

NAOMI AND THE BOOK

A long time ago, there was a book. The book belonged to a woman. If the woman had been a man, she would have been a priest, a high priest even, but there were no woman priests where the woman was, so she became a witch instead, a witch being only the unauthorised version of a priest. As a woman, she had had nothing to with the approved rituals of the kingdom, but as a witch she was able to practise other rituals, rituals which some people said were more powerful than the rituals of the kingdom: admittedly, they normally said this a few seconds before someone set light to them on a bonfire, but they said it nevertheless.

The woman was a witch, and the witch had a name, which was Naomi, and Naomi soon became well-versed in the other rituals. She took care to keep this skill to herself because in this kingdom women were not encouraged to read or write or do any kind of work outside the home, and witchcraft involved all three of those things. It was a time when the religion of the kingdom was strictly enforced and witchcraft was not tolerated and so it was not politic or safe for Naomi to advertise her skills. She confined herself to learning and to increasing her wisdom, which activities kept her away from the attention of the authorities, but tended to displease her neighbours, who grumbled about her refusing to cure their sheep and make their daughters marriageable. But a few stern glances from Naomi, as well as the odd burning barn and exploding cow, ensured that nobody grumbled too loudly.

One day a famine came upon the land, followed swiftly by a plague, and then a war. The war didn't last long, because the invading armies had nothing to eat on account of the famine and then mostly died of the plague, but it did serve to make things worse. And so the king was compelled to call his three chief priests together and ask them what they planned to do about the state of the land.

The first priest said, "We have already been praying night and day. Our priests have flagellated themselves and our congregations have asked forgiveness for their sins."

"And yet nothing has got better," said the king.

The second priest said, "We have sacrificed our animals and thrown large quantities of valuable objects into the sea."

"And yet nothing has got better," said the king.

The third priest said, "We have tortured the atheists until they confessed their crimes and we have burned the heretics in cages."

"And yet nothing has got better," said the king for a third time.

"We've pretty much done everything," replied the first priest, and the other priests nodded their agreement.

"Have we considered torturing any priests?" asked the king. "Or throwing them into the sea or burning them?"

"There is one other option," said the first priest.

Naomi was in her cottage, reading, when there was a knock on the door. She was almost glad of the interruption, because the book she was reading was one that had first to be written before it could be read, and the ink it required to be written in was Naomi's own blood, and also the print was quite small, so all in all it was a tiring read. She put the book down, dabbed at the cut on her arm, and went to open the door.

Outside stood a young man in the garb of a herald. In fact, he was a herald.

"I have come -"

"To take me to the king, I know," said Naomi.

"- for the land has grave -"

"Need of me, yes, I'll just get my big coat."

“You are a mighty witch,” said the herald in awe of her ability to foretell what he would say.

“And you’re a royal herald,” Naomi pointed out. “You’re hardly likely to be taking me to see the pig race. Here, hold this.”

And she handed him a large cauldron full of books.

“Have you come far?” enquired the King.

“Just three villages from here,” Naomi replied. “Now what do you want me to sort out first, the plague or the famine?”

“You are a mighty witch!” cried the king.

“Lucky guess,” said Naomi.

“Can you help us?” the king asked.

“Depends,” Naomi replied. “On what you do for me.”

“You would bargain with us?” the king asked.

“Not at all,” Naomi said. “If you want to carry on eating stones and dying of boils, that’s entirely your choice.”

“What is it that you want? A castle? It is yours. A fleet of ships? They await your command. The hand of my son? You shall have it.”

“None of that,” Naomi answered. “A castle I can conjure up from sand and dust. I have no need of ships when porpoises and fish will carry wherever I want to go. And your son has no chin. No, what I desire is this: that my sisters and brothers in witchcraft and wizardry be allowed to live their lives unhindered and practise their arts as they will.”

“No!” said the king. “Such magic is evil and must be suppressed.”

“Then arrest me,” said Naomi. “Forbid my magic and incarcerate me. For I am the greatest witch of all.”

“Perhaps we are being too hasty,” said the king. “We will draw up a charter, permitting those who practise the black arts - ”

“The *magickal* arts,” corrected Naomi.

“- to live in freedom,” finished the king. “Now please, stop this famine and end this plague.”

“All right then,” said Naomi. “Now, I’m going to need a room, some ink, some paper. Oh, and some cheese.”

“Cheese?” said the king.

“Yes, I’m starving.”

For three days and nights Naomi laboured in her room at the top of the highest turret in the castle. On the fourth day, the king himself banged on the door and said:

“What are you doing in there? My people are starving and ill.”

“Keep your crown on,” said Naomi. She was standing behind him with a book in her hand.

The king turned. “What magic is this?” he asked. “How did you get out of the room without - ”

“I was in the bathroom,” said Naomi. “Here, take this.”

She proffered the book to the king. He took it.

“There is a hasp on this book,” said the king. “Or a clasp, I forget which.”

“It is there for a reason,” Naomi replied. “If anyone save I reads the spell within in, it will not work.”

“If anyone save - ” the king began, confused by the witch’s grammar.

“I mean if anyone else reads it apart from me, it won’t work.”

“Oh.”

The king gave back the book.
“Right, let’s go,” said Naomi.

In the great hall of the royal palace, all were gathered, bishops and priests and lords and judges and some women as well. In the centre of the hall, facing the throne, on which sat the king, was a table, and at that table stood Naomi the witch, with the book in front of her.

“Hurry,” said the king, “There is no time to lose.”

“Where is the charter?” asked Naomi.

The king signalled impatiently, and a page stepped forward and read the charter. It was quite short and by the time the page had got to “and all practitioners thereof will be free in perpetuity their magickal arts to pursue” the king was drumming his finger on the arm of his throne.

“Finally,” he said when the page had rolled up the charter. “Now, if you please - ”

Naomi undid the hasp, or clasp, on the front of the book and opened it. A gasp ran around the hall.

“It is empty!” cried a bishop.

“What trick is this?” shouted a judge.

Naomi merely smiled and turned the pages.

“They’re all empty!” cried an earl.

“It’s an empty book!” said a duke.

At last Naomi stopped turning the pages. She had reached the middle of the book where, on one page and one page only, a single word was printed. The word was ALEPH.

“Is that it?” said the king.

“How many words did you want?” Naomi replied.

She looked at the page and spoke the word:

“Aleph.”

A ripple seemed to run through the room and everyone found themselves holding on to the nearest cleric or nobleman as the very air shook for a moment, and was then silent.

“It is done,” said Naomi and turned to leave.

“Not so fast,” the king said.

Guards appeared and held the witch fast.

“We cannot have sorceresses telling us what to do,” explained the king. “Throw her into a dungeon.”

Naomi went into the dungeon silently. She spoke not a word as the guards slammed shut the door and bolted it from the outside. She ignored her dinner of oats and water, and she sat without moving as night fell outside her prison.

The king woke in the night. A window was battering itself against the wall and rain was coming in and soaking the fine rugs on the floor. He waited for a servant to run in and close the window, but none came. Putting on his robe, he went outside.

The corridor, which was on the second floor, was ankle-deep in water. Servants ran about with buckets and barrels, trying to contain the flood. A fish floated past the king. On a whim, he knelt down and tasted the water: it was salty.

The captain of the guard appeared.

“Your majesty, a boat awaits,” he said.

“A boat?” asked the king, “Why?”

“Sire, the sea - ”

“What of it? Is it rising?”

“No sire,” said the captain. “It is *raining*.”

The king still looked confused, so the captain went on:

“The sea is raining on us, sire.”

From his best ship, the king looked back at the castle. The valley in which it stood was filled with water – seawater that was somehow falling from the sky.

“Kill the witch,” he ordered.

The captain of the guard looked sheepish.

“She is gone,” he said. “The first thing we did was go to her dungeon, but it was empty. In it we found only this.”

He opened his palm. In it was a wooden model of a fish, with glass spikes of rain shooting from its stomach.

“Find her!” cried the king.

The sea rain stopped after two days and two nights, when it had thoroughly drenched the kingdom in salt rain, killing every surviving crop and ruining every single ounce of drinking water. The peasants who had survived the plague worked hard to restore their smallholdings, but there was no food to fill the nobles tables and the efforts of the king’s army to tax the peasants failed when a mysterious second wave of plague swept through the royal barracks. The kingdom survived, but not the king, who caught a nasty bout of sea flu and died the same day as most of his nobles and clerics.

As for Naomi, she was never seen again. Her book, however, still exists. It was hastened to safety by a master librarian who secreted it in the reading room of one of the libraries of the old university. For years, he never dared look at it, lest it release some evil magic into the world: but one day, when he was old and deaf and feeble and dying, and felt that nothing much could possibly harm him now, he unfastened the clasp (or hasp) and opened the book.

There once more was the word:

ALEPH.

He was about to read it when another word appeared next to it, also ALEPH. And next to that, a third ALEPH.

And another, and another until the page was filled with ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH.

And the page before it and the page after it, all ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH until soon the entire book was full with ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH ALEPH and he no longer knew which ALEPH was which and could not find the original, and therefore magical ALEPH.