

THE BOOKS OF PANDEMONIUM: BOOK 1

BLACK ARTS

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Chapter 1

London, 1592

The day of the testing dawned cold and bright. Jack scrunched the top of his blanket up around his chin, huddling in the warmth. This was his favourite time of day. It belonged to him and nobody else, not even his ma.

He listened to her gentle snores, and watched a spot of light move slowly across the wall.

Jack had built the wall himself when the old one fell down, using an enormous slab of wood that he'd found washed up in the estuary mud. It had spent a long time underwater, and was crannied all over with dark fissures and tiny holes made by worms. You could still just make out a worn carving of a lion in the centre. Jack liked to imagine that it had once been part of a Spanish admiral's dining table. It had taken him

a whole afternoon and two fist-fights to get it home safe.

The spot of light moved across the pitted wood, regular as a sundial. Right now it was crawling along a deep crack that ran from one corner to the centre, approaching the lion. When it reached it, his ma would stop snoring. A couple of minutes later, St Olave's bell would strike seven. Jack would have to come out of his blanket cocoon; it would be cold, and there would be things to do. Today there would be big things to do.

The delicious, warm, half-asleep feeling was ebbing away already. Jack pulled the blanket tighter, trying to hold it in.

His ma stopped snoring. Jack's eyes flicked back to the spot of light: there it was, right on the mark. He concentrated on feeling as warm and comfortable as possible.

The bell began to bong. His ma cleared her throat with an explosive *harrumph*.

' . . . five . . . six . . . seven, and up!'

Jack's ma had always been a brisk riser of a morning. She was a large woman, and she'd been slowed down in a lot of ways after her left foot was crushed under a stolen demi-cannon when Jack was eight. She'd had to quit her trade, but she'd never let the accident change her morning routine.

'Up, me lad! Up to greet the new day!' She seized the stick that lay on the floor beside her and heaved herself

upright. She stretched, yawned and shuddered with pleasure.

‘Cold one today. Get your blood flowing, Jack. Put some colour in those cheeks of yours. Tingle the yumours . . .’

Jack pulled his blanket up over his head.

Already she was clumping about, starting the morning’s business. Her big, sturdy body was like an earthquake in the tiny room, pulling on clothes over her nightshirt, banging open the bread box for breakfast, jabbing at last night’s fire to see if it had any life left in it. Jack heard a grunt of satisfaction, then a sucking sound as she lit her pipe.

Like the Spanish admiral’s table, the tobacco in her pipe had come from the river – a cask washed up just east of Custom House Quay, trundled away by Jack before the stevedores could get it. It burned with a thick black smoke that smelled of mud and rotting winter leaves.

‘Ah . . . what a tingle! Have a puff, Jack. Lord knows, you need as much tingle as you can get, today of all days.’

‘Ma . . .’

‘Yes, lad?’

‘No.’

Jack stumbled to his feet, staggered into his trousers, wrapped the blanket round his shoulders and made a dash for the door. He’d got used to his ma’s craze for tobacco

smoking – mostly – but first thing in the morning it was still too much.

‘Your loss, Jack!’ Her laughter followed him out into the fresh air.

Jack’s gaff was built up against the north wall of a small, grey, moss-eaten court. The court had no entrance apart from an ivy-choked opening in the west wall. Jack had found it two summers ago, while hunting for rats with a stray dog he’d made an alliance with. The dog had disappeared last winter, but the court remained. He had no idea what it was doing here, walled away in the middle of the Southwark Shambles. His best guess was that it still existed because no one else knew about it.

The court was empty apart from Jack’s gaff and a canvas tent that sagged against the opposite wall. It had rained in the night, and pools of water gleamed in the tent’s folds. The pile of firewood under the canvas was dry, Jack noted with satisfaction.

He pulled down one corner of the tent’s roof. Clear, cold rainwater sloshed down over his head, making his scalp tingle. He rubbed his head dry with the blanket.

‘How’s the foot, Ma?’

‘Oh, very bad . . . very bad . . .’ She poked her head through the doorway, blew a smoke-ring, and winked at him. ‘Never you mind the foot. You mind Sharkwell, boy. You worry about the testing.’

She was watching him, her strong, gypsy-queen brows

drawn together over her dark eyes. Most mornings, her eyes contained a spark of devilish laughter, just waiting for the right thing to set her off; but now they were serious.

She knocked out her pipe against the wall. 'Had your wash?'

'Yes, Ma.'

'Teeth?' She handed him the tooth stick, frayed at one end. Jack used the frayed end to poke half-heartedly at his teeth. His ma was smoothing down his hair, plastering it over his forehead.

'No practice this morning. You're ready, Jack. You stay sharp, and don't let Sharkwell put the fear on, and you'll be grand.'

Jack pulled a face, the stick still in his mouth. 'Rister Harkwell.'

She stood back and appraised his hair, nodded in satisfaction, then pulled a small chunk of black bread out from her apron, bit off a corner, and started to chew.

'Yes,' she said after she had chomped at the bread for a while. 'Mr Sharkwell. Don't forget it, Jack. You're going to have to pay mind to Mr Sharkwell from now on.'

'I know it, Ma.'

'He's a hard man, but—'

'But fair. I know.'

'You be sharp, Jack. Be sharp, and—'

'Don't cross him. I know.'

‘And don’t forget to mention my name when you speak to him . . . and steer clear of ’prentices.’

She passed him the loaf. The bread was tough and sour.

‘They’re only envious, you know . . .’ She patted his cheek. ‘You’re sharper than the lot of ’em put together. Now, it’s nearly time. Have you got your tools?’

‘Yes, Ma.’

‘Safe and ready?’

‘Yes, Ma.’

‘Show me, then.’

Jack rolled up the left sleeve of his shirt. There was a hidden pocket sewn onto the inside, and wedged into the pocket was a thin, tightly wrapped sausage of cloth.

‘Good.’ She patted his cheek again.

Jack scowled. ‘Do you have to do that, Ma?’

‘Course I do. I’m your ma.’ She laughed, and for a moment the sparkle was back in her eyes. ‘You go along now. Wouldn’t do to be late.’

Jack walked slowly across the court. Already his heart was beginning to thud. He looked back as he was lifting the mat of ivy that hid the opening in the wall.

His ma was standing at the door, watching him.

‘I’ll be back before sundown, then,’ said Jack.

‘And what else?’

She said it every day, before letting him go. The answer came on its own, like a ritual.

‘Watch my back.’

‘Never forget it, Jack,’ she said. ‘Stay sharp. Stand the test, and don’t be afraid.’

They were the last words she ever spoke to him.