

The Witchmaker
A Short History Before the Beginning

Prologue

The Ink That Never Dried

Voice of Brother Matthias, Illuminator of Shadows

The first time the manuscript breathed, Brother Matthias thought it was the cold.

Vellum curled beneath his hands as if drawing itself inward, like a creature protecting its softest parts from winter's teeth. The candles sputtered in sympathy, little golden souls trembling above their wicks. For a moment, the scriptorium seemed to exhale, ink, smoke, and the sweet rot of old parchment filling the air.

He had copied hundreds of manuscripts in his forty years behind monastery walls—psalters, treatises, dying saints' confessions whispered into his ear as they mistook him for an angel. None of the other manuscripts behaved like this. None of them whispered back.

Wrist aching from hours of writing, Matthias lifted the quill again. The page shimmered faintly, as though the letters were sweating. He hesitated to touch it even now. The ink remained tacky long after it should have dried, glistening crimson-black like the surface of a wounded fruit.

Every word is a blade, the old masters used to say.

But this manuscript had teeth.

He dipped his quill and began to trace the next line. Latin unfurled beneath his hand, elegant and severe. The author's script was furious, a theology hammered into form rather than coaxed. Matthias could almost hear the writer's ragged and righteous breath pressed into the strokes.

Then came the other voices.

Three of them, layered beneath the line he had just inked, soft as moth wings brushing against his ear.

Maiden. Mother. Crone.

A trinity of breaths, whispering from somewhere between the fibers of the page.

He froze. The quill trembled. A bead of ink swelled at its tip like a drop of blood.

"Not tonight," Matthias murmured, as if the manuscript might listen. "Please, no more tonight."

But the parchment warmed beneath his palms, unmistakably flesh-warm, and the whispering rose like the sound of women kneeling to pray, or weeping, or singing in a room he was not meant to enter.

*Do not write their lie,
Write ours.*

He had tried to tell Prior Thomas once, tried to explain how the words shifted after he wrote them, how the margins bloomed with herbal sigils he did not recall illuminating, how the text seemed to strain against the cage of doctrine pressed upon it. The prior struck him across the cheek for speaking blasphemy.

Yet blasphemy was already here, pulsing through every line.

He glanced toward the heavy door of the scriptorium. No footsteps. No coughs. The brothers slept. Only he remained awake with the pages that would not still themselves.

Matthias bent closer to the manuscript.
The ink moved.

Not much—not enough to startle a man unaccustomed to scrutiny—but to Matthias, who had spent decades watching letters dry upon skins, the movement was unmistakable. A subtle rearrangement. As if the words were tired after centuries of silence and finally remembered how to breathe.

On the lower margin, a rose appeared.

Its petals were rendered in strokes of watered vermillion, edges seeping outward into the vellum as though the flower had been pressed there moments ago, still damp with morning dew. He touched it with one trembling finger.

The paint was wet.
The whispering deepened.

*We bled for these pages.
Let them bleed for us.*

A shiver crawled up Matthias's spine. He looked at the line he had just written:

Mulier est imbecillioris fidei, woman is of weaker faith.

But below his line, faint as a ghost breathing through cloth, he saw a second sentence written in the same hand:

Woman is the faith they fear.

Heart rattling against his ribs, he scraped his chair backward. The quill clattered to the table, rolling into a pool of ink that spread like a bruise. He pressed his palm against the illuminated rose. It pulsed beneath his skin.

Something, someone, had been here before him.

He looked again at the manuscript. In the margins, he recognized a symbol he had seen only once before, carved secretly on the underside of a pilgrimage shrine: the mark of a midwife. A circle broken open. A seed split to reveal its living core.

Matthias understood then; or thought he did. This book was not merely a condemnation.

It was a battleground. A war fought in ink by men determined to define sin, and by women determined not to be defined.

The manuscript shivered again, pages rustling, though there was no wind. Lines rearranged. Marginalia rewrote themselves. The rose bled deeper.

This was no ordinary treatise. No manual. No scripture.

This was a mirror.

He closed the manuscript with shaking hands. His breath fogged the air above it.

Outside, snow fell under a relentless hush, winter burying the world while fire was being prepared for women like the ones whispering in his margins.

Matthias stood.

He gathered the manuscript, its warmth startling in his arms. Like a pulse, its spine throbbed faintly. He carried it across the scriptorium to the old stone wall near the candle rack, a hollow spot known to none but the illuminators.

He whispered a prayer he had never found in any sanctioned text: "May the truth outlive the men who fear it."

He slid the manuscript into the cavity, sealed it behind loose stones, and pressed wax over the cracks with trembling thumbs.

When he stepped back, the candles stilled. The voices quieted. Only the faint scent of roses remained.

Before leaving, Matthias touched the wall once more. "Every word is a blade," he whispered into the cold. "But even blades rust."

He extinguished the candles. Behind the wall, ink glowed softly, refusing to dry.

PART ONE

The Inquisitor's Wound

Nuremberg, Winter 1485

Snow fell like ash the morning the midwife was dragged into the square. Her name was Agnes, though the men announcing her crimes did not bother to speak it. They called her *the accused, the woman, the instrument of the devil*, but she stood straight-backed, as if simply waiting for a birth to begin.

Heinrich Kramer watched her with the thin, sharp stare of a man who had already decided the shape of truth before hearing it.

He fancied himself a scholar of women's souls, though he had never understood one. Failure had carved him clean of humility, the kind of wound that never learns to scab, only to spread.

He questioned her the way he always did: rapid, righteous, needing the cadence of her fear to steady the tremor in his own hands.

But Agnes did not tremble.

"The child was born still," she said. "It happens, Father. Blood has its seasons."

Her calmness enraged him. Women were meant to weep, to break, to justify his certainty.

"Confess," he demanded.

"No."

The crowd shifted uncomfortably. Snow gathered in the folds of her shawl. The world felt very quiet.

Heinrich stepped closer until his breath clouded the air between them. "You will confess," he hissed.

Agnes tilted her head. "You mistake silence for sin."

And then she said it, the sentence that would shape centuries: "May the ink you write with turn to blood."

Gasps. A crossing of chests. The kind of fear that thickens the air.

His face shifted. Not with belief, but humiliation. Humiliation, in men like Heinrich Kramer, is the root from which theology grows like a poisoned vine.

Heinrich lifted his quill to sign the order for her imprisonment. Crimson seeped down the shaft, warm and wet against his gloved fingers.

He wiped the quill on his sleeve, but the stain remained.

Behind him, Jakob Sprenger, the younger Dominican scholar assigned to take notes, looked away quickly. He had seen his sister speak with similar steadiness before the friars had declared her a heretic. Silence had protected no one.

The midwife was taken.

The crowd dispersed.

The snow kept falling.

And Heinrich Kramer, humiliated before commoners, swallowed the metallic taste of his own rage and made a private vow in the cold:

No woman would ever silence him again.

He would write a book to ensure it.

A manual.

A hammer.

A scripture forged from his wound.

And he would make the world believe it.

PART TWO

The Women of the Press

Nuremberg, 1485—the ink workshops

The printing house smelled of metal and damp wool, of ground lampblack and boiled linseed oil. The scent of a new age being born through machinery and human breath.

Margarete, the printer's youngest apprentice, scrubbed ink plates until her fingers darkened like bruised petals. She was small, quiet, and often overlooked, which meant she heard everything.

The clatter of type.

The groan of the screw press.

The muttering of scholars who believed the machine would make their words eternal.

She also heard something else.

A faint *tic-tac*, like a heartbeat trapped in iron.

At first, she thought it was the press's rhythm, the way wood and screw iron sang under tension. But the more she listened, the more she realized: it wasn't the press.

It was the letters.

The tiny metal blocks—A, B, C, D—warmed beneath her fingers as if alive. Once, when she blinked, she swore she saw them rearrange themselves. A "V" leaning toward an "A." Like it was though whispering. She told no one.

Some truths are safer sewn into silence.

That evening, as snow blew in under the door, two women slipped into the workshop.

The first was Agnes. She had been released, but she was still being watched closely. Her wrists bore rope marks. Her eyes burned with something beyond fear.

The second was Lucia, a mystic nun exiled for visions the Church found inconvenient. Though she seemed untouched by cold, her linen veil was dusted with snow.

Margarete froze when they entered. Women did not belong in the workshop, especially after dark.

Agnes placed a hand on her shoulder. "We're not here to cause trouble," she said. "But trouble has already found us."

Lucia stepped to the type case, running her fingers over the metal letters as though reading a scripture only she could feel. "They listen," she whispered.

Margarete's breath caught. "You hear it too?"

Lucia smiled, a quiet, luminous thing.

"The Mother of Light speaks through whatever we give our hands to. Ink, herbs, mirrors. She has waited a long time for a place to write herself."

Agnes pulled a small pouch from her cloak, scattering dried petals and narrow leaves onto the ink-stained table—valerian. Rue. Yarrow. The alphabet of healers and midwives.

"Each plant is a letter," Agnes murmured. "Each letter a way through the dark."

Together, the three women bent over the first draft of Heinrich Kramer's manuscript, a stack of hand-penned pages. Margarete had been typesetting them for days.

The text was a knife aimed at their throats.

Woman is weaker in faith.

Woman is governed by her womb.

Woman is the gateway of the devil.

Lucia pressed her palm to the margin, and for an instant, Margarete saw faint threads of ink bloom beneath the parchment, as if the paper were breathing with them.

"We change the margins," Agnes said. "Not the center. Men never read the edges."

Margarete hesitated. She could lose her position. Her father could lose his shop. They could all lose more than that.

But the press's heartbeat quickened beneath the table. The letters shimmered in the candlelight, as though urging her forward. So she set her trembling hands upon the type case.

Lucia whispered new lines, soft counterweights to the men's condemnations:

Woman is the faith they fear.

Woman is the healer who remembers.

Woman is the mirror in which truth wakes.

Margarete rearranged letters backward, mirror-script, tucking the countertext into the margins, binding it between lines only another woman would recognize.

Agnes dabbed the herbal sigils onto the sheets' edges, invisible once dried but alive in the fibers.

When the candles guttered low, Lucia bowed her head. "Their words will chain us," she murmured. "But our words will haunt them."

Margarete swallowed. "What do you think will happen when they discover this?"

"They won't. But centuries hence, the ink will open its eyes," Agnes answered without hesitation.

In the darkness of the workshop, the press exhaled a slow, warm breath. The letters glowed faintly, like embers waiting for flame.

PART THREE
The Book of Fire
Nuremberg, 1486—The Pressroom at Dusk

The manuscript was finished by spring. Or so Heinrich Kramer believed.

He carried the pages into the printing house with the triumph of a man bearing scripture. Jakob Sprenger followed behind him, shoulders bowed, the way a loyal hound follows a master whose command it no longer entirely trusts.

Hands stained with ink that would not wash away, Margarete stood at the press. Agnes and Lucia hid behind a stack of paper, veils and shawls pulled low.

The finished pages lay on the table like an open wound. Margarete felt them thrum beneath her fingertips.

Heinrich unfurled the first sheet.

The text glared back with the cold authority of men convinced that fear is holiness. Lines equating women with demons. Accusations dressed as doctrine. Logic sharpened to a blade.

He smiled.

Jakob did not.

“Begin the printing,” Heinrich commanded.

Margarete swallowed. Her heart hammered so loudly she feared he could hear it.

She inked the plates. Set the letters. The first proof slid from the press with a soft hiss.

Heinrich seized the page before it cooled.

Then he froze.

The ink began to bleed.

Not smear, bleed. Thin rivulets of red-black seeped downward, forming delicate branching veins along the margins. A rose shape unfurled at the base of the page, petals blooming outward.

Gasps filled the room.

Jakob stepped forward. “Heinrich... the letters... they’re shifting.”

Indeed, entire words rearranged themselves as they watched:

Mulier est imbecillioris fidei

(woman is weaker in faith)

became—

Mulier est fidei portatrix

(woman is the bearer of faith)

Heinrich's face turned ashen. "Witchcraft," he spat. "This is their doing."

He pointed at the workers, at the press, at the apprentices, at Margarete, with the blind panic of a man whose certainty is decaying.

Agnes stepped from the shadows.

"No," she said. "This is the truth you tried to bury."

Lucia emerged beside her, eyes luminous. "The Mother of Light corrects the lies men write."

Heinrich lunged toward the women, knocking the page to the floor. He seized a lantern from the wall, its flame quivering.

"If ink bleeds, let it burn," he growled.

Jakob grabbed his arm. "Heinrich, don't—this is madness—"

But Heinrich had already shattered the lantern against the press.

Oil spilled.

Flame followed.

The fire caught the manuscript first, a curl of heat, a ripple of gold along the page, before racing up the wooden frame. Margarete cried out as the press, the heart of everything she had ever known, ignited like a living thing in pain.

Flames leapt to the rafters.

Workers fled.

Jakob dragged Heinrich back as embers rained around them.

Agnes stood still amid the orange glow. "Print my ashes," she whispered, a prayer, a prophecy, a benediction.

Guards stormed the room. They seized Agnes and tied her wrists. Lucia slipped into the smoke, becoming indistinguishable from it—half miracle, half myth.

Margarete, coughing, choking, staggered toward the burning press. No time. The roof groaned.

She reached into the fire, ignoring the sting, and pulled free a single untouched proof wrapped in folded vellum.

She tucked it under her coat.

Then she ran. Out into the night, down the alley, toward the river. Behind her, the press collapsed with a terrible, final scream of metal.

Agnes was dragged toward the square.

Lucia vanished into the world of stories.

Jakob knelt amid the ash, holding a charred scrap in shaking hands.

And Heinrich Kramer, face lit by the flames he had created, stared at his burning pages and swore that the world would know his version of truth, even if he had to resurrect it from cinders.

But Margarete had already carried the real text away, the margins blooming inside it like seeds waiting for spring.

The book would burn.

But the story would not.

PART FOUR

The Flight and the Burial of the Text
Along the Rhine, Winter 1486

The night Margarete fled Nuremberg, the river was half-frozen, its surface split between black water and sheets of moonlit glass. Snow clung to her lashes, and smoke clung to her hair. Beneath her coat, the manuscript proof was warm against her ribs.

Bells tolled behind her.

Margarete looked back. The sky above the printing quarter glowed orange, the shape of the burning press rising like a pyre into the winter dark.

She ran harder.

On the riverbank, a merchant barge was preparing to depart, its crew distracted by the commotion upriver. She slipped into the shadows, climbed the rope ladder, and hid among crates of linen and Venetian dyes. The barge shuddered as it pushed off, drifting into the wide black current.

Only then did she dare pull out the manuscript. The vellum edges shimmered faintly, as if breathing cold fog. Margarete held it close to the lantern light.

Words shifted slowly across the page, forming, dissolving, reforming—not with violence, not with chaos, but with the care of a hand weaving a tapestry.

Her own typesetting.

Lucia's whispered counterlines.

Agnes's herbal sigils, unfurling like vines.

She pressed her fingers to the rose in the lower margin. It pulsed gently.

A single tear slid down her cheek, sizzled as it touched the warm vellum, and disappeared.

Far behind her, Jakob Sprenger stood among the ruins of the printing house. The fire was mostly out now, the building a collapsed skeleton of char and frost.

A scrap of the manuscript was caught under a beam, a single paragraph mostly intact, its margin smeared with ash.

When he lifted it, embers stirred and glowed faintly as though remembering.
On the margin, in Agnes's herbal alphabet, he recognized two symbols:

Remembrance.

Truth.

He sank to his knees.

He had known his entire life that obedience was safe, that silence was holy, that doubt was the path of the fallen. But seeing those delicate marks, women's knowledge pressed into the bones of the page, broke something open in him that had been locked away since his sister's execution.

"It was never witchcraft," he whispered. "It was witness."

In the distance, soldiers shouted. Heinrich demanded arrests. Interrogations. A new press. A new draft. A new war.

Jakob tucked the charred sheet into his coat and walked away from the flames.

He did not return.

The barge journey lasted three days. Margarete rarely slept. Whenever she closed her eyes, she saw the press collapsing, the flames licking the rafters, Agnes's face lit by firelight as she whispered her final words.

On the third night, when the barge moored near a village outside Strasbourg, she slipped ashore with the manuscript hidden beneath her cloak. The snow was deeper here, muffling her footsteps, absorbing every sound.

She walked until she found a small garden behind an abandoned chapel. A briar rosebush twisted through the stones. Its thorns looked like ink strokes.

Margarete sank to her knees and unwrapped the proof. The pages glowed faintly in the moonlight. As she breathed upon them, the text rippled—not fleeing, not hiding, but settling, as if choosing its final form.

The voices were faint but present:

We are the ink that never dried.

We are the women they fear.

We are the truth that remembers itself.

Margarete dug a shallow hollow beneath the bush with her bare hands. The cold bit into her skin, but she did not stop.

She placed the manuscript inside. Covered it with earth. Pressed her frostbitten palms to the soil.

“Grow,” she whispered.

The rosebush trembled.

A single red bud formed, impossibly, in the dead of winter.

Margarete stood, numb fingers staining her dress with dirt, and disappeared into the darkness, a girl with ink under her nails, carrying no possessions except a story that refused to die.

INTERLUDE

The Flame and the Thread

Some stories begin in fire.
Some begin in silence.
This one begins in both.
Fire forgets quickly—
it devours, consumes, purifies, annihilates.
Fire is the language of men who fear being unseen.
Thread, however—
thread remembers.
It winds through the margins,
binding what should have been severed.
Carrying whispers from one century to the next.
Sewing truth through the places where ink was meant to wound.
Fire writes the fear.
Thread writes the future.
And somewhere in the dark between them,
a book breathes beneath a rosebush,
waiting to be found by the hand
brave enough
to turn the first page.

Epilogue

The Book That Remembers Her

Strasbourg → Venice → Every Library Thereafter

Years passed. The buried manuscript endured winter after winter, its pages safe in a cradle of roots that curled around it like a ribcage. Snow melted into soil, feeding the rosebush. The rosebush fed the earth. The earth fed the ink.

When at last the chapel ruins were cleared by traveling scribes, one paused near the bush, drawn by a faint shimmer, like candlelight trapped in frost. He brushed the soil aside.

There, wrapped in a threadbare scrap of cloth, lay the manuscript that had survived the fire.

When he lifted it, the pages exhaled.

Not smoke.

Not dust.

Memory.

He carried it to Venice, where printers made copies without noticing the countertext sleeping inside the margins. The book spread from port to port, monastery to monastery, classroom to courtroom, its authority sharpened by fear, its pages recited by men who never wondered why the ink never quite dried.

And always, somewhere within its lines—
the whispers remained.

The rose in the margin.

The mirror-script beneath condemnation.

The herbal alphabet Agnes pressed into the fibers.

Lucia's visions braided through her counterlines.

Margarete's trembling typesetting holding the world together like a seam.

The women they had tried to erase were still there, breathing beneath the weight of a book that claimed to define them.

Centuries later, a scholar would open one of the earliest copies and tilt it toward the light. Letters would shift. Margins would bloom. A rose would unfurl as if stirred by breath.

And a single sentence, faint but unmistakable, would emerge across the page:

We are the ink that never dried.

The scholar would blink, wipe her glasses, and lean in. Then the pages would turn themselves, rustling softly, as if eager for her to continue what had been interrupted long ago.

And the book, as it always had, would whisper its warning:

Blame is a book that forgets who wrote it.