



The Undertow

“**T**he curse to be born is to die. No one escapes here alive. Take one last breath as you go. Pulled down in the undertow,” a middle-aged, portly man, read aloud, repeating the last verse over and over as he scratched at his itching beard; its longish point resting on a crudely written scroll he had found on his doorstep moments before. “Interesting, if not a little grim.”

For the life of him, he didn’t know why he kept the unruly facial hair. He surmised it was because it made him feel more wizardly. If he wanted the mystical world to take him seriously, he felt he needed to look the part. Besides, appearances would go a long way if he wanted to get something out of the Samhain festivities taking place on the morrow. Marking the turn of the occult new year, it boded

well that a significant practitioner of the mystical arts would be in attendance. Likely more than one, if he dared to hope.

If only the ill-begotten rain would pause long enough to allow the ceremonial fires to be lit. Though he lacked the required coordination, taking part in the deosil dance of the local witch community was necessary if the good folk of Salisbury were to mitigate the toll of the approaching winter on the elders and the sickly.

Reflecting on what he had just read, the verse's spiritual message sent goosebumps crawling up his back; an eerie tingling sensation taking root along the base of his scalp beneath a full head of long, prematurely graying hair. Perhaps he should bring the scroll with him and inquire of the High Priestess what she understood the words to mean. Should she consent to speak with him, that is. The insufferable woman exuded an air of superiority that rankled him more than he cared to admit.

He sighed. Nothing good was ever gained by fretting over the worries of the morrow.

Recalling what he had been up to before the peculiar sensation had prompted him to open the exterior door of his ramshackle, one-roomed hovel to find the scroll left on his doorstep, he tried to put the High Priestess out of mind.

Something about the aged appearance of the scroll unsettled him—an omen of what might soon come to pass. Something his instinct hinted might involve the local coven.

The worst part about the discovery of the mysterious message was realizing that he wasn't about to decipher its meaning without putting in the commitment the local coven required. It was an ongoing dilemma he had promised himself last year around this time that he would no longer tolerate. And yet, here he was, dependent upon those who sought his favour.

Temporarily forgotten, the ancient paper crackled as it rolled back upon itself—abandoned as he, a self-proclaimed warlock, lit a candle and placed it on the stone sill of the cottage’s solitary window. With any luck, the visions created by the flickering light wouldn’t prove as auspicious as last year. However prophetic his otherworldly predictions had proven to be, the village folk wouldn’t abide much more of his grim prophecies. Revelations he would rather avoid having to make if it were up to him. Capable of special skills not many outside the world of witchcraft had the ability to perform, he felt it his God-given duty to warn his fellow citizens of their impending hardships.

He grunted at the irony. *God-given, indeed. More like a curse...*

Eyes widening, his attention snapped back to the scroll—the yellowed parchment mocking him with its presence as its warning continued to echo in his head. *The curse to be born is to die.*

If he wasn’t mistaken, a deeper, underlying meaning existed in those words. A forecast of dire events that were about to be unleashed on the world unless he could find a way to avert the ensuing tragedy. Chilled, he lamented that his next couple of days would take him away from what he had the local blacksmith working on. ‘An epiphany born out of legend,’ he had called it.

To compound his worries, the advent of the scroll would probably set his research back even further as he struggled to puzzle out its true intent.

He took a deep breath. For now, it was imperative that he discovered who had left it. Especially if it signified that the blasted witch hunters had caught wind of his work and were on their way to pay him a visit.

Naïve in many things, he was no fool. He *had* been followed recently. If he wasn't mistaken, someone had taken to spying on his everyday activities, thinking they were sneaky enough to conceal their presence from him. Not overly threatened by what he had considered a harmless act, he hadn't bothered to pay much attention to the incursion.

Until now.

The underlying implications of the scroll's message altered how he thought about going forward. Fairly confident that no one of authority had turned their eye his way, the introduction of the ominous tidings made it clear that it was paramount he discovered the identity of his stalker before he came to rue his ignorance.

Chin in hand, he considered his dilemma. He couldn't deny that it *was* possible the mystery person might be an agent of the queen. If that were true, it would be someone of import. Lizzy's parliament had passed a second witchcraft act a couple of decades earlier, tightening the penalties for the conviction of invoking evil spirits for any purpose. Since then, the witching community had gone to ground more so than ever before, and for good reason. With the abdication of Mary, Queen of Scots—precipitated by the rumours of her role in her late husband's death—King James and his regency had taken control of the north and were fanning the flames of the witch hysteria sweeping the land.

Not caring to ponder that scenario lest he induce unnecessary panic, he decided that his stalker might be a local citizen who had taken more than a passing interest in his private endeavours. In fact, it could be one of the witches from the Salisbury Plain coven. In the past, their High Priestess had made no secret that she desired his increased involvement in their supernatural activities and had subsequently presented as openly spurned after his latest

refusal to do so. As such, her attitude toward him had been cold over the past year.

He sighed. It wasn't like he didn't appreciate the Witches of Salisbury Plain. He was just unwilling to give up his autonomy in the occult world to appease their desires. Of the belief he could better attain his goals by himself, he had turned down several occasions to join them over the years, but the more he dwelled on the matter lately, the more he realized that becoming part of a greater community might actually benefit his deepest desire.

With a shake of his head, he dismissed his perpetual battle of morals and concentrated on the matter at hand. *Whoever* skulked in the shadows, the presence of the scroll forced his hand. It was nigh time he discovered their identity, if for no other reason than to ease his troubled mind on the off chance that things went badly for him.

He considered that last thought and nodded. Why else would anyone exert the energy to keep tabs on what he dabbled in unless they harboured ulterior motives?

Having little time to spend on the conundrum at the moment, the mystery of the scroll would have to wait for another day. He had a ceremony to attend.

Not relishing the wearisome trek up to Salisbury Plain, it was a trip he could not, in good conscience, avoid. Whether the residents of Salisbury liked it or not, they had a right to know their future. Especially if someone were blessed with the means of accessing the hidden knowledge, such as he.

He stopped to gaze at the leaden sky through the grimy windowpane, his haggard complexion reflected in the candle glow, and said out loud, "Even if what I discover foreshadows their death?"

Turning back to stare at the unkempt room littered with open tomes, jars lining sagging shelves laden with various-

shaped vessels filled with unguents and precious metal filings amongst other, more undesirable substances, he answered himself, “Yes, Herbert Gullveig. Even if it means being pulled down in the undertow.”