

“Explosion on King Street”

By Faith Hunter and D.B. Jackson

Hannah followed the sound of footsteps down the narrow alleyway, keeping far enough back that the man she tracked was only shadows and echoing footsteps on the cold, clear morning air.

Ethan would be most unhappy with her for following the tough -- Nap, he was called -- but she had overheard Sephira Pryce, the self-proclaimed Empress of the South End, when she sent her man to pick up a payment from Lieutenant Patterson. Patterson owed Ethan a half crown and hadn't paid, and Sephira had been known to steal Ethan's payment from time to time.

The byway narrowed and Hannah slowed, holding her skirts close to keep from brushing them against the barrels and crates stacked along the wall of the Bunch of Grapes Tavern. A hen and her clutch pecked at spoiled food on the muddy side street and the protective fowl cocked her head and spread her wings to make herself bigger, a challenge to the intruder. Hannah wondered how her prey got by without the bird making a ruckus.

From ahead, Hannah heard a sharp click, metal against metal. The earth heaved. The world tumbled around her. Slamming her back and down. She sat up, her ears ringing. Debris was everywhere and smoke—sharp and acrid—hung on the air. People came from the nearby shops and from the tavern.

There had been an explosion, she realized, and her wits were addled, as much as her ears were deaf.

The chicken and her clutch were gone.

Ethan had just arrived at the tavern and put in an order for ale when the bomb went off. The force of the blast hammered him against the bar and peppered the back of his coat with shards of glass. He managed to keep his feet, but his ears rang and acrid smoke burned his lungs.

He thought he heard whispers, realized that these were shouts and groans barely penetrating his abused ears. Determined to reach the street, and to help others do the same, he waded through the hazed air, past the twisted, splintered remains of what had been tables and chairs. The bloodied and wounded, too numerous to count, lay strewn across the tavern floor. Ethan saw at least two

men who appeared to be dead. He bent, lifted one of the injured, an older gentleman bearing a bloody gash on his arm and several on his face and neck. Together, they stumbled out onto King Street.

The carnage within the tavern was replicated here. Wounded littered the street, blood stained the cobblestones. In the middle of the lane, sat the source of the explosion: a black chaise, its roof gone, its interior little more than a smoking carcass. Whoever left it had taken time to unhitch the horse from its harness -- a small mercy. But the carriage stood precisely between the Bunch of Grapes and the British Coffee House, one a Whig establishment, the other Tory. Which had been the intended target?

The question should have been enough to occupy his mind. But at that moment he saw a figure stumble from a nearby alley, her steps unsteady, a dazed expression on her freckled face. Hannah Everhart. What, in the name of all that was holy, could she be doing here in the midst of this madness?

Dazed, Hannah fell against the tavern and slid back to the street in an ungainly, dizzy heap. She propped herself on one elbow and wiped at the tears, not certain when her eyes had begun to water. Her fingers came away blackened and damp, but not bloodied. She could see, despite the smoke that surrounded her and the people running madly everywhere. She patted her middle to ascertain she was unbloodied, satisfied that her whalebone corset had protected her from the worst of the blast. And she wondered how she had gotten here from the byway, and what had happened to the hen.

Though the world swam around her, she resettled her skirts over her stockinged knees and ankles, checking to see that the bright yellow wool of the new stockings was undamaged. They seemed to have come through the ... explosion. Right. There had been an explosion.

Her ears still rang, but she could hear shouts now, so that meant she wasn't deaf. But she had no idea what to do next.

A hand appeared at the edges of her vision and she looked up to see ... Ethan. Her shoulders slumped in dismay as he was wearing his stern face, shadowed by his tricorn hat. There had been a time when that stern face was all she ever saw, but over the last few months, things had changed. He had married and moved into the Dowsing Rod with Kannice. He had begun to laugh more, to smile often. He wasn't an unhandsome man when he was happy.

"Are you injured?" he asked. She still couldn't hear, but she read his lips. Fortunately he was not prone to facial hair which would have made that impossible.

“I am quite deaf,” she said, placing her hand in his. He helped her again to her feet, steadying her with only one hand so that no one would think they were acting improperly. She nodded when she had her balance. He placed a clean folded handkerchief into her hand and she quickly wiped her face, the white cloth coming away blackened. The soot and grime would never come out.

“Come.” At the best of times Ethan was a man of few words. Accompanied by his stern face, he was almost frightening.

Holding to the walls as they walked, she followed him along the main street, recognizing that he was taking her to the Dowsing Rod, thankfully, not to her aunt’s home. Her aunt wasn’t a witch, but the Everhart women were known for temper in the face of, well, explosive events.

Minutes later, the effects of the blast were making themselves known, and Hannah swayed drunkenly, catching herself on a small dray, loaded with barrels. She pressed her middle and hoped not to shame herself by losing her breakfast.

“Let me help,” Ethan said. He kept his back to her, and yet she heard him, even as his magic, which he refused to call such, enveloped her in a cloud of relief.

Ethan’s healing spell appeared to strengthen the lass. A bit of color warmed her cheeks, and she looked to be more steady on her feet. He took her hand and led her the rest of the way to the Dowsing Rod.

Upon entering, they were met with the smells Ethan had come to associate with what he now called his home: musty ale and fresh bread, the sweet, slightly fishy aroma of Kannice’s renowned chowder and the scent of pipe smoke billowing in the rafters. Ethan steered Hannah to a small table near the hearth and stepped to the bar. He saw neither Kannice nor her barman, Kelf, but with food cooking they couldn’t be far. Moments later, his wife emerged from the kitchen, her cheeks flushed, strands of auburn hair on her brow.

“I didn’t expect to see you so soon,” she said, smiling and coming around from behind the bar to greet him with a kiss.

“I take it then, word of what happened didn’t precede us.”

Her expression clouded. She looked him over, picked dust and shards of glass off his coat. “I haven’t heard a thing.” Her fingers brushed his cheek. “Is this blood on your face?”

He dabbed at his cheek with a finger, winced at the sting of a cut. “Aye, I suppose it is. There was an explosion of some sort, over on King Street. I’m fine,” he added, anticipating her next

question. He tipped his chin in Hannah's direction. "Miss Everhart was closer to the bomb than I. She could use a cup of Madeira. Watered, I think."

Kannice glanced at the girl and hurried back to the bar. Ethan returned to the table and pulled a chair next to Hannah's.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

Her stare had gone a bit glassy, and she didn't look away from the fire. "I'm all right My ears are still ringing." At least her voice sounded strong. "But why would anyone set off a bomb in the middle of the city, in the middle of the day?"

"To foment unrest? To hurt the patriot or loyalist cause? To make it seem that one side or the other is too barbaric to be trusted? It could have been done for any number of reasons. We stand on the cusp of war. It's a wonder there haven't been more incidents of this sort."

"Aye," Kannice said, joining them and placing a cup of watered wine in front of the girl. "It's only a matter of time before the King's soldiers return to Boston. And when they do, there'll be trouble."

Hannah reached for her cup with a shaking, soot-stained hand. "I remember the last war, the one with the French. I was but a girl, but nevertheless, I don't care to see another."

"Well someone feels differently," Ethan said. "That much is clear."

"Hannah," Ethan said. "Why were you in the byway?"

She pulled on her ear lobes, trying to speed the return of her hearing, and accepted the earthenware from Kannice who joined them at the table. There was watered Madeira in the cup and Hannah sipped, the wine clearing the smoke from her tongue and throat. Her head began to clear as well, and she realized that her clothing was sooty, the embroidered Indian muslin of her apron ruined. Worse, her aunt would quickly learn the location of the explosion, and therefore know she had been in the byway, when she had no business there at all. She might have been killed. Her aunt would be furious. And most distressingly, the chicken and her chicks were likely dead.

Tears filled Hannah's eyes and she sighed, feeling the strain on her ribs. The explosion had indeed bruised her when it tossed her, willy-nilly, to the ground. "I saw Nap," she said, her tone despondent, "and his mistress. I was in the market when I overheard Sephira Pryce. She sent her man to pick up a payment from Lieutenant Patterson." Hannah looked up at Ethan, whose gaze

was less severe, more attentive. “I know that the man owes you a half crown and hasn’t paid, and,” she glanced at Kannice, to include her in the conversation, “the woman has been known to steal Ethan’s payment from time to time. Thank you for the wine. It is excellent.”

Ethan actually smiled, but shook his head at the same time. “You will be the death of me. And yourself.”

“Are you going to chase Nap?” she asked.

Ethan avoided her question and asked instead, “Just before the explosion, did you feel a trace of power, as of a spell cast in the vicinity?”

“I don’t recall such. Why?”

“Because I did. A mere shiver of a casting. And then the explosion.”

“Do you think it was targeted at Nap? Do you think he’s dead?”

“I have no proof, but I fear for him. There have been rumors of a new conjurer in Boston, someone who has set himself -- or herself --in opposition to Sephira and Mariz.”

“If a witch wanted to draw her out, attacking Nap would certainly accomplish that end,” Hannah said asperity in her tone. “It would precipitate a war neither side could win.”

Ethan nodded his agreement. “The caster appeared the day the *Wayfair Seas* cast anchor. The *Wayfair Seas* sailed from the Port of Galway,” he said, explaining to Kannice. He swung his gaze back to Hannah as he concluded. “And there are Everharts there.”

“I’m not sure I understand what that means,” Kannice said, her clear gaze darting between Ethan and Hannah. “Witches, you mean?”

“Aye, witches. But more than that, relations of our friend here.” He canted his head toward the young woman, whose hand still trembled as she raised the watered Madeira to her lips. “And perhaps answers to questions I’ve had about her power and her ancestry.”

“What kind of questions?” Hannah asked, setting aside her cup and narrowing her emerald eyes.

Ethan hesitated, unsure of how much to tell her just now. She remained fragile, shaken by the day’s events. Only moments before he had seen tears in her eyes, though temper may have bolstered her. “Well, for one thing,” he said, “it seems that you and Sephira Pryce are linked in some small way. This ship from Galway has drawn her notice, or at least that of one of her men. I

think I'd like to ask her a question or two about that."

"As would I!" For all her previous shakiness and brimming tears, she sounded abruptly as eager as a puppy.

Ethan and Kannice shared a glance. He could see that she was trying, with only mixed success, to stifle a grin.

"She's been hurt," Kannice said with mock severity.

"Aye. She should rest."

"No!" Hannah said. "I mean, yes, I was hurt. But the wine is working wonders. Truly. I feel much better."

"And your gown?" Ethan asked.

Hannah scrutinized the front of her attire, frowning at the soot, and a small tear in the fabric at her shoulder. "My aunt will have my head," she said, sounding forlorn.

Kannice smiled, glanced Ethan's way again. "Perhaps not. I may have something that will fit you, and later you and I can clean this. I might even be able to mend that tear."

"Really?"

"Aye. But I'm not sure I like the idea of you going with Ethan to see Sephira Pryce."

"He won't let any harm come to me, will you, Mister Kaille?"

Ethan started to answer but didn't get even a word out.

"Of course he won't. And I was the last one to see Nap. I must go with him. Moreover, it's my family we're to discuss with her. Isn't that right?"

Ethan eyed Kannice again, his nod reluctant. "She should be there. Something is afoot, and I'd bet every coin in my purse that Sephira knows what it is."

"And it must be tied with the man Nap was going to see," Hannah added. "The one who owes you coin."

Hannah fingered her borrowed finery. The skirt was of warm brown wool and smelled of fresh bread and herbs, stored as it had been in the small nook over the Dowsing Rod's storage area. It

was a bit too full in the bosom, and an inch too long, but it was clean and dry, and Kannice had offered to clean and repair her own gown while they were gone. Hannah had no idea how she might repay the kindness of Ethan's wife. And no idea why the lovely woman had married such a curmudgeon as Ethan, though she was too well-bred by far to ask such a thing.

"Woolgathering?" Ethan asked as they walked the byways across town. "Or worried about meeting Sephira?"

Hannah dropped the fabric and pulled on her gloves against the cool of day's end, as much to avoid Ethan's gaze as to ward off the chill. "Both, I suppose. She does have quite the reputation."

"If she or her toughs attack us, or if at any time you fear for your safety, get out of the house. Once you're on the street, you should be out of harm's way, and out of mine as well."

"Or I can stay and fight."

Ethan laughed and Hannah narrowed her eyes at him. "And how would you defend yourself," he asked, "against pistol rounds and the spells of Mariz, her conjurer?"

"I would open a ward of protection, of course."

"A...ward." Ethan slowed and tilted his head at her, something odd in his eyes.

Hannah stopped in the street. She had practiced this in the backyard of her aunt's house, and had made a token in which to store the working: a stone removed from the shore of the bay, well washed in the waters from which she took her power.

Taking a slow breath, Hannah held out her hand for Ethan's. He stared at her hand for the space of several seconds before placing his hand into hers.

Hannah uttered a single word. "*Hedge*." She felt her magics rush through her, through Ethan, and into the ground. Around them a hedge warding opened, a blue-green shield of magics.

Ethan's russet ghost appeared beside the thieftaker, his glowing eyes fixed on her.

Light shimmered around them, the color of Boston Harbour on a bright summer day. The power of it brushed the skin on Ethan's face and neck, and raised goosebumps beneath the sleeves on his coat.

Ethan stared at Uncle Reg, the spectral guide who usually appeared only when he conjured.

"Why are you here?" He rounded on Hannah so abruptly, she actually backed away from him.

“What did you do?” he demanded.

“I--I opened a ward--”

“Aye, you said as much. But how did you access my power?” He pointed at Reg, his gaze never straying from the girl’s face. “What is he doing here?”

“I don’t know,” she said, eyes wide. “I swear it. I used my magicks, as you’ve seen me do before. But I wished to open the ward around both of us, to keep you safe as well. Perhaps that drew him here.”

Reg still watched the girl, but Ethan had to admit he didn’t appear any the worse for having been drawn to them by whatever witchery she had done. Indeed, his expression was more one of curiosity than alarm or hostility.

Ethan inhaled, blew out the breath, feeling something loosen in his chest. It had only been a few months since another conjurer, one of far more malign intent, had used Ethan’s power as his own, casting spells that wreaked havoc in the streets of Boston, and nearly destroying Ethan’s life. The memory remained too raw, but that wasn’t Hannah’s fault.

“I promise you, Mister Kaille . . .”

He raised a hand, and she fell silent. “It’s all right. I don’t believe you’ve done anything wrong. It was . . . I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have reacted as I did.”

She watched him, whatever relief she might have felt at his apology clearly tempered by her confusion at his erratic behavior.

“You say we’re protected now?” he asked, resuming their walk across the city. Reg glided with them, watching the girl still. Ethan wasn’t sure whether he should dismiss the spectre or be glad of Reg’s continued presence.

Hannah hurried after him. “Yes. A ward of protection is proof against most any danger we might face.”

“You won’t mind if I cast a warding on both of us. I carry mullein for just that purpose.”

Her expression soured. “You’re free to do as you wish, of course. But it would be a waste of the leaf.”

“Can you feel this ward of which she speaks?” Ethan asked, drawing Reg’s bright gaze.

The ghost nodded.

“Would you trust it to protect us from Sephira and her men? Would you trust it against Mariz’s conjurings?”

Reg eyed them both, as if he could see her witchery clinging to them. For all Ethan knew, he could. After a few seconds, the ghost nodded again.

“Should I cast a warding as well?”

Reg shrugged, then shook his head, drawing a satisfied grin from the young witch. Ethan tried to smile in turn, but was reasonably sure he produced naught but a grimace.

Hannah imagined the house owned by the self-styled Empress of the South End, Sephira Pryce, would be the finest thing she had ever seen. She envisioned marble colonnades and wondrous gardens. When Ethan pointed it out to her from some distance, she was mildly disappointed. Marble it was, and the gardens were fine. But she had seen larger, fancier homes on Beacon Street and in the finest neighborhoods of the North End.

They were halfway down the street from Pryce’s home, when Ethan paused. "Did you see that?" he asked. Ethan pulled her to the side, into a byway that gave them a view of the house and the strange antics of a figure in the shadows. Hannah gathered her borrowed skirts close and leaned to obtain a better perspective.

Ahead, in the shadows cast by the home next to Sephira’s, something moved. "I see a person," Hannah said, her voice dropping to a murmur. "Please tell me 'tis human and not some hell-spawn creature as we saw when last we worked together." That creature had been half the size of a man, naked and hairless, its skin the gray of ash, its limbs short but its hands and feet tapered and almost graceful, in contrast to the black eyes and those terrible teeth, bared in rage. Ethan had called it a fae, and it had called itself Unseelie, but whatever its creature-name, it had been horrible.

"Nay," Ethan said. "Neither hell-spawn nor fae, but human. I do believe that’s Nap, trying to gain entrance to the house via the side window."

The figure resolved itself to a man, but he didn’t look like the man she remembered from only hours before. "Nap was wearing outer clothing, with breeches, a coat, and shoes, prior to the explosion. Threadbare at cuffs and hem and with rounded heels and holes at the toes, to be sure, but he was not coatless, barelegged, and barefoot as he now appears."

Ethan chuckled under his breath.

"You find this amusing? And why would he not use the door?"

"Amusing because Nap would only be missing his outer garments had someone more powerful taken them from him."

Hannah twisted her mind around whom Ethan might mean. She took a slow breath and smiled. "Lieutenant Patterson."

"That would be my guess," Ethan said.

"When Nap went to collect the half-crown he sought to steal from you, the Lieutenant took his clothes and sent him back without. And likely after a good drubbing. But why should he seek to enter the house and obtain clothing without being seen? Such conduct against one of Sephira's men should result in instant retaliation, not such sneaking around."

"Unless..." Ethan prompted her.

Hannah thought a moment and then met his smile with one of her own. "Unless he was collecting the half-crown to keep as his own, not to turn over to his mistress. The man is a *sneak*."

"Perhaps," Ethan said. "Stay behind me, but keep your ward prepared." With those words, Ethan stepped into the street and approached the alley between Sephira's house and the house beside it.

So absorbed was Nap by his efforts to enter Sephira's home, that he remained utterly unaware of Ethan and Hannah's approach. Still, Ethan placed his feet with care, and his young companion did the same. As they drew nearer, Ethan saw that the tough had bruises and cuts along the contour of his jaw and the side of his neck. And indeed he was inappropriately dressed for polite company and the weather.

He had braced a pair of fat logs against the house, and was balanced on them precariously as he grappled with the sash. His rear parts were high off the ground, and chill bumps covered his arse. Ethan resisted the urge to chuckle, and to cover Hannah's eyes.

Halting a few paces short of the man, Ethan cleared his throat.

Nap whirled, causing the logs to topple to the side. He fell to the grass, landing hard on his rump, but doing no serious damage to anything more vital than his pride.

He glared up at Ethan, his dark eyes ringed by still more bruising, his lip split, his chin caked with dried blood. Whoever had taken his clothing had also given him a thorough beating. Ethan

had endured enough similar thrashings at the hands of Nap and his fellow toughs to inoculate him from any pangs of sympathy.

“What are you doin’ here?” Nap asked in a low voice. He clambered to his feet, glanced Hannah’s way, but then eyed Ethan again.

“Apparently, I’m saving the home of Boston’s foremost thieftaker from a gutting.”

“Keep your voice down.”

Ethan raised an eyebrow.

“Please,” Nap grumbled, the word wrung from him like water from a damp rag.

“A few answers might buy my silence,” Ethan said, dropping his voice a little, though not to the level of Nap’s whispers.

The tough’s gaze darted toward the rear of the house. “I’m not in the habit of answerin’ to the likes of you,” he said, his voice a rasp. “Now be gone.”

Ethan shrugged. “We were on our way here, as it happens. I require a word with Herself.” He started in the direction of the front door, gesturing for Hannah to follow. “It’s possible I’ll let slip what I’ve seen. Sephira has ways of loosening a man’s tongue.”

“Wait!”

Ethan stopped again, turned. He kept his expression mild.

Nap tugged at the hem of his shirt, as if belatedly aware that Hannah could see his legs. “What do you want to know?” he asked, surrender in his tone.

“Who did this to you?”

“I’ll not tell you that.”

“All right. Why were you beaten and robbed?”

“I won’t answer that, either.”

Ethan frowned. “I’m not sure you understand how the 'answering questions' element of our arrangement is supposed to work.”

“Were you on King Street when the bomb exploded?” Hannah asked.

Nap hesitated.

“There are burns on his arms,” she said to Ethan, “and his shirt is blackened at the shoulder.”

She was right. Ethan hadn’t noticed.

“Answer her,” he said. “Or we go to Sephira, right now.”

After a moment, Nap nodded, tight-lipped. “Aye. I was there.”

“And is there some link between the explosion and this state you’re in?” Ethan asked.

“A fine question,” came a voice Ethan knew all too well. “I’d like an answer to that as well.”

Sephira stood just behind them, dressed for riding in a short skirt that revealed her booted ankles, a waistcoat and jacket, and a whip in one gloved hand. "I leave my own home for an afternoon ride and everything falls apart. A bomb explodes in my city. My man is beaten and, from the looks of things, his clothes are stolen." She took three slow steps into the small space, forcing Hannah and then Ethan out of her way. The smell of horse and stable clung to her. Her lustrous hair, which had clearly begun the day braided in a thick plait, had come loose, small strands flying in the breeze of her progress.

With each step she said, "While I don’t approve of the riffraff questioning my men, I must say that my curiosity is piqued as well. You will answer. Now. Who did this to you? Why were you beaten and robbed? And why were you on King Street when the bomb exploded?"

As she walked down the center of the small space, Nap backed away from her, only to trip and fall to the ground once more. He crawled on his elbows and bare feet, crabbing away, before rolling over and trying to stand. Hannah turned her face to the street. There were things she did not need or desire to see ever again in this life and Nap's bare bum was now foremost among them.

"Answer me, Nap, or I'll give Ethan leave to scorch you with his magicks. He’d probably enjoy exacting a bit of revenge for all you’ve done to him over the years. You and I both know he has cause."

"I’m not yours to command, Sephira," Ethan murmured, his voice too low to carry to the retreating Nap. But Sephira heard and laughed, as if she found Ethan amusing. Hannah narrowed her eyes, wondering if there were workings that would set hair afire. She rather thought that the Empress of the South End would look splendid racing down the street with a flaming head.

Amused by the thought, still eyeing the lane, Hannah spotted a man watching them, hiding in the very byway where she and Ethan had hidden only moments before. Had he been following them, spying? And if so, had this man—whoever he was—seen her in her working?

With his attention still fixed on Sephira and her man, Ethan didn't realize Hannah had sidled nearer to him until she whispered, "There's a man. Don't turn! He's behind you, in the same lane from which we approached the house."

"What did she say?" Sephira asked, eyeing Ethan.

Ignoring her, Ethan checked the position of the sun, looked up Summer Street away from where Hannah said the man was hiding. Finally he glanced back in direction from which they had come.

The man stood in shadows, his coat and breeches dark, his plaited hair as black as pitch, his eyes shaded by a prominent brow. Ethan didn't allow his gaze to linger; he pretended not to have noticed him at all. But he had time enough to register a tall, lean form, broad shoulders and long limbs.

"Nap," he said, his voice low, his tone even, "please turn slowly and tell me if you recognize the man standing in the byway, two houses down."

Sephira stiffened, but was too disciplined to turn in haste.

Despite his predicament, Nap responded with cool restraint as well. He didn't look right away. But when he did, a frown crossed his features. Even before the tough spoke, Ethan had a sense of what he would say.

"What man? I see no one."

Ethan and Hannah spun. Sephira spat a none-too-ladylike imprecation.

"He can't have gone far," Hannah said, lifting her petticoats and racing toward the lane.

Ethan sped past her, reaching the byway in mere moments. He caught a glimpse of the man as he rounded the far corner, and sprinted after him. "Tell Sephira to send Mariz, and whomever else she can spare!" he called over his shoulder.

He heard Hannah relay his message, but he heard her footfalls as well, and he muttered a curse of

his own. He had hoped to keep the young witch from following him. Understanding her as he already did, though, he should have known better than to think it would be so easy to keep her from danger.

Reaching the end of the first byway, Ethan spotted his quarry nearing the intersection with Marlborough Street. If the stranger managed to turn onto the thoroughfare, Ethan would lose him amid the midday throng. He ran on, his limp worsening by the moment, pain radiating from foot to thigh. At the same time, he drew his blade, slashed the back of his hand, and muttered, "*Pugnus ex cruore evocatus.*" Fist conjured from blood.

He aimed the spell at the retreating figure's back, and it struck true, knocking the man off his feet. He flailed as he fell, hit hard on the cobblestone street, and lay still for a moment.

As Ethan neared him, however, the stranger scrambled to his feet once more and spun. A pistol glinted in his hand, full-cocked and leveled at Ethan's heart. Ethan skidded to a halt, shoes scraping on stone. He shouted a warning to Hannah behind him. But the alley was empty; he had nowhere to hide.

Hannah shouldered past him, extended a hand. Magick brushed Ethan's face, made his skin prickle.

The man gave a cry, and the pistol fell from his hand and discharged, the report deafening in the narrow lane. But the round glanced off a building, harming no one. The man stared at Hannah for the span of a heartbeat. Then he ran on, turning onto Marlborough.

Questions flared in Ethan's mind, but he knew they would have to wait. He pushed past the young witch to pursue the man, Uncle Reg glowing beside him.

"Are you here because of my spell or hers?" Ethan asked the spirit, gasping the words as he ran.

Reg pointed at Ethan.

"I suppose that's reassuring."

Ethan turned onto the thoroughfare, and caught sight of the man running back toward Cornhill and the heart of the city. The stranger wove among laborers and chaises, past women and children. He glanced back only once, as if to see if Ethan still followed. Spotting him, he continued on. But as he gave chase, Ethan felt another stirring of magick slide by, as soft as a caress. He hoped it might slow the man, but it didn't.

He followed for as long as he could, but the man was faster than he, and crowds choked the city street. Before long he had lost sight of the stranger. He slowed, stopped, whispered an imprecation.

Moments later, Hannah reached him, flushed and breathless. "Where is he?"

"I lost him."

"No matter. I touched him with another working, a finding. I should be able to locate him again."
