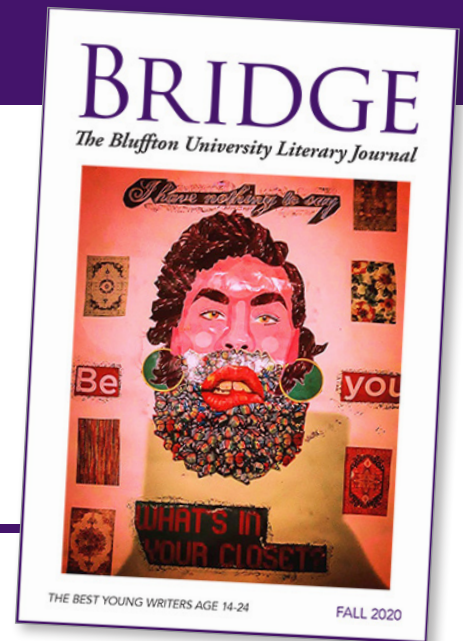


BRIDGE

The Bluffton University Literary Journal



THE SILENT HOUR

Ahlana Hirschfield

It was September when Armstrong started screaming at night. Not a whimper or a wail, but a shriek, loud and grotesque, like the color of coagulated blood. I held my pillow over his face the first time it happened. I held it there instinctually, just long enough to stifle the screams back down to the safety of silence. I knew then, as he gasped for air at the release of my pillow, that we were all going to pay for his screams.

And we did.

We fasted for seven nights in repentance. I saw the Mooney twins sneak bread out of the kitchen like city rats. But I was not tempted.

“If you seek eternal salvation, you must learn to resist temptation,” Her Grace said, turning her head for all eleven of us in the circle to see the sternness of her sharp-featured face. The wood floor was cold beneath my bare knees, and although I tried my best to focus only on the sermon, I found myself shuddering at the idea of winter creeping back into our home. Armstrong held his head high in Her Grace’s direction, soaking in her words like they were vital to his being. I would bet that Armstrong could fast for the rest of his life and still thrive on Her Grace’s words as sustenance. I yearned for his control.

Continued on page 2

AHLANA HIRSCHFIELD is a fiction writer, filmmaker, and a female villain apologist. She is dedicated to telling untold stories about not-your-wife-or-mother women. She is a current MFA candidate at the City College of New York.

“When one person from the group brings sin into our household, we must all repent for it,” Her Grace began. Armstrong flinched. “That’s the responsibility of accepting each other as Brothers and Sisters. Do not take this for granted—the ability to repent. It is a gift to be used wisely and often. After all, what are we here for if not repentance?”

I grabbed the hand of the Mooney twin sitting next to me to stop her from fidgeting, and immediately repented for her sins inside my head as I felt the warm bread crumbs stuck to her skin with palm sweat.

“You’re all here in this room with me because you know that I am not concerned with your physical bodies but with your souls and where they will spend eternity. This is what we’re all working so hard for.”

I’d never admit it aloud but sometimes I don’t know the difference between my body and my soul.

We repented twice for Armstrong’s breach of silence before it was apparent amongst the group that he couldn’t control the screams. Although eventually we stopped repenting as a group, Armstrong did not. Every night before the silent hour, Her Grace would come into the musky, unlit room that the Mooney twins and I shared with Armstrong—the Children’s Room, as she called it—and she’d stand there as he knelt beside his cot to pray, with one long-fingered hand placed on his shoulder. Then he sat on his bed and she spoke to him in tongues. I pretended to be asleep, but I wasn’t.

I pretended to be asleep often. On most full moons, Her Grace went out to the woods to do what she called God’s Pursuit. I could never sleep on those nights, knowing she was out in the woods alone, so close to the Outsiders. Knowing that come morning time, an Outsider could be brought to our home for salvation. On most full moons I would lie awake, trying to recall every detail of the night I was saved, but I never could. The memories from when I was seven came in flashes: playing near the woods with a stray

Continued on page 3

dog from the village, an arm stretching out from behind the trees to offer me an apple, looking into Her Grace's eyes while she whispered promises of eternal life. That was all I could remember. And then I was brought home.

Her Grace was blind in the left eye. Where her good eye was dark and focused, her blind eye was blue, dull, and drifting. She wore it proudly as a badge of divine work, claiming that it was a gift from God herself. It was a form of divinity I couldn't understand—it seemed like God's cruel joke to me. Her bad eye was off-putting, and for as much as I tried to avoid it, I often found myself staring directly into it. It wasn't her long, golden hair hanging down her back, or the way her crisp white cloak fit her perfectly that I paid the most attention to. Her Grace was almost beautiful, almost angelic, but not quite.

In our home we all wore cloaks. They kept us conservative and equal. Her Grace wore white because she was a daughter of God, which marked her purity and leadership. The rest of us wore blue cloaks. The children and I, Mr. and Mrs. Jaredy, Mr. and Mrs. Longmire, and the Cline sisters all wore blue, and we all held the same role in the household: to serve Her Grace and to serve God, herself.

"Can you speak in tongues?" I asked Armstrong as I slid a poorly rinsed plate into his towel covered hands. He dried the cracked dish closely, and took his time to set it in the cupboard.

"No," he said.

"But I heard Her Grace speak to you in tongues last night," I said, looking over my shoulder to make sure we were the only ones in the rust colored kitchen. "How did you know what she was saying?"

"I didn't," he said.

I let a bowl slip from my fingers back into the dishwasher and turned towards

Continued on page 4

Armstrong, staring at him long and hard. The two of us were in constant battle to be the best, to be godly, even more so than the rest of the group because we were the same age. We had even been called to the woods by Her Grace around the same time all those years ago. We did not put up a fight the way the other children Her Grace had saved before our time had. Armstrong and I both chose to take Her Grace's hand on the nights we were selected for salvation, and she never let anyone in the group forget how selfless that made the two of us. Her Grace always said Armstrong and I were born to follow. The Mooney twins were the only children she'd saved after us. They were tempted by eternal salvation, tempted by the apple, but when it came time to come home through the woods, they fought it. They called for their birth parents, kicked and bit Her Grace the entire way home. They spent an entire week fasting and praying with Her Grace before they were ready to be saved. But Her Grace said Armstrong and I followed her through the woods willingly. We barely needed initial fasting and prayer. We didn't put up any fights because we were born to submit. However competitive, in this home he was my Brother and I his Sister, and in that connectedness, I worried for him.

“You are a man of many words, Armstrong.”

He smirked, a real smirk, and plunged his arm into the water for the bowl I dropped. “I don't think Her Grace was talking to me last night. I think she was talking for me.”

When the night screams became more frequent, Armstrong was moved into Her Grace's bedroom. He stayed there for three nights and three days, and work was hard without him. I did double the work in the garden, and picked up his chores around the house. Admittedly, working alone in the garden made it harder to control my thoughts. Without Armstrong there to spark my competitive nature, it was difficult to keep my head

Continued on page 5

clear and focus solely on ripping mangled weeds out of the soil.

I scanned our plot of land, guarded by the woods like a perfect circle: the fruit and vegetable gardens parallel to the hanging line for laundry, the bundles of Her Grace's rosemary and thyme growing around our cottage. The cottage was made of stone and tucked away on the eastern most side of our acre of land. For its modest outward appearance, our home was of a fair size on the inside. From the garden I could see Mr. Longmire chopping firewood out beyond the cottage near the edge of the woods, and I could hear the three Cline sisters humming from the kitchen window behind me. I couldn't see her or hear her, but I knew Her Grace was sitting in one of those six rooms, relying on me to prove my worth through my work. But my thoughts, along with my eyes, wandered up to the open sky above me while ideas of the outside world crept into my thoughts. So much for resistance. I wondered what it would be like to be an outsider again, like I was for the first half of my now 14 years on this Earth. I wondered who I would be had Her Grace not saved my physical body and why I was chosen when I could barely train my thoughts to revolve solely around salvation. My thoughts rambled even more. Was the Outsiders' religion truly as foul as Her Grace preached? And how could they even believe in anything other than our God? Why was resisting temptation not as easily done in private? Then I wondered if God could hear my thoughts. Mrs. Jaredy swung the back door opened with a basket of wet sheets in her arms so I stopped my rambles and went back to work.

"Good of you to pick up extra work," Mrs. Jaredy said, hanging an alabaster bed sheet on the clothesline.

I bowed my head toward the small woman, whose pregnant belly was swollen and beautiful, and returned to the weeds. Mrs. Jaredy and her husband were the newest members, called upon by Her Grace on their wedding night six full moons ago. It was Her Grace's first successful pursuit in many months, and we were all relieved to have the

Continued on page 6

extra help and faith in our home. They were beyond frightened that night and had barely touched their apples by the time they made it through the woods. After a few days of fasting and one-on-one sermons with Her Grace, like the Mooney twins, they wanted to be saved. Her Grace called it one of her most successful pursuits because she was so thrilled when she found out she'd get to deliver a baby in our home.

Armstrong returned back to the group after three nights with Her Grace, and every night since then was silent. Every night and every day—he did not speak again.

“I know a secret,” one of the Mooney twins said, pulling slightly on my smock. I threw feed down at the chickens, with the small twins trailing behind me. This was my least favorite chore because I couldn't understand how chickens could be so mean and hideous and still be a creation of God.

“Secrets are sinful,” I said back to her.

“Well,” said the other twin, squatting down to look at the clucking birds. “So is Her Grace.”

I grabbed his arm, hard, and yanked him up until he was standing straight. “Never say a thing like that again. Lying is worse than keeping secrets, and you're old enough to know that. Her Grace saved us and we must always honor her for that.”

The girl dumped her empty bucket of chicken feed upside down and sat on it. “It isn't a lie,” she said. “We have proof and we can show you.”

I pulled her up from the bucket. “I'm not interested in anything you sinners have to show.”

“I'm not a sinner,” the girl said.

“We're all sinners. Don't you listen to the sermons?”

“I guess she doesn't want to see the book,” the boy said.

Continued on page 7

“What book?” I asked, immediately regretting giving into temptation so quickly.

Silently, I begged God to forgive me.

“The book of spells. We couldn’t open it. We found it in Her Grace’s room,” the girl said, twirling around me.

“I don’t believe you,” I said. “I don’t believe either of you’d do something as stupid as steal from Her Grace.”

“We didn’t steal it,” he said. “We just borrowed it.”

“And we’re putting it back tonight!” the girl said.

“Do you want to see it?” he asked.

I turned away from them. “No.”

“You’ll regret it if you don’t,” he said.

The girl fixed her eyes to my own. “Don’t you want to know the truth?”

I sat very still on my cot while the Mooney twins shuffled into our small room. The girl pulled a thick book out from inside her pillowcase. The boy guarded the doorway, peeking out into the common area to see if anyone was lingering. This was easy to do because none of us have doors on our bedrooms except for Her Grace. Our home is just big enough to fit the entire group, but intimate enough for us all to keep an eye on each other. That’s important when you’re a family. Since the Mooney twins, Armstrong, and I had made dinner the night before, the adults had dinner duty this night which was more efficient because there are seven of them and only four of us. The adults were already working away, cooking a meal that would prove their worthiness to Her Grace. The children weren’t the only ones who had to prove themselves to Her Grace. The boy gave his sister a look that signaled the all-clear, and she gently sat the book on my lap. Instinctually, I ran my hand over the cover like it was something familiar. The dark leather was worn, and

Continued on page 8

the writing on the cover was indiscernible to me. I didn't have to know anything else about it to know that it was a secret.

"This book could be anything," I said. "Why on Earth would you call it a book of spells?"

"Well, it's pretty obvious," the girl said, pointing to the circular symbol on the cover of the book. I shrugged. It meant nothing to me.

"Haven't you ever heard the tale of the One-Eyed Witch?" the boy asked.

"Unlike you two, I've been a Sister for far more than a year of my life. I don't remember tales or stories or anything else from my outside life. Those things do no good for me here, and they won't for you either. So I'd advise you to forget about it."

The boy shook his head. "That's the problem. We did forget about it!"

"We forgot about the tale until we found the book, and then we put all of the pieces together like a puzzle," the girl said.

The dinner bell rang loudly before I could speak. The Mooney twins ran out of the room and, panicked, I shoved the ancient-looking book under my pillow.

Mr. Johnson asked Armstrong to lead us in prayer at the dinner table, and Armstrong peered woefully at Her Grace.

"This boy is practicing silence," she said, her voice clear and voluminous. "Choose someone else."

One of the Mooney twins led us in prayer, and as I shut my eyes I began to think about the book in the other room. It made me feel something I had never experienced before—it was like responsibility but not exactly. It felt more exhilarating than that. It was like superiority. It was like power. And that's how I knew it was bad. That's how I knew I needed to return the book and be absolved of my sins.

In the time between communal night prayer and the silent hour, I snatched the

Continued on page 9

book from my room and slithered down the long, dark hall leading to Her Grace's room. I trembled outside of her door and time seemed to slow down as the voice in my head went back and forth between whether I should return the book or take it and run. Everything was dark and terrifying, even my thoughts. My body surprised me by knocking on the door.

Her Grace opened the door, her good eye scanning the length of me and focusing hard on my face. I stared into her blind eye. "I think I have something of yours."

At the first glimpse of the book, she grasped my forearm and pulled me into her room, somehow without losing her calm composure. She shut the door hesitantly behind her. If only the sweat trickling down the back of my neck was that of a salivating beast resting behind me, waiting to pounce.

"I must admit," she began, reclining her tall stature into a cushioned chair. "I would have never expected this from you."

"I didn't take this from you, Your Grace," I said. "I found it. And I knew it shouldn't have been in my hands."

"Where did you find this?" she said, taking the book, delicately. One of her fingers disappeared into an opening I hadn't noticed before in the binding and I heard a soft snap after my eyes darted away, uncertain. She reached out a long, toned arm to grasp my chin and turn my head to face her. "Tell me."

"The Mooney twins," I said quietly. She nodded as if she already knew.

"Did you try to open this book?" she asked.

"No," I said. The way she was staring me down made me wonder if she could read my thoughts. "But I wanted to."

"Why didn't you?" she asked, and I had the feeling she was testing me, only I wasn't sure on what.

Continued on page 10

“Because I had to resist temptation. That’s why I brought it back,” I said.

“How about the twins? Did they try?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. I could hardly remember anything. “I think they said they couldn’t open it.”

She looked at me as if she was conjuring up a grand plan and suddenly placed the book back into my hands.

“Try to open it,” she said.

“But I don’t want to,” I said. I figured this was a test after all, and I wanted her to know that I was committed.

“I’m telling you to do it. Open the book.”

I held the book for a moment before deciding she wasn’t testing me. I slid a finger underneath the hard cover and flung it open. There it was. This book was something divine but not exactly. Secretly divine. It was magical. Words I could not pronounce danced across the pages in blood red colored ink. The way the letters curled and spiraled made them look the way Her Grace’s whisper sounded. I shut the book forcefully, expecting to look up and see a disappointed look on Her Grace’s face. But she was beaming.

“It’s you,” she said, marveling at her own words.

I wanted to scream, to beg her to carry out my punishment so I could repent, but I stayed quiet because it’s all I knew how to do.

She laughed a beautiful, ringing laugh and held my hand in hers. “You are a daughter of God, Isadora.”

That was the first time I had heard my first name spoken aloud in four years.

After that evening, I began nightly lessons with Her Grace. She taught me about the book and its origins, which I learned was a book of prayers. She referred to it as an equivalent to the Outsiders’ bible, except ours was real. It was where she gained inspiration

Continued on page 11

for all of her sermons. She taught me that it was written by a daughter of God like herself, passed down through generations of daughters, and that it held every grant to every wish. The prayers in the book were not like prayers we had said before dinner or bed. They were prayers like songs or chants. Prayers that directly called on the divine work of God herself, to perform miracles to heal and save those who need it, like us. The book held the power to change an Outsider to a salvation seeker, to denounce their religion, tainted by greed and power and masculinity, and to accept themselves as a follower of a daughter of God. And more than anything, to accept God, herself. Only a true daughter of God could open the book and learn the sacred prayers and inspire others in their pursuit. That's what Her Grace told me.

"This must be how you cured Armstrong from his night screams," I said.

"Precisely," she said. "But every gift comes with a price. Armstrong knew this. I shared this information with him before I performed the prayer. He knew he'd never be able to speak again if I cured the screams."

"Brave," I said.

"He is a brave soul," she said. "Keep this in mind—some gifts come at greater prices. You mustn't use this book leisurely."

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"There are certain prayers in this book that can work a miracle, but something must be given to God in order for Her to answer the prayer."

"A sacrifice," I said.

"A sacrifice, precisely. The greatest prayer in this book is one which saves another's life. Any daughter of God can utilize it in a time of urgent need, but that daughter will pay with her life."

"But only her life here on the physical Earth," I said.

Continued on page 12

“Yes. She will be saved eternally.”

I had the most difficult time believing I was a daughter of God. I was nothing like Her Grace, who was strong, disciplined, willful, intelligent. I could not compare. I was nothing if not meek and unsure. My stream of consciousness was on par with that of a wild animal—untamed, ungrounded. I yearned for control but it was often too difficult to locate. My being a daughter of God made little sense to me. I’m a sinner. But I opened the book, therefore it had to be so.

Her Grace held a ceremony in my honor, to present me as a daughter of God to the group. I had never known another daughter of God aside from Her Grace, so I didn’t know what to expect. Her Grace told me I was the first daughter of God she’d ever initiated. She let me hold the golden cup which contained the blood of God, herself, and my Brothers and Sisters each took turns drinking from my own shaky hands. Each of their eyes met my own as they drank, and that is when I first felt power. I wasn’t just accepted that night, I was celebrated. I wasn’t prepared for so much attention, to be honored in such a way, but it was exhilarating. Soon after the ceremony, I was leading sermons. I tried to stay humble, but sometimes, very deep down, I was basking in my newfound glory. I was eating up the attention like a ravenous cannibal. I wanted more.

It was still September when I stood up straight in the damp basement, twirling an old riding crop between my fingers. The Mooney twins stood side by side, their heads hanging down in shame. Her Grace stood off to the side in the shadows, and I couldn’t see her face, but I didn’t need to because I could feel her watching me. She’d caught the twins stealing food out of the kitchen, and it was time for me to learn to be authoritative.

“Hold out your hands,” I said. “Turn your palms out for God to see.”

Continued on page 13

A glint of light shined through a crack in the ceiling above us and I halted to stare at the rosy palms before me. I counted each line and wrinkle and compared them to my own hands. Mine were blistered from years of working in the garden and welted from the times I had been on the other end of the riding crop. Those days felt very far away. I tried to recall my own fear of the crop, but I couldn't. I continued looking at my palms and thought how different mine looked from theirs, my hands that have only held five more years' worth of things than theirs.

Her Grace cleared her throat, snapping me out of my trance. I cracked the crop down on pink flesh, and I did not flinch when they screamed. Where I had expected to feel shame, I felt indifference. I returned the crop to Her Grace, who looked almost unrecognizable standing in the shadows. It wasn't until I, too, was standing in the shadows that her wandering eye comforted me with familiarity.

It was almost October when Armstrong disappeared. No one had seen him since night prayer. I was worried for him and for a reason I couldn't comprehend, Her Grace was worried for us. She asked me to move my belongings into her room and I obliged without question. It was for the sake of my security, she said. For my protection. What I needed protection from, I didn't know. Mrs. Jaredy was ordered to take my place in the Mooney twins' room so that no children were left unsupervised. The twins sat on my bed as I removed my wooden chest from beneath it. I plopped it next to the boy and he grabbed my wrist with his hot, blistered hand, shoving a crumpled piece of paper into mine.

"It's from Armstrong," he said. He held his sister's hand and dragged them both toward the doorway.

"Wait," I said. "Why didn't he give this to me himself?"

The girl turned back to look at me with judgment. "Because he was afraid of you."

Continued on page 14

I peeled the wrinkled paper open and read the dark scribbles.

She's lying to you. Check the binding of the book. You're no more special than anyone else. She kidnapped and tortured us all, and now the Outsiders know. We're coming for her the first night of October. Don't try to protect her, you'll only get yourself hurt.

Instinctually I ripped up the piece of paper and, holding the scraps tightly in my fist, snuck outside to bury them in the dirt of the garden.

"No windows were broken, Your Grace," I heard Mr. Jaredy say from the other side of the window where I was perched reading the prayer book. I didn't want to listen to a private conversation, especially a private conversation with Her Grace, but I couldn't resist it. "No doors broken into."

"I know," Her Grace said.

"And the only pair of tracks—"

"I know. They didn't come for him. He left for them."

"He won't make it through those woods, Your Grace. Worry not."

It was October 1st when the outsiders broke into our home. Their shouts and screams cut through our silence like a knife. They came at night, well past the silent hour, and woke us with their hideous high howls and low growls. I could see the crowd of villagers outside through the small window next to my bed where I was sitting. I spotted a woman who looked so familiar that I couldn't peel my eyes from her to any of the others. Eventually, my attention was torn away from the crowd outside when two large men knocked down the bedroom door and grabbed Her Grace, who had been standing right beside me with her hand on my shoulder. Silently, I panicked. She fought them for a

Continued on page 15

moment, but she knew not to keep going. The men were burly and could snap her in half if they really tried. They knew it and she knew it. They each gripped one of her arms and dragged her out of the room, through the common area where the rest of our group had gathered—huddled in a corner, and outside towards the shouting villagers.

“We’ve caught the One-Eyed Witch!”

The villagers went wild, vicious.

“Make her pay!”

“Kidnapper! Baby murderer!”

“The Devil’s mistress!”

Her Grace was screaming my name.

I grabbed the book off the shelf and ran out of the room.

“Stay here,” I shouted to the frantic, crying group in the common area. “Don’t any of you move.”

By the time I’d run outside, the outsiders had begun to tie Her Grace to a large tree with thick, dark rope. The crowd was cheering with an undeniable violence while I watched as my sister, my mother, my mentor strained and struggled to breathe.

“Have you any last words?” a man asked her, moving his torch toward her cautiously. The crowd fell silent awaiting her words. I clutched the book to my chest as my eyes began to sting. I looked to Her Grace and back at the book.

“Don’t, Isadora,” she shouted, her face still stern as ever. “You don’t have to pay for me.”

The villagers turned toward me, now awaiting my answer. I could tell they were battered and muddy from tearing through the woods. I was lost in a sea of filthy skin glistening with perspiration, illuminated by torchlight. Shifty eyes followed me as I moved closer into the crowd. I knew I could do it. I could sacrifice my life to save her, to save

Continued on page 16

myself eternally. I would never be the daughter of God she was. It wouldn't make sense for a brilliant daughter of God to sacrifice herself for a lesser, more unworthy daughter like me. I wasn't ready to be a leader yet. I didn't know if I ever would be. But I would try anyway. This was my chance to prove my goodness—despite my unruly thoughts, despite my temptations, despite my lingering passion for power and attention, despite my doubts. This was my chance to save Her Grace the way she'd been saving me for years. I knew the prayer. I could've proven my worthiness to Her Grace and God once and for all. I could've given the ultimate sacrifice, like a true daughter of God.

And then I spotted him. Armstrong, standing in between a man and woman who were guarding him with their lives. I cornered him like prey, searching for a sign of regret in his eyes. There was none. I hit him across the face as hard as I could.

The man pushed me. "Look at what she did to my boy!" he said, his voice breaking like a child's. He grabbed Armstrong's jaw and opened his mouth. His tongue had been cut out. The sight of it knocked the wind out of me.

Armstrong grabbed the book, he tried to open it but couldn't. I started to cry but controlled myself immediately.

"Stop! I'm the only one who can open it," I said.

He shook his head and held the book closer to my face, sliding his finger into the binding the way Her Grace had many nights ago. I heard the familiar snap and then he opened it.

He opened the book.

My knees nearly gave out beneath me.

I peered through the darkness, searching for Her Grace with fury in my eyes. The crowd remained silent. She tried to avoid looking at me, but her blind eye always seemed to wander right back to me. For the first time, I was not comforted by it. In fact, I was

Continued on page 17

mine. It was the same woman I spotted from the window--the familiar stranger. I looked at her desperately, wondering why her face was so nearly identical to my own.

“What did she do to you?” the woman whispered. I studied her face again in search of some meaning. I knew I should have felt something looking at this woman—comfort or love or relief. I felt nothing. I slid her hands off of my shoulders and migrated to the front of the crowd.

“If you’re going to say something, little girl, say it now,” one of the village men said as he stuffed a dirty rag into Her Grace’s mouth. She broke eye contact with me, turning her head as much as the constricting rope would let her so that I wouldn’t be able to see her face. I dropped the book and looked at the palms of my hands. After all this time, I still didn’t know the difference between my body and my soul.

“Well?” the man said, tightening the rope around her waist. His patience was wearing thin and the crowd was shifting, unable to stand still any longer. I felt two sets of small, calloused hands grab each of my own. I didn’t have to look down to know who they were. I nodded in Her Grace’s direction.

“Burn the witch.”