cloak. “Have the End Times come?”

Moonlight outlines the ghost-white scar in my companion’s cheek as he glares into the night. “Girl, the world doesn’t end just because some stars drop out of the sky. I’ve seen it happen before, in... another land.” He squirms on the horse uncomfortably.

Was Wolf a soldier once? They usually boast of the things they’ve done in England’s name.

“Maybe it’s an omen, the stars falling? A sign of good fortune?” I eye the sky with care.

“*Omens*.” Wolf rolls the word around in his mouth, finding it foul. “Very fashionable these days, omens.”

He’d belly-laughed when I first told him my name, Astra, meant “star”, “hope” and “divine strength” in the holy script. “How meaningful,” he’d sneered. Not one to love meanings, is Wolf, or anything that can’t be seen or touched. At least he didn’t question why my mother secretly taught me Latin.

I flinch as another star falls to earth.

No need to be scared, I tell myself. But the words seem too close to a lie. I try again. *There’s probably no need to be scared*.

“So pretty,” I whisper. “A sign of good things to come.”

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“You call hope falling from the sky good fortune?”

“That’s not how I see it. I’d rather look on the bright side. It’s more like Heaven growing closer to Earth, don’t you think?”

Wolf sucks his teeth as yet another star plummets to earth. “See that falling star, there? That’s one less bright side to look on.”

He tosses what’s left of the venison – so that’s just the bone, then – into a bush.

“Let’s ride on, girl, and not worry about *stars*.”

The moon is bright in the sky when we come to a fork in the forest path.

“Stonebridge lies to the left,” says Wolf. “Not a bad little town to hide in. I passed through it last summer. Strong ale.”

Until he rescued me from the fury of friends and neighbours I’d known all my life, my mother’s hut burning down around my ears, I’d never gone outside my village. I’d always wanted to travel with my head, not my feet. The learning of things was my entire world, and my map grew bigger every day. To me, adventure meant seeking the kind of knowledge that’s written down (from my mother’s notes, mainly, or scraps she’d copied down from learned religious types). If it wasn’t written down I learned it from asking my eternally patient mother, or from any Goodwife or Goodman able to withstand an endless river of questions beginning with ‘why’.

Before the sickness swept across England, York was just somewhere in the North. A place I could point to on one of my mother’s maps, but never wanted to see. Now the Pestilence creeps onwards, snatching every life it sees, but York is untouched by the disease. Reaching it is a goal that fills nearly every waking moment.

I’m headed to York not because the spirit of adventure calls me, but because I must.

We take the path to the left, passing a marker stone announcing Stonebridge just beyond the crest of the hill.

That’s when Wolf slides off the horse without warning. He draws his sword, its point extended into the night.

Finger to lips; silence.

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Several figures lie in the road, their bodies at broken angles. The brigands who killed them must be long gone.

Wolf prods the closest body with a boot. It lies still. At his gesture I slide clumsily off the horse to join him. Even by starlight I can tell those glistening puddles pooling by the travellers' sides haven't been made by rain. It hasn't rained in days.

My mother was an apothecary, a surgeon, a midwife. She knew *everything*. She taught me so much

but not enough

of what she knew before she died of the Pestilence

my fault my fault couldn't save her mea culpa couldn't save her should have tried harder mea maxima culpa all my fault

I've seen plenty of blood. It's been there when I've delivered successful births, and when I've treated farmers who've fallen onto their scythes.

Blood on its own isn't a problem. It's the violence of it all I can't stomach. The harm of it. Someone actually wanting to hurt someone else. On purpose.

I rub a hand across my suddenly damp forehead. I hold my breath but there's no escaping that iron smell in the air. Unable to stop myself, I run to the nearest bush and empty my guts.

My mother would never have sickened at the sight of blood spilled in anger.

From now on, I vow that neither will I.

Wolf's studying something on the ground. Wiping my mouth with a dock leaf, I come over.

"You want this?" He passes me a shapely bow, spoils of the road, and I hesitate. The bow's still got splashes of blood on it.

"It's good wood," he persists. "Nice bit of ash. I would, if I were you."

"Well, you're not, are you?"

He frowns at the bow. "We could clean it up a bit..."

"Wolf, *no*. We've been through this. Killing healthy people isn't something healers do."

He tosses the bow into the undergrowth, clearly disappointed. "Fine. One sword for me. No bow for you. Let's be on our merry way."

I gesture at the bodies. "What about them? They need - graves, or something."

“I’ve no hoe to dig a grave tonight,” mutters Wolf, looking away. “Little inclination, either.”

After some persuasion he helps me drag the bodies over to the wayside, where I place a cross of twigs over the head of each and arrange them with their hands in prayer. It’s the best I can do for a grave. It’s better than nothing. It’s not enough.

Our duties done, we walk over the crest of the ridge that leads to Stonebridge until a huge valley lies stretched out before us. The town lies below, lit by a full moon and framed by stars falling from the sky like arrows shot from a bow. The air is rich with the sweet hops-and-lavender scent of the fields.

It all looks so beautiful, yet there’s something ugly about it. Something I can’t quite put my finger on. A feeling of being *locked-in*. Then I spot the source of my discomfort.

“That wall. The big one hemming in the town. Was it there the last time you came?”

Wolf’s face darkens, if such a thing can happen at night.

Pigs roam freely in Stonebridge’s town square, and I see the welcoming lights of an inn. Not a single house has a Pestilence cross daubed on its door. The only problem, really, is the vast ring of stone that’s closed off the town from the fields and forest beyond.

I draw my cloak closer around my shoulders.

“It wasn’t there last year,” says Wolf heavily. “You’re right – it’s big. Bigger than needs be. Nothing like it in any town or city I’ve seen.” He pauses. “Not even the foreign ones. Or the ones under siege.”

“Is it there to keep people out, do you think?” I drink in the wall’s ugliness. “Or to keep people in?”

“An excellent question,” replies Wolf in bright, forced tones. “One to consider at leisure in an alehouse, maybe.” He tugs his travelling hood low to hide his scar, in readiness for company. A nice gesture, though it doesn’t hide the rest of him. “We’ll spend the night in Stonebridge, then?”

I raise my chin firmly. “Might as well. We’ll be as safe in those walls as anywhere.”

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Food and warmth await, yet I can't help feeling I've signed the Devil's pact in blood. As if it's read my thoughts, the night sky lights up with a sudden impossible brightness.

"God's toes," mutters Wolf under his breath. "What *now*?"

Even more stars fall, until the sky burns with celestial bodies dropping from the sky.

Then a single star shoots down that's so much bigger than the rest. It glows first white, then a sickly green.

The only star that matters.

The *wrong* star.

Just before it lands inside the town it turns to a stomach-knottingly ugly shade of purple.

Its colours are all *wrong*.

It's nothing that people here on earth were ever meant to see.

CHAPTER 2

As that last, most terrifying star falls I stuff a fist into my mouth to stop myself from screaming. Then it's over, and the sky is clear at last.

"Scared?" Wolf prods me in the ribs. "We'll ride through the night if you are. We can reach the next town by noon."

"If there ever *is* another noon," he mutters into his beginnings of a beard.

I'm not sure I was meant to hear that last bit.

A wide river flows past Stonebridge, and the town's main gate is reached by a bridge that looks older than the town itself. When we walk the horse towards the bridge it rears up in protest and refuses to budge. We end up letting it graze on the lush greens growing by the river. We're better off seeking entry into the town without a stolen horse, anyway.

I trail my hand along the bridge's mossy sides as we cross, enjoying the rasp of living green beneath my fingertips. My belly rumbles at the thought of hot stew and a part of me regrets telling Wolf I wasn't hungry, though another part is all the more excited that we'll finally be spending the night in an inn. It's only when we're half-way across the bridge that I notice two iron cages suspended above the main gate.

I'm about to say "oh look, how strange," as if it's just another curiosity on our travels, when I realise with horror that the cages aren't empty. There are people trapped inside. Never mind moonlit walks across pretty old bridges. We need to make sure they're alive.

The caged people look slumped and quiet. I hope they're sleeping. But hope and good intentions are not enough.

"Some towns use cages like those to deter criminals," says Wolf, following my gaze. "Me, I'm feeling marvellously deterred already."

"Even if they're criminals, we need to make sure they've been looked after properly. And we have no option – we still have to go in. Don't we?"

I know Wolf will take us into town if that's what I really want. It's just that I'm not sure what I want anymore. Stonebridge has food, shelter and everything I could

want – yet it hides its true face behind a giant stone wall and traps people in cages.

What kind of place is this?

“Are you *sure* you want to stay here tonight, girl?”

After pausing for longer than I’d like, I nod firmly. This isn’t just about me. Wolf needs a proper place to rest, too. Why should we both suffer just because I’m scared of something I can’t name? Though if I could, it would be a word along the lines of ‘danger’.

“I’m sure the stew at the inn will taste better than stale bread,” I say in a loud voice I hope Wolf will find convincing. “And didn’t you say the ale is good around these parts?”

Wolf shrugs. “It tastes better than the Holy Virgin’s toes, I assure you.”

“You can’t say that!”

“I can. I have it on good authority. A monk who spent years meditating on the notion informed me that Her toes almost certainly taste divine.”

Sometimes Wolf is *so* disgusting. Perhaps he worries my life has been too comfortable up until now, and thinks all the cursing and stolen food will somehow balance it out. But I need to keep a brave face and show I’m a worthy travelling companion, so I keep walking, and Wolf follows my lead, and we draw nearer to the town’s main gate.

Mea culpa, a little voice inside me whispers, deep where I almost can’t hear it.

All. My. Fault.

Life stirs as we approach. The prisoners wake, grumbling. On seeing us they all start calling out at once. There are children’s voices mixed in with the cries, and I wonder how often they get food and water. I wonder what they could have done that’s so bad.

One of the prisoners, an old man, presses his face against the bars. “Fellow travellers! Get us out!”

That doesn’t sound like the greeting of a criminal to me. I look around for a lever of some kind. “Is there a way to drop these cages?”

Wolf bristles beside me. “These murderers and thieves would kill you soon as look at you. Don’t make offers you can’t keep.”

I round on him. “They’re mostly children, can’t you see? We need to get them out.”

He looks ready to sour the air with his reply, but settles for muttered profanities as he joins me to examine the main gate.

“No! No!” The old man howls as we get closer. In spite of his words I quicken my pace, drawn to the shadows of an alcove in the wall of the main gate. Maybe it’s where the lever or pulley to lower the gate is kept.

“Don’t worry,” Wolf calls up with a leer. “We’re not here to throw shame-stones or rob you. My companion here plans to help - I wasn’t so bothered, myself.”

“Stay back!”

As we set foot on an uneven flagstone, I hear a tell-tale *thwipp* but it’s too late. Wolf and I are hoisted by our ankles into the air, snagged in hidden ropes. A trapdoor opens in the top of the cages and we’re dropped in with the other prisoners. I’m stuck in one cage and Wolf is in the other. He shares his cage with a tall lad with curling blonde hair which looks almost blue in the moonlight. I’m stuck in mine with the remaining prisoners.

This, then, is our rescue mission.

People press around me in a throng. I don’t want to meet their gaze if it means seeing accusation in their eyes, but apologising is the least I can do - every word an arrow in my gut.

“I’m so sorry,” I say helplessly. “I tried.”

“I did warn you,” croons the old man beside me. “Didn’t I, my dear? Didn’t I try? Now we can all hang here and rot.”

“But I’m innocent!” I swallow down the rising panic in my gut. I hear the plaintive note in my voice and hate how weak it sounds.

The old man shrugs. “Oh, yes. Of course. We all are. Look around you, sweet girl...”

He gestures around the cage. Moonlight casts everything in shadow and bleached bone, but the prisoners seem to be mostly my age, wearing travelling clothes mixed with brighter hats and hose. From somewhere in the cage comes the jingling of a jester’s cap. No-one here looks like a hardened criminal. If there are any

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around here, maybe it's us. After all, Wolf did steal a deer from the King's forest. They'll chop off his hands or worse if they find him.

"I'm Astra," I say slowly. "My friend over there is Wolf."

"I am Columbine," says the old man, "and this is my little troupe of mummers and entertainers. We were heading north to flee the Pestilence. Much like yourselves, I expect?"

He raps his knuckles on the cage bars. "We only got as far as the main gate, dear girl. And here we all are."

Someone's foot is pressed to my face. I'm about to speak when someone else elbows me in the neck, knocking all the wind out of me. My first coughing thought is *oh mercy I can't breathe*. My second is that the elbow is bare, belonging to a boy around my age with his sleeves rolled up. His elbow banging into my neck is incredibly painful, yes. But he was just shifting round. We're packed so very tightly in here.

I draw in a choking breath. It sounds like a whistle.

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Bio:

Magda Knight is the founder and editor of Mookychick.co.uk, an intersectional feminist alternative lifestyle site first launched in 2005. She writes speculative fiction for adults, young adults and changelings. Her YA speculative short stories have been featured in the *Timeless* anthology (Pugalicious Press), the *Mythology High* anthology (Buzz Books) and the British comic *2000AD*. Two of her unpublished YA novels were longlisted for the 2012 Mslexia Children's Book Awards. Her adult short stories have been published in *Derby Shorts* (For Books' Sake), *Quaint Magazine* and *The End Was Not the End* (Seventh Star Press). When she grows up she would like to be a sword or a bear.