

Chapter 1

The time she had feared was coming. All the omens had pointed to this date. She stood in the gloom of her bedroom looking through the poky window, one knee on a chest which doubled as a bench. Still no sign of danger, but it was just a matter of time. She reached out her left hand, beneath its billowing black sleeve, touched the smooth fur of a comforting flank, and heard the re-assuring purr. Even so, the cat's tail was upright, waving slowly and tensely. But why fear, in any event? What was to come was to come.

She scanned the rise to her left. That was the direction they would come from, the easiest way down into the hollow. And sure enough, soon she saw glimmers advancing over the hill, the reflections of their helmets and pikes in the sunlight. Soon after that she could make them out as separate figures, twelve of them. She managed a scornful laugh – twelve men for one old woman! And then they were trudging over the narrow wooden bridge across the river. If only it would collapse under the weight of their great clumsy boots – but of course it didn't.

When they were at her gate she went out to confront them, the cat at her side, rubbing against her right leg but hissing now and then.

As she emerged from the front door one of the men in the ranks shouted 'Seize her!'

'Burn her!' cried another.

'No! Burning takes too long. Let's find out for sure! To the river!'

'Quiet men! That's enough! I *will* have order!' This man, surprisingly young, seemed to be their commander. 'Goodwife Black?' he asked.

'No sir. Never wed or betrothed – and proud of it!'

'Shrew!' shouted one of the men.

‘Quiet, I say,’ bellowed the commander. Turning back to her he said ‘Madam, we demand that you put your household at the disposal of the New Model Army and the cause of Parliament!’