

The Hour of Salem

The moon glowed white like an opal set against velvet. A cool breeze carried the smell of autumn through the air and only a lone owl called out to break the silence. Alice would have liked to spend the night inside with a blanket, but her needs this evening were different.

Red, soft leather rested in her hands as Alice thumbed through the pages of the book she'd found at the library. She liked reading about the occult, but she'd depleted the entire library catalog. Her curiosity began when she was in fifth grade and found a bit of family lore in her grandmother's attic. Allegedly, her family had ties to the witch trials, but nothing official could ever be found.

Everything Alice had read had been from a more academic perspective: rationalizations behind demons, metaphorical dissections of spell craft, and biographical information on some of Salem's most notorious witch trials. The research had grown stale for her, so Alice began seeking out true witchcraft. Most of what she found was cliché and felt like a tourist attraction more than anything of substance, but Shoni's Grimoire was different from anything else she'd read.

After Alice's research, no one named Shoni had existed during the Salem Witch Trials or any witch trial she could find records of. Shoni may have been like a pen name to keep the alleged witch safe, but Shoni's Grimoire was unlike anything she'd read before. No needlework or carving symbols into apples for Shoni, but powerful herbs mixed with naturally occurring oils along with the remains of animals that felt more like the staples of a medieval witch. After reading through the book in a single sitting, Alice felt that this was unlike anything else.

"It could be a different school of magic?" Alice asked, writing to no one in particular in her stream-of-consciousness notes. "Some witch from another time or place that found herself transported to Salem? Witches couldn't communicate freely, so it would make sense that this feels unlike anything I've read before. The biggest question is, what was it doing in a tag sale for five dollars?"

As a historical artifact, it could have been worth at least a hundred dollars, but it would be priceless to practicing occultists. It was new, something that the online community craved. Alice had offered to make scans of the pages for those who would practice, but the scans always ended up corrupted. An attempt at scanning the book had been cut short by the library scanner

sparkling until it flickered out. No one Alice knew near enough was a practitioner who felt comfortable trying their luck with one of Shoni's spells. In the end, Alice decided to try her luck.

The other thing that set Shoni's Grimoire apart was the kinds of spells. Many grimoires were likened to magical remedies and passive curses. Shoni's spell craft sounded more like science fiction: lures of eternal youth, time travel, creating matter from nothing, instantly healing terrible wounds... Shoni could have been a mad woman with dreams of the distant future, but her writing was so clear and sensible that it read like an instruction manual. The spell she chose in the end allowed her to go back and witness an hour at a moment of power.

Gathering the herbs was the hardest task. The ingredients were clear, but finding them was more challenging. What fascinated Alice was that the herbs were more or less local to Salem. It meant that Shoni—whether foreign or local—spent enough time in America to compile her spells thoroughly to match Alice's location. Wandering through public parks and more than her fair share of private yards was awkward, but she walked the neighbor's dog and disguised her foraging with poop bags. She had to sort through her collection at the end of the day to find the herbs exactly as Shoni described down to the number of leaves. Just finding the herbs was enough of a challenge. The spell she'd chosen had limited animal ingredients, but she did have to order some oil made from elm trees online. On the time and moon phase of Shoni's choosing, Alice found a place to cast the spell.

"A place of great woe..." Alice thought. She'd spent the day wandering through town, but couldn't find something that resonated quite right. Finally, she found a place in town. It was known by locals as the Hanging Tree. While official executions were more notable, the Hanging Tree was a place where less official executions had taken place without even the dignity of a rigged trial. It was rumored that eighteen (or thirteen depending on the story told) alleged witches were murdered under the boughs of the Hanging Tree. It made Alice sick to her stomach to consider how many people had been murdered out of paranoia, the lives lost amid fear. It wasn't a famous place of atrocities, but it was a great and reserved woe.

Alice dropped the herbs into a bowl of water, spilling a spiral of elm oil into the concoction. As the water spiraled, Alice started chanting the words she'd spent the days before memorizing:

“From hours passed, in time to come,
This light shall find its home.
Let me see what has been done,
By the glow of the rising moon.”

The breeze seemed to stop for a moment and Alice felt her breath catch. Her thoughts spiraled out of control and she had to take a moment to remember what was real. Suddenly the crisp autumn night didn't feel real. The leaves rasped together as the wind pushed through them and a bitter cold wormed its way into Alice's scarf. She clutched her elbows but kept chanting through the fear roiling in her stomach. Two more times and she closed her eyes. “This isn't a real spell,” Alice said, encouraging and calming herself. “This isn't a real spell...”

Warmth flashed over Alice's face and she risked opening one eye. The world was bleary like she was looking through water as she tried to blink the tears away. Through it all, Alice saw a flickering light beneath the tree. It split and multiplied into three smaller torches all together under the tree. The picture became clearer as Alice saw a collection of faces under the tree. Three men stood around the Hanging Tree with a woman bound by her wrists. The woman looked just like Alice.

Alice almost stood, but a hand gripped her shoulder, cold and bony. Alice turned and saw only the grey, flaky fingers with bloody nail beds. “No...” a voice whispered, “you haven't been here yet. Not this way...”

“Who is she?”

“No one of consequence,” the voice continued, ice clinging to her ears. “She was accused of witchcraft and the people could not wait. She will die soon.”

“Who are you?”

“You've been spreading my name...you know me well. I wondered where my book had drifted off to.”

“Shoni?”

“Yes.” Alice could feel the smile curling across Shoni's lips and the wet exhale left condensation on the side of her face. She focused her attention back on the Hanging Tree, the woman pleading quietly as the men prepared the noose.

“Why are you showing me this?”

“Me? You cast the spell that brought you here. You are the one responsible for your predicament.”

“Predicament?”

“You asked to see what had happened here.”

“What? No, that can’t be what the spell meant!”

“My spells do exactly as they say...this is the first hanging of the Hanging Tree’s history. A nameless maid from a poor family, executed before justice was enacted. And so many more to come. She will mark this ground as haunted.”

“I didn’t want this!” Alice cried out. The events played out in front of Alice, her presence unnoticed. She couldn’t do anything, only watch. “I’ll find another spell to go back!”

“From where?” Shoni chuckled, the laugh making Alice shiver more than the chill. Alice looked down at her hands and saw the book was gone. Alice stood and turned, but Shoni was always behind her with a hand gently resting on her upper arm. “The book was never yours. It was mine and now it will go to whoever I deem it will go to next.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“I take your offering and give a gift in exchange,” Shoni said. “You wanted to know what real magic looked like? This is it. Pain and suffering from a misunderstanding brought about by ignorance.”

“I just have to wait it out,” Alice said. “Just an hour, that’s all there is...and then the spell will be over.”

“Over?” Shoni laughed, her cackle summoning a harsh wind that ruffled the leaves together. “You asked to witness an hour. The spell never said it would bring you back. Enjoy your hour of Salem...it is steeped in family history.”