

The Sorcerer of Ipswich

A novel by Margaret Pless

Chapter One

Gabriel Bishop didn't sleep the night before his trial. It was freezing in Andover gaol, so perforce he sat huddled in his straw bed with his coat on, knees to his chest, chin to his knees, shivering. Around midnight Silas Winthrop had come, bearing a shovelful of hot coals. Saying nothing, his erstwhile friend slid them in a pan under the door of his cell. The gesture was not lost on Gabriel. The former apothecary crawled from his bed to the warmth and put his hands over the coals, and was able to stop trembling.

Warming himself by the fire, Gabriel had a pretty good idea of how tomorrow would go. First, Governor John Winthrop would formally charge him with witchcraft and arson in the first degree. Then, Winthrop would paint himself the victim by discussing the years Gabriel lived in his manse, his friendship with Silas, his broken engagement to his daughter Sarah, his affair with Fanny the slave, and so on. Winthrop would be sure to link these relationships with Gabriel's actions during the smallpox epidemic, accusing Gabriel of having deceived and abused his patients as he did his friends. Then, John Winthrop would connect the riot at Gabriel's shop to his shunning and the breaking of his engagement with Sarah, to explain Gabriel's actions and the meeting house fire on December 21st as a plot of revenge.

After that, Governor Winthrop would ask Gabriel some leading questions; such as how long had Gabriel plotted to steal Fanny, or how many people had he defrauded with his medicines, or at what time of night Gabriel had set the meeting house ablaze. There would be no answer Gabriel could give that wouldn't make him look callous and secretive; but of course that was Winthrop's intention. Finally John Winthrop would describe, several times and in diverse ways, how he'd tried to save Gabriel from his own rotten nature. The remainder of the time would probably be dedicated to some kind of scriptural test; quizzing Gabriel on esoteric points of Protestant theology and belittling him when he failed these tests. Winthrop would use Gabriel's ignorance as proof he was a student of Satan.

If Gabriel was given an opportunity to speak freely tomorrow, he doubted there was anything compelling he could offer in his own defense. It wouldn't matter that his medicines saved people's lives, nor would it make a difference that Fanny fled Ipswich of her own free will. It wouldn't matter that he set the fire specifically in the empty meeting house so that nobody would be harmed while she escaped. Just as it hadn't made a difference that Silas Winthrop damn near coerced him into proposing to Sarah, or that Winthrop himself had been opposed to the match from the start – this was a trial with a predetermined conclusion, just as that partnership had been predetermined to failure.

However, if he spoke so plainly at the trial, John Winthrop would accuse him of mind-reading – indeed, rumors were already spreading that Gabriel could not only read minds, but write memories, thereby changing his victims' recollections. This rumor, which Winthrop himself had doubtless sown, particularly affected his own children – Silas Winthrop, the same Silas who brought Gabriel warmth on cold nights like these, and Sarah, whom Gabriel had set adrift.

Obviously, the rumor was meant to excuse and indemnify Winthrop's children as the trial proceeded to its inevitable conclusion. But Gabriel's insight into what Winthrop would do was not borne of magical capability – even now, on the eve of his trial, that idea seemed laughable. Gabriel knew these things because Winthrop kept sending over Thomas Braithwaite, clerk of court, to offer him diverse plea bargains, and these revealed the specifics of Winthrop's machinations. Talking to that boot-licker made Gabriel feel dirty, and Braithwaite had a habit of speaking just to fill the silence. The clerk probably didn't even realize Gabriel was exploiting him, just as Winthrop exploited people.

So far, Gabriel had told Braithwaite he would ask for the water test. This seemed to fluster the clerk, so that last time Braithwaite suggested he might find a place in Penn's colony for Gabriel in exchange for a full confession. It was obvious at this point Winthrop was only offering him plea bargains to try and extract what Gabriel knew of Fanny's escape so she could be recaptured.

Regardless of what the clerk promised him, a confession meant surely meant death. It certainly wouldn't be the first time Winthrop reneged on a bargain; John Winthrop would betray Gabriel, just as he'd betrayed Anne Hutchinson and Asa Braithwaite. The promises of exile or resettlement were just ruses, enticements to make Gabriel reconsider the path he'd chosen. Winthrop knew as well as Gabriel did that if he drowned as an innocent man, neither of them would see Fanny the slave ever again.

The escape had gone off beautifully, exactly as Gabriel planned it would - by the time Winthrop and Silas returned after the fire, Fanny had been gone for nearly a day without anyone noticing she was gone. She fled swiftly, just as Gabriel told her to; and although Winthrop hired his best tracker to find her the trail had gone cold. She was always swift on a horse, Gabriel remembered, and now rumor had it Fanny had flown out of Ipswich on the wings of the devil. Gabriel had felt a twisted pride when he heard this; the kind he thought he would feel when he married Sarah Winthrop.

However, Gabriel wasn't happy. Although the achievement of setting Fanny free from John Winthrop glimmered proudly in Gabriel's imagination, more often than not he thought of his many regrets - to his friends, to his teacher, to Fanny, and to himself, which had driven him to that point.

If only I'd taken Asenath's advice, Gabriel thought, and shunned smallpox patients. If only I'd taken my own advice and never told Silas about the witch-mark I gave him. If only I'd taken Silas's advice, and left Fanny alone - I would have never fallen in love with her; I could have left Massachusetts and found somebody else. And if only I'd taken Fanny's advice and married Sarah as I promised. If only I'd listened to Sarah - we could have been happy together. But I couldn't do these things, even though I really did try to. - couldn't be satisfied with that life, as good as it seemed to everyone else. And now I will probably never see Fanny again, and the rest will survive me - no, I will be drowned in front of them with Governor Winthrop watching. But this way, I can prove he was wrong about me; and Fanny will live free in the world to come.

Gabriel had been here for thirteen days. If, in that time, he had been overtaken by madness, he was unable to appreciate the loss. Silas had told him he was going mad, forcing Winthrop to make him take the water test, but Gabriel wasn't so sure. The water test had to be better than waiting on Winthrop's verdict, rigged as Silas agreed it would be.

It reminded Gabriel of the years he spent living in John Winthrop's manse, he himself resisting Winthrop's agenda while Silas pleaded for the path of least resistance. The only difference was that now, Silas thought he could save him from his father, could obtain an acquittal despite the mountain of evidence in Winthrop's favor. So really, it was Silas who was going mad, and Gabriel was stuck in a cell listening to his hopeless bargains and promises that somehow, everything could be made right again.

Being a captive audience for Silas's and Thomas's entreaties was part of Winthrop's calculation, Gabriel thought as he watched the fire, burning and dying on the floor. He's trying to break down my resolve, make me second-guess myself, to put my own fears and feelings before objective truth and reasoning. I can't let him win, Gabriel thought; I mustn't let him win. Fanny deserves better than that.

Fanny was the only one who mattered any longer; indeed she was the only one left. Gabriel used his memories of her as a refuge from the harshness of the cell, from everyone else whom he had hurt so badly – thinking of her and how she loved him was Gabriel's only refuge from regret. He had only to think of her, and the freedom she wanted so badly, and his resolve to stay strong through the trial would be renewed. He loved her, and she loved him too – Gabriel remembered her telling him that. Not the first time I told her, nor the second, but she told me eventually. Not that it was important, who said who loved who first: what he did for Fanny was the only thing he could have done by her. There was no possibility he would confess if it meant turning her over to John Winthrop – if loving Fanny meant never seeing her again in this world, Gabriel would pay that price.

In the cell, there was not much to do except ponder what had happened before; to walk down the paths in his memory instead of actual paths in the forest, to gather thoughts instead of mushrooms and plants. It made a depressing daily exercise, because Gabriel was hard-pressed to determine how he might have spared himself this fate. For example, what might he have done differently during the smallpox epidemic, the one that set his downfall in motion? He could have left Silas unmarked – but no, then Silas would have been sickened, disfigured, even killed by a plague from which Gabriel might have spared him. People were rapidly taking sick and dying; he was exhausted, overworked, and had so little time to decide what to do. He could have marked Silas and never told him – Gabriel could have stuck to his plan – but only a stone-cold bastard could have done that, and Gabriel underestimated his ability in that regard. If only, if only – but there was nothing for it now but to remember.

He gave Silas the witch-mark on a night in November. As a ruse, Gabriel invited him to meet at his apothecary, to get drunk on Asenath's whiskey as a present to themselves. Gabriel got the cups and poured, and kept topping off Silas's cup. They stayed up for a while talking, and Silas tried to leave several times, but Gabriel bid him stay. Silas said he was tired. Gabriel offered him the cot he kept in his shop. Silas told him to wake him in a few hours. Gabriel promised he would, pretending to read.

Once Silas was asleep, Gabriel got his needles. He picked one with a forked tip, tested it to make sure it was sharp. Quietly, he retrieved a little vial of reddish powder, translucent like dead skin. These were smallpox scabs, dried to flakes and powdered. Gabriel opened the bottle and dipped the needle in. He went to Silas, fast asleep from the drink, and unbuttoned his shirtsleeve. Gabriel pricked Silas's milk-white skin with the needle, holding his wrist steady. There was a drop of blood, which Gabriel wiped off with his sleeve. Silas's eyelashes fluttered a little as Gabriel finished, but he did not awaken. Gabriel put away the needles and the powder, and waited until the scab was dry before waking Silas up and sending him home to John Winthrop.

Within a few days Silas came back to the apothecary, and showed Gabriel where he had pricked him. The welt had formed up nicely, but it had not spread – in short, the inoculation had worked perfectly. Silas didn't know this and thought he was about to die. He had brought his will for Gabriel to witness, and asked him to watch out for his sister, once they were wed. Then Silas began weeping in his apothecary shop, contemplating all the things in life he would miss out on, being dead from smallpox.

Hearing him carry on like that, Gabriel could not lie any longer. He told Silas what he had done, and Silas made Gabriel show him the needles and the powder and explain it all in detail. Gabriel did so, thinking for sure Silas would spurn him for life.

Instead, Silas was astonished, and called it miraculous. He asked Gabriel why he hadn't offered it to everyone already. Gabriel had said it wasn't exactly safe, that many people considered it witchcraft. Silas had said that was ludicrous, and that he should offer it openly. Gabriel pleaded with Silas not to tell anyone, explaining that he was sworn to secrecy and Silas needed to keep the same; that there were some things an apothecary had to keep in his own confidence. But Silas would not agree, no matter how Gabriel explained it to him. When he finally let Silas go, Gabriel had a bad feeling about what would happen next. That Sunday, Gabriel hid the needles and powder in a safe place.

Thinking back to it now, Gabriel decided that he should have stayed strong in the face of Silas's despondency. That was his mistake – if he hadn't told Silas the truth, he wouldn't have told anyone else, and the apothecary shop would still exist, and then none of this would have ever happened. But even if Gabriel had gotten away with it, he wasn't sure he could have escaped this fate forever. Asenath had been plain enough about that when Gabriel made his plans to become an apothecary in the first place – that there was a reason she did her potion-crafting under the table, an afterthought and a side-job to the proper work of brewing beer and distilling liquor for her public house. She had warned him then of the risks, but Gabriel simply hadn't listened to her.

Days after Silas made Gabriel tell him the truth, Gabriel went to work at his shop and found a throng of four dozen men and women waiting for his ministrations. Apparently Governor Winthrop had gone to preach in Andover that Sunday, leaving Silas in the pulpit. Silas had taken the opportunity to speak at length about Gabriel's mark; especially the lifelong immunity part. Now the parishioners were here, asking hard questions about it. From the porch of the High Horse, Asenath Black glared at her apprentice accusingly, having heard the sermon of Gabriel's magic needle for herself.

The townsfolk encircled Gabriel, and refused to let him inside. Gabriel tried to get past them, making excuses about what Silas had spoken of, but the situation quickly unraveled.

One man asked him if Gabriel could protect them, why he wouldn't; and when Gabriel tried to explain, another cried out he was a witch. It caught on in the throng, like a child's game; the circle of voices bounced the word 'witch' from mouth to mouth whenever Gabriel tried to speak. The word ripped at him each time they said it, like they were tearing away his clothes. His vehement denial only seemed to confirm their suspicions.

The crowd blocked his way; if he got near anybody they pushed him back into the center of the throng, not letting him leave; knowing Gabriel wouldn't fight back. He pleaded with them individually to let him pass. Their looks were so hard, that even now Gabriel wept to remember them.

He heard a crash; saw someone had broken his shop window. They brought out his mortars and pestles, his glassware and scales, and smashed them with hammers. Gabriel watched helplessly, terrified he would be beaten to death next for witchery; but they let him go unharmed.

Over the following week the rest of Gabriel's life unraveled. John Winthrop invited Gabriel to his manse to tell him that the wedding was off; and if Gabriel came near Sarah again he would be whipped in public. Sarah stopped sending him messages, when previously she would have taken any risk to send

word to him. Even Asenath Black shunned him, citing Fanny as a pretense. Nobody in town wanted anything to do with him any longer. Gabriel went back to his house beyond the walls, and shut himself up inside. Silas turned up half a dozen times, but Gabriel carried on with his alchemy, pretending he could not hear Silas's pleading for forgiveness, or his pounding on the door of the house they built together.

Sometime after that, Gabriel had been wandering around the forest, going to his gathering spots, looking for ingredients with which to make his medicines no one would buy any longer. He remembered now how angry he was then - towards John Winthrop, who humiliated him, towards the townsfolk who shunned him, towards Silas who had betrayed him. He was spurred on thinking of Sarah and Fanny – whom he would never see again, who might well spend the rest of their lives as Winthrop's chattel. He came over the crest of a hill and noticed the steeple of Ipswich meeting house in the distance. It was then that Gabriel hit upon the plot which would certainly end in his execution.

Remembering it now, Gabriel knew that it was only because of Winthrop's cruelty that he had been driven to this point. It would be impossible for Asenath or even Silas to understand it, because although they knew Winthrop's coercion they had never known his fist. When he was fourteen, Winthrop broke his nose for saying something flippant, then called it an accident. Maybe that was true – Gabriel was always small for his age; and John Winthrop in those days was strong and intemperate. Fanny would understand it - indeed she knew more and worse stories in that vein. She understood what had driven Gabriel to this – why Gabriel had no choice but to set that fire, to set her free. Of course she understood him, which was why when he came for her, she went without asking any questions. She trusted him, even after everyone else had turned on him. That was why Gabriel would do anything for Fanny, why she was his only respite from a mindful of painful memories and hateful thoughts. That night, he had returned to Hurdle Maker's Hill with his plot, and prepared to set it in motion.

Gabriel had waited for Silas and the Governor to leave Ipswich, so he would not have to face them in the manse. Thankfully, the Governor tended to advertise his absences, and left Ipswich with his son and a full complement of learned men. Gabriel knew they would be gone for several days, out to preach in some new settlement or another along the Connecticut River. Gabriel watched them ride away, and then slunk into Ipswich town and hid himself until he was sure most people were asleep.

He crept up to the meeting house in the dead of night. He remembered the arched windows looming over him like giant headstones; Gabriel broke into the meeting house by smashing one of them. Climbing through, he cut his hands on the glass, but it didn't matter. Nobody heard anything, the village stayed quiet. Gabriel tore up the prayer books and the psalters, gathered the pages as kindling. He climbed up into John Winthrop's pulpit and piled up the pages into a heap.

All that was left to do was start the fire, to kindle the blaze that would give Fanny her escape. He went to the sacristy, where the host candle was left burning. He took the sacred fire out of its glass case carefully, like he was picking up a baby chick. He took the candle up into the pulpit. He rolled up a psalm, used it to light the other pages. It kindled, casting a golden-red light over his hands.

He remembered how happy he felt, feeding the fire signatures of paper and book covers like he was hand-feeding a lamb. As if in answer to his gladness, the flames reared up and rushed into the darkened space of the meeting house, like an angel at the annunciation.

Gabriel retreated, feeling the heat on his face as the pulpit itself caught fire. The oil that had been used to polish the wood burned quickly. For a moment, the pulpit was wreathed in fire but not consumed; then the finish scorched and the timbers burned in earnest. In his memory, the fiery pulpit was still burning, like a sign of revelation. Even now, Gabriel was unsure how the fire could have spread so quickly – it was meant to be small, but within minutes it had engulfed everything of value.

Tendrils of flame crept from the pulpit, igniting the drapery. The windows of the back wall burst and exploded, glass falling and sparkling like shards of ice in the heat. Gabriel stayed to watch until the front third of the meeting house was cloaked irretrievably in fire, like the temple curtain in Jerusalem. It had been amazing, in its own way – he had only left at the last possible moment. What had happened afterwards was hazy in comparison; when Gabriel remembered that night, he remembered the flames, and the timbers of John Winthrop’s church cracking like ice in the devil’s mouth. It had to be justice that it had happened that way – as God’s vengeance against Winthrop’s cruelty, Gabriel was merely its instrument. How else could such a small flame have consumed something so large and magnificent?

In the coldness of Gabriel’s cell, the coals grew a white coat of ash, faded to charcoal and died, as the sun thawed the night into a dull grey, then blue, then easterly pink. Night was ending, morning was coming, and then it was here: the first day of his trial.

Gabriel marked time by watching the sun’s progress illuminating the town square, as the sun emerged from behind the meeting house, distant and inaccessible as heaven to a sinner. In twos and threes, the commons was populated with spectators. They must have come from all over Hampshire Valley, just to see him go to court. Someone wheeled out a cart of hot cider, selling refreshments to the throng; meanwhile Gabriel could smell bread baking in various houses as the workday began.

Gabriel splashed some water on his face, through his unruly hair, and tied it back. He gnawed on a bit of hard tack, pretending it was a cracker, but lost his appetite when he found a weevil.

Around eight o’ clock Gabriel heard men approaching his cell. His heart began to beat faster, ratcheting up the tension running throughout his body and mind the night previously, and the week previously, and indeed since his arrest. The door to the cell was unlocked. Rackman, the warden, looked impassive and stony. Silas had changed into his church clothes, black garments as fine as his eyelashes and shiny like his long, curly hair.

"It's time, Gabriel." Silas sounded unwilling, as if it were himself facing trial.

"Really? I was just starting to enjoy myself." Gabriel said. Silas gave him a faint smile, but it didn't reach his eyes, which wore the same expression Silas used while praying at someone's deathbed.

"On your feet," Rackman growled. "We're to put you in irons."

Gabriel offered Rackman his wrists. They were returned to him locked in a heavy manacle. Rackman led and Silas followed, escorting Bishop between them down the hall.

In the sally port they were rejoined by two Negro servants, flanking Gabriel on either side. That they were both Negroes seemed conspicuous, as if the slaves themselves were condemning him. Gabriel recognized one of them. It was Caesar; he was Asenath's slave. Sending Caesar here was meant to show that she had condemned him, too – like a sign to the community of her disavowal.

The doors of the gaol were huge wooden doors, like the gates for a fortress. This made them unwieldy, and for this reason a smaller door had been cut into one side. It was through this lesser door Gabriel entered, but for his exit the portal would open wide. Two boys undid the bolts, the gates swung in heavily, groaning as they let in the light of day and the sound of the square. The murmur of voices became a rabble, and Gabriel found himself face to face with the townsfolk who thought he was a witch and a poisoner. They hissed and spat, and for a moment Gabriel was reminded of the riot at the apothecary shop, of the hammers destroying his vessels and tools.

Although Gabriel himself was frozen like a deer before a pack of wolves, Rackman grabbed his wrists, dragging him forward, and he felt Caesar's hand holding the back of his neck down, forcing him to crouch as they half-ran towards the meeting house, enfolding themselves in a mob with different designs. Within it, the screech was louder, though he could scarce hear it over the feverish beating of his own heart, begging him to flee, flee, away from the danger, away from these hellish people.

The crowd roared and booed, the shrill scream “Witch!” mobilizing them to action. Some people were throwing pebbles and garbage at them. Other spectators were caught in the cross-fire, and Gabriel could hear women shouting for their children to get clear of the men.

Rackman pulled him with more urgency and Gabriel dared not resist. A glass bottle shattered at his feet, knocking his hat askew. Gabriel couldn’t see anything from the center of the dogpile, and cowered in the archway of the wave he knew would soon come crashing down upon him. In the chaos he felt Silas’s hand reach for his and Gabriel held it.

Splattered and bruised, they made it to the stairs of the meetinghouse, where a cordon of godly men with muskets made another wall for Gabriel to hide behind. Now distanced from the mob, they continued up the steps at a more dignified pace, so that everyone could have a good look at Gabriel before he went into the court; to see the witch who hid amongst them.

It was just himself, wearing the same grey hat, frizzled beard, and spectacles as always. These people had been his clients, neighbors, and fellow shopkeepers. But when Gabriel looked out at the mob in the square, he gazed upon the faces of strangers, and wondered if it was they who had changed instead of him. Their eyes had a steely glint as they pretended not to know him.

Facing the crowd on the steps of the meeting house, Gabriel heard a faint cracking sound. Far away, the ice on the Connecticut River was breaking up. A huge piece of it cracked and slid underneath the downstream sheet, revealing a distant pool of icy water. Fate looked him in the eye, and Gabriel screamed in terror on the steps. He stumbled, and the mob cheered.

Gabriel Bishop fell to his knees before the meeting house; darkness descending on him like a crashing wave. He tried to get up, but his legs would not obey him. He heard Silas shout, the sound echoing in his mind. Rackman pulled him upright and dragged him across the temple threshold. Inside it was quieter, and the darkness enfolded Gabriel’s mind completely.

Gabriel remembered the next moments only in fragments. He heard Silas swearing at someone, but understood not the words. Gabriel smelled a pungent odor, snapped back into consciousness, his heart still racing, as if he'd run a mile. Rackman took away the smelling salts.

"There, he's back, see? No harm done. Go tell your father we're ready." Silas nodded curtly, and went inside the packed meetinghouse. When they were alone, Rackman said;

"I've got my eye on you, Bishop. Try any more of that funny business in court and you'll be living in a basement cell from here on out."

Chapter Two

It had been forty-two years since John Winthrop had signed his name to the Massachusetts Bay Company and left England for the New World aboard the ship *Arabella*, never to return. He had been as frightened then as the apostles were, when the Son bade them come with no purse, no tunic, and no extra shoes. Indeed, there was much to be afraid of. They could have been lost at sea, or arrived at the wrong place; or come to the right one, and found only hastily dug graves and empty dwellings there. John had prayed desperately during the voyage, and wrote sermons during his sleepless nights and delivered them on pitching decks, shouting to be heard above the wind and waves. It was his best work.

To be sure, some mistakes were made. The ships veered off course; it was only after they passed the Bay of Rhode Island that the captain realized they'd gone too far south. Undaunted, John set a course heading up the Connecticut River. They dropped anchor at the river's mouth and took on fresh water and such provisions as they could find while river pilots scouted up ahead in smaller boats.

The ships sailed upriver for another fortnight, reaching the new settlement of Springfield before the river grew too shallow. They put off and set out north, following the river in search of fertile farmland. They left many things aboard the *Arabella*; heirlooms which in this stage of the expedition had become vanities. In this humble manner John Winthrop led his pilgrims northward, with a few men scouting ahead on horses and a baggage train behind them.

They found their promised land when their instruments indicated they were approximately fifty miles north from where they disembarked. There it was green and lush, and the fruits of the earth sprung up in summer like a host from Eden. John Winthrop named this town Ipswich. A few miles away, on the opposite shore, he placed a second settling party in a more fortified area. John named this town Andover. The year was 1652.

They were far from Boston - without roads it took a week for riders to make their way. It was up to John to see to the settlement's defense. At first, the wolves were his greatest concern, so that John never left the house without a musket for protection. He erected a short wooden wall to keep them out at night, naively thinking it tall enough. But soon, John learned there were more dangerous things in the woods of New England than animals.

In 1668, the Indians attacked. They overcame the walls of Andover Town in the dead of night and crept into the English houses. Their tomahawks and knives filled the night with screams. Those that did not flee were lost, and the Indians carried off diverse valuables and weapons. They killed women and children as eagerly as men. Only Providence spared John's manse from being penetrated; although his Negro woman's handiness with a birding piece certainly helped. The other minister was not so lucky. At the funeral of John Endicott, John Winthrop vowed revenge against the red men for their savagery.

It was the beginning of what would come to be known as the Indian War. John captured the Indian settlement to the north and renamed it Deerfield, securing the valley at the cost of many lives. Pressing his victories, John raised forces in Ipswich. After a fortnight of drilling, he sent four dozen of the Hampshire Valley's strongest lads to engage the Indians at their camp in Ashe's Ford. Leading them was John's eldest son, Eliot Winthrop.

The Battle of Ashe's Ford was a bloody one, with heavy casualties to both sides. Their ambush briefly gave Eliot's men the advantage, and the Indians fled the camp. Following them, Eliot's forces to crossed over Ashe's Creek. While they were vulnerable, the braves turned about and attacked again. Eliot gave chase to the warrior-chief and his van of riders, fighting back with halberds and bayonets.

Ultimately Christian bravery won the day, and all agreed that Eliot Winthrop fought valiantly. That night however, when everyone was celebrating, he complained of a headache. He had been struck in battle; a glancing blow. Eliot went to sleep that night and never woke again.

In mourning, John eschewed the pulpit for a year and day; and decided his other son, Silas, should become a preacher. He threw himself wholeheartedly into governance, building an overland road to Boston and a bridge to connect Ipswich and Andover. This road made the colony prosperous and Winthrop famous, so that in 1677 the Massachusetts Bay Company officially added Ipswich and Andover to its list of settlements, and John Winthrop won the election against Thomas Dudley to become Governor of the entire colony, from the river to the sea.

But just as things started to get easier, the ungodly stole into John's colony, like rats aboard a ship. Some of them were from England; others were misfits and excommunicates from colonies to the south. John had hoped that if he let them build farms separate from his towns that the ranks of the godly would not be corrupted. This had proved as naïve a prediction as the height of the first palisade. Families like the Blacks and the Bishops could only corrupt his colony from within, for they carried sinning with them like rats carry fleas. Now, the whole colony was itching with their afflictions.

It was obviously a punishment from God that Ezekiel Bishop got himself shot; so that it would fall to John to raise his orphaned son. At the time, John believed Gabriel was innocent and tractable. Silas had keenly wanted Gabriel to stay with them; and it was hard for John to deny him in the wake of losing Eliot. For these reasons John Winthrop took Gabriel in and raised him for six years.

But Gabriel was not the eager sponge Winthrop had hoped for. Once fed properly, Gabriel proved to be an argumentative and confrontational boy, who constantly tested John's patience. He had a sort of obsession with corporal punishment, accepting it readily as a dare. Because of this, John made the mistake of being lenient with Gabriel.

The meetinghouse was well attended for this trial, to the point of being over capacity. Church members all sat in their assigned seats; the unchartered had to make do in the mezzanines and standing in the aisles. Tomorrow, there would have to be a lottery to choose who could come inside.

"It's about time we got started, Thomas." The studious clerk at his elbow nodded, opened his ledger and made himself ready. At this the people in the gallery seated themselves, and a simple rap of John's knuckles on the chair's arm earned their silence. Thomas called out the roll.

"The Grand Court will hear the case of Gabriel Bishop, indicted of acts of witchcraft, on this, the seventh of January, 1685. Presiding is Governor John Winthrop, who will determine the guilt or innocence of the accused before God. I would remind the gallery to hold their silence during these proceedings; only officers of the court may pose questions to the accused."

Winthrop nodded to Thomas. "Bring him in," the clerk called, and the governor saw his foster son for the first time in a fortnight.

Gabriel Bishop was unkempt from his stay in gaol, but not much more than usual. His clothes were a bit dirty, and the luster was gone from his unruly hair; it was brown as a dead leaf. His color was pale, more so than it had been after the arrest, and the shackles hung weightily on his thin limbs.

Gabriel was dressed too informally for the proceedings. Everyone else had washed their clothes for the occasion, but Bishop wore his grey coat, grey hat, and his black hunting boots, which were falling apart and repaired with strings. Gabriel faced the Governor on the dais, but refused to meet his gaze.

"Gabriel Bishop. I expected so much from you; but even now you cling to your separateness. Tomorrow, you shall have black clothes." To his right Governor Winthrop heard the scratching of Thomas's quill.

Gabriel gave an impassive shrug, as if to say 'if it pleases the court.'

"I let you into my homestead, live in my house for six years. You befriended my youngest son, and courted my daughter. You were shown the right way of Protestantism, and when you came into your inheritance on Hurdle Maker's Hill, I believed that I had reformed you as one of my own. But you

abused the trust invested in you. You sickened your clients, and performed black magic to protect those you favored from the smallpox. Your words are witchery, and you possessed the minds of my son and daughter, the better to hide yourself amongst the godly. After Silas revealed to us who you really were, you burned our meeting house so you could steal Fanny, my servant.”

As the governor spoke, Gabriel glanced about, and behind him, at the gallery of witnesses.

“Hast thou nothing to say in thy defense?” the Governor asked, raising his voice.

“You need to ask a question,” Braithwaite said to Winthrop privately, “The accused isn’t allowed to speak at liberty.”

“What in the burning hell,” Winthrop replied, “Gabriel, you’ll speak when you’re spoken to, have I made myself clear? And you’ll stand when you give testimony, and speak clearly and coherently to the point.” That had been a problem in the pretrial phase, when Braithwaite was collecting written depositions.

“Yes, governor.” Gabriel fidgeted in his manacle. He held it up. “Might I put this off?”

John thought about this. On the one hand, he probably wouldn’t be here long; but on the other, forcing Gabriel to testify in irons might look cruel and unusual to outside observers. “Rackman, unlock him!” Thomas sprinkled sand on his transcript as the bailiff did so, drying the ink.

“God be with thee, John Winthrop.” Gabriel thanked him.

“Amen.” Winthrop agreed. “If you’re done with your pleasantries and requesting accommodation, perhaps we’ll get started with these proceedings.”

“By all means.” Gabriel said, in mock-politeness.

“Braithwaite will swear you in. Put your hand on the Gospel Book.” The clerk picked up the embossed leather volume from the office table in the rear of the sanctuary.

Gabriel was about to touch it, and then drew back. “I can’t.”

“You’re in a Protestant court, Gabriel. You’re going to conform to Protestant orthodoxy while you’re here.” If Gabriel wanted to be tried by Quaker laws, he should have burned a church in Pennsylvania.

“No, I cannot. It is not meet for a man who burned the Word to then to swear by it. Prithee, let me not touch thy Gospel Book; I shall swear by the Holy Spirit.”

John Winthrop sighed, annoyed to be changing established procedure on Gabriel’s whims. “Braithwaite, is that meet to you?” John asked, “May he swear on the Holy Spirit?”

“Theologically it is meet.” Thomas said neutrally. “If the accused wishes it.”

“Very well. Swear on the Holy Spirit.” Gabriel did so silently, his lips moving.

“Louder, Gabriel.” John said, warning him.

“...and the meditations of my heart before this court be true and pleasing to thee, Lord our God.” Gabriel said, becoming audible in the middle of the prayer.

“Start over; I want to hear the entirety of what you said.”

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart before this court be true and pleasing to thee, Lord our God.” Gabriel said, repeating himself.

“Not good enough. Repeat after me: I swear before the Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that the evidence I give shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, under pains and penalties of perjury.”

Gabriel repeated this oath with a sigh, as if to say 'I should not have to say this'.

"Finally. May we continue? Thank you. Gabriel, do you know how the Black Man tempted Jesus in the wilderness, during the forty days' fast?" Winthrop's tone was a little annoyed.

"Yes," Gabriel said, without elaboration.

"Do you know *why* the Black Man tempted the Lord?"

"I think so." Gabriel said, sounding bored already.

"Because the Black Man saw an opportunity to make the only living God bow in deference to his own creation." Winthrop continued, "Incarnated, Jesus was vulnerable to hunger, thirst, pain, jealousy, as all the sons of Adam are. Had he given in to temptation, no stones would have turned to bread, no angels would have arrived to break his fall. Had the Son succumbed, he would have died a mortal's death, an eternal death, his half-discovered mission on earth over before it began."

"In the Lord lives a covenant in perfect harmony." Gabriel's nose was a little crooked from where John had broken it ten years earlier.

"So you agree the Black Man didn't sell you his magic because your poor soul was so attractive to him. He saw you wavering, between your radical beliefs and degenerate faith, and saw a weak point; whereby he could introduce witchcraft into the Kingdom of God on Earth. Do you confess it?"

"No, I do not." Gabriel said. "I am no witch."

"So you deny it? You did not commit acts of witchcraft?"

"I know not what a witch is," Gabriel said, "they do not exist."

"How can you know a witch cannot exist if you know not what they are?"

"There's no such thing as witches." Gabriel said it more confidently. "So I cannot be one."

“So sayest thou. There are many who would disagree. Starting with the people dead from your smallpox, though they cannot testify against you. Did you kill them for money? We found a trove of coins from familiar hoards in your strongbox.”

Gabriel looked insulted. “Never,” he said, “I earned my wages.”

“So why are they dead, then? Incompetence?”

“More would have died if I had shut myself up on Hurdle Maker’s Hill and done nothing.”

“So you admit the red plague was your doing. You set it on the town, then protected those you favored with your witch-mark.”

“No. I am no witch, that mark is not magical.”

“Keep denying it, Gabriel, it only means we’ll hear more evidence against thee. You marked my son Silas. How many others did you mark, so that the pox would pass them over?”

“T’was only he.” Gabriel said, possibly lying. “I did it in secret, but I could not hide it - my conscience gave me no rest.”

“What queer morality you Quakers have. Did you ask him to keep it a secret, too?”

“Yes.” Gabriel said. “I begged him not to tell anyone else.”

“If your mark is no witchcraft, then why be so secretive about it? Did some other witch swear you to silence?” John Winthrop said.

“I am no witch.” Gabriel repeated stubbornly. “I know no other witches.”

“You are an arsonist, however. You burned my house of worship, and you can see here how the community holds you responsible. If I were in a hasty mood, I could have you hanged summarily.”

“Thou couldst; thou wouldst not.” Gabriel responded. “Thou hast not, for the time being.”

“Nay.” Winthrop said. “Although most innocent men plead more heartily than you.”

Gabriel glowered, “I’m not going to beg thee for mercy in this sham trial.”

“Prithee, in what way is this a sham trial?” Winthrop asked, mockingly. “It seems a very real trial in my estimation. Have you not been afforded with every right entitled to you?”

“Thou would terrify me with these proceedings, torment me until I tell thee whatever thou would know – or have me say as a confession. I’m alive now because I haven’t, nor will I ever. So we might as well get on to the water test; I think that would save thee some time and trouble.”

Winthrop frowned. He thought Gabriel might bring up the water test, but as a last resort. “I see how this is. You know you’re guilty, and you want your secrets to die with you.”

“I’m not a witch.” Gabriel said stubbornly. “My secrets are my own.”

“No. Your secrets are your source of power, your means of witchery. Each of your victims was foolish enough to keep secrets with you, and it gave you control over them in turn. The secrets you keep protect your soul and tie you to people in this world. Gabriel, it is these secrets I will expose in the following proceedings, so that once you’re gone you can never come back to haunt us.”

Gabriel had no quick reply for that. Finally, he said: “Thou hast an awfully high opinion of my witch-arts, John Winthrop. Thou hast overestimated it greatly, and so too the knowledge I still have in confidence. I plead my innocence to the water test: let it show I have nothing to hide.”

“You think you’re clever, don’t you, Gabriel?” Winthrop asked rhetorically. “You must, since you’re treating this like a game. This is your one chance to spare yourself a death sentence, and you’re throwing it away, demanding I put you to the river.”

“Yes.” Gabriel agreed. “I think the river would prove a fairer court than this one.”

“Shut up about the god-damned river. For now, this trial will take place with evidence and testimony as befits a court of law – not primitive torture tests befitting savages.” John Winthrop had never been much enamored of trials by virtue and ordeal. “This is very unscientific of you, Gabriel.”

“Being accused of witchery has me disenchanted with my scientific arts.” Gabriel replied. “Having my shop turned out by an angry mob probably didn’t help.”

“I had nothing to do with that.” Winthrop responded. “You brought that on yourself.”

“So sayest thou.” Gabriel said.

“While we’re on the subject of ways you’re not going to obtain a reduced sentence, what news have you of my servant, Fanny? The Black Man lent thee his powers to burn the meeting house, and she has been missing ever since. Gabriel, I ask as your erstwhile father-in-law: does she live yet?”

“I can’t say.” Gabriel replied; but the answer was obviously yes.

“But you know where she went. You know where she is now.” John Winthrop said.

“I have no witch-like powers, so I cannot guess her location.”

“I don’t believe you. Only a witch could have done what you have, for the price of it is eternal damnation - costly for a free man, but for the Black Man’s servants a passage paid. Gabriel, did you truly hold your soul in such mean regard as to sell it for magic?”

“No...” Gabriel said, before noticing it was a leading question. “It wasn’t a trifling decision. I didn’t have a choice anymore. And not about the magic part, but about setting her free.”

“‘Setting her free’? You mean stealing her.” Winthrop said. “You’re saying the Black Man compelled you to steal her on his behalf.”

"I didn't steal anything." Gabriel maintained. "She left of her own free will: I just took her beyond the palisade and gave her a horse. I promised her I would do it, because I love her."

"I will not profane this court with recitations of your lecherous behavior. Unburden yourself of this smut on your own time, to whichever God will counsel you." Winthrop said, allowing himself a chilly jest. "How is it Gabriel, being alone in there? Do you think of the night that you burned the meeting house? Was it revenge for your apothecary? For being shunned from your source of power? Or was setting the fire always your design, a personal plot of revenge against me?"

Gabriel looked at him hatefully, as if his Quaker speech could not rightly word his black ideas. He said, "Thou used to beat me severely. Thou forced me to take up thy religion; and when I would not convert, thou cast me out."

"I did right by you then. T'was thee who betrayed me by leaving the manse. Is this really your defense? I'm warning you – this won't do well by thee, Gabriel."

"Thou art a hypocrite, John Winthrop!" Gabriel was trembling now, a Quaker affectation.

"Gabriel, stop it." John Winthrop said, but Gabriel ran right over him.

"In the kingdom of God thou canst not own another man as property. Paul implores the Roman slave owners to free their slaves in his letters. What if Fanny was thy daughter, Governor?"

John Winthrop sighed. This was like trying to pin down a louse and tease it from your hair. John interrupted him, "Gabriel, listen to me carefully. I know what you're doing. These gentlemen, too, are familiar with your traps. Which innocent party are you trying to fool with your romances?"

"Nobody." Gabriel said. "I speak the truth. I did what I did because I had no other choice. Fanny made me promise to free her... after the apothecary was sacked and the wedding was called off, I had no other option but to free her by forceful means."

“So, you used Sarah as a pretext to acquire my servant, so you could declare your love and free her after the wedding?” Winthrop said, disgusted. “I knew you weren’t sincere, but I never suspected you would exploit Sarah like that – she was the only girl who ever loved you for what you are.”

“It wasn’t like that.” Gabriel protested. “I wanted to protect both of them from you.”

“You’re going to stop this, immediately. I already warned you twice.” Winthrop commanded. “We’re done for today. Tomorrow you will abandon this attempt to convince us that your Quaker piety drove you to witchcraft. Do you understand me, Gabriel?”

“Yes, Governor.” He said it with a flippant smirk, as if he’d won this round instead of digging his grave deeper. “Who will testify against me tomorrow?”

“Who do you think?” John said, annoyed. “My children, though you may know them better as your principal victims. Rackman, get this heretic out of my courtroom. We’re adjourning until nine ‘o clock tomorrow. Braithwaite, meet me in my chambers.”

John remained seated, as Rackman and Silas led Gabriel away. The silence of the courtroom dissolved into half a hundred whispering voices, and the shuffle of six dozen feet quietly clearing out. In hushed voices they discussed the fate of the Sorcerer of Ipswich and the bravery of Governor Winthrop, who so fearlessly faced him and spoke to him like a man.

Chapter Three

Since the announcement that Gabriel Bishop would be tried in Andover, an austere, self-critical mood had settled onto the patrons of the High Horse. For the past week, Asenath Black's usual tipplers seemed put off their tippling, her gamblers put off gambling. Hunters ceased their poaching, or at least of making a contest out of it, and players of instruments left them under their covers, as if everyone in town had silently agreed it was Lent, instead of the first week of Epiphany.

After Gabriel's arrest in Ipswich, the High Horse had been packed with men looking to discuss the scandal. Eagerly they told Asenath the details as she filled their cups, gauging her reaction to see if it would make fit grist for their rumor mill. They were eerily excited to see Gabriel tried, and eerily desiring to hear of his trysts with Fanny the slave. In their drunkenness some muttered of burning him to death like a proper witch, that Gabriel deserved it. Asenath knew better than to press her luck by throwing them out, but she was relieved when Governor Winthrop relocated the trial to Andover, and did not regret the loss of business.

As a barwoman Asenath had learned when to keep things to herself. There would be no profit to her in talking about Gabriel; her apprentice had so thoroughly buggered himself that Asenath assumed he slept in Andover gaol twisted like a pretzel. There was nothing she could do for him now, except thank God that Gabriel wasn't her son, or she'd be on trial with him.

Wreathed in blue smoke from her pipe, Asenath stretched towards the fire, resting her heels on a block of wood just a few inches from the grate. Surrounded by her handsome wooden house, warm by her stove she let herself be comfortable. Here, Asenath could admit to being a little proud of herself, and proud of her business the way most women her age were proud of their children. Not that she hadn't tried that with her late husband, or once again, years later, by taking on Gabriel Bishop as an apprentice – but these things hadn't worked out the way Asenath hoped.

Not that there was anything wrong with her husband – William had been a fine partner, until the tree he was cutting down fell on him. Something was definitely wrong with Gabriel, but that wasn't her fault – whatever it was, Asenath had warned him off it. If only he'd listened to her, the High Horse wouldn't be missing its neighbor, and Gabriel's apothecary wouldn't be looted and shuttered next door. But then again, Asenath might have told William something similar about lumbering.

Anyway, she preferred placing her trust herself– other people were often untrustworthy, a fact she was reminded of on a monthly basis, when it was time to collect tabs. If she had a copper for every partial payment and needless dispute, she could have Caesar re-do the bar's surface in hammered-out pennies. Chuckling at this, Asenath decided the polished wood surface was superior.

The truly beautiful part of the High Horse, however, were the new glass windows, a gift from Silas Winthrop. From them, Asenath had a commanding view of the countryside – and more importantly, you could see them from the road, glittering proudly in the day and looking bright and inviting at night. After they were installed, passing Indians kept appearing in the windows, leaving nose prints and hazy blotches of steam on the panes. Asenath had to put up curtains so they wouldn't go peering in at all hours of the night.

Looking out her windows, Asenath watched a young man was dove hunting across the road, now and then punctuating the stillness with the report of his musket. She tucked her white wool shawl around herself, happy to watch him from the comfort of her stove.

The thump of footsteps on her porch roused Asenath from her ponderings. Taking the pipe in her hand, Asenath stood up, making her way behind the bar as a gust of cold air came in with her guest.

"Got quite a busy shop here, haven't ye, Goody Black?" Daniel Wheelwright asked, kicking the mud off his boots.

She smiled at him; a gesture she rationed carefully. Asenath didn't like people to see her teeth, which, like her fingernails, were stained with smoke and age. "They're all in Andover, haven't you heard? Now off wi' ye, old man Wheelwright, I'm expecting better company than drunk tradesmen."

Daniel approached the bar, spinning a silver coin in his fingers. He was old too, but not so much as her. Like Asenath's, Daniel Wheelwright's hands were calloused and toughened, his muscles quick and wiry from a lifetime of manual labor. They were old friends, a trust built on twenty years of business and trading. There was nothing improper about it, though younger women always seemed to think so.

"I'm a sober tradesman for now, but not for much longer." Asenath took a mug from the cupboard and filled it from the hogshead.

"Here, old man." She said, handing it to him. "To your health."

"Thou always brewed it dark and strong, Asenath, dark and strong." Daniel slid the coin across the bar, tucking into his drink. "Don't break it, I'll be here awhile."

"You don't need to tell me that. Thy wife heckles me about it."

"She's much to be jealous of. A widow like you with her own business, her own vote... and a barrel of the best ale in Massachusetts. Why wouldn't I linger here?" Daniel said, fondly.

"Barrels. I have barrels of ale. And stout, and amber too. I'm sure we cut a very threatening figure, me and my vote and my barrels. It must set Governor Winthrop's heart a-trembling."

"Surely, almost as much as Gabriel Bishop. Winthrop probably never worried about keeping Fanny protected from him – or well covered, might I say?" Daniel joked, even though it was too soon.

At this Asenath was put out. "I've naught to say about Frances, or how she manipulated my apprentice. Keep your heel rumors to yourself, I already have to live with the facts."

“Oh, Asenath. Are you still angry at her?” Wheelwright asked. “The way I heard it, Gabriel made her do it. She was afraid of him, and fled from him the night he burned the meeting house.”

“I wonder how that’s working out for her now.” Asenath said, with the implication it had worked out very well for Fanny indeed. “And I’m angry at Gabriel about something else entirely.”

Wheelwright took a contemplative drink from his cup. “John Winthrop turned him, I think; I know I couldn’t suffer to live around such holiness. He should have let thou adopt him; thou would have raised him with the Commandments. Maybe then, he would not have rebelled so ardently.”

Asenath shrugged. “Quaker blood usually tells, but who’s to say? Maybe if I’d kept Gabriel at the start, I could have converted him. But after John Winthrop was through with him, there was no way.”

“I never understood why he threw Gabriel out. Did he do something, back then?”

“I couldn’t say specifically. They were fighting like cats and dogs.” Asenath said. “The governor broke his nose that year and called it an accident.”

“We all knew about that. But was it really just over religion?”

“As far as I know. Gabriel didn’t talk about it much while he lived here.”

“Well, it was all for naught; he became your apprentice in the end. Mayhaps there’s a lesson there.” Daniel said earnestly, “Who’s John Winthrop to say the Lord didn’t make thee barren so as to raise fatherless children like Gabriel?”

Asenath blushed. “I would tell you to pipe down, but thankfully we’re alone.”

“I wonder how Sarah Winthrop feels about all this.” Wheelwright mused. “Jilted, probably.”

“You think? I’m furious at Gabriel for not marrying her when he had the chance.”

“Well, men and women want different things,” Wheelwright said, drinking from his cup.

“Men only ever want one thing,” Asenath said. “Except you, for some reason.”

“I’m nothing special.” Wheelwright said, “I’m just old, and already married. We men lose our edge with time. But as for thee, Asenath, I think thou art sharper with each passing year.”

“Don’t flatter me.” Asenath said, “I know what I am.”

“You’ve nothing to hide from me, Asenath.” Daniel said, “I yet carry your mark in confidence.”

“Don’t call it that. What you have is a scar.” Asenath gave it to him during a different smallpox epidemic. “Unless yours can call the Devil, it’s not a ‘mark’.”

Daniel drained his mug and gave it to Asenath. “If I could call the devil from a pox scar on my leg I wouldn’t bother making chairs and barrels for this lot. I’d be living like the Sultan of Shangri-La, with demons to weave my wicker for me.”

Asenath brought Daniel a refill. Changing the subject, he asked “If thou couldst have anything from the Black Man, Asenath, for what would thou wish?”

“Nothing.” Asenath replied. “The Black Man ruins whatever wish you ask of him. That’s his game, or weren’t you listening to John Winthrop for the past twenty years?”

“Well, what if he didn’t? What if the Black Man was feeling charitable?”

“Still nothing,” Asenath said. “I couldn’t be happier if I was Queen. Simplicity is a virtue; I embroidered that on my sampler.”

Daniel wasn’t joking any longer. “It doesn’t worry you, what’s been going on? The Governor’s moved his entire retinue to Andover for the trial, and there’s nary a soul in this High Horse.”

“So they shunned me.” Asenath shrugged, “It’s not the first time. They’ll come back in twos and threes after Easter; by Pentecost you’ll never know there was a witch trial. I’m still planning on a full house and music for Election Night.”

“That’s a high expectation you’ve got, Asenath.” Daniel said.

“That’s how it’s gone before. You remember the sermons John Winthrop used to give about me. I couldn’t give two bits if that old bat is wroth with me. Why do you think I named this place the ‘High Horse’?”

“He was wroth with thee when he was a young man. Now he’s plain vindictive. And you did make those medicinal drinks, for those women. You know the ones I mean.” Daniel said.

“I let Gabriel take over that years ago.” Asenath said dismissively. “And I don’t think John Winthrop ever knew for certain that someone was making those.”

“Don’t think because Winthrop hasn’t acted, he hasn’t forgotten. He remembers.”

“Well bully for him, then!” Asenath said, raising her voice. “So too do I. I remember being scared out of my wits the first year after William died, giving the Indians the mistake beer for free so they wouldn’t come kill me. I remember how the townies used to come here armed and asked me not to say they’d been. I remember how Winthrop blackmailed my suppliers in 1675, so that I had to import my grain from Rhode Island. That old man did everything he could to try and make me fail, but I didn’t and nobody cares what he thinks of me anymore; even his son drinks here.”

Daniel gave her a pained look. “There’s something I have to tell thee. It’s important.”

“Do you have to get started so early? Why don’t you get pissed first, and make it worth my while?” Asenath didn’t seek out secrets, but for her, keeping secrets was like mopping up spills.

"I heard you know where the black wench is." Asenath dropped her pipe on the floor.

"Careful, Danny," she said, retrieving the pipe, "on whose authority you get your rumors." Drat, she had spilled her tobacco on the floor. Still smoldering, Asenath swept it back into the pipe bowl with her calloused fingertips, and took a few puffs to relight it.

"So, do you know, or don't you?"

Asenath sighed, smoke billowing from her nose and mouth in bluish clouds. "No, I don't. If I had I would have come forth already."

"I don't believe you. And neither will John Winthrop."

"That's his problem. I don't know where she is." Gabriel and Asenath must have argued about Fanny a dozen times. By the time the smallpox came, the disagreement had caused a bit of a rift between them. "Really. Next to Winthrop, I'm probably the last person to know about Gabriel's plan."

Daniel was trying to read Asenath's expression. "Oh hoh! Never lie, Asenath, it doesn't suit you. Tell the truth of it, you know where she went, didn't you?"

"If I knew, I'd be in Andover with the lot of them, not here, getting the tippler's inquisition from thee." Asenath reached under the bar and retrieved a pair of tin snips. Taking Daniel's coin from the bar, she split it in twain, taking half for herself. "I'm cutting you off. There's your change."

"You're going to tell me what you're concealing from me, Asenath."

"Are you trying to imitate Winthrop? If so, it's not very funny."

"Oh, I'm serious. There's trouble on the wing, Asenath, and I need you to be straight with me."

She returned to her place by the fire and said "All this idle chatter is making my teeth ache."

Daniel Wheelwright tried to engage her a time or two again as he finished the dregs of his drink. Asenath pretended she was alone. She got her wool baskets and set to carding, feeling Daniel's eyes on her back.

She scraped the combs and drew, scraped, and drew, pulling loose balls of fiber ready for spinning. Finally, Daniel got his on his feet to leave, but still he lingered, as if he'd figure out where Asenath was hiding Fanny if only he watched a little more carding. For nearly a quarter-hour he watched her like that.

"What do you want, Daniel?!" She finally snapped. "Speak your piece or go!"

His quiet seemed a hurt one, and as Daniel found the words, Asenath regretted her harshness.

"You're as true as women come, Asenath, and hard like iron. There's a witch hunter come from Deerfield, and I fear he means to kill you."

Chapter Four

It was an hour past noon when Gabriel Bishop was led out of the meeting house. Thomas Braithwaite's stomach grumbled, and thought himself lucky that there was a servant to see to his lunch. Though the trial had recessed for the day, the clerk's labors were far from over. Thomas took a moment to organize his ledger, adding page numbers to the transcript and placing it in order. Once he was finished, only a few people lingered in the meetinghouse. Thomas went to the Governor's de facto chambers for the trial, carrying his leather tome of records, warrants, and blank paper.

The vestry was comfortable, and finely decorated for Winthrop's use. What impressed Thomas most was knowing it was all on loan, since Winthrop's own furnishings had been ruined in the fire. Thomas walked around the four wooden chairs and round table brought for his own use, and thought it was very fine indeed. The table was laid with sandwiches and a steaming pot of tea.

Thomas took one, eating it hungrily, and then taking another. Someone knocked at the door. Thomas hoped it wasn't Governor Winthrop, come to find him stuffing his face like a chipmunk. Chewing quickly, he opened the door and a woman of eighteen entered, freckled and lively, carrying a tray of teacups. She was John Winthrop's replacement for Fanny.

"Ah, Brydie. Thy timing couldn't be better," he said, taking a teacup.

"It was a lot to carry. I had to make two trips to the kitchen." The servant girl's Irish accent was rough but charming.

"Don't apologize. Have a bite to eat, I can't finish all these myself." Brydie seated herself and tucked into a sandwich without preamble. Having lunch with Brydie was something Thomas allowed himself to look forward to, the way oarsmen look forward to passing their marker-posts.

Thomas leaned on the arm of his chair, watching Brydie eat. John Winthrop was very strict in his custom of everyone eating in their turn, servants going last. It was the one Protestant mannerism which wore at Thomas's patience. The practice recalled the famine days, when there was barely enough food to go around. In Thomas's house, everyone said grace and ate together.

"It's really good," Brydie said, through a mouthful of ham.

"I've thee to thank for that. I might go without eating all day if not for thy considerations."

"I suppose it's nothing like house work, witch trials," Brydie said, sipping her tea.

"It can be. I've been instructed to handle the accused as if he were kith and kin."

Brydie's brow quirked. "How do you mean, kith and kin?"

"Like family." Thomas explained. "Silas Winthrop in particular is looking for any excuse to force an acquittal, and the Governor wants this conviction to be absolutely stainless, in case we move to execution. Which is unlikely – I've also been instructed to give Gabriel every possible chance to confess."

"And how." Brydie said. "You should watch out for Silas."

"Why?" Thomas asked.

"I think he's getting into fights. He comes and goes at all hours, just to vex his father."

The clerk would have said something cruel about Silas in response, but at that moment John Winthrop opened the door without knocking. "Governor!" Brydie exclaimed, standing up too quickly, brushing the crumbs off her skirt. "Can I bring you anything more for lunch? Anything at all?" She looked to Thomas, and he noticed Brydie was a poor liar, who blushed when she tried to conceal things.

Winthrop fixed Brydie with a sour look. "No, thank you. Thomas, we have business to attend to." At least he hadn't heard them talking.

In a society where vanity was frowned upon, John Winthrop had been much blessed. Thomas thought he looked like a woodcut of the Emperor Domitian; a host of squashed, cramped features were locked in battle over the real estate of John Winthrop's face. His nose was massive and hooked like a hawk beak; his gaze was piercing, and his eyes were so dark in color they seemed nearly black. Artists commissioned with his likeness struck a difficult balance between capturing Winthrop's likeness and not insulting him with their craft.

"Aye. Brydie, we'll speak later," Thomas said, dismissing her.

"What was she doing here?" Winthrop asked casually, brushing bread crumbs off Brydie's seat and taking it for himself. The Governor ignored the refreshments Brydie had laid out for him.

"Asking me about the proceedings. I was explaining it to her."

"I wouldn't say too much. She's given to giggling; I can tell she's a gossip."

Thomas covered his mouth and coughed politely, as if to say, 'let's get started.'

"Braithwaite. I suppose you know better than to record Bishop when he goes significantly off course, do you not?"

"Of course. I didn't write down any of that stuff he said about Fanny."

"Good; his words could poison a weak mind, even written down. You've come along in this nicely. I'll make a magistrate of thee yet."

"After two convictions I would hate to start making mistakes now." Thomas said modestly.

“That’s why you’ll be the one to question Bishop when he confesses. If he confesses.”

“He’ll confess,” Thomas reassured him. “They always do, after the ones they’re protecting turn on them.”

John Winthrop didn’t seem convinced. “He’s a stubborn lad. He might just kill himself to spite me. You saw how he chose to appear in court today, with his grey clothes and that peculiar ‘thou’. I hope it didn’t offend you.” The Braithwaites of Quaker Hill had been famously persecuted until their incorporation and conversion.

“Not really,” Thomas said. “I’m used to it by now. I would have the people of Boston see that my heart is turned towards God; and that I don’t carry any mercy in my heart for degenerates like Bishop.”

Thomas could feel the Governor’s eyes on him, as if he was sizing him up. “You were re-baptized when you were five, but allowed to remain with your mother. What do you remember of Quakerism?”

“Nothing,” Thomas said honestly. “Though I remember my father a little.”

“It must be distasteful to you to put on their clothes again, even as a mask to win Bishop’s confidence.” John Winthrop said. “Rest assured I’ll do whatever I can to get you elected to the office of magistrate if you bring me Gabriel’s confession.”

Thomas had some news on that account. “There was a report from Rackman yesterday. Bishop prays less, sleeps less. He’s growing desperate. It won’t be long now until he confesses everything to anybody he thinks could grant him absolution.” Thomas could pretend to be that person, for an hour or two. “And Hardship Cole will recover your Negro woman. Just you wait.”

“If Hardship finds her frozen corpse in a field somewhere, mark me Thomas...” John Winthrop trailed off, as if he couldn’t stand the thought. “I’ll hang him. I won’t have a choice anymore.”

"She lives." Thomas said. "Bishop wouldn't choose the water test if she didn't. She's near to our grasp, probably in hiding with the other woman."

"Asenath Black." The Governor reminded Thomas. "Aye. She'll know where Fanny is. Or she will know how to find out. You made it clear to Hardship to bring her here unharmed?"

"He's a professional." Thomas replied confidently. "If I know Hardship, she'll surrender peacefully, under the guise of a harmless old lady. Witches tend to go with him the easy way."

"That is how Asenath hides herself." John Winthrop said begrudgingly. "Both of them need to confess. Then I can exile them; and I won't have to kill anybody over this nonsense."

"If it were me, I would take Bishop at his word." Thomas said. "He's a dangerous man; I'd put him to the river and let God make his choice."

At this Winthrop gave Thomas a long look, as if he was searching his words for justice. "The day will come when it will be your choice to make, Braithwaite. And I pray you don't find it as easy as that." Winthrop got his cloak. "That's all for today. I have some private business to which I must attend."

"As you like, Governor Winthrop."

Thomas stayed for a long time after Winthrop left; until all the sandwiches were eaten and what tea was left had gone stone cold, finishing up his own work. By the time Thomas left the courthouse, the sun had already set. In the twilight Andover Town seemed awash in blue colors. In the windows of the finest houses Thomas saw women lighting candles. They made Thomas think of his wife, Marie, waiting for him at home in Boston. He should write her back, he thought, as he went to his rented room.

The Squaw's Fire was a tavern which played at being a Boston coffeehouse. Its shutters had been painted dark green, and its window panes glittered with variegated rosy colors. It didn't seem to fit

in with the austere facades of the other buildings; adhering to the letter rather than to the spirit of the vanity laws. Thomas let himself in, and headed for the parlor, to order himself a half bottle of wine.

The parlor was crowded with people chatting, and candles burned gaily in pewter holders. A mandolin player had come. He strummed “Pastyme with Goode Companie”, a banned madrigal by Henry the Fat. Though the musician did not sing the words, the lyrics seemed to intrude into Thomas’s head, unbidden. As he ordered his wine he found himself thinking of idleness and vice and youthfulness, and then of the accused. Thomas could have made player stop, but chose not to. The Governor’s endorsement would be of little help if ordinary people knew him for a scold. Thomas got his wine and took it upstairs, retiring to his attic room for the evening.

Thomas’s rented attic was as disorganized as his ledger was kept tidy. Dirty clothes and balled-up papers littered the floor, and the sideboards were covered wall-to-wall with dirty plates. He didn’t want the barman cleaning it, in case something important was thrown away, but he also never quite found the time to tidy the room himself – so the untidiness accumulated. Thomas lit a candle and seated himself, pouring warm wine into an unwashed cup. He took up his quill and wrote:

Dear Marie, how I miss thee! Every night my dreams take me to Boston, to thy side. I pray nothing troubles thou in my absence. I would be glad to know thy heart has some happy occupation; although I cannot be there to share in it.

Today, we began the case against Gabriel Bishop. Having spoken with the accused, I sense he wishes to draw the proceedings out as long as possible, just as Governor Winthrop would bring them to a swift conclusion. Just today Winthrop seemed pained – even his son Silas opposes him. I sense a hard road to conviction, for no enticement will convince Bishop to confess. But it will earn good wages, I think: with Winthrop’s support, the name Braithwaite shall never again be a by-word for heresy.

Marie – truthfully I am pained too. I would have thee reconsider the words exchanged about vanity and pride at our parting; namely, when thou told me it would be prideful to seek out the magistracy. What thou said grieved me greatly.

If only thou knew what this vocation meant, what a blessing and burden it is, thou would love it with nary a second thought, as I do. If thou had met John Winthrop, surely you would see that his power is grounded in humility and respect for God and Creation, which privileges him among men. Just today, Winthrop thought not of himself, but of justice; and spared Gabriel yet again when I would have drowned him. He is no distant lord but a friend in Christ, whose responsibilities weigh upon his conscience greatly.

He thought of another idea to persuade his wife, but a pounding on Thomas's door snatched it from him. "Braithwaite! Are you there?!"

It was Silas Winthrop. Had he been downstairs earlier? Thomas swore, and blotted the letter, as the pounding became more frequent, insistent; now that Silas knew Thomas was inside his room.

"Let me in, Thomas!" His tone seemed aggressive. Thomas had a bad feeling about it.

"I'm writing a letter to my wife." Thomas said from his desk. "Come back later."

Silas was turning the knob repeatedly, trying to get in. "This can't wait 'til later!" Silas's voice sounded at once agitated, desperate, and frightened. "Prithee, Braithwaite. Just let me in."

I should turn Silas away, Thomas thought, but then thought twice about refusing him. Ordinary excuses about the messy room mingled with a fear Thomas didn't want to indulge, but feared to ignore. There was a real possibility that here, alone, the Sorcerer of Ipswich might work some evil magic between them. It was certainly loud and raucous enough downstairs for such things to go unnoticed.

"Hold up a minute." Thomas cried.

Thomas Braithwaite took hold of the bolt, and considered his dilemma. If he let Silas into his room, there was a strong possibility Bishop would take control and kill him. Then again, if he refused him, Bishop could take control anyway, and force Silas to kill himself. The clerk also thought of John Winthrop. How could Thomas face him if his inaction brought Silas to harm? If he let Silas in, perhaps he could subdue him before he hurt himself, or anybody else. The clerk opened the door.

Silas Winthrop carried a half-empty wine bottle. His ponytail had come loose, showing off his wavy, black hair. Silas let it grow long out of vanity. Now it was tangled, dirty with the refuse the townsfolk had thrown at him when he escorted Bishop through the square in the morning.

“You look like Hell,” Thomas said, as Silas shuffled into his room and sat on the bed.

“Everything is Hell.” Silas said, sullenly. He was drunk. “I can’t testify against Gabriel. I know that I said I would, but I can’t. I’ve come to turn myself in, so I won’t have to be arrested to-morrow for contempt.”

“How do you mean ‘can’t’? Is Bishop going to stick pins in you tomorrow if you testify?”

Silas shook his head no. “I *won’t* testify against him. It’s my choice. It’s my fault Gabriel’s on trial to begin with. If I hadn’t said anything...” Silas trailed off, trying not to weep. “If I hadn’t said anything none of this would have happened. He’s scarred, and he’ll never surrender willingly to my father. But he’s not dangerous, not malicious – I swear to that. The accusation that he’s a witch is just impossible. Even counting a bunch of stuff Father doesn’t know about, I can’t agree. If Gabriel was a witch, I would have known – nobody spent more time with him than me.”

That was part of the problem. “I know he’s your friend, Silas, but he’s a church-burner and a slave thief. If he gets off, it’s because John Winthrop took mercy on him, not me.”

“But it’s my fault!” Silas cried. “And because of what I said, no one will listen to me any longer. They laugh at me, say Gabriel wears me like a pair of shoes. It stings, Braithwaite – I tell you it stings.”

The sound of Silas Winthrop weeping was discomfiting. Finally Thomas Braithwaite said; “There, there. It will purify thy heart to testify, to free thyself of Bishop’s evil influences.”

“Please don’t make me talk about it again.” Silas said. “Gabriel already hates me for what I did.” Thomas noticed that Silas’s knuckles were scratched and bleeding.

“What happened there?” Thomas asked, remembering Brydie’s warning from before.

“Oh.” Silas said, getting gloves from his pocket. He put them on. “It’s nothing.” He started drinking from his wine bottle again. It was of the same sort found on the Governor’s table.

Silas was definitely not all right – and Thomas needed a weapon. The irons for clearing the fireplace seemed likely. Casually, he took a few steps back, until they were near to hand.

“There’s not much I can do for Gabriel unless he does something for us.”

“Aye.” Silas said. “I know what you mean. I’ve tried everything to convince Gabriel to confess, but my words roll off his ears. He’s got a mind to kill himself, just to spite us.”

“Why would Gabriel want to do that?” Thomas asked, grasping for a fire poker to use.

“It’s not without reason, in his own mind. You know Father used to get drunk and beat him?” Silas continued. “Not Ezekiel Bishop; my father. He used to punish Gabriel for things Sarah and I did. Father told us it was because we were such godly children, that we had the privilege of a whipping boy. I tell you, Braithwaite, I wish it had been me instead.”

As Silas reminisced on the Sorcerer's behalf, Thomas got hold of the ash shovel. He took it from the rack quietly, hid it behind his back.

"Tell me more about Gabriel." He needed to get closer.

"Wait." Silas said. Thomas straightened up, holding his breath. Had Gabriel somehow tipped off Silas to Thomas's designs? The clerk tightened his grip on the shovel, ready to strike. "I probably shouldn't say any more. You might use it against him."

"No, no." Thomas said, relaxing a little. "I'm no straw-man for your father. What you say in this room is just between you and me." Just let him keep him talking, and get a little closer.

"Do you really mean that?" Silas asked.

"On my honor." Thomas said.

"It's like he's already given up. All he talks about now is Fanny and the water test – and that's if he talks at all. Sometimes, Gabriel won't even respond to me, just stares at the wall like he's already dead. You can't understand how this feels – I used to tell him everything, and now he won't even speak to me. Have you ever lost a dear friend, Braithwaite? Someone you loved more than yourself?"

Silas paused on the question, looking miserable and buried in his own memories. It should be now – while the sorcerer's guard was down. Hastening towards him, Thomas struck.

He wasn't quick enough. Silas caught the shovel and pulled it from the clerk's grasp, instinctively tossing it to the floor with a clang. Thomas didn't get another chance to attack.

Silas grabbed Thomas by the shoulders, pushing him back against the wall. Silas's wine bottle rolled across the floor, pouring reddish-purple liquid onto Thomas's clothes and documents.

“You sneaking son of a bitch!” Silas said. “I was just about to confess myself to you!”

“Silas, be reasonable!” Thomas implored him. “You’re being manipulated; Gabriel Bishop is an empty shell inhabited by a demon wizard. He’s got his claws in thee yet!”

Silas slammed Thomas’s body against the wall again. “You think I’m the brute here? You’re going to convict an innocent man because my father wills it! You’re worse than a Catholic inquisitor, Braithwaite, because you make it seem like they’re getting a fair trial.”

Thomas’s back was pressed against the wall, Silas Winthrop’s fists around his shirt.

“I’m not Bishop’s inquisitor.” Thomas said, searching for the words to spare himself, “But if you really were Gabriel’s friend you would testify on his behalf.”

At this Silas eased off. “You’re trying to trick me again. I know what you’ve been promised, Braithwaite. I won’t help you murder my friend so you can become the new governor.”

Bishop’s probably watching us right now, Thomas thought. He’s in his cell, pretending to meditate, but he’s watching us. He’s plotting his next move, trying to find a weakness he can exploit.

“Silas, let me go.” Thomas said. “No one’s trying to murder Bishop. The penalty for his crimes is just death. Hast thou forgotten his trespasses against thee?”

Silas finally released him, picked up the ash shovel from the floor and sank into an armchair in front of the fireplace. He looked hopelessly into the dark hearth. “No. I haven’t forgotten what he did.” Silas twirled the shovel between his fingers, contemplating it. “Indeed it pains me yet.”

“His secrets don’t have to be yours to keep, Silas; that’s what gives Bishop his power. Bare your soul to the court tomorrow and you’ll be out of his reach for good.”

"I'm not Gabriel's pawn, Braithwaite." Silas said, stubbornly. "And I'm not going to testify."

"You have to." Thomas said. "If you don't, I'll testify how you attacked me in my room to-night. Your father will have no choice but to arrest thee."

"You tried to hit me with a shovel!" Silas said, outraged.

"Because you're enthralled to Bishop's will, Silas!" Thomas cried. "You came up to my room drunk, and why? What did you think you were going to accomplish? Do you even remember?"

"I came here to see if I could trust thee, Thomas. And I guess I got my answer." Silas Winthrop put back the ash shovel back in its proper place.

There was a rebuke in Silas's words which Thomas hadn't been anticipating. It struck a nerve in the clerk from Quaker Hill. "You need to leave."

Silas took his wine bottle and went. Thomas looked around his room, noticed his ledger had fallen off the desk during the scuffle. Cursing under his breath, Thomas picked it up off the floor and blotted the red stains from the leather cover, and from the court documents within.

Chapter Five

Hardship Cole drew a bead on a black squirrel sitting on the porch railing of the High Horse. If he pulled the trigger, he was fairly sure he'd hit it in the head - his musket was accurate to a hundred yards. But shooting at the house would wake up Asenath, so the witch hunter from Deerfield let the squirrel go. He watched it hopping around the yard, digging little holes in the snow, wishing he could shoot it.

After five hours of surveillance, he was getting bored. The most suspicious thing Hardship had seen all morning was Daniel Wheelwright, and Goody Black had closed the tavern after turning him out.

When Wheelwright left, he shot a suspicious glare his way. Hardship stared back, and motioned for the old man to move along with the business end of his gun. Remembering the surly old man, Hardship wondered if he was going to become a problem.

When he had asked around the village yesterday for friends of Asenath Black's, all hands pointed to Wheelwright, the cooper. Wheelwright was a confrontational sort, answering every question with another question, refusing to tell Hardship anything of value. And now, he was here – no doubt telling Asenath of their conversation yesterday. He liked Wheelwright for a witch as well, for the old man was salty and overly loyal to Asenath. Wheelwright took his time walking back to Ipswich, still giving the witch hunter that sour look.

In response, Hardship shot a round at the sun and Wheelwright stopped dead on the road. As he reloaded, Wheelwright started heading towards him, then thought better of it and retreated. Hardship shot another round and Wheelwright sped up accordingly. This amused Hardship until the old man turned the corner back to Ipswich, but as time passed he became bored again. The squirrel climbed back onto Asenath's porch, its bushy black tail swishing as it nibbled on a nut it had found.

Nothing suspicious was going on here – and nothing would, unless Hardship shook it loose. Hardship dug out from his position pretending to hunt in the copse across the road. He carved out a seat on a snow drift, to get a better look at the house.

The High Horse had been shut for a while now. Hardship figured Asenath was sleeping. Old ladies like her were given to mid-day naps. Perhaps now would be the time to have a look in the cellar. No one needed to know he had been there – and if he did leave any evidence, Asenath would probably assume it was pranksters. If the fugitive was hiding at the High Horse, she would be hiding there. Hardship had observed the building from all angles, and noticed there could be secret rooms in the cellar carved into the earth like caves. If Asenath had hidden Fanny the slave within them, recovering her for Governor Winthrop would be as easy as winning a fist-fight in a blind alley.

Hardship did have a warrant from the Governor in his pocket, authorizing a formal search of the High Horse and Asenath Black's arrest as an accessory. But in his experience, Hardship had better luck recovering fugitives if nobody knew he was looking for them. With the possibility that Wheelwright had figured out that much, Hardship decided he should search the High Horse now, before Fanny could be moved. If the fugitive turned out to be in the cellar, then Hardship's work was half done; if not, Asenath Black need not know he'd been there.

Hardship secured his musket, and prepared to sneak inside the High Horse. As he approached, he thought he saw a curtain flutter from the upstairs window, but perhaps it was just the wind. He went under the porch and found the door to the brewery had been left open. Hardship stepped inside and bolted it behind himself.

The cellar was dark inside, and chilly as a cave. Fortunately, a candle had been left burning in a sconce by the wall, to facilitate checking on the brew. The dim light reflected off the kettles, curved and

hammered to give them a shining dappled copper skin. They crouched in the darkness like huge toads. Hardship listened carefully in the darkness for the breathing of another soul. He took the candle to light his way, little wax drips falling on his hand. The dirt floor was uneven, and the witch hunter had to be careful with his step, so as not to trip over anything. He searched the cellar carefully, clearing each corner; listening for breathing and movement. But he was alone – the fugitive was not here, after all.

Looking for traces of her, he gently inspected the walls, stepped around the monumental kettles and tanks. There was a lot of queer stuff in a brewery, he thought, picking up a sieve big enough to make a cup of tea for a giant. To one side he found a cot, with some man's clothes heaped up on it. There were no secret chambers; Hardship found a few locked cabinets but none big enough for a person to hide in. He supposed there was some good liquor in there. A staircase provided access to the first floor of the High Horse. He walked up the stairs and tried the door to the bar.

At first he thought the latch was jammed, but quickly Hardship realized it was barred from the other side. He wondered if this was something special, just for him. No sense in forcing it, he thought; unless she was letting Fanny share the bed, Asenath was not keeping the Governor's servant here. Carefully, he crept out the brewery, leaving the candle in its place by the door. The house was quiet – surely, Asenath still slept. From there, he headed northeast – towards the river and away from the road, following a cart-track towards the forest.

That had been a complete waste of time. He needed to start finding some clues, and fast. Time was of the essence – the longer Fanny stayed missing, the harder it would be to find her. Much time had elapsed since the fire - Fanny could be hopelessly lost by now, taken as a prisoner by the red men, or even kidnapped by an unscrupulous white one. She could even be dead by now, God forbid. But this was the governor's servant, and Hardship was determined to get answers – that was what he told himself, as he resolved to visit Gabriel Bishop's witch-house in search of clues to Fanny's disappearance.

An abandoned witch-house was not the kind of place you visited on a lark, but there wasn't much choice left. The risk that the house was really dangerous was small – any wards or spells left by Bishop would have weakened with each passing day he was gone. And surely Bishop had kept something of Fanny's there, tickets for passage, or a map marked with the path she would travel. Something there must have been overlooked – it had to be, or else Fanny would never come home.

Bishop's dwelling was built in a place called Hurdle Maker's Hill, a little rise about a mile from the road. The path to it cut through a dense forest, a little cart-track overshadowed by monstrous evergreens. It was the kind of place you'd hunt bobcats, a place where the red men walked unafraid. The witch hunter held his hand up to the sky, measuring the distance between the setting sun and the tree line. Two hand widths; so he had two hours before nightfall.

Hardship disliked this path – it was lonely and solemn, like nature's graveyard. The forest floor was clogged with fallen timber, rotting limbs of trees covered in ice and snow. With time the ice had melted and re-frozen, layers of snow draping over the dead boughs in sheets, dripping down into tooth-like points. It was three miles distant from the safety of the palisade – practically a world away if the Indians chose to attack. Yet there was the gable of the witch-house, looking more like a hunting cabin than a farmhouse in the wintry gloom. Who would choose to live out here? Hardship walked a little faster, eager to get free of the dense woods. But Bishop's dwelling was farther off than it seemed.

The witch-house was one story tall, L-shaped, with a loft in the attic for storage. The exterior was finished with cedar shingles, and the windows were locked tight behind wooden shutters. The roof was hidden under a thick blanket of snow and ice, which had accumulated since Bishop's arrest. The door had been broken in by force, and since then snow drifts had piled up between the door and the jamb. They must have trapped the witch inside, Hardship surmised, reading the horse tracks on the ground and the trampled garden. It made him wonder what kind of a state the house was in.

Hardship approached the door, kicking at the snow and trying to push his way through. It was no use – the ice and snow had accumulated into a frozen pack, and he had no tools to loosen it.

Looking up, Hardship noticed the star-shaped window in the roof gable, made of a circle of rhododendron wood. The circle was divided by red saplings split and twisted into a star design, whose points reached out to touch the wreath surrounding it. The star had many points, more than Hardship could count easily from down here. It was the dwelling's only decoration, and was distinctly Quaker in its styling. Out of place, he thought – the sort of window you'd be made to change in Deerfield.

He peered through the shutters, and saw the bedroom, with a bed and a small looking-glass made of polished metal. Empty drawers from the dresser were stacked up on the bed. Hardship tried to open the shutters with his knife, but the clasps weren't just a simple hook and eye closure, and so they wouldn't open. Hardship tried to wrench open the shutters by brute force, but was unsuccessful.

Frustrated, Hardship retreated into the front garden and kicked a dead shrub from its flower bed. I should have brought an axe, but if I go back now to get one, it will be night by the time I return. There must be another way inside, Hardship thought, going around the perimeter again.

Next to the front door was a trapdoor to a cellar, hidden beneath a blanket of snow. Once he excavated it, he found a chain and hinges – and a lock, which had been broken off the door by force. This would be his way into the witch-house.

Hardship heaved on the chain, once, twice, and finally the trapdoor came unstuck with a crack, the ice holding it shattering like glass. Inside, it was completely dark – there was no telling what awaited him down there. He looked down, and listened, but heard nothing. How deep was this cellar? He put in one leg, then another, and lowered himself into the darkness. His arms clung to the lip of the cellar door, ready to pull himself up and escape if need be. A few feet later, his feet touched the ground.

Gabriel Bishop's cellar was a partly finished room, with a staircase leading up to the first floor. The part Hardship was standing in was storage – sacks of grain, piles of fuel, and barrels of supplies were stacked up, with space allowed below the trapdoor for new arrivals. The part nearer to the stairs had a table and bench, upon which stood brewery equipment similar to Asenath's, albeit much smaller in size. A cabinet stood open, with a few empty bottles. He sniffed the lip of them – something medicinal. Hardship supposed the governor's men had poured out these tonics when they came through here.

Something papery tickled the top of his hat. He grasped for it and found it was nothing more than dried herbs hung from the rafters. As his eyes adjusted, Hardship searched through the brewing implements, and found some odds and ends that might be stolen. For instance, here was a finely-done miniature of Fanny, covered with a dome-shaped bit of glass. He turned it over; the initials JWW were stamped on the leather frame. Hardship put the stolen picture in his pocket, and went through the rest of the drawer. There were dice, cards, ribbons, nails, but nothing else of interest. Putting it away, he went up the stairs and into the house.

The inside of Bishop's dwelling was a mess. The governor's men had tossed through it, just like the villagers pillaged Bishop's shop. In the hall a bookcase was lying on its side, as if drunk. The books were piled on the floor, as if it had vomited all its knowledge. He went left, and into the study. It too was in disarray. Someone had gone through Bishop's desk and glanced through his papers, tossing correspondence on the floor as they went. Hardship picked one letter up, struggling to read the first few lines in the dimness. The words shivered and wobbled like naked lambs on the page – a sorcerer's trick, Hardship thought, except that this problem affected him constantly. As he tried to read it, similar letters switched places with each other, confounding him until he threw it away.

There was nothing useful here. Hardship went back into the hall. It was a low ceiling, and a lower threshold; he reached out and touched it as he walked into the kitchen.

The back wall of the kitchen was dominated with a large fireplace, the only one in the cabin. The kitchen rug had been kicked to one side, and all the food had been spilled on the floor. Corn and wheat grains crunched under Hardship's step as he searched the kitchen. The storage jars were up-ended on the table, and the tea was conspicuously missing. Hardship went to the shelf, peering in the jars. Nothing of interest – this place was almost exactly like his own kitchen at home.

Hardship went to the fireplace and stirred up the ashes. He found the charred remains of a book's spine in there. Apparently, Bishop had burned his accounts before burning the meeting house. Braithwaite would probably like it, Hardship thought, but to him it was useless – nobody could read a burned book, could they? He threw it back into the ashes and went into Bishop's bedroom.

The little bronze mirror he'd seen before hung in the door frame; Hardship inspected his teeth with it. The witch must be short, he thought, like a woman. There was a strongbox in here, under the bedroom window – it was unlocked and empty. The governor's men had taken whatever was inside. Hardship looked through Bishop's drawers on the bed, and at the wardrobe which had been partially emptied. It was mostly gray clothes, but there was one black coat and trousers, finely made as if for a wedding. No women's clothes or locks of hair to be found – or at least, nothing that might help Hardship find her now. A ladder connected the bedroom to the loft; so he moved on. He climbed up, taking care not to hit his head on the rafters.

Hardship Cole knelt in Gabriel Bishop's loft, in the place where the magic had happened. Judging by the fire-pans, copper vessels, and hand-grinders furnishing the place, it had been used for alchemy. As in the brewery below, the herbs and ingredients were also missing here – this made Hardship think they'd been taken somewhere for safe-keeping. A few alchemical diagrams drawn by Bishop decorated the walls, but otherwise this room seemed no more promising than the last three the witch hunter had inspected. A chilly breeze was coming through the star-shaped window, which Hardship now had the

chance to inspect closely. The rhododendron boughs had been bent with water and twisted, then drilled, pegged, and cut on the bias, so that it was hard to see where one piece ended and the next began. It had clearly been locus of some enchantment; though Bishop had been gone so long that it probably wasn't active any more.

Hardship counted the points on the star; testing himself to determine if he had been bewitched. Staring at the interface of the boughs at the center point of the star, Hardship decided that it was probably harmless, although he would like it better with a chair driven through it. Finding a suitable stool, he was about to begin when he heard the sound of someone outside in the yard. Hardship put it down and crouched behind the window.

Hardship peeked through the rhododendron boughs and saw Asenath Black in the dead garden, astride a grey pony. She was looking at the footprints Hardship had left behind when he was trying to find his way inside the house. The fringe of her white shawl flapped in the breeze, and strands of her grey hair had fallen free of her bun and seemed to float on the wind. The light colors shone in the blueness of the twilight. Her face was wrinkled and browned with age and work, but watching from the gable window Hardship could see a trace of how Asenath looked twenty years ago. This was greatly discomfiting, but there was nothing he could do but keep watching.

Asenath covered her once-pretty face with one hand, and when she took it away, Hardship saw her crying. He risked to stand up a little more, twisting his fingers through the boughs of the window. What was she doing here? Had she followed him here, or did she come of her own accord? Had she seen him at the High Horse? He was sure she had been sleeping.

It was suspicious for her to be over here – Hardship had more than enough reason to threaten her now. The way he was feeling was like the way he felt when a likely doe sauntered into the range of his weapon. He could fire at will - Asenath would give Fanny up now that he had caught her here.

Suddenly Asenath looked up and gasped, her eyes widening in terror at the witch hunter perched above her. Hardship didn't look away, but when he tried to call out her name he couldn't find the words. She turned her horse around, still looking at Hardship, her face white with terror. She whispered something too soft to hear, spurred on her horse and fled. He tried to yell out to Asenath to halt, but the words caught in his throat, choked him into silence. He tried again, but it was no use – it was like trying to speak in a dream. He took his hands off the window and swore at himself for touching the cursed thing. There – he could speak again – but now Asenath was too far away to hear him, and he had no hope of catching her. Mutely, Hardship watched as the old woman took her pony through its paces, fleeing Bishop's dwelling for good.

Chapter Six

Sarah Winthrop awoke just before dawn Tuesday morning, and could not fall asleep again. Today she would see him; Gabriel Bishop, the witch, her intended. Today and tomorrow and the day of the water test – that was what Silas had promised her. It would have to be enough, she thought, getting out of bed. She hadn't seen him since the night of the fire – although he had been distant well before then.

Every morning Sarah awoke disoriented with her own melancholy, until she remembered what happened. Gabriel had possessed her, used her – deceived her from the very beginning. He even made her say “I love thee” and repeated it back to her, worked his magic to make that thought her own. Even now Sarah suffered from lingering effects of his enchantments; she cried purposelessly and for nothing, missing Gabriel and channeling his feelings through the curse he'd laid on her.

Being in love with Gabriel was like being drunk. When she was with him, all pleasurable things seemed accentuated and bad memories were hastily forgotten. He made Sarah forget what she used to believe, dulled her wits and played with her perceptions; and when the game was finally up, he left her miserable and sickened by what she had learned. He left without me, she remembered; he shut me in my room, and barred the door so I could not follow him. He never loved me, he only loved Fanny - I was just the means to an end. Because of that, even her happy memories of Gabriel were a total loss.

Sarah went to her mirror. It was ten inches in diameter, made of silver and glass. She worked through the rat's nests with her fingertips, before brushing it out with a hogs-bristle comb. She wore it short – it used to be long, but it tangled too often. Silas had it easier; his hair was softer and did not curl so tightly. He looked handsome yesterday morning, before he took Gabriel to court. It used to trouble Sarah Winthrop that she bore such an unmistakable resemblance to Father. Now her ugliness was the easiest reality for her to bear.

Going to the wardrobe, she picked out a slip, tights, and a bonnet. Sarah chose a plain dress to wear, for there was no embroidery or cosmetic that would suit this grim occasion. She took these items to the mirror, checking to see how the outfit looked, as if it mattered.

I should never have set my cap on Gabriel, Sarah reflected; plain girls with relevant names were always destined to get paired up with men like Father. Only pretty milkmaids got to run off with their childhood sweethearts and be happy – that is not my portion in life. If only it had been.

When she first met Gabriel, he was a child – and she a younger one. The year had been 1672. Asenath Black found Ezekiel Bishop shot dead, his musket and Indian servant-man missing, and young Gabriel hiding in the basement. The lad was malnourished and refused to speak at first, but after an examination Father had deemed him salvageable. Of the shooting he was deemed innocent – it seemed obvious that it had been Ezekiel's Indian slave who did the deed. Father said keeping native slaves was like keeping tigers. There would have been an inquest if anyone really cared.

A week after Ezekiel Bishop was cremated and his ashes were thrown in the Connecticut River – Quakers had no place in the town graveyard. Father took on Gabriel as a foundling – a step short of a formal adoption, but it was better than becoming a houseboy. At the time, it hadn't seemed like a bad idea – Father had said taking Gabriel in would help heal the pain of Mother's death, that Gabriel's was a soul in need of saving. Only years later did Sarah learn the real reason, that Father had taken Gabriel to forestall Asenath Black from adopting him.

It even took Silas months to win Gabriel's confidence, for he was paranoid and possessed of queer habits. For months after his arrival Gabriel stole apples from the kitchen and hid them all over the manse, breeding flies. He'd had to be forcibly broken of this mannerism, and of others.

Gabriel's transition had not been easy. Ezekiel had taught him so little of letters that Gabriel could barely scrawl out his own name. He needed extra lessons and hectoring to get even with Silas,

especially in theology and maths. Eventually, Gabriel managed to learn all of it; yet he didn't accept it. A year passed, and then another. Father told him to begin his preparations for conversion, but Gabriel did not. A few of Father's books written by Quakers went missing, then turned up on different shelves.

Gabriel often knew the rod while he lived in the Winthrop manse. In the first few years it was effective, because he was small and John Winthrop was strong. But ultimately, Gabriel learned Father's limits. It didn't happen overnight, but slowly – he grew up and Father grew older, until one night, the Governor's blows could no longer harm him. After that, Father dared not raise his hand, lest Gabriel call his bluff. What a humiliating experience, Sarah reflected – no wonder Father feels unmanned.

She was sixteen when the change happened. Over the course of a month, Gabriel bleached all his clothes gray, and started addressing everyone as 'thou'. He refused to pray aloud at all. Gabriel spoke of rebuilding the dwelling on Hurdle Maker's Hill, and Father made it clear Gabriel wouldn't be welcome in the manse for much longer if he missed his confirmation in May. When they were on speaking terms, it only seemed to be so that each could take offense at something the other said.

The day after Gabriel missed his confirmation, he left the manse. He stayed at Hurdle Maker's Hill for a while, although Silas said it was really not fit to live in yet. After a month or so, Asenath Black took pity on him and let Gabriel have a cot in her cellar in exchange for his labor at the brewery. Father was furious, but there was nothing he could do about it – Gabriel was unable to be contained by Father's power, and now he was beyond his reach of his edicts.

She should have known him for a witch then, she thought, getting dressed. But instead of shunning him, Sarah fancied him. She even took her part in humiliating Father by visiting Gabriel against his wishes. Perhaps her disregard for the Fifth Commandment was the reason Gabriel's enchantments found purchase – witches could not entrap the righteous in their spells. Back then it seemed impossible

that Gabriel could hold such evil in his heart – back then, Sarah thought she knew him. But looking back, it was plain as day that Gabriel had always been a stranger in this manse.

There was nothing for it now, Sarah reflected – Gabriel is going to die a witch, Fanny is most likely dead already, and I will remain here, with Father, until he dies. It was all cinched up, she thought as she put on her dress shoes, tying the black ribbons in a bow. This trial is merely a formality.

Sarah went downstairs and took her breakfast alone, a cup of tea and a piece of toast. She took it to the parlor, where she was really not supposed to be eating. That was Fanny's rule, anyway, but Fanny was not here. Her food seemed to stick in her mouth, and after a few bites she gave up.

As Sarah was waiting for her tea to get cold, Silas joined her. He had two boiled eggs and some bacon on a plate. "Good morning, Sister," he said, balancing his plate on his knees.

"Well met, Brother," she replied. "Do you want my toast? I can't finish it." He shook his head no, his mouth full of eggs. He chewed his food, swallowed.

"You should eat it. You're looking a little pale." Sarah had lost a stone since her engagement with Gabriel ended. It was starting to show in her face, in the hollows of her cheekbones.

"I can't. It doesn't taste right," she said, handing him the rye bread.

Silas took a small bite of it, chewing it over. He handed her back the remainder. "It tastes fine to me. I'm sure the new girl will fix you something else, if you asked her."

"Not when I'm already wasting this." Sarah took another bite anyway, although she didn't care for it. "So are you going to testify today, or aren't you?" After last night's supper, it had been left an open question. He was supposed to; but there was a row about it last night, and Silas stormed out of the house with the dinner wine. He hadn't come back until well past midnight.

"I will." he said, "I'm sorry about last night. I shouldn't have said that. I went to Braithwaite afterwards. He convinced me to testify." Silas didn't seem very happy about it.

"I heard he was convincing." Sarah said. There was a reason Father had picked him, after all – and evidently, Silas had already fallen into the trap. "So do you want to go first, then?"

"Would you go first?" Silas asked. "I need some time to think on what I'll say."

"It's a trial, not a race. It doesn't matter to me which of us goes first," Sarah shrugged. "We'll each get our turn, when the time comes."

"Maybe once I've said my piece I'll stop fighting with Father so much," Silas said. "Once I've said the truth and God's will is done, maybe I'll feel better."

"You and Father have been going at it like wild cats lately," she said, "it reminds me of the time he broke Gabe's nose."

"Oh, God. I remember the way he moaned; like a bride on her wedding night. And the look on Father's face when he carried on like that... I thought he was going to give him a palsy. It was that night I knew he really was a Quaker. Only their kind is so salty. I quit trying to convert him after that." Silas was smiling thinking of it, though it hadn't been funny when it happened.

"Wilt thou testify in his defense?" Silas got quiet again, eating his bacon. Sarah sighed in disappointment. "No one will have me now, and it's his fault. But you'll get him off anyway."

"He's innocent, but thy wronged heart wants him convicted. Do you really believe he could have met the Black Man in the woods and sold his soul to him without us knowing about it?"

"What happened speaks for itself." Sarah said, finishing her toast. "He's a witch, Silas. The only reason you'd even consider testifying his defense is because you're possessed too."

Silas was about to respond when Father's bedroom door opened, and he strode down the hallway in his judging clothes, black robes billowing. Silas waited for him to pass, then dropped his voice to a whisper.

"I'm not possessed. Neither were you. Stop saying that."

"Oh Silas. I *was* possessed; but not anymore." Sarah stood up, curtsied to her brother, and went to the kitchen to put away her tea cup and get her coat. She heard Silas slam the front door as he left. Sarah put on her black bonnet and gloves. Father joined her in the hall. He opened the door, and they left the manse.

It had snowed overnight. Sarah's skirts ruffled it as she walked, cool breezes from the snowflakes tickling her legs. Sarah remembered how this walk used to be, when Father's thumb fit within the palm of her hand.

It would not be proper to ask him to hold it now, she thought, although she wanted him to. Sarah couldn't help herself; she reached out for Father's hand anyway, and John shook it away; gave her an estimating look, cold as the melted snow in her dress shoes. Sarah kept a few paces behind him after that, holding back her tears. She would not have these people see her cry.

A throng of people were waiting in front of the gaol again, to shame Gabriel as he came out. Father led Sarah around the perimeter of the mob and into the meeting house. Father showed her to her seat, and Sarah knelt, whispering a prayer for herself. She was in the front row: everyone could see her, and she could hear her name being whispered from man to man.

Some minutes later, Father and Thomas Braithwaite emerged from the vestry, ready to continue the proceedings. They took their seats, and the gallery silenced itself. Thomas Braithwaite summoned

the accused. Sarah could hear the chains clanking as Gabriel walked the aisle with Silas. She could almost feel Gabriel's gaze prickling the hairs on her arms and legs.

Thomas Braithwaite said: "In the case of Gabriel Bishop, accused of being the Sorcerer of Ipswich, I hereby reconvene the Grand Court to hear the witnesses. Sarah Winthrop, please step thee forward." She did so, and knelt before her father.

Father placed his hand on her forehead and said, "By the power of God the Father, protect thy servant Sarah, so that she may testify in full truth, as a witness to thy perfect sacrifice. Amen."

"Amen," she said, and every voice in the gallery joined her in encouragement. She rose.

"Who is this man?" Father asked her, gesturing to the accused.

"Gabriel Bishop. My foster brother. He's a witch," Sarah Winthrop replied.

"What makes you say this?"

"He put thoughts in my head, thoughts that were not my own, though I believed they were. He does it to Silas too, and I don't know how many others."

"What kind of thoughts?" Father asked her.

"He made me think I loved him. He hid things from me; I saw the world only as Gabriel wanted to show me. He and Silas hid from me what he was doing with Fanny, made me suspect nothing. He proposed to me and I could not refuse him."

"From your own heart, didst thou ever love him?" It was not the question she expected.

"He was my foster brother." Sarah said, hoping it was answer enough.

"I don't mean filial love. Didst thou fancy him? Didst thou wish to run away with him?" Father asked her, knowing the answer already. Sarah hadn't hidden things from him when she was younger.

“Yes, but...” she said, “I was fifteen. No one knew he’d become a witch then; and he scourged me anyway, after he moved away.” It was humiliating to say it to the court.

“So when he came back for thee at age twenty, why didn’t thou turn him away?” Father asked sharply. He was getting angry; Sarah could see it in his black eyes. He would not hold back his wrath against her for betraying him – today, he would take back control.

“I... he was my foster brother. Silas’s best friend. As thou said, I fancied him.”

“He was an apostate; practicing a degenerate form of Christianity. It was his rebellion against me which thou fancied. Did he ever tell thee he knew magic? Did he practice it openly before thee?”

“No. He never told me anything of the kind; I would have shunned him and told you straight away. It’s what he did to me, that I know he’s a witch. He used me, deceived me.”

“And thou art for the whole of it blameless, just a helpless thrall to Gabriel’s will?” When Father put it that way, it made Sarah feel very foolish indeed.

“Yes, blameless,” Sarah said, “I didn’t knowingly aid him in betraying me.”

“Did you let him touch thee, Sarah? Did he shew thee his shameful nakedness?” It was such a disgusting question.

“No! He tried to convince me, but I resisted. I didn’t want to do those things. I stayed chaste.” She said it earnestly because it was the truth, but she could feel her face getting hot.

“Art thou certain? He never touched thee? Never kissed thee on the lips?”

“I...” She looked at John Winthrop helplessly, begging Father not to ask her these questions.

“Answer me, Sarah. Thou art under God’s oath.”

“He did kiss me,” she said softly, “I shouldn’t have let him but he did.”

“Speak up, child! He did what to you?” Father said, making her repeat herself.

“He kissed me! I did let him kiss me. But nothing more than that.”

“So the accused was capable of controlling thy mind, of convincing thee of anything, of kissing thee on the lips, but thou kept chaste? How canst thou be so certain, Daughter?”

“He tried to, but I never let his hands underneath my dress. I never let him see my shame. No matter what excuses he made, or how many times he tried to convince me, I refused him.”

Father gave her a smile, as if he was about to let up on her. “You’re a clever girl, Sarah, my own flesh and blood. The accused could not have gained such power to control your mind if he could not control your body as well. Don’t lie: He deflowered you, didn’t he?”

“No!” She cried. “I never let him touch me! I would remember if he had; I was there.”

“But the accused made you believe things that weren’t real; could he not also remove events from your memory, as coins from a penny bank? Is that implausible to you, given what he’s capable of?”

“Gabriel didn’t make me forget.” Sarah said. “I’m certain he didn’t touch me.”

“Or maybe you just think you know. For example, did you ever drink alcohol with the accused?”

“Do I have to answer, Father?” Sarah said, in a small voice. “Yes, at his bonfires.”

“Alcohol dulls the memory. Perhaps he took you to see the Black Man in the woods, and replaced your memory of the encounter with an innocent one of a bonfire.”

“No! That’s not what happened; those bonfires were real.” They were her happiest memories of Gabriel; they had to be real. “It was real,” she insisted, “Silas was there too. He knows it was real.”

“It was a dream, Sarah. Gabriel replaced thine memories with his own, while he knew thee.”

“No!” she cried. “I never let him touch me!” Sarah fell to her knees, kneeling before John Winthrop again. “Father, I swear it to thee!”

“I want to believe you, Sarah,” he said. “I will as soon as you tell the truth.”

How many times did she have to say no? Sarah covered her face with her hands and let out a bloodcurdling shriek through the courtroom, deafening to her ears, like the cry of a harridan. “Never! I never let him touch me!”

“Why are you screaming, Sarah?”

She wailed in frustration, “Because that witch is driving pins into me, trying to make me tell you that I slept with him when I didn’t!”

There was nothing for it but to lie. Father had put her up on trial too, and wouldn’t be satisfied with the truth. “Don’t make me say it.” She pleaded. “He wants me to say it, he’s hurting me!”

“We can tell. The punishment will end when you come to terms with reality. Feel how God demands his truth, Sarah, and speak: Gabriel deflowered you, the better to enthrall you to his will. Do you agree?” Father said it with contempt, as if he had made his point and she should concede it.

“No!” Sarah cried, falling to the floor, trembling in fear. “I never let him touch me!” She beat her arms and legs on the floor, rolling and flailing about, and bit down on her lip until she cut it. Anything to make Father stop; she thought, tasting the blood. “I never let him touch me!” Sarah cried again.

“Thomas, make a note that the accused has revised my daughter’s memories. That is why she cleaves unto this lie, despite physical pain and considerable distress it causes her to utter it under oath.”

“No! I swear I never knew him!” Sarah said. “Gabriel!” she cried, pointing at him. “Tell them you never touched me!” His hazel eyes shone like a cat’s. “Tell everyone you never had me, witch! Gabriel! Tell them!” He said nothing, and Sarah wailed like a woman in childbed. “Gabriel!”

“That’s enough. Silas, remove her.” John Winthrop said. Then Silas was with her, pulling her up by the arm, half-leading, half-dragging Sarah from the courtroom as she wept.

Chapter Seven

In the attic of a shabby Boston boarding house, Fanny was roused from a dead sleep. Wrapped in rough wool blankets, the young woman felt as if her body were deep underwater, rushing forth from the depths like a departed soul to the call of the Lord. There was a voice calling her name, a hand prodding her. Feeling that surface light, Fanny's eyes snapped open. Had she been asleep for an hour or an age? Fanny beheld the child who roused her from her dreaming; Madeline, the other servant. "Eevey," she whispered to Fanny, eyes gleaming. "Eevey, it's time to get up."

Fanny sat up, uncomplaining. The breeze through the attic's gable was nippy; the sun had not yet risen. Old Sam and the lodgers were still asleep, but Fanny and Madeline rose earlier to fetch water and ready breakfast. In many ways, it was the same life she had lived in Ipswich, except instead of Fanny, she went by 'Eevey' now. Fanny found her bonnet wrinkled amongst the bedclothes, and tied it with a bow under her chin. Madeline, watched her intently. She couldn't have been older than nine, and had taken Fanny for a big sister.

"Madge, go downstairs. I'll be there in a minute," Fanny said. She knelt by the bed in her slip, getting dressed. Madeline climbed down the ladder, which connected the attic to the rest of the two-story house. Fanny put on her blue dress, made from canvas. Fanny went downstairs, tiptoeing past the bedrooms so as not to wake the lodgers, who slept three to a bed.

Fanny went to the kitchen, then outside to fetch water. She filled a large bucket from the hand pump. It was cold as ice. Halfway to the door she spilled a little, but it didn't matter. She put some water on to boil and added a little salt. Fanny got a cup of oats from the meal jar, and gradually poured it into the water; stirring vigorously so there wouldn't be any lumps.

As she worked, the owner of the boarding house, Sam Shephard, came in wearing his dressing-gown and carrying a teapot. He bade Fanny bring him some hot water, and added; "Got eighteen for breakfast this morning, Eevey, be sure you make enough porridge."

Fanny nodded at him, quickly but distinctly, to show that she'd heard, then filled a kettle from her bucket with a ladle made from a long gourd. She hung it on one of the iron hooks and swung it over the fire, letting it boil. Fanny didn't miss a beat returning to the porridge.

Waiting for his tea, Old Sam watched Fanny cook. "You really know your way around that hearth, don't you, Eevey? I'll bet your family was sorry to see you go." Fanny shook her head, thinking, they were never really my family.

"Old Master White was awful partial to me. Even named me after his wife when I was born," she lied. Evelyn 'Eevey' White was a name Fanny made up during the ride from Ipswich. She picked it because it sounded like a white woman's, if you read it off a passenger manifest.

"A fair name for a fair lass," Sam said, a bit forwardly, "your grandmother must have been a queen in Africa."

Wheeling around to get something, Fanny knocked over her mug of cold water and it drenched the hem of her skirt. She sighed, too hurried to clean it up. "I can't chit-chat right now, let me work."

The old man nodded, content to watch her cook, stir, and get serving dishes. Madge came in to get cups and spoons for the table, quiet as a mouse. "Good morning, Madeline," he said, "you're looking fit today."

I wouldn't have even known she was there, Fanny thought, spooning porridge into chargers, a wooden trench of a serving dish designed to feed two people. She noticed Sam's water was boiling and took it off the fire. Fanny filled his teapot and the old man retreated to his room, to break his fast in private.

Over the next hour, the lodgers, all men, took their breakfast in the dining room. Fanny stood by the door, taking breaks to refill plates and eat a few mouthfuls herself before heading back to the dining room. Their talk was of shipping, and trading, and margins. This seemed promising to Fanny; if they can get a crate of sugar from Barbados to London, surely I could get passage to Philadelphia.

After breakfast, Fanny and Madeline set to scouring the plates. When they finished Sam had come back from his room. He put his hand on the back of Madeline's neck, patting her. She jumped when he touched her, as if she'd gotten a nasty shock.

"Did I scare you, child? It's naught but your old Uncle Sam," he said, "go on and let me have a word with Eevey, would you?" Madge left the kitchen, Fanny kept tidying up.

"So. Eevey. A week in my service and your first salary's due," Sam began, taking some coins from his purse. "I hope you find it generous."

Fanny looked it over, but five shillings and ten pence wasn't going to be enough. "I don't know," she answered, "I'm not used to managing my own money."

"Well, keep it in a purse, first of all," Sam grinned, gap-toothed, "and second of all, don't lose the purse." Fanny tried to laugh at his joke, but it came out sounding half-hearted. "So Eevey, how are you liking the house? Be it ever so humble."

"Fairly well, sir." Fanny answered, and this was mostly true.

"Splendid, because I think this is working out nicely." Sam said. "You know your duties, all of them, and you've got the vigor of youth about you. I'm offering you a permanent position."

Oh no. That was not the plan. "I can't," Fanny began, "I should be off within the fortnight, bound for--"

"For Philadelphia, yes. But what's over there that you can't get here? And besides, Madeline loves you. You should stay." Fanny had been trying not to think about the girl. She couldn't take her with her, and she couldn't let her know she was leaving.

"No," Fanny said, more emphatically, "I'll be gone before February's here."

"There's something you're not telling me, isn't there? What's the trouble, lass?" Sam's expression had lost its mirth. Did freedom mean ending a conversation once you were done talking?

"No, Sam, there isn't. I'm just not long for Boston." That was what Gabriel had told her to say, if someone asked her too many questions. The magic words worked; the old man dropped it.

"Well, if a fortnight's all you want to work here, it'll be a fortnight you'll stay. But the offer's still on the table, if you change your mind."

"Yes, Sam." She said. "And if there's nothing else... may I take my leave for the afternoon?"

"I'll convince thee yet, Eevey White. Aye, go; but have my supper ready by seven." So Fanny left to see about getting herself a ship to Philadelphia.

Heading for the wharves, Fanny was impressed by the density of Boston, a town built up on an island all by itself. She had never seen so many buildings in one place before. The steeple of the church stood proudly, high above the roofs of the shops and manses, painted in subdued tones of pink and gold and orange. On the corner a man was selling hazelnuts roasted in sugar; they smelled so delicious that Fanny went past him quickly, to avoid the temptation. In Boston Town, Men wore fine black clothes, and women, black dresses, made with fabrics and trims Fanny knew you couldn't get in Ipswich. To be present in this place felt like walking in a dream. She had dreamed of freedom in Ipswich, but never had Fanny thought she would actually get this far.

Gabriel must have been a witch after all, she thought; only a witch could have gotten her away from John Winthrop. Fanny had suspected before; Gabriel's smallpox immunity was suspicious, the 'inoculation' he marked her with discomfiting. But she had made excuses for him all the same, given Gabriel the benefit of the doubt. It was only when he'd dropped all pretense that Fanny finally saw him for what he really was. He was a witch, whose magic was blacker than charcoal of his bonfires.

It was on a Saturday night Fanny escaped, just a few days before Christmas. Silas and the Governor were gone, preaching in Deerfield. She had been roused by the noise of someone carving out the rawhide window next to her bed with a saw-toothed knife. Paralysed with fear, Fanny curled into a ball whilst the intruder kicked the window in, revealing Gabriel the Quaker on the other side. His clothes smelled like ashes and his hands were cut and bleeding. She asked Gabriel what in the hell he thought he was doing, scaring her like that. He replied that it was time to leave, and bade Fanny to dress warmly. While she did so, Gabriel went across the hall and barred Sarah's door from the outside, quietly. He stole one of Sarah's hooded cloaks off the hat rack and gave it to Fanny, to cover her face.

They ran as fast as they could to the eastern gate of the palisade. The distance seemed to fly as lightly as the wind, her fear and excitement overcoming any fatigue as Fanny dashed through Ipswich

Town, Gabriel at her back. They ran swifter than deer, and just as silently, their tread muffled in a dusting of fresh snow.

As they escaped Fanny could tell something strange was going on. Men were shouting and horns sounded, to wake any still asleep in the witching hour of that December night. A faint, dancing light illuminated the streets of Ipswich, orange and gold. Fanny asked Gabriel what was happening, but he just urged her to run faster. They got to the west gate; the doors had been left open, deserted. Where were the guards? Fanny wanted to walk then, but Gabriel bade her keep running.

They ran until they got to the Connecticut River. Gabriel told her to walk behind him as he navigated the sheets of ice, testing them. The running water beneath the ice would throw the hounds, he said. They walked down the river for about a mile, then climbed up the banks at its closest approach to Gabriel's little cottage. In a copse of trees Fanny saw Gabriel's black horse tied up, saddled for a journey. Gabriel handed Fanny a knapsack and said that this was farewell - John Winthrop's men would come for him now, but he had kept his promise to her.

Fanny looked back to Ipswich Township and saw clearly what she had not been able to see before. On the hillside the meeting house burned brightly, a gout of black and grey smoke trailing across the sky, obscuring the moon. Fanny could faintly hear the panic of the townsfolk, and their doomed attempt at fighting the fire. She couldn't help but weep as she watched the meeting house burn. He held her tenderly then, and she knew in that moment Gabriel did love her, after all - that this would be his greatest act of witchcraft. She thanked the sorcerer and kissed him goodbye, then rode from Ipswich as fast as she dared; and lamented not each and every mile she put between herself and Gabriel.

Fanny turned a corner and saw the longest wharf she had ever seen in her life, opening out into a deep harbor. More ships than she had ever seen before were tied up at the docks. Even larger vessels

waited in the harbor, ready to take her to sea. One docked vessel loaded up provisions for a journey; Fanny noticed what must be the luggage and the passengers waiting to travel. Why were they so somber, she thought, when they're about to go on a grand adventure? Just looking at them made her excited, thinking of how she would board one and sail to freedom.

Fanny had seen boats before in Ipswich, but none so monumental. They moved, just barely, rising and falling on the little ripples in the harbor. Fanny thought of the weight of them and was amazed that such boats could be moved so lightly by the tide. One ship stood out among the others, because its railings and decks were pink. Her figurehead was a blooming flower. Fanny imagined standing on the pink balcony adjoining the captain's cabin, free to go wherever she wanted. It seemed a fine life indeed. If John Winthrop had taught her how to read, Fanny would have read the name of that ship.

Fanny walked around the harbor, looking at the signs for something likely to mean passage within the colonies. She arrived at a string of small offices which used ship's wheels for signboards. Fanny looked through the window panes until she saw one with a man inside, writing. She let herself in.

"Excuse me, but is this the booking office?" She asked, poking her head through the door. A harried-looking little man in black clothes was adding up accounts in a ledger behind a tall desk, the end of his ostrich feather quill flapping and bouncing about.

He snapped, "Just a moment!" He closed the book and made eye contact. "Oh, wipe your feet, would you? On the boot jack, by the door. It's picky, I know, but I just don't like it getting messy in here. Come back and let me talk to you. The name's Ephraim Day. How may I be of service?"

"I want passage for one to Philadelphia." Fanny said, causing Day to start rifling through his papers looking for a timetable.

"It's a two-day journey," he said, hunting down a particular square. "The fare is twelve shillings."

"Is that for first class? I don't need a stateroom." Fanny said, taken aback. She had run Gabriel's horse ragged getting to Cape Cod, and had only been able to sell him for five shillings; in total she had but ten.

"Nope, that's the second class deck. Got fabric curtains down there, makes adjustable suites. We don't offer steerage for such short journeys." Mr. Day said, rather pointedly.

At least it sounded nice, if barely affordable. "I can only give you ten right now," Fanny said, "will that be a problem?"

"Only if you can't get the last two. I'll make a note here, so pay the balance when you embark to Philadelphia. We leave weekly; our next ship is scheduled to leave January 15th."

"So... What day is today?" Ephraim Day seemed irritated she'd had to ask.

"For God's sake, it's the Ninth of January! So do you want to depart on the fifteenth, or don't you?!" Fanny was taken aback at the reaction.

"No need to get so worked up, I know what month it is. That sounds fine to me. The fifteenth, then; I'll go." Day eyeballed her, put out that she didn't cower in response. "You'll put yourself in an early grave with such fits," Fanny admonished him. He seemed a flibbertigibbet of a man, who spent his waking hours running around like a headless chicken.

"You don't talk like the rest of them," Ephraim grumbled. "Here, give me your fare." Fanny surrendered her money to the shipping clerk. "Wait a moment," he said, that ridiculous quill bouncing about. Fanny waited for him to write her ticket, wondering about that quill. "Name," Ephraim asked.

"Evelyn White," Fanny Winthrop replied.

"Port of destination, Philadelphia, port of departure, here," Ephraim continued, scribbling out the details of her passage, "with a balance of two shillings to be paid. You'll sail aboard the *Pilgrim's Rose*."

Fanny thought back to the boats outside. "Which one is that again?"

"Red trim, red balconies. Red sails, too; but they're folded up at present." Day said.

"Do you mean the pink boat?" Fanny asked. "With the flowers on the bow?"

Ephraim took some offense. "It's red, it's just a little weathered. And it's a 'ship', not a 'boat'."

"There's nothing wrong with a pink boat." Fanny said in reproach. Ephraim got a little dish of wax and put it over his oil lamp, to give the document its official stamp. With a practiced hand he carefully peeled it off, making the impression.

Ephraim handed Fanny her ticket for travel in an envelope. "Present this ticket, plus your two shillings, to get on board the *Pilgrim's Rose* for travel. I bid thee safe travels and good day." Fanny pocketed the ticket and took her leave.

Back on the wharf, the sun was getting lower in the sky. Fanny walked up and down its length, looking at the whaling ships, the cargo ships, the passenger vessels, fishing boats and personal crafts. She thought of what it would be like to own a ship herself one day. This daydream lingered with Fanny as she made her way onto King Street, into the marketplace of importers and exporters.

Fanny walked past crates of tobacco and thought of how much work went into cultivating this huge amount of tobacco, and how many other Negro slaves it could purchase. A different vendor sold sugar, the product of Negro labor in the West Indies, in exchange for the golden leaf or for cold hard cash. Not for the first time, Fanny reminded herself that there were worse fates than being John Winthrop's house slave. She had been blessed to be born here, to have been spared those destinies. Wavering, Fanny resolved that it was still better to be free, and that she could not, in any case, go home. She watched the triangle trade which made the colony viable, and lingered upon her symbolic role in it. Doubtless, John Winthrop had selected a Negro serving-woman instead of a white servant for a reason. Perhaps even she herself had been born for a reason, to tacitly endorse the husbandry of Negro slaves. Certainly, her master's participation in the slave trade made it acceptable to people who might otherwise avoid it. The men who sold these things could have been John Winthrop's neighbors and friends. But for the moment, nobody recognized her. They went about their business.

A town crier disturbed Fanny's reverie with his bell, marching through the market square and shouting "Hear ye, hear ye! The witch trials have begun in Andover! Accused is Gabriel Bishop, of acts of witchcraft, theft, and arson! The witch trials have begun in Andover!"

Time to go back to Sam's, Fanny decided. Unlike in Ipswich, she was not one of the only two black people in town; and from these other Negroes Fanny had received many a glance of interest. She put up her hood to avoid their prying eyes. They knew their own too well to be deceived by Gabriel's spell, which allowed Fanny to pass by the whites unseen; to them, she was naught but the servant of a godly man. It had even fooled Old Sam; Fanny wondered how long the spell would last.

When Fanny got back to Sam's boarding house, the place was deserted. All the tenants had left for the day. Thankfully, they had to see about their own supper. It was quiet inside, and Fanny thought she was alone. She got a broom and dustpan, went to the parlor and began to sweep it; it looked a little

dusty. John Winthrop had trained Fanny not to leave 'til tomorrow any tasks which could be done today. Though she doubted she would be paid extra for sweeping, Fanny didn't want Sam to find her sitting idle. Old habits die hard, she thought, sweeping up around the fireplace.

Fanny had just gotten into the rhythm of her work when she was startled by a strangled, feminine cry. She held her breath, like a rabbit sensing a cat about to pounce. She heard another yelp, this time so brief that if Fanny had not heard the first one, she might not have noticed it, and then a kind of a growl. The noise was coming from the kitchen.

Quietly Fanny set her broom and dust pan to one side, making her way down the hall. As she got closer Fanny heard a masculine word mumbled and the smack of a hand on flesh. Rather than barge in, Fanny crossed into the dining room, went into the cupboard. There, in the little annex leading to the kitchen, surrounded by wooden mugs and breakfast plates, Fanny heard the familiar, obscene rhythm of sexual congress.

Fanny listened, and through a little gap in the annex door, saw Old Sam atop Madeline. Her clothes had been pulled off to let Sam at her. The old man was plainly and disgustingly naked, his flesh swaying with each thrust. He muttered softly;

"Such a good girl, you are." Madeline whimpered in response. Fanny took a step back, and in doing so the floorboards creaked, loudly.

Sam stopped, hearing Fanny, and shushed Madeline be quiet.

Fanny dared not breathe, like a rabbit hiding in a thicket. After a long moment, Sam went on with it. Fanny tiptoed out of the annex, and leaned against the dining room wall. The whole world was tilting out of control, and her head was a thousand miles above her feet. Madeline whimpered again,

and Sam softly shushed her; but Fanny heard not Madeline's voice but her own, and bit the tip of her tongue so that she too stayed quiet.

Fanny sank to the dining room floor, curled up in a ball. She wanted to stop what was happening, but she was in the basement of the High Horse again, with Gabriel. She could hear the sorcerer whispering to her again that it was alright, to be thou not afraid; but his voice sounded like Sam's, his breath stinking of alcohol. Fanny couldn't move, couldn't even raise a hand against him. Gabriel's words were like poison, paralyzed Fanny as surely as if irons bound her there. He promised he wouldn't hurt her; then he pulled away her clothing and pressed himself inside of her.

It stung. Fanny heard Madeline scream again, and wished she was free of this terror Gabriel was visiting upon her, fifty miles away from a cell in Andover. In her mind, she pleaded with him again to stop; closed her eyes and wished herself free. When she closed them, Fanny saw before her the red poppies Gabriel had grown for her as a present; trembling on Asenath's table. He whispered to her that he loved her. She pleaded with him to stop, but Gabriel paid her no heed. And then suddenly, it was all over, Fanny heard Sam groaning and Gabriel pulled away, ashamed. He said she couldn't tell anybody what had happened, because he didn't want her to be punished on his account.

Trembling, Fanny opened her eyes, touched her heart, which pounded as if it would leap from her breast. Faintly, she heard the sound of Madeline weeping. But there was nothing she could do. Fanny stole back to the parlor, her hands trembling, her heart racing as it had when she'd run out of Ipswich. She took up her broom and resumed her sweeping.

Chapter Eight

Gabriel watched Silas kneel before his father before he testified. John Winthrop laid his hands on Silas's head, instructing his son to tell the truth before God, the father of Creation. Left unsaid was his demand that Silas not make a scene like Sarah did yesterday.

The memory of Sarah's testimony lingered in Gabriel's mind long after Silas escorted her from court. It followed him to his cell, echoed in Gabriel's uneasy dreams, and distracted him from Silas' swearing-in, now in progress. I should have said something, Gabriel thought – I should have said it wasn't true. Braithwaite wouldn't have entered it in the formal record, but Winthrop would have heard me say it, and Sarah would be vindicated. She was indeed blameless – so why didn't I say so in her defense? Why is Winthrop punishing her for something I did? The questions swirled around Gabriel's mind, intensifying his suicidal resolve to prove Winthrop wrong at the water test.

"Amen," Silas said, after Winthrop had sworn him in.

"Amen." John Winthrop replied. "Thomas Braithwaite will depose the witness."

Braithwaite rose, then bowed to Silas in greeting. The bow looked out of place in Hampshire County, and out of order for Braithwaite to initiate it. Here was a man who aspires to a higher station in life, Gabriel thought. Silas spared Thomas a glance, and then returned the gesture.

"Your name." Braithwaite said, informally.

"Silas Winthrop. The second son of John Winthrop, esteemed governor and here presiding."

"And who is this man?" Thomas asked, pointing to Gabriel.

"Gabriel Bishop, my foster brother. He's an apothecary, and a Quaker." Silas said.

"Would you say you were friends?"

“Yes.” Silas said. “I helped build his house, and before that we shared a room in the manse.”

“I see. What year did your mother die?” Thomas asked, treading into memories Silas generally kept closed. Revisiting them, Silas seemed momentarily distracted from the script he’d prepared.

“In 1669. I was ten when it happened.”

“Would you say you’ve known Gabriel for a long time, then?”

“Yes. He’s like a brother to me.” Silas spared Gabriel a glance, trying to condense years of friendship into a moment of vanishing reverie.

“Did you notice any change in him recently?”

Silas let the question linger as he watched Gabriel from the stand. His gaze was impassioned, desiring, and determined. Gabriel recognized that look, remembered what it prefigured. John Winthrop sneered, and wrote something down in the record.

Silas found his words. “Gabriel lost everything because of me – his apothecary, his rightful place in the community, his future. He wasn’t of a right mind when he started the fire, and even now he is not recovered. He believes the water test is a martyrdom, and that he deserves to die.”

“Those with a guilty conscience often crave their rightful sentence.” Thomas replied. “If he wishes to be tested, why should your objections stop the court?”

“Because Gabriel is unfit to command his own defense and has no advocate.” Silas said. “I move to declare a mistrial, and suggest John Winthrop recuse himself from this case. Father, you cannot pass judgment from a state of victimhood. One additional counselor, even one such as Thomas Braithwaite, does not an impartial court make. What happened yesterday to Sarah was coercive enough: in the interest of your judicial integrity we must not continue.”

“Request denied.” Winthrop said. “Thomas, proceed!”

“Father, what are you doing?” Silas pleaded. “A mistrial would be to your own benefit.”

“You were marked by Gabriel, were you not?” John Winthrop said, harshly. “You were. I am not obligated to take your suggestions under consideration. Gabriel has too much control over you.”

“He doesn’t control me Father, I swear it.” Silas said, baffled. “Please, reconsider.”

“That is a meaningless oath. Your soul betrays your love for him. It’s why you testify in his defense, even now.”

“He saved my life.” Silas said. The two men were like rams in battle. Silas held his own against his father, unwilling to let himself be disarmed so easily.

“The fault is mine.” Winthrop said, relenting, searching for a better angle of attack. “I sent you to draw Gabriel back towards Protestantism after he went off the path. I asked too much of you, and you succumbed while trying to carry out your mission.”

“No,” Silas said. “I allowed Gabriel to choose his religion for himself.”

“You lied to me?” Winthrop said. “Indeed, I should not be surprised. You took him to be a true brother to you, unaware – as we all were – of the danger he posed to the community.”

“You treated him like your whipping boy.” Silas, said obviously provoking Winthrop. “I felt sorry for him after he was thrown out of the manse.”

“You’ve been his possession for years, seduced by his degenerate theology into a state of enthrallment.” Winthrop said, dropping his charitable pretense. “He burned down your meeting house, Silas. Have you forgotten?”

“No.” Silas said, defensively. “His sins grieve me more than thee, Father.”

“And why is that? Did Gabriel tell you he would set the fire beforehand, so that thou could lure me away with thee to preach? So that he could complete this act of evil?” Winthrop said it as if Silas stood accused, instead of Gabriel. Too late, Silas realized no quarter would be given to him.

“I wouldn’t have left Ipswich if I knew what he intended.” Silas said hastily. “After the sermon about the mark Gabriel shunned me. He was enraged with me, and distraught over what had happened. He said we would never be friends again. I thought I had done enough.”

“Hardly.” Winthrop sneered, getting the upper hand. “Because of your negligence, the accused stole your slave, burned your meeting house, and seduced your sister. You let this happen, was it by negligence or commission?”

Silas discounted this. “He didn’t *seduce* Sarah. She loved Gabriel; she would have married him.”

“There’s an inconsistency – Sarah says they were never together, yet you say they have been.”

“They were.” Silas said. “That’s the truth of it.”

“Or perhaps Gabriel has a hand in your memories, too – hence, she believes one tale and you another. You certainly kept secrets on his behalf, gave him that power over you.”

“I’m not his thrall, Father. I make my own decisions.” But this denial sounded weak.

“If that’s so, why didn’t you tell anyone about the affair between him and Fanny?”

Silas paused – even the truth could not spare him Winthrop’s wrath. “I wanted to. Actually, I wanted to sell her, just replace her so that nobody else would have to know what happened. But you wouldn’t have given me permission, nor could I betray you. So I refrained, to Fanny’s peril.”

“Was that really the only solution you could envision?” Winthrop said, disappointed. “You’d have rather sold my servant without my permission than confront Gabriel about his abuses?”

"Yes." Silas said. "The alternative would have hurt Sarah too deeply."

"Her feelings have not been spared. If your aim was to protect her, you failed in that too."

Winthrop said pensively. "Fanny could be dead because of your inaction, Silas."

"Yes, that's true." Silas said, defeated.

Winthrop let the words linger in the air before dismissing him. "Thank you for your testimony. The accused will be remanded to custody, until we reconvene."

Silas took a seat in the same pew as Gabriel, waiting for the gallery to disperse. His hands were trembling. Silas folded them into fists so that nobody would notice as they put on their cloaks and gloves and headed towards the exit. But even though he had hidden it from sight, Gabriel could still feel him trembling. In Silas's eyes that determined look remained: he had not given up on saving Gabriel yet.

They waited there for a moment in silence. By degrees the meeting house emptied of people and became quieter and quieter.

"Truly dost thou believe I'm mad?" Gabriel finally asked. "Like a raving lunatic?"

The question made Silas take off the armor he'd put on for Winthrop. "No, Gabriel, I understand why you did it. If it had been me, I would have burned down the manse with Sarah and Fanny inside."

Gabriel was stunned. What a horrible, brazen crime that would be. "Didst thou verily wish to convert me back? Didst thou really make some kind of arrangement with him?"

"Gabriel, I never wanted to." Silas pleaded. "I just told him I would so he'd let us be."

"Be what?" Gabriel asked. "Bosom friends? 'Brothers'? How can I even call you that now?"

"Father's trying to divide us, don't listen to him. I'm the one on your side, Gabriel. Trust me."

"I set that fire in your church." Gabriel said harshly. "I left the candle in your manse. It was me."

“What you did was an accident. Don’t talk like that.” Silas said, collecting Gabriel’s chains.

They went through a side door and out the back of the meeting house; where Rackman awaited them in the cart. Since the disastrous first day, Braithwaite had arranged for the cart for transport to and from the court. As they got in, Gabriel wondered how long Silas would delay the inevitable, awaiting his confession. One week? Six? Until spring?

The cart set off across the square at a snail’s pace to return Gabriel to his cell. The morning mob had dispersed – after the first public appearance, the public interest in seeing him had waned considerably. Across the square Gabriel saw a young woman with red hair, carrying a basket. She had a child with her, a girl of four or five. The mother pointed at the cart, teaching her daughter. There was something strange about that woman using him as a parable for her child - it moved Gabriel to speak.

“Silas.” Gabriel nudged him with his boot.

Silas asked him, “What is it?”

“Listen. Sarah was telling the truth; I never touched her. The Governor coerced her to lie, that’s why she screamed under oath.”

Silas gave Gabriel a queer look. “Next you’ll say the moon really is made of cheese. You shouldn’t worry about it. Focus on something that we can prove – that would exonerate you better.” But it was plain Silas didn’t really believe him.

It was early afternoon when the cart pulled into the yard of Andover gaol. Silas took him to the north wing, back to his cell; and locked the door behind them. Silas went to the next key in his ring and unlocked Gabriel’s manacles.

As per John Winthrop’s demand, Gabriel had worn a set of black clothes for the trial. They were on loan from Silas, and fit Gabriel as poorly as the religion they represented. Gabriel was eager to put

them off and get back into his own gray garments. Silas hung around in his cell, watching him change back into his dirty clothes, his eyes lingering on Gabriel's body. Finally he said;

"There's worship tomorrow morning. Father's going to give a homily."

Gabriel buttoned his shirt. "Alright. Enjoy it." He didn't have much else to say.

Silas sighed. "I know I made mistakes. I'm not here to help Father's case against thee, I'm doing everything I can to frustrate it."

"He said he sent thee to convert me back. It must be true, for Winthrop said it under oath. I can picture it, too; Silas the Evangelist, saving me from myself." Gabriel said, putting his gray clothes on.

"Doth thou love me so well as to force-feed me the cup of salvation?"

"Gabriel, I never wanted to convert you! Father made me promise I would, and I agreed so that I could see you without restriction. But I never tried to take away your faith."

"Dare I to believe thee? The opposite seems likelier. Then once thy holy father bit the dust, I could have been thy right-hand man. We'd have been just like him and Braithwaite. Was that what thou wanted?"

"Never!" Silas said. "I hate him almost as much as thou dost; I'd rather die than be the Governor of Massachusetts."

"Bold words for someone who hasn't got any dying to do!" Gabriel said, putting on his hat. "Stop helping me; I can prove my own innocence at the water test." Gabriel turned his back on Silas, to put away the black clothes.

Silas inhaled sharply, like he stepped on a pin. "I know it's my fault that you're accused." he said through gritted teeth, "And I remember how Father used to beat you; how that poisoned the way you think about us. We deserve it."

"So sayest thou," said the Quaker to the preacher's son. "Leave me."

"Gabriel, there's something I should tell thee. Last night, I went to Braithwaite's room. He said if I really was thy friend, I would testify in thy defense. Prithee, reconsider the path you're taking. I know Father would exile thee, if thou confessed. He exiled Anne Hutchinson."

Gabriel believed that. Exiling witches instead of hanging them mollified enlightened men, because it seemed merciful, even though the outcome was quite similar. "I can't." Gabriel said. "I made Fanny a promise. If I confess, the Governor will make me tell where it is I sent her."

"Gabriel, be reasonable. Fanny belongs at home; she's in far more danger now than she ever was from us. To bring her back would be a kindness."

What was it she told Gabriel? That only free people could say such things. "I think Fanny would see it differently. That's why getting free of ye Winthrops is so important to her."

"Fanny's not like us," Silas said, "Please, be reasonable. She won't get far on her own. Tell me where she is, for her own safety."

"She's not a child, Silas; and for that matter, neither am I. I'm not telling thee where I sent her."

The insults were wearing at Silas's patience. "Why art thou casting away thy life for a Negro like Fanny!?" Silas cried. "She's not in love with thee, Gabriel! She just used thee!"

"Quit thy shouting and leave me. I would pray in the quiet."

"I'm not going anywhere," Silas said ominously. "She never loved thee, Gabriel; she was scared of thee. She couldn't refuse thee, and thou took advantage. She said thou ravished her."

Gabriel didn't like this talk at all. "She wouldn't have told thee how she loves me. Thou would not understand it if she had. For her, the consequences are much more severe. It was probably *thee* she was scared of; I saw how thou beat her. John Winthrop didn't make those marks." But he could see Silas's reasoning too. "She loves me. She told me so."

"Wake up, Gabriel! She said she loved thee because thou made her say it. Dost thou see it not? She wanted to get *away* from thee. That's why she asked thee to free her."

Gabriel tried not to listen to Silas's words, but he heard them, the idea traveling through his mind like a crack in a glass pane. He had thought the same thing himself, when Fanny asked him for freedom. How many times had he told the story of their love to himself, alone in this locked room?

"She loves me. She promised me." Gabriel insisted.

Silas loomed over Gabriel like the specter of John Winthrop in his glory days. "She doesn't love you, Gabriel. I'm the only one left who still cares about you, can't you understand that? Prithee, confess and spare thy life!"

Gabriel stood his ground. He could feel Silas's breath tickle his beard. "I swore her an oath, Silas. I can no more break it than the walls of this gaol." If he broke it, his love would be a vain one.

"You're not well, Gabriel; not thinking reasonably." Silas said, putting his hands on Gabriel's shoulders. "Confess. Let me help thee."

"I would rather drown!" Gabriel said, throwing Silas's hands away. "Get out of my cell, Silas!"

Silas's handsome features twisted into a caricature of his father's ugly ones. Gabriel steeled himself not to flinch, and Silas slapped Gabriel across the face. The blow stung, but Gabriel stood his ground.

"Get out of my cell." Gabriel snarled.

"Or what happens?" Silas asked. "You're going to confess tomorrow. Swear it to me, Gabriel. Swear it, like thou did to Fanny!" Gabriel could feel Silas's rage blaze against him. He wanted to solve this dispute by combat, practically begging for Gabriel to rise up and strike him.

"I won't fight thee, Silas." Gabriel said. "Once was enough."

"Was it, Gabriel? I put your lights out last time, but you kept on with Fanny. Maybe this time, you'll learn your lesson!" Gabriel put up his hands to defend himself.

Silas threw his fist at Gabriel's chest; Gabriel caught the blow in his hand, and turned it. Silas tried to hit him again with his right hand, and again, so that Gabriel did not see his foster brother's left hand going for his temple until the blow connected, staggering him. Silas knocked him to the floor.

Gabriel jumped to his feet. He put his hands into fists, watching Silas watch him, to see who would strike first in the second exchange. "Please, Silas. I don't want to hurt thee." Gabriel pleaded.

"Is that what you're afraid of?!" Silas roared. "Come on and fight back, lady-weight!"

Gabriel charged at Silas, swung wide for him; Silas sidestepped. Gabriel wheeled around to face him, but Silas was too quick. He got Gabriel hard in the stomach.

The blow knocked the wind out of Gabriel; he sank to the floor. Silas straddled him as he went down, pinning Gabriel's arms to the floor. Gabriel tried them up again, but Silas slapped him again to make him stop struggling. "Yield, Gabriel." Silas said. "You can't win."

A clang in the hall stopped Silas cold. Silas got off Gabriel and gave him distance, as if nothing had happened.

“Winthrop! Everything alright in here?” it was Rackman, blessed Rackman. “I heard a ruckus this way.” Gabriel sat up, as if he’d been seated quietly on the floor the whole time.

“Everything’s fine.” Silas said. “I was just talking to the accused; he says he wants to confess.”

“That’s Braithwaite’s job. Come ye out of there,” Rackman said. “Else it’ll be inadmissible.”

Silas let himself out of the cell, and locked it behind him. “Think on what I told thee, Gabriel.” Gabriel could hear Silas leaving, his steps getting quieter and quieter. Gabriel touched his fingers to his temple.

Rackman was watching Gabriel in his cell, looking amused. “Looks like your number’s just about up, Sorcerer. You don’t even have enough power left to keep Silas in line.”

Gabriel got onto his hands and knees, then back on his feet. “He said you were funny.”

“Oh, I’m a salty one.” Rackman said. “The better to resist your infectious charms.”

Gabriel wanted to ask ‘what charms?’, but said “Go away, Rackman”, instead. He went to his bed and sat in it, wrapping his arms over his head. He heard him leave shortly after that.

Once Gabriel was sure he was alone, he let himself weep. What if Silas was right, he thought, what if Fanny never loved me? Gabriel went back to each happy memory of her, the ones that proved it; but now he wasn’t so sure. Did Fanny tell me she loved me, Gabriel wondered, or did I have to ask? Had she hesitated before answering? Gabriel couldn’t remember. Was his love a memory or a daydream he’d allowed himself to have? Maybe Silas is right - I really was no better than her masters. Curling up in his bed like a boiled shrimp, Gabriel remembered her and wept.

Chapter Nine

The Andover meeting house had been the finest church in the western valley, until the Ipswich meeting house was constructed. Built in 1670, the main sanctuary was sixty cubits long, forty cubits across, and two stories tall, with a mezzanine twenty cubits long in the back, for the women. John Winthrop knew the exact measurements because it was he who drew up the plans. The timber supports for the roof were exposed and artfully curved into joints, bearing the weight of the roof in their delicate arches. Originally, they had come to a point at the center of the ceiling, but five years ago John had a cut-away done in the apex, and added a cupola. When filled with sunlight on a clear morning like this one, it reminded John of the vault of heaven.

John would admit he was proud of it. He'd lavished the front wall of the church in handsome hardwoods during the renovation, and added a raised wooden dais where church members would sit, about thirty cubits long and spanning the half the length of the church. It elevated these elect members by half a cubit; enough to provide a heated subfloor for them. There was a second step at the front quarter of the church, building up the dais to a full cubit, to make a stage for trials like Gabriel's.

Above all was the carved wooden pulpit, fifteen and two thirds of a cubit tall, backlit by a pair of the handsomest clear-pane windows Dutch glassblowers could craft. Standing inside of it, John Winthrop could see the men on the main floor and the women above, boys aged seven to seventeen towards the front. Deacons attended them with chastening staves. If John looked through the windows, he could see the New England countryside without; their own Promised Land. Above John's head was a sounding board, wrought with the image of a star. The pews and mezzanines were packed, and those parishioners who came late were made to stand. They would hear him from those back corners, though; John had tested the acoustics when he designed the sounding board. It was a fine meeting house indeed, the finest in Hampshire Valley, since Gabriel set its successor on fire.

Looking out across the multitude, John Winthrop counted the babies which had been brought by their parents. In a few moments, they would hear him speak; though they would not remember. John opened his Bible, took out the sermon tucked in on a separate sheet of paper. It was a new sermon, written after Sarah was touched by Gabriel's magic on the witness stand.

It was almost ten o' clock in the morning. The congregation settled into their places and looked to John, awaiting the famous preacher's words. Before he began, John swept his eyes across the space of the meeting house, and confirmed everyone was in their proper places. Sarah and Brydie sat together, near the windows, so that the sun shone on them. Sarah looked as if she would depart at the first possible moment, so unhappy was she to have come. She was shunning him, but she would weary of it in time. Sarah was so like him – one day, she would thank him for this.

Silas and Thomas waited in the clergy seats. Thomas had worn his clergy collar, but Silas had not - John made a note of it. The white collar was not something a man put on and off as it pleased him. The priesthood was a covenant, a responsibility to hear the Word of God and repeat it faithfully, no matter what. But Silas was like Jonah; seeking to avoid the task to which the Father had set him. John decided that tomorrow, Silas would wear the collar whether he wilt or no. To not do so was to embarrass the church, the bride of Christ. John began the morning's worship with a collect:

"Dear heavenly Father, we pray to thee for mercy, to wash clean our souls so that the bitterness of eternal death might not be ours to face alone. Let us stand with your son, Jesus Christ; to bear his cross and die with him; so that, like him, we may share in everlasting salvation. Let the Holy Spirit alight on us now and at the hour of our death, and fill us with a vision of what awaits us in the Kingdom of God. For thy everlasting mercy pray we now, Amen."

"Amen," The congregation repeated, their many voices unified into one.

“In the name of God the Father.” John replied. “The heart is an inconstant and fallible dwelling-place for the human soul. We live our lives struggling to master it. Its beat quickens as we stoke our passions; and when it breaks our very souls are set adrift. In the heart the weeds and the wheat of our lives co-mingle, if we would let them grow up together. This mortal life is a test, to vet our hearts before God and each other, and so prove ourselves worthy of the ranks of God’s elect. To live up to the task God set for us is to die with the Father; and thus be resurrected in the Son.

“But the mortal heart begets sin; it rebels against God with sinful desires. There was no sinning when the world was new. It was Cain who first conceived in his heart of murdering his brother, Abel; and it was Eve, their mother, whose inconstant heart was tempted by the snake.” John said. “God was horrified by his children then, for their monstrous acts had been made perfect by his hand. He sought to quench the evil in the Flood; to wash the earth of its sinfulness. What little good was left in Creation, God put aboard Noah’s Ark; to weather a lengthy and uncertain voyage.

“Yea, the waters came and went, but sinning persisted; for Noah carried it and kept it dry in his righteous heart. Once there was room again on the earth, Noah planted the seeds of sin anew. Sinning flourished and bore fruit; and in its season, the wine ripened.

“Hear more of the sins of God’s most elevated elect. In his drunkenness, Noah left himself uncovered in his tent, and cursed the sons of Ham when they saw his nakedness. Abraham bound his son Isaac to the pyre, and would have slew him; except the Lord stayed his hand. Lot slept with his daughters; and Tamar seduced Judah, her father-in-law. Jacob tricked his brother Esau into giving away his birthright for a mess of pottage; and, with the help of his mother, tricked old Isaac into anointing him. Leah deceived Issac on the marriage altar, and Rachel let her do it. This prefigured the treachery of Leah’s sons against Joseph. They tore the garment from their half-brother and sold him into slavery. And when Joseph received his brothers in Pharaoh’s court, he pretended not to know them.

“To sin is a mortal thing. As we die, we sin. Not even godly men escape it. Yea, I shall tremble at the call of the Lord, for then the time of reckoning shall be at hand. I know because I have poured out my heart on God’s altar, that I might guide the hearts of men.

“Throughout our lives we secret evil away in our hearts, lest it appear in our outward selves, like an apple whose seeds rot before the body of the fruit. Every sinful thought and act finds its repose in mortal heartstrings, where they drive men to temptation. In the hearts of godly men, these sinful contents are white and mild, being exorcised frequently by devout prayer; but for those who hide their sins, their hearts are like a brewing kettle, fomenting a dark and fateful elixir.

“I look out over you this morning and see pure hearts, countenances which tell of good souls within you. But as our hearts are so imperfect, so too are our eyes, and our other earthly senses of perception; fallible and finite, like all works of men. There is a hidden world beyond our sight, which weaves in and out of our perceptions, subtly influencing our lives and labors. Black hearts can mask themselves to appear godly, as a madman can mask his madness for a time. Perhaps I cannot see ye as you truly are. Are ye true servants to the Father yet, possessed of pure hearts?”

The parishioners clasped their hands and knelt, murmuring to themselves ‘Yes, truly!’

“But ‘twas ye who carried this sinning to a virgin land! In your hearts you brought it here, as you brought your Bibles and built your houses. You carried it with you to the ships, as surely as Noah carried sinning along with him! Did you not think the Black Man would find you? As you had quit England, didst ye believe yourselves out of his reach?”

“No, no,” The congregation replied, their ‘no’s overlapping each other like ripples in a pond.

“The secrets you keep in your heart will hide God from you on the last day; when God’s elect ascend into heaven, ye shall not be among them. Hide not thy sin, but come forth with it, for those

debts left unpaid in this life are paid a thousand-fold in the next.” At this, John allowed himself eye contact with Sarah. She gazed back, steely-eyed and defiant.

John spoke to the congregation “Confess your sins now, so that your sinfulness shall be bled away in the world to come.” As they moved to confess, Sarah did not kneel, nor did her lips move - John made a note of it. No man was too pure to not confess themselves unto the Lord.

John paused for a few moments, so that everyone had an opportunity to clasp their hands and say something of their sins aloud. Thomas and Silas did it too. Their words were like raindrops in a turbulent river, whispering and sloshing and mixing into themselves, becoming a discrete but indistinct body of sound.

Once they were quiet again, John continued.

“As one seed yields up a sheaf of grain, so does one sin beget many, if it is given time to ripen. Each heart carries with it the urge to know and to have and to want; to be the master of his own fate. The angel Lucifer saw this in the human heart, and took it up for himself as a standard. For his hubris, God cast him out, and burned him black with hellfire; thus is he named ‘the Black Man.’ But he is servant to the Lord yet, because the Devil could not master the God which made him. Like men, he serves, and perpetuates sinning, so as to separate the wheat from the chaff amongst us. Would ye serve such a servant? Whither would your hearts lead ye? To his fire?!”

“No, no!” The congregation cried. Sarah was watching him still, her gaze rapt as a falcon’s. Beside her, Brydie trembled in fear, murmuring the word ‘no’ with the rest of them.

“Oh, but they will!” John cried, stirring them up. “Ye believe yourselves white, but ye are black with sinning! At the end, God’s elect will see the awful spectacle of your undoing, as ye are carried from

the judgment place by the Black Man's ministers! Oh, what a ministry they will do unto you; with hammer and tongs they shall torment you, as your neighbors look on in horror!

"I confess it! Our sins are heaped up like kindling; mine, and thine, and everyone's! Just as the Israelites ignored Jerimiah, so too did we become complacent, and so too our temple was lost! The sins littered our hearts like scraps of lint and straw; and easily enough the witch Gabriel collected them, and used them to spark the conflagration! 'Twas ye who burned your church!"

"No! Not we!" The congregation replied. Some of the women had tears in their eyes, and some of the babies were becoming frightened and fussy.

"Yet ye suffered witches in your midst. You drank lustily of their liquors; trusted apostates and degenerates to make your medicine. Too tolerant were we: I brought the changeling into my manse, and he bewitched my children. But the time for tolerance is passed. No longer shall I suffer a witch to depredate my settlements! Now, there can be no middle ground; either you abet the witch, or you shall persecute him! Which would you have?!"

"Persecute him," The congregation pleaded. "Persecute him!"

"Aye, persecute him!" John agreed. "But what of the witch who begat him? No sin cometh from whiteness; t'was the serpent from whom Eve took up her stain. Likewise Gabriel was gray of heart, until the witch dyed him in her colors. It was she who taught Gabriel his spells, to hunt your souls like cats hunt mice. What would you have me do with her?"

"Persecute her!" The congregation demanded. "Put her to the river!"

"So ye know the witch!" John Winthrop said indignantly. "The barren woman! It is not so hard to identify the witches in our midst, when we would open our eyes and see them! Even the mask she dons is a twisted caricature; the face of a scold and a widow. She hid in plain sight, her witchery a secret all of

ye doth knew! Are ye enthralled to her yet?! Would you still suffer her to live? If not, speak the witch's name!" John shouted it, his voice booming against the sounding board like a clap of thunder. Sarah watched her father impassively, as if Gabriel's magic made her immune to the frenzy.

"Asenath!" a few voices in the congregation said, but more joined in. "Asenath! Asenath Black!" They repeated Asenath's name, not knowing who she was, but demanding her arrest.

"Asenath Black doth be the witch?!" John Winthrop said, feinting so the congregation would make up the gap. "Truly, Asenath? Are ye certain that Asenath is the witch in your midst?"

"Yea, Asenath!" The congregation said.

"And what of ye? Would the complacency settle in your hearts again, that dread complacency which would drive us to Undoing? For if you do not purify your hearts, other witches will find them; as surely as rats sneak aboard a ship. You may hide it from us and from each other, but the Almighty Father will see! He will see and he will throw ye to the midden!"

Some of the congregation knelt again, whispering more of their sins. Sarah, however, stood up abruptly. John fixed her with a hard look, and Brydie grabbed her wrist, pleading her stay. Sarah shook off both of these, and fixed her Father with a look that said she was leaving.

"He will throw ye to the midden!" John shouted again. "Confess your sins, and repent! You cannot hide them, for we know what they are! Repent, repent!" Sarah turned her back and left, her footsteps measured but bold. John could have stopped her with his deacons, but he let her go.

"So sayeth the Lord, our God. Amen." John said.

"Amen!" The congregation replied, unified in one voice, like an ocean wave.

“Here follows the readings.” John Winthrop descended the pulpit, and Thomas Braithwaite ascended it with his Bible, each place marked with a red ribbon. He would read now, and calm them.

John took his seat next to Silas, closing his eyes as he listened to Thomas read the gospel and epistle. His words brought succor and comfort to the hearts that John had just laid bare; stanching the corruption with which they had previously festered. In quiet silence the congregation listened, the women dabbing handkerchiefs to their eyes and the men looking shaken as they evaluated their souls in the unyielding light of the Kingdom of God.

Thomas Braithwaite said the dismissal and the church’s silence fragmented into that quiet activity again as a hundred and fifty godly men and women fetched their coats. John touched Braithwaite on the arm as he took his seat again.

“Yes?” Thomas said, attending to John.

“Sarah’s gone. Follow her, and fetch her if she makes a spectacle of herself again.” Silas leaned over in his chair, and fixed Thomas with a glare.

“Aye.” Thomas said, unperturbed by the intimidation. “Should I go now?”

“Yea, go. But follow her for a time. I would know where it is she wanders.”

“As you will, Governor Winthrop.” Thomas said, put on his coat and set off. Silas leaned back in his chair and sighed softly in irritation, and crossed his arms.

“What are you so sour about?” John asked.

“You should have sent me instead. I can still follow simple commands: fetch, sit, speak, and so on.” Silas said, sullenly. “It’s going to start rumors, everyone seeing her and Braithwaite together.”

“Braithwaite knows his boundaries. I won’t have you striking her again, like you did in court.”

"I didn't strike her." Silas said. "I've never struck Sarah."

"You might as well have," John said. "Dragging her from the court as you did, pulling her along by the shoulder and arm. If I let you go after her now people will be checking Sarah for bruises later, assuming you laid them on her."

"You hurt her more grievously." Silas said, guilty. He knew the reputation he'd earned. "She shouldn't talk to Braithwaite alone. I don't trust him."

"Well, keep it under your hat. He's going to be the Governor soon. And wear your white collar to the meeting house. If I have to ask again, I will burn it. It's a mark of office, not a political statement you can put on and off when it pleases you."

"Yes, Father." Silas said, defeated. John let his apology hang in the air.

"Let's go." John told him after a few moments of silence.

Brydie rejoined them in the narthex and they all left the meeting house together. As they left, many people stopped John Winthrop to shake his hand and offer him words of praise for another instructive sermon; truly, he spoke the Word of God. John had long since learned to accept such praise graciously, even if it was just flattery. Outside of the meeting house, loose circles of men and women had gathered to talk. As John and Silas passed by, he heard three women gossiping;

"It's about time John Winthrop saw to Asenath Black." The first one said. She was fat and rosy. "I always thought there was something queer about the way she carried on with Wheelwright; as if he was married to her instead of Goody."

"Yea." The other gossip replied, thin like a needle. "And so brazen, naming it 'The High Horse'. John Winthrop was too lenient with her; she should have been wedded to a man who wouldn't spare the rod at such scolding."

A third woman, a mother with her child said; “As if any mother would let their son wed Asenath Black. When she was younger she used to drink with the men, lively as can be and barren as a desert! I always suspected she was a witch.”

“She is a witch.” The child repeated, saddened. She was not older than thirteen. “May God have mercy on her.”

Chapter Ten

Asenath dashed to the brewery just as soon as she returned home from Hurdle Maker's Hill. She did not bother watering her pony, although she'd forced it to gallop. She tied it up and fled inside, leaving the saddle and bridle. The witch hunter was but moments away, there was no time to de-tack. She dashed to the safety of her cellar, barring the exits behind herself.

The witch-hunter could arrive at any moment, his musket readied. Asenath waited a quarter-hour, then a half hour; barely daring to breathe. Each minute stretched itself into ten. But the witch hunter did not come. As the shock wore off, it was hard not to believe it had been a fantasy.

After Daniel Wheelwright made his fearsome proclamation, Asenath laughed in his face and said it was a good ruse. Then Daniel went to the window, and drew the curtains shut. He bade Asenath hide herself behind them, as he pointed out the young man Asenath had noticed dove hunting while she had her smoke. She laughed again, she had been watching that lad all morning to no result. But Daniel was certain; that was the same man who had come to his workshop, asking questions about her.

Asenath told Daniel he was being ridiculous and turned him out, but closed the shop, just in case. An hour later, in her bedroom, Asenath espied the same young man sneaking into her cellar. Once he was gone Asenath checked the brewery – nothing out of place. She got her pony and followed him.

She still didn't believe Wheelwright's story, despite the break-in. This boy was a hunter, a rough-spun yeoman. He wasn't a witch hunter; she wasn't a witch. A queer coincidence, this is but a queer coincidence. Asenath was let down as she followed his trail straight to Hurdle Maker's Hill.

The last time Asenath had been here was nearly eight weeks ago. Gabriel and she had argued; she said he was on a path to self-destruction and Gabriel, eyes glittering, swore he would prove himself to Fanny, to John Winthrop, to Sarah, to Silas, and to Asenath herself.

The house looked as if it had been looted since then. The Governor probably hadn't got much of evidentiary value. Indeed, Gabriel had carried off all his best stuff and given it to her for safe-keeping after his store had been looted – rare and strong herbs, unique vessels and filters, recipe books and implements, and so on. These items laid in her brewery yet, secured in her cabinet of toxic materials. That box of stuff would be all she had left of Gabriel once he was gone.

Asenath thought she was alone in Gabriel's yard, until she saw the eyes of the witch-hunter peering at her through the gable window. He sat in the same spot where Gabriel used to work his alchemy, white fingers curling around the rhododendron boughs hungrily. Frightened, Asenath choked back a scream. He tried to say something, but she hadn't given him time for words. Asenath galloped away, knowing he had seen her – that she should have heeded Daniel's warning.

In a fit of piety, Asenath knelt and confessed her sins amongst the copper kettles and fermenters. The silhouettes of the tanks were like cameos of old friends. For an hour she prayed, and confessed a litany of sins; things done and left undone. But after an hour, Asenath could bear it no longer. She could hear her horse whinnying, wondering when she was going come back and feed it. She got her blunderbuss and loaded it, and ventured forth from the security of her home.

Night had fallen. Gun in hand, Asenath went outside, listening carefully for the witch hunter's step. From the corner of Asenath's eye, each deep well of shadow was his silhouette, every broken branch his musket. He was both everywhere and nowhere, about to strike and never striking.

Asenath wasted no time. She put off her horse's saddle and bridle and threw some hay at it. Then she put on its blanket and left the stable. She went on the porch, and shuttered the windows. Then she went inside and barred the doors.

Feeling as if she had won herself some time with the defenses, Asenath took bread and cheese, and wheat beer to drink, and thought on what she would do.

She had a choice about her death, Asenath decided as she ate. There was always a choice, even if it didn't seem that way. She could cower in the brewery as she'd been doing, and maybe injure the witch hunter in a shoot-out. She could surrender, and plead with him to dispatch her quickly, without torturing her. She could try to kill him quietly, before he killed her. Asenath certainly knew enough of poisons to craft something that would accomplish the job.

She could indeed poison the witch hunter, although this idea did not please Asenath much. And even if it worked, John Winthrop would surely send other witch hunters, or a militia brigade. She would postpone her fate by a day or two, perhaps, and probably ensure the High Horse was as thoroughly stripped of valuables as Gabriel's properties had been.

She could poison herself, a notion Asenath entertained with ill ease. It wasn't the sin of it that bothered her, for she had known a fair bit of sin in her life. Truthfully, she had reconciled herself to going to Hell, as she wouldn't share Heaven if John Winthrop was going to be there. But she had never considered suicide in her life, not even after William died.

She was certainly old enough to die. That didn't make death more attractive, but it did put it in perspective. Living to the age of sixty-two and getting to die at a time and method of one's own choosing were luxuries Gabriel did not enjoy.

And there was another thing to consider, Asenath thought. If she killed herself, her will would be in force; but if she were convicted as a witch, it wouldn't be valid. Once she was sentenced, John Winthrop would be able to award the High Horse to whomever he wanted, including himself. Caesar would get sold, or become a ward of the Winthrops, as would her house. The thought of the High Horse and Hurdle Maker's Hill both being added to Winthrop lands offended Asenath deeply.

She sighed, unhappy with this grim conclusion. Suicide, then. She would carry the poison with her, and use it once the game was up. Before she began, Asenath said another prayer; that God would keep her from needing this black elixir she was about to make.

Asenath went to the cabinet where she kept her whiskey. She unlocked it and took a half-pint of whiskey, undid the seal on the cork and gulped down a mouthful to make some room in the bottle. It felt like fire in her stomach.

She went to her work table and opened up Gabriel's chest of herbs. Inside were dozens of envelopes, parts and seeds of every kind of plant; labelled in Gabriel's hand. They were packed in haste, so Asenath sorted through them to find one strong enough for her purposes. Finally, she turned over an envelope that had what she needed inside; the word *Aconitum* written on the front.

Asenath put on gloves and retrieved an herb grinder. The envelope was tightly sealed, and a black cross had been written over the seam in ink, Gabriel's warning. The envelope was light, less than an ounce. Asenath opened it carefully, saw its purple petals and its withered black fruits. Gabriel used Latin names, but Asenath knew this plant as 'monkshood', which some called 'wolfsbane'. It seemed so little, but Asenath knew its potency.

She ground it all up and funneled it into the whiskey bottle with a scrap of paper, trying to keep the dust to a minimum, as it prickled her lips. She stoppered the bottle, shook it, and cleaned up her work area carefully. She put the bottle next to the fire where it would be warmed, but not boil.

Over the next half hour the whiskey steeped black with the monkshood. Once she was done cleaning, Asenath retrieved it and inspected her handiwork. The extract was black as ink, with black sediments; if she had wanted it for medicine it would need to be diluted by at least fourfold. As is, the bottle should have enough poison in it to kill five people slowly. She slipped it into her pocket.

By the time she had finished, it was approximately midnight. Asenath went upstairs, and slept soundly. She dreamed of nothing, and woke at sunrise as if nothing bad had happened yesterday. She unbarred the doors and opened the windows; and opened the High Horse for business as usual.

Around nine o' clock the witch hunter came. Asenath recognized him coming down the Ipswich road. His saddlebags were packed, his musket strapped to his back. Asenath came out to the porch to greet him, bunching her shawl around her shoulders against the morning chill.

The witch hunter noticed Asenath as he tied up his horse, and called "Hello!"

"God be with ye, Stranger!" Asenath said, as he bounded up the stairs on long legs.

"I don't suppose it's too early for breakfast?" the witch hunter asked. "I'm famished."

"Certainly not. Come in." Asenath said. The witch hunter followed her inside.

The young man took off his hat and his musket, and set them by the door. "Nice place you have here." He said admiringly as he warmed himself. "It's cozy."

While Asenath saw about getting him some breakfast, he sat down in Asenath's chair, but stood up again suddenly when he noticed the carding things and tobacco pipe laid off to one side. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize."

"Polite young man, you are." Asenath said, slicing a smoked sausage and some bread, "Not taking a lady's chair while she's up. What's your name, anyway?"

"Hardship Cole," the witch hunter said. "This is a brewery, isn't it? I'll take a spot of beer."

"As you wish," Asenath said. She got a mug and poured the beer, dark brown except for the white foam at the top. It might mask the flavor of the poison, she thought; but Asenath refrained. No

good would come of poisoning the witch-hunter. What did he do, anyway? John Winthrop would just send more young men to die.

She brought Hardship his beer and his breakfast. He tasted it, and said, "My, that's good." He took a long draught of the beer, and tucked into the victuals.

Asenath took her chair and her pipe and set to smoking. "Hardship. That's a good Puritan name, humble but tenacious. What brings you to Ipswich, Hardship Cole?"

"I'm hunting a cat o' mount," Hardship lied. "He's preying on a farmer's livestock around these woods. Lambs keep going missing from his flock."

"You shan't find her." Asenath said. "There are no cat o' mounts in these woods."

"What makes you so sure?" Hardship asked.

"I've lived out here for thirty-five years and I've never been set upon by a giant cat. They're in the mountains, perhaps, but they don't come into the valley anymore." She said, puffing on her pipe. "They learned their lesson about the white man, just like the Indians did."

"Maybe they just left your house alone. They generally don't pick a fight they can't win."

Asenath blew a smoke ring at Hardship Cole. "Tell me more about this cat o' mount. Was it hiding in my basement yesterday, about two hours past noon?"

Hardship bit his lip, chagrined. "So you did see me."

"Aye, and you saw me at Hurdle Maker's Hill; and I saw you see me there. So let's not play pretend; tell me what it is that you want, witch hunter."

"I thought Wheelwright told you yesterday." Hardship said. "I'm looking for Fanny the Slave."

"You're out of luck, sirrah." Asenath said. "She's not here."

"I know." Hardship said. "Tell me where she's hiding, I'll go fetch her and give her back to the Governor, and he'll drop the charges."

"I'm not privy to Gabriel's plot." Asenath said.

"Why would he have kept it from you?" Hardship said. "Isn't he your apprentice?"

"Apprentices often keep things from their masters." Asenath said. "I didn't approve of what he was doing with Fanny at all."

"So he didn't tell you he planned to steal her?" Hardship said, disappointed.

"No." Asenath said. "He hid it from me, lest I interfere."

"You would do her a kindness if you brought her back to her family, where she belongs." Hardship said, suggestively. "She's in more danger now than she ever was in Ipswich."

"I wish I could help you." Asenath said. "But I don't know where she is." She paused, waiting; Hardship took a drink of his ale. "Now what will you do, Hardship Cole?"

"I'll have to arrest thee." Hardship sighed. "And bring you to Andover. You'll be tried by Governor Winthrop there."

"I shan't be going anyplace without a warrant." Asenath said, defensive.

"I have one." Hardship said. He took it from his pocket. "Here, read it for yourself."

Asenath took the document, and unfolded it. She was charged with witchcraft in the second degree, and additionally as an accessory to Gabriel's arson. Effective immediately, Hardship Cole had the authority to detain her and search her property, person, and papers. It was signed by Governor John Winthrop. "When do we leave?" Asenath asked.

"As soon as I wish." Hardship said. "Go - pack your bags. Bring clothes for the trial."

Asenath went upstairs to her bedroom, wishing that this wasn't happening. She read the warrant again: if anything, Daniel was being optimistic. Winthrop wouldn't finish her quickly; he fully intended to toy with her in court, to press every angle of attack. If Winthrop could not have Fanny back, he would take everything he could from Asenath to make himself whole: her house, her servant, her land, her apprentice, and even her life. Never, she thought: I will never give you the pleasure of breaking me in court, of seeing me plead for mercy. I am not your helpmeet to be so misused.

Asenath got a canvas bag and put her Sunday dress and her dress shoes in. She hoped someone would figure out what she intended, packing this outfit. She didn't want to be buried in everyday clothes. She got her will from her chest of papers and put that in the bag as well.

There was a pewter cup on Asenath's bedside table, half full of water. She poured it out the window; it splattered on the porch seconds later. She uncorked the bottle of poison, and resisted the urge to throw it out her window too. She steeled herself to be brave as she poured out the smaller dose. That way it would be less painful, she decided. She drank it quickly, before she could change her mind.

The taste of it was wretched and bitter. She wasn't able to finish it in one go, but what she did take made her shudder, going down. Should have diluted it, she thought, wanting to rinse her mouth out with something. Shame about the water – she would get something downstairs. Something better: one for the road, as it were. Asenath came down the stairs, bag in one hand, and empty cup in the other. She set the cup down, a good swallow of poison left in it.

"Give me your hands." Hardship said, holding a supple leather strip.

"Wait," Asenath said. "I want one last drink before I go. Just to stave off the demons."

Hardship smiled at her, his own eyes a little glassy from drink. "I heard you were a tippler. I won't deny thee; pour it."

Asenath went to her hogshead. She grabbed the cup and filled it from the hogshead. She put it to her mouth and drank. The cup was still noticeably contaminated with poison; she would drink this.

“Wait.” Hardship said, just before she drank it. “Let me have a taste first.”

Asenath put the cup to her lips, and went at it hastily. Almost immediately Hardship’s cast darkened. He was suspicious, Asenath knew. She drank faster.

Hardship watched her drink. “Did you hear me?”

Asenath wasn’t able to drink like she used to. Though the beer did not taste much different for having been poisoned, she had to lay off at two-thirds, knowing she would vomit if she gulped the rest. “What was that?” Asenath lied. “I’m a bit hard of hearing, dear.”

“I might help thee.” Hardship said, reaching for the cup.

“No!” Asenath cried, grabbing for it.

She was quicker than Hardship, and knocked it over. The poisoned beer spilt all over the bar and onto Hardship’s boots. Asenath tried to feign a drunken smile, as her stomach ached with cramps. Hardship stared back, unimpressed.

“I thought you knew how to hold your liquor.” Hardship said suspiciously.

“What can I say?” Asenath lied, innocently. “I’m a widow of sixty-two.”

Hardship took the mug of beer, and sipped the dregs of it that clung to the cup. He tasted it carefully, then spat on the floor. He sounded angry. “You shouldn’t have done that, Asenath.”

“What do you mean?” Asenath asked innocently. “It’s the same draught you had for breakfast.”

“No, it isn’t. You’ve laced it with something. Tell me what it is you put in here.”

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're on about." Asenath said. "No idea." Hardship grabbed her wrists and bound her, a little roughly. Up close, Asenath could see the lad's eyes – he was betrayed, feeling he had let his guard down. She could have just as easily poisoned him instead of herself.

"Don't resist." Hardship said, tying the other end of Asenath's lead to a post in the center of the tavern. "Damn my eyes, but you nearly fooled me. I thought you really were just a tough old tavern wench. You really did it too, didn't you? Your bag seems suspiciously not-packed." Hardship opened it up, laying out the one set of clothes, and then her will, consisting of several pages sewn together. "That's not much clothes for a long journey. And what's this, some kind of witch contract?"

"It's my last will and testament." Asenath said. Her stomach hurt. "Leave it be."

Hardship opened it, and read it for a bit, befuddled. He turned it upside down, then right side up, then put it in the fire.

Asenath shrieked, "What are you doing?! Get that out of there!"

"I knew it." Hardship said. "It *is* a witch contract." He let it burn.

"You must retrieve it. John Winthrop must not have my legacy. Please, Hardship, I beg of you!" Asenath pleaded, watching her will flame up, and crumble into ashes.

Hardship watched her, doing nothing to retrieve the paper. The last bit of it burned through.

"That was my only copy...alas." Asenath said, grieving. "But the governor will never have my dignity. I've seen to that."

Hardship looked disturbed. "Prithee, tell me how to reverse the poison."

"You can't." Asenath said. "That egg is cooked."

"Surely there's an antidote, or a spell you can do. You trained Gabriel, did you not?"

"I trained Gabriel, but he exceeded me. I loved him as my son, but he disregarded me. He turned against me and threatened me, and in my own pain I shunned him. I failed him – I should have stopped him from hurting her, but I couldn't. And afterwards I was too afraid to tell Winthrop what happened." The poison was getting to her blood now. "I swear to God, Hardship, I'm not a witch. I don't know the Devil, I just try to go my own way. Gabriel was like that too, before Winthrop took everything from him."

"Tell me about it later." Hardship said, hunting around the bar for something. He was opening drawers and cupboards, and rifling through the things on the shelves. "Where do you keep your salt?"

"I beg your pardon?" Asenath asked, still reminiscing.

"The salt, Asenath!" Hardship roared at her. Asenath pulled her bonds lower down on the beam, slumping belly-down onto the floor of the tavern. She tried to pull herself up, but rolled onto her side.

"I don't remember," she lied. Hardship kept rifling through her drawers until he found it. He was grabbing other things, boiling water. She felt a little bad for Hardship – surely, the rumor he wanted to kill her had been false. He was doing his best to save her life, but he would fail, just as she had tried to outwit Winthrop and failed. On some level, Asenath regretted the suicide, but more she regretted the loss of Gabriel, in whom she saw redemption. What an amazing alchemist he would have been.

"Asenath, are you still awake?" Hardship called out.

"None of your business." She said, getting cross. "Stop meddling with my suicide!"

"Stay awake for as long as you can bear it."

"Why are you trying to save me?" She asked. Hardship had no ready answer, but kept working. He was mixing some remedy – but unless he was working off Gabriel's recipe, it would be futile.

Moments later, Asenath heard Hardship approaching. He pulled her into a sitting position, and showed her the folksy antidote he'd brought: a teapot full of warm liquid. He squatted in front of her and offered her the spout. "We can do this the easy way, or the hard way."

"No." Asenath said, and turned away from him weakly. The witch hunter easily grabbed her by the neck and brought it to her mouth; she had not the strength to resist. "Leave me be." She said.

The witch hunter growled, "Drink it, Asenath."

And when she would not, he poured it down her throat anyway, nearly drowning her.

Asenath coughed and sputtered, then vomited. She gasped at the air when he was done. The witch hunter left again to go get something else. Time flowed like pine sap, sticking to Asenath's senses. Hardship pressed a cup to her lips, and she had not the strength to resist him.

It was plain water this time, icy cold from her well. The witch hunter force-fed her four or five cups of the stuff, as Asenath lost the strength to keep her eyes open. She could hear Hardship swearing under his breath, the words wandering through her head like lost patrons in a library. The sound of them got quieter and quieter, until she slipped away altogether.

Chapter Eleven

Once Father made his point, Sarah excused herself from his homily. She had nothing to confess to him; her heart was like an empty strongbox. He would never believe she'd kept chaste, and there was no making him believe the truth of it. Indeed, he had already moved on to blaming Asenath Black for what had happened, and to everyone else that seemed as good as the truth.

When she left, she fancied a few younger members of the congregation glanced at her, as if they too longed to walk away from this talk of killing Asenath Black. Sarah didn't blame them for staying in their places, though - they yet had something to lose from Father's reprisals. In the narthex, Sarah picked out her scarlet cloak from amongst all the black ones. Fanny had stolen her other one, but the subdued red suited her. Sarah would not ask Father for a replacement. She departed the meeting house.

By the sun, it was no later than one o'clock. On the high steps of the meeting house, Sarah saw the Connecticut River, shining like the gates of heaven on the horizon as the noonday sun glinted off the pack ice. A wintry breeze caressed her cheek, awakening her with its touch.

Sarah set out towards the Andover palisade, and traced its perimeter once she arrived there. Snow had melted on the other side of the wall and dripped though, forming an icy glaze which issued forth in rivulets from each chink in the timbers. The ice on the wall reminded Sarah of melted candle wax. As she walked around the palisade, Sarah went back to the fairest stretches of her memory and sailed down them again; trying not to reflect on how things had changed.

After Gabriel left the manse, Sarah saw little of him until she was fourteen. His apprenticeship with Asenath Black kept him outside of Ipswich, and if Silas visited he usually wanted not to take her along. The few times Sarah did see Gabriel, it was only in passing; she could ask him but a few hasty questions and then they were separated again.

Silas had more latitude to see Gabriel, after Father made him promise to lure Gabriel back towards Protestantism. But on his eighteenth birthday Gabriel had a secret Quaker baptism, with Silas as his makeshift officiate. Silas told her of it once, and not to tell anyone. But she did not have to.

Gabriel's Quaker blood started to show after that; so that Father turned his eyes away in distaste whenever he saw Gabriel's gray form at a distance in the marketplace, or on the commons. Sarah would have thought the Quaker clothing plain if anyone but Gabriel wore it.

When Gabriel turned twenty-four, Asenath gave him a birthday present; a piece of her land next to the High Horse. He built a shop on the roadside, and opened for business as an apothecary. Within a year, the value of the storefront had been paid back. It seemed very queer to Sarah. Whence had Gabriel received his training; and wherefore did the townsfolk trust him so readily?

Silas explained to her that Asenath had trained him. She was a clandestine herbalist, or at least she used to be; the one you sought if you wanted to end a shameful pregnancy before it quickened. The barren woman taught Gabriel her secret trade alongside her public one, and that was why the farmers went to Asenath instead of the physician. It explained why Father hated her so.

After paying off his debts to Asenath, Gabriel came a-courting. It began with a letter, written in a hand that Sarah barely recognized as Gabriel's. Sarah recalled yet the pleasure of reading it, envisioning Gabriel writing the words. She wrote back with a hasty 'yes'.

They were reunited on an early September day, but it was warm like summer. Silas took Sarah from the manse, and unbeknownst to Father they met Gabriel in the town commons. At that time, Gabriel the Apothecary was so well respected that he and Silas greeted each other in the street as equals. In their company, Sarah was escorted beyond the walls of the town.

It was the first time Sarah had ever seen Gabriel's house. He showed her the modest dwelling-place, pointing out the parts that Silas had helped with. He had a garden of flowers and herbs of every kind, and picked one for Sarah to wear in her hair. They made a bonfire and Gabriel opened up some cider from the High Horse, which they passed around as they drank of it. It was tart and sweet; Asenath's best. The effervescence of the drink seemed infused into Sarah's memory of that day; now the crackling of the bonfire and her brother's eyes sparkled merrily, as the three enjoyed each other and the pleasant summer weather.

As the sun set, Silas made some excuse to go into Gabriel's house. Once Gabriel was alone with Sarah, he apologized to her for how he had been ten years ago; and said he had been angry then. She forgave him. Gabriel asked if she really did want to marry him, or if Silas was just saying that; plainly expecting rejection.

Sarah had laughed at him. Of course she did, she said, the cider making her bold; she had wanted to marry Gabriel since she was fifteen years old. He kissed her in the firelight. That night, the walk home to Ipswich had felt like a walk through New Jerusalem.

Sarah was not allowed to be present for her own marriage negotiations. Silas worked as her advocate, mediating between Father and Gabriel to engineer the promises and compromises needed. It had taken several afternoons to win Father over; and behind closed doors Sarah often heard Father saying "No."

Sarah feared that would be the end of it, but Silas enlisted the help of other ministers to win Father over to his way of thinking. Reluctantly, John Winthrop agreed to the partnership; Sarah remembered the joy in her own voice Fanny told her the good news.

Once the marriage was agreed upon, Gabriel regained the right to visit the manse. Whenever she knew Gabriel would come, Sarah spent the entire day in merry anticipation. Each hour before his

arrival seemed long indeed, and the ones thereafter much too brief. She thought she was in love, then; for an hour did not pass that Sarah did not think of Gabriel.

Now Sarah sorted through her memories of him, trying to ascertain which vignettes were of the real Gabriel, and which were of the sorcerer who stole him away. The Gabriel who inspected his broken nose in her looking-glass in those years ago must have been real, thought she; the one who burned the meeting house, the sorcerer. But what of the others? What about the bonfire? Which memories were realistic in their aspects, and which were colored by Gabriel's hand? Or was Sarah herself to blame, revising her memories over time the way a river changes course?

There were certainly memories of Gabriel which Sarah tried not to remember, like the night he came to the manse drunk; and told Sarah she looked like John Winthrop in a dress. He carried on insulting their family until Silas asked him to leave. She had deceived herself, Sarah decided as she walked; by telling herself that Gabriel hadn't really meant it, that it was the drink talking on his behalf. Until the night of the fire, she clung desperately to the fantasy that Gabriel might steal her away; that they would elope and escape Father forever. Sarah knew not whether it was magic or her own deceptions which allowed her to think that was the case.

So walked Sarah around the palisades of Andover, asking herself questions which she could not answer, collecting clues from her memories like shells after a storm. Perchance some guardsmen saw her walking, and offered words of greeting; Sarah glided past them without acknowledgment. She could see, but did not look, heard, but did not listen; and knew not how many turns she made about the palisade's inner border. Some time passed, but Sarah had no sense of it. It was only when the quality of the light began to change that Sarah became aware of time passing.

At a distance lay the brick walls of Andover Gaol. Sarah's cheeks felt a little red from the sun, and it was now midafternoon. Sarah had walked nearly the distance from Ipswich to Andover in her revolutions around the walls. Andover Gaol was the destination of this pilgrimage.

Heretofore, Sarah thought gaols to be ugly structures, representative of the bleak purpose for which they were designed. But this one was made of bricks; of the sort one might use for fine manses. They were the first bricks from the Andover brickwork, and thus their color and size were highly irregular. Another clue to the gaol's primogeniture was the plain patterning of the masonry. But here and there Sarah spotted more complex designs, laid in inconspicuous places.

Sarah approached the walls, and wondered if Gabriel knew she was here; if he could reach out and feel that she was close. He must be able to, thought she; reaching out her hand and touching it to the bricks. After a day in the sunlight, they were almost warm.

As she waited at the walls of the gaol, Sarah thought that her entire life was like a ship, and Gabriel's was like an unnavigable river mouth. She had run aground on Gabriel's sandbars; found herself trapped in a maze of submerged obstacles and tidal currents. Beached on Gabriel's shoals, Sarah had cursed her fortune, and herself for her naiveté. Gabriel was not the fair port he had seemed; he was a watery graveyard, strewn with shipwrecks at ebb tide. When the waters receded, their timbers poked forth from the surface like irregular teeth, wordless and terrible warnings of what would come.

At the time, Sarah's only thoughts had been of her continued survival. She dumped what weight she had to, leaving her unbalanced. It had given her just enough leeway to push herself free of the sandbar before the tide came in again. Sarah made haste. She got a little way towards the river mouth before crashing into another submerged obstacle. It was hard and immovable, another shipwreck. Sarah tore away her keel as she tried to escape.

At the next ebb tide, Sarah took stock and found her fortune grim. She was at the mercy of Gabriel's currents. Each morning she drifted a little ways, as if Gabriel was deciding whether to set her adrift or leave her high and dry. But he would have to decide soon; Sarah's hull was cracked and she listed to one side, taking on salt water. She dabbed it from her eyes, wondering how much longer it would be before she sank and joined the other shipwrecks. It was hopeless now.

Just then Sarah heard the voice of Thomas Braithwaite calling her name. She wanted to hurry away, but it was too late to pretend not to have heard him. "Hello, Sarah! Sarah Winthrop!"

She faced Braithwaite as he approached, met him at the gates of the gaol. "Having thyself a turn around the town?" He asked, too familiarly.

"No." Sarah said, not wishing to elaborate.

"Walk with me then," the clerk said; and Sarah knew better than to refuse him.

For a few minutes they walked in silence. Finally, the clerk said "I'm sorry about the day before."

"What did you do?" Sarah asked tonelessly. "Father's right, I should have known better."

"The fault is mine. I should have told him to stop badgering thee."

"You didn't, though." Sarah said, using the distancing 'you'. She didn't like Braithwaite being so friendly. "Father ripped my honor to shreds in court; painted me as a slattern and a thrall. Now it doesn't matter whether it's true or not."

"I know. I'm sorry he shamed you. I should have said something."

Sarah wished Braithwaite would go away. "Did you interrupt my contemplation just to share your sympathies with me, Mister Braithwaite?" Sarah asked.

"Truthfully, nay." Braithwaite said. "I interrupted because I suspect it was a show you put on in the courtroom yesterday, and not an actual attack of possession. Is it true?"

Sarah took a moment to answer. "We shouldn't be talking about this outside."

"You're right. My room is private." Thomas Braithwaite said, forwardly.

"No, not there." Sarah said, wondering if that had been meant as a way to entrap her. In any case, it was inadvisable to go behind closed doors with him. "Escort me around the palisade again."

They arrived at the fortifications and turned left, tracing the perimeter of the palisade, as if they were remarking on its battlements. Quietly, Sarah asked "Why do you think I lied?"

Braithwaite whispered; "It's not any one thing in particular; more like a constellation of things, not least of which was happening upon you before the walls of Andover gaol, weeping for him."

"I wasn't weeping." Sarah whispered back, defensively. "I was praying."

"I watched you for a time; you were weeping. Dost thou love him still?"

"Who, Gabriel? No." She said. "I hate him more than anything."

"Thou must not lie to me, Sarah. I'm not going to tell your father." Braithwaite said it earnestly, which made Sarah hate him more.

"Thou art compassionate when it comes cheaply, Thomas Braithwaite." She said.

"I want to help you." Braithwaite said, chagrined.

"Would that you had kept away then, and left me to my prayers!" She cried, hurling the words at Braithwaite; as if by saying them angrily enough they could turn into a curse.

"Lower your voice," Thomas said. "Don't let anyone hear you."

But someone had heard; Sarah looked up and saw one of the yeomen on the palisade's ramparts looking down at her, leaning on his halberd. When he recognized whose daughter he was staring at, the man quickly averted his eyes.

Sarah kept walking with Braithwaite, until everyone who had heard them before was well beyond earshot. Then he whispered to her; "So did you lie?"

Sarah whispered back; "I didn't have any choice about what I did. I had to choose between Gabriel and myself, and Gabriel's already condemned. Father forced me to bear false witness."

"So you did fake it." Thomas sighed. "I can't let this go, Sarah. If anyone else finds out, I have to dismiss the case with prejudice. Gabriel would be set free."

"So strike my testimony, or burn it; or use it for scrap paper." Sarah said.

"It doesn't work that way. You have to formally recant it in court."

"You mean I have to go back in front of Father and tell everyone I lied last time?"

"More or less," Braithwaite said. "It would be better for you if you did it before he's put to the water test. If you wait until afterwards, it might seem as if you were scheming to get him killed."

"But I'm not scheming! Gabriel deserves to die for what he did to me. Even he knows that; that's why he won't confess." Sarah said, realizing her voice was over-loud. She dropped it to a whisper again and said; "He's a witch, Thomas!"

"I think he's guilty too." Braithwaite said softly. "But I could not have been the only one to wonder if your fits in court were an affectation. One falsehood can reach out and poison every noble act in a man's life; think of what thy father said today in the meeting house."

"I see you're a godly man, Mister Braithwaite. But there's no way I'll recant," Sarah said, "I've been humiliated enough. If you want me to take the stand again, you'll have to indict me for perjury."

"I won't force you." Thomas Braithwaite said. He took her hand; held it fast. "You'd be doing God's will if you recant. You won't be punished, I'll see to that."

"It's getting close to supper time," Sarah said, shaking her hand free of Braithwaite's grip. "Wilt thou walk me back to the manse? I know Father sent you here to collect me."

Braithwaite said that he would. Oftentimes she caught the clerk looking at her during their walk; and seemed as if he would try to convince her. But each time he thought better of it, and said nothing.

Father had made a study of decorating the Andover manse with paintings of his wives and children. Eliot Winthrop, Sarah's dead brother, was in the dining room, alongside Emma Winthrop, her mother. In a folio box in the parlor were engravings of the other five Winthrop children; all lost in infancy. The last child, Alexander, lived only eleven days before the Lord took him back to heaven, and Emma with him. In the hall hung the portrait of John's only surviving children, Sarah and Silas. They shared the picture, looking angelic at six and eight years of age, respectively. Silas held a little psalter in his hand, and Sarah, a rose. Back then, they could have been twins.

The smell of baked ham was heavy in the air; it tempted Sarah, despite her poor appetite. She put her scarlet cloak on the rack and took Braithwaite's coat. Silas and Father were in the parlor, Silas reading his psalter on a bench and Father in his chair.

Silas looked up from his reading when he heard the front door open. "Sister," he said. "You're home." It was the kindest greeting Silas offered her since breakfast two days ago. Sarah ignored him. Thomas Braithwaite headed towards the kitchen, following the delicious smell of the food.

Sarah took a seat under the window; whose sill was wide enough to make a little bench. Father did not acknowledge her, but once she'd taken her place, he rose from his, and followed Braithwaite into the hallway. She heard his voice calling. "Thomas!" John Winthrop said. "A word in my study, if you don't mind."

The two magistrates went into Father's bedroom and closed the door behind them. After a moment, Silas, who had resumed reading his psalter, said quietly; "You're in trouble, Sarah."

"I am not speaking to you." Sarah replied, glaring at him.

"You're going to the scaffold," Silas said, turning a page. "Two days from now."

"A likely scenario." Sarah said, dismissively. "If anyone deserves the scaffold it's thee."

Silas's eyelashes fluttered as he read his psalter. "Oh, I'll be there. I'm to say a blessing."

She said quickly, "You're lying."

"No, I'm not." He said. "It'll be me and thee and Thomas Braithwaite."

"That's not half as funny as you think it is." She said. "Stop it."

"I wish I could." Silas closed the book, and put it aside. "He told me after worship. Don't blame yourself. He's doing it to me and you in equal parts. That's why he picked me instead of Rackman."

"The detail in which you've illustrated this is painstaking." Sarah said. "I believe thee not. Leave me in peace."

"It's the truth, Sarah. Father sends us to the pillory on Friday morning. Wear something plain for it. Your scarlet cloak won't do; I'll lend you mine."

"Father wouldn't shame me." Sarah said hastily. "This is a ruse."

"It's going to happen."

"Stop pulling my leg. It's not funny anymore." Sarah said.

"I'm sorry, Sarah." Silas said. Sarah searched Silas's eyes for the sparkle of deception, his lips for the smirk that would belie his jest. She did not find them; Silas was earnest.

The scaffold was for gossips, bitches, slatterns, and scolds. In the past, Sarah would have walked over hot coals to prove to Father she was not like them. Now, she only felt a sense of rushing inevitability, like the changing of the tides.

She asked: "With what crime am I charged?"

"Simple fornication." Silas said. It would be enough.

"I'm innocent." Sarah pleaded hopelessly. "Gabriel and I never did that."

"Gabriel said the same thing when we left the meeting house." Silas replied. "It doesn't matter to me, Sarah. You were engaged to be married. That eagerness is common; even healthy."

"But I didn't." Sarah repeated. "I could have, but I chose not to."

"You don't have to lie to me, Sarah." Silas said. "I understand why it happened."

"Nay." Sarah said. "Nay, Silas. You do not understand." In the past, Sarah would have dressed Silas down for not believing her when she spoke the truth. But now, the point was moot. "My life is as over as Gabriel's."

Silas went to her, and Sarah moved over so he would have space in the window. "Ssh." He said, taking her hand. "That's not true. A wedding isn't everything."

Sarah shook her head. "You don't understand. I'm fallen. Undone."

“Don’t talk like that.” Silas said, holding her tightly. Silas wrapped his arms around her then, the way he used to do when they were children and Sarah was frightened from summer thunderstorms.

“You’re my sister, God would not turn his face from thee.”

Sarah wished she could believe Silas. But she could see now that it was a lie – it had always been a lie. She was finished. “He already has.”

Chapter Twelve

On the walk back to the manse, Thomas Braithwaite confronted himself with the results of his interview with Sarah Winthrop. Sarah had delivered false testimony, at least in part; that was perjury. If Thomas did nothing, it made him party to conspiracy. If Gabriel Bishop drowned at the water test, Thomas would become an accessory to murder.

Bishop was guilty, though; there was the mark and the fire, the Negro servant and the tavern-keeper. All that was sufficient evidence in Thomas's eyes. Sarah's testimony should have been to redeem her in the public eye. Instead, John Winthrop had savaged her on the stand, forcing her to bear false witness to make it end.

As a result of Sarah's possession in court, everyone believed Bishop was the sorcerer Thomas suspected and more. But it was a lie, a performance; Sarah was playing a part. Were the witnesses as aware of it as he? The idea crept on Thomas like a spider on his shoulder, clouding his heart with doubt. He wished he could go back and interject, but it was too late now. The error of his inaction struck Thomas just after it was finished; and he saw the yellow eyes of the accused.

Thomas had excuses for his cowardice. It had happened so quickly, he said to himself; it was not his place to intervene. The cruelty with which John pressed her, and the desperation with which Sarah had affirmed her honor prevented his getting a word in edgewise. If Thomas made himself an enemy of John Winthrop's he wouldn't be able to help anybody. Bishop was plainly guilty; even if Thomas struck out Sarah's testimony he wouldn't be exonerated. What happened was a family matter between the Winthrops, and not germane to the case. That was what Thomas told himself, when he found Sarah Winthrop at the walls of Andover gaol, weeping and insensible to the whisperings of passersby. Thomas watched her for a time, thinking he should let her alone, knowing he could not leave her.

The clerk watched Sarah from the corner of his eye. She was pale, and flat in affect. The melancholy in her heart seemed to have spilled over, depriving her of her color and her will. Sarah caught him looking, and glared back at him mistrustfully.

He couldn't make her recant. It was too cruel. And Thomas wanted not to involve himself in Winthrop's family dealings. It was not his place. But the clerk's thoughts all sounded like the excuses of a guilty man to him. But what else could he do for her but keep this secret?

After a time, they arrived at Winthrop manse; a two-story dwelling with glass windows facing the street. Thomas had heard that John Winthrop's other house in Ipswich had a porch, but this winter house had no such gathering spaces.

It exhibited a restrained elegance, to which the other houses on the street aspired. The front of the manse was painted white, but the sides and back of the house remained their natural color. It had been built in stages; a plain kitchen and hall to the back and more specialized rooms in the addition facing the street. Thomas noticed the demarcation where the builders had switched from using old wood to that of trees from the next generation.

Sarah opened the door to the manse, inured to the niceness of her aristocratic dwelling. Thomas found himself counting luxuries. There were at least five color portraits in the house. The candle sconces were tiled with looking glass, and there was a rug on every floor. In the parlor was the man himself, John Winthrop, looking aged and embattled compared to his picture, painted at the height of his rule.

"Sister, you're home." Silas Winthrop said, greeting his sister.

Thomas gave his coat to Sarah and headed down the hall abruptly, eager not to treat with Silas. There was a heavenly smell of roasted ham. Thomas headed towards it, knowing he would find Brydie

there and perhaps could cadge a bite before the formal pecking order commenced. He was nearly at the kitchen door when John Winthrop called him:

“Thomas! A word in my study, if you don’t mind.”

Thomas Braithwaite and John Winthrop went to the Governor’s bedroom.

“Bring me a cup of wine from the sideboard there.” John Winthrop asked as he closed the door behind him.

Thomas obeyed, and poured it. John Winthrop seated himself in front of his desk, reviewing what he’d written that day. Thomas brought him the cup, feeling rather servile. John took the wine, whispered a blessing, and drank deeply. Thomas watched him, wondering what John Winthrop got out of making people subordinate themselves to him.

It was dark in the bedroom; so that to double as a study John was obliged to make the flat roof of his desk into an altar of candles. He had a runner sewn for it, so that the wax drips did not spoil the wood. The candlesticks were as crowded together as Winthrop’s personal correspondence was in the pigeonholes.

A letter, half-written, lay next to a quill on Winthrop’s desk top. “What are you writing, sir?” Thomas asked.

“I’m adjudicating a dispute between Salem Village and Samuel Parris. Apparently he’s not being given his firewood. The village committee says they gave him a firewood allowance, but Parris says that five pounds is part of his salary. So he refuses to buy wood, then complains to me that he’s freezing.”

“Oh.” Thomas said. There were reasons preachers like Parris chose nowhere towns like Salem Village; just as there were reasons such men were never offered positions in decent churches. “Has he

made a plantation out of his parsonage yet?" Thomas asked, recalling that Parris owned a postage stamp of land in Barbados.

"Not as of yet. Here, read this." John handed the clerk Parris's list of demands.

"Christ, what an eyesore." Thomas said, after a moment's scanning it.

"So far, I wrote Samuel that he who cuts his own wood is twice warmed."

"Serves him right." Thomas said. He handed the letter from Parris back, and John Winthrop crumpled it into a ball and tossed it on the floor.

"I don't think Parris will resign, though. He's got fight in him, and fancies himself an educated man. We must watch him closely, Thomas; lest he overstep his bounds. This whole matter of people bringing wood to your door every day is pageantry. Wait, let me write that down." John dipped his quill and wrote out the sentence.

As John worked, he talked. "This is what being governor is like, Thomas. Those who loathe Parris will take my repudiation as a sign of weakness, and attack him all the more fiercely. Those who would keep Parris in his drafty pulpit will band close now, and the factions shall be riven deeper still." He sounded sad about it.

"What was it you wanted to see me about?" Thomas asked, feeling strange as John Winthrop explained to him the difficulties of governance.

"Has Gabriel confessed yet?" John Winthrop asked.

"Not yet, no." Thomas said.

"How often have you asked him?"

"Twice." Thomas said. "Silas has also been pressuring him to confess."

“What makes you say that?” John Winthrop asked.

“He showed up at my room last night and pleaded with me about it.”

“Oh. I thought he was out fighting again. What did you talk about?”

“How everyone assumes he’s Gabriel’s thrall.” Thomas said, leaving out the fight and the shovel.

“He was trying to convince me of Gabriel’s innocence, but mostly he wants to spare Gabriel’s life.”

“I think I know what will break his resolve.” John Winthrop said. He retrieved a document from his desk and handed it over. “Two days hence we will recess the Grand Court. On Friday morning you shall take my daughter to the scaffold.”

Thomas took the legal writ and read it. It was a charge of fornication with Gabriel Bishop, for which Sarah would be made to stand for two hours in public view.

“You’re making a mistake.” Thomas said, giving John Winthrop the order back.

“What makes you say that?”

“I promised Sarah I would not speak of it.” The governor watched Thomas intensely. His eyes were sharp like a falcon’s, foresighted to a nearly prescient degree.

“So you do have a weakness.” Winthrop said, drinking wine. “My daughter is holding out for Bishop. Thou shalt punish her more lightly than I.”

“I can’t. You’re making a mistake, John. If thou would shame her, see to it yourself.” Thomas said, fearing John Winthrop would rise up like a prophet, gaze into his heart and know him false.

Instead, John Winthrop put off that artifice. He addressed Thomas as an equal. “You believe I was too harsh with her before.”

“I think... I think if you force Sarah into atonement she will never forgive thee.”

"This isn't about Sarah." John Winthrop said. "It's to leverage Gabriel into confessing."

"But why?" Thomas said. "Your case against him is water-tight."

"It would spare Silas and Sarah in the end if I exiled him. I saw what happened at the court – Gabriel yet has some regard for Sarah's life and dignity. He will crack if I press on her, admit that he possessed her. Sarah will be spared her iniquity."

"The punishment for sorcery is death." Thomas said. "You ought to kill him."

"No. I am not some tyrant who delights in public executions. Let Gabriel become someone else's problem. This trial has become a spectacle and I want to end it without any unnecessary ghoulishness."

"What if he doesn't confess and we shame your daughter needlessly?"

"It's not needless." Winthrop said. "Sarah allowed Gabriel to control her with his magic, and her memories have been altered as a result. But she is guilty, even if she does not remember it."

"I can't make her stand for atonement." Thomas said. "It's not my place."

John Winthrop took Thomas's hand, and held it. "This is a test God hath given thee, Thomas; to punish a guilty woman when your mortal heart would spare her."

"No." Thomas pleaded. "We can find someone else."

"But you must." John Winthrop said.

"Wherefore?" Thomas asked. "She's your daughter."

"Dost thou remember Goodman Beckett, after his wife was hanged for witchery?" John Winthrop asked. "Dost thou remember what became of him?"

“Yes.” Thomas said. “He was haunted by her voice for a year, and it drove him mad. I notarized his death certificate after he threw himself into Boston Harbor.”

“We have no choice. If Bishop still controls Sarah when he dies...” John Winthrop said. “He could curse her soul, salt the earth of it and turn Sarah towards evil and witchery herself. That would be a fate worse than death for my daughter. Will you follow this order or do I have to ask Silas to carry it out?”

Thomas had tried his utmost, but he could resist John Winthrop no longer; not without earning the governor’s suspicion. He took the writ.

“I’ll make the arrangements.” Thomas said, defeated.

On their way out, Thomas caught a glimpse of his reflection in John Winthrop’s looking-glass. The clerk saw two knaves there.

Silas Winthrop waited for them in the dining room. He rose when they entered and looked Thomas in the eye. Something in his dark gaze bespoke both understanding and contempt. Thomas reasoned that it was just because Winthrop’s son knew what would come on Friday. But in his heart, something quailed and whispered to Thomas that Silas the Evangelist knew him false.

The buffet was elegantly placed, but had gone cold; whereas Brydie looked a good deal less sweet but warmer, like a lit blunderbuss. She had been waiting for nearly half an hour, and carved the meat somewhat ruthlessly off the bone. Then she flitted away to the kitchen.

Each man took his portion in turn and John Winthrop said grace. Across from Thomas was a table setting for Sarah, who was not coming to eat. Finally, Thomas ate of Brydie’s food. The ham was a bit tough and the sauce had thickened; but Thomas liked it anyway.

Across from him, the Winthrop men ate. They said nothing of consequence, yet every word belied their conflict. Thomas noticed a fresh scuff mark on Silas's hands. He wondered whether Silas had been fighting again, and if so, whom.

Brydie returned to serve coffee. Thomas drank half a cup to be polite, though in truth it intensified his feeling of disease. His heart flitted around like a caged bird before an earthquake, nerves jangling like an ill omen. Thomas said some polite words and excused himself from the manse. The Winthrop men hardly acknowledged his leaving.

After sunset, temperatures fell markedly. Thomas kept his hands in his pockets, and ruffled up the collar of his coat to keep warm. He set out across the town commons to the Squaw's Fire, whose colored windows were illuminated with candles.

As he came to the center of the snowy commons, Thomas stopped, his breath fogging the air like tobacco smoke. Overhead, the stars sparkled like diamonds. The backdrop of the Milky Way was dark blue and black and pale gold. Thomas stopped to admire it a moment longer.

He waited, and watched the stars and planets. The Hunter was rising; the Bear and the Queen turned in their endless dance. The Pleiades twinkled at him, laughing at the silly clerk who thought they were made to be a map for seafarers. Their whence and wherefore was not for Thomas Braithwaite to know. Nevertheless, they shone their light on him, showing him a glimpse of their heavenly sisterhood. Then they danced onward, as they had since Creation and would 'til Judgment Day. It seemed distant and peaceful to him. But then a shooting star flashed across the sky, and destroyed the peaceful vision.

It streaked across the heavens, broad like the Connecticut River, and fell to earth, breaking into pieces which burned red and gold. The light of it was brighter than any earthly fire, ghostly like burning spirits. Thomas held up his hand to shield his face; fell to the ground in fear. With a roar it shot

overhead, soaring towards the west. Moments later Thomas heard a report, like distant cannon fire as it exploded in the air and fell to pieces.

The light seemed to burn all the brighter after it was gone, the specter of the dying star etched into his memory. Thomas tried to rise, but could not stand. He was bound, restrained by a supernatural grip. It took him away from his body, which Thomas left trembling on the frozen ground.

Inside Thomas's heart that ghostly light roared yet, commanded him by name and made him kneel. Hands over his eyes, Thomas dared not answer it; but the light sent itself into his heart anyway, seeking out its truths. Thomas's sins and falsehoods scurried from one corner of his heart to the other, scuttling about like water bugs in a cigar box. There was nowhere for them to flee - no mortal heart could conceal them from the gaze Thomas dared not behold.

Thomas wanted to submit his doubts and objections, blame this on Gabriel the Sorcerer; but the light silenced him. Thomas wanted to speak in his defense, but the words stuck in his throat like food ready to choke him.

The light declared it was no illusion, nor a magician's conjuration. In words beyond language it belittled the clerk's legalistic excuses, and the fences John Winthrop had erected around the Word. The voice said that Thomas would learn to see things as they truly are.

Thomas quailed, wanting not to look at what the apparition would show him. Striving to speak, he cried out in his heart for the light to depart. Spare me, leave me, Thomas begged, his heartbeat faltering and delicate. His hands were frozen over his eyes, as Thomas lay immobile on the frozen ground which he could no longer feel beneath him.

In response to his plea, the night itself seemed to shake in fear. The light asked Thomas if he truly meant what he said.

Yes, leave me; I am not thine, Thomas thought, the word he could not speak burning at his lips. Leave me be, let me go, I beg of thee. Let this cup pass from me.

The night shook in rage again, stung Thomas like a slap in the face. Then the spell was broken; and Thomas was alone again, lying in the dirty snow.

Thomas did not take his hands from his eyes for a while. He feared to do so, thinking the light had surely blinded him. When he took them away, he saw the Pleiades twinkling peacefully in the distance, still giggling at Thomas and his little theophany.

Thomas Braithwaite got up off the ground and brushed the ice off his coat. He saw other people in the street; they had also seen the light of falling star, or heard its impact. They looked upon him questioningly, asking if he saw it too. Unable to answer their questions, Thomas quickly hurried to the safety of his room. His entire body was still trembling from what had happened.

Inside it was close and noxious; the scent of tobacco seemed to press itself into Thomas's nostrils. He elbowed his way gently through the crush of people. They had taken the shooting star for a good portent; a sign of a rich harvest and a good election in the New Year. Thomas left them, unable to believe such happy fictions.

In the safety of his room, Thomas tried to tell himself again it was a visitation from Gabriel. Then he said it was just a coincidence; and that he was suffering from overwork. He tried to tell himself that he had imagined what happened out there. But it was no use, Thomas knew what he had seen. The patriarchs had been right; and when Thomas's eyes were about to be uncovered, he had cried out in fear. He had refused it, yet for some purpose the light spared his life anyway.

Thomas tried to evoke it now, but it was useless. The light was faded from him, it would only return on its own terms. Thomas sat up in his room that night, and wrote his wife of what he saw. He burned the letter once he was finished.

Chapter Thirteen

Fanny rose again before dawn the next morning, and the morning after that. She made breakfast, cleaned the boarding house, and scoured the plates with Madeline, and did not speak of what she had seen in the kitchen. Indeed, she wanted not to think of it, for it opened a cellar door packed full of memories of Gabriel, memories Fanny couldn't bear to remember. So she barred that door, and chained it shut so Gabriel could not come out; and nailed some tacks in the jamb for good measure. She could not afford to grieve what had happened then, now.

He was on trial for witchcraft, she thought as she prepared Thursday's breakfast. If Fanny knew Gabriel's moods, it meant he would hang for her. Her heart cried out in bitterness, angry that it couldn't despise the sorcerer as Fanny wanted to.

If he was a monster, he was a pathetic one; one that brought her flowers and fulfilled her wishes at the expense of his own life. She could not love a monster; but neither could she despise one that wanted so desperately to be loved. But monsters kept their nature; no matter how pathetic they were, they would always be monsters. Fanny knew it when she looked back and saw the meeting house burn.

Fanny had one more night before her ship to Philadelphia; the passage for which she yet owed two shillings. Now Fanny was wondering if Philadelphia was far enough. Gabriel still might be able to reach her there; John Winthrop might be able to find her yet. But a voyage to England or Barbados would be many times more expensive, and she could not linger in Boston for much longer. She would have to earn the money once she arrived in Philadelphia, and use it as a stepping stone to leaving New England for good. It was far away, she reassured herself. She would certainly buy a few months' time if she fled there before word got back to John Winthrop of her whereabouts.

“Oy, Evey!” A lodger called her. “Another spoon here!” Fanny brought it to him, and went around with a pitcher of water in case the men wanted refills. By and large the lodgers abstained; drinking too much cold water was unhealthy for you. They preferred ale.

Once that was done, Fanny went back to the kitchen. Sam had left shortly after he woke up, saying he had an affair at the shipyard. Fanny took no issue with that; he came and went as he liked.

Madeline was sitting on a stool. She was making a poppet with corn husks and a bit of string, and had picked out the husks which had gone black from mold. She layered them over an armature of white husks, and then tied the string around it tightly, to keep the leaves together.

Once Madeline sensed someone was watching her, she looked up and smiled. “Evey.” She said, holding up the poppet. “What do you think? It’ll look like you when I’m done with it.”

“It’ll be a fair resemblance then.” Fanny said, noting the colored face and colored hands. “But what happens when the black rubs off?”

“I’ll use soot and ashes to blacken it again.” She said, adjusting the husks lovingly.

“Then I guess you’ve thought of everything.”

“As much as I could. But these types are brittle; not like the wooden and cloth dolls they sell in yonder stores.” Madeline said it with a hint of jealousy. “But then these are made the way I like them.”

“That’s the spirit.” Fanny said. She watched her at her craft for a little while. You wouldn’t have known from looking that anything was wrong with the girl’s life. Like Fanny, Madeline endured it by keeping her happy memories near to hand and her black ones locked tightly away, in chests and cellars.

“You’re leaving soon, aren’t you?” Madeline asked as she worked. “When?”

“Where did you hear that?” Fanny asked, not having the courage to deny it.

"I listened in after Sam bade me leave you on Tuesday. When he offered you a position here."

"It's not your fault, Madge." Fanny said, gently. "I'm not long for this place. I need to be getting on to Philadelphia. That's been the plan from the start."

"Nay, it's Sam's fault. But I don't blame thee." Madeline said, as she tied the waist of the doll's dress. "I would leave if I could. Two more years, and then my time is up." She sighed sadly at that, and Fanny could no longer restrain herself.

"I saw what happened, Madeline. What Sam did... what he does... is deeply wrong."

The child set aside her work, and lowered her voice. "You mean, in the kitchen? Was that you in the pantry?"

"Yes." Fanny said. "I'm sorry, I should have stopped him."

"I'm glad you didn't." Madeline said. "Even if you stopped him, you wouldn't have stopped him. You would have just made it worse, later on."

"You should say something to somebody. To the preacher, or to the captain of the guard. They would listen to thee." Fanny said. "They could find you a different master, a kinder one."

Madeline started making the sleeves and bonnet for the doll. "I wonder which town it was thou came from. It's different here. Everyone knows Sam's this way, but they don't do anything."

"Every town has people like that. My master, he..." Fanny began, unsure if she should tell this story. "My master used to beat this foundling child he had, when his real children did him wrong. Everyone knew about it, but nobody said anything, because he was the preacher."

"Why do they exist?" Madeline asked unhappily. "What did I do to deserve this to happen to me, over and over and over again? How come the Father doesn't punish men like Sam?"

“He will.” Fanny said. “The day will come when men like Sam will weep and plead for the mercy of angels like you. And then it will be your choice whether or not he shall have any. Think on the parable of Lazarus and the rich man.”

“But why should it happen at all?” Madeline asked. “That’s what I don’t understand.”

“You will, Madge.” Fanny said. “The Lord works in mysterious ways. Maybe he doesn’t always answer our prayers, and maybe he hurts us; but there always is a reason. He’s always watching out, even when it doesn’t seem that way. He’s the real master here. Old Sam isn’t nothing but a foreman of the Devil. He’ll see his homeland soon enow.”

“Do you understand what the Bible means?” Madeline asked Fanny.

“I can’t read.” Fanny replied. They would have talked longer, but she saw the lodgers were filing out of the dining room, to go about their day’s work. It was time to bring in the dishes, and scour them clean again. Madeline set aside her poppet and helped.

As they washed the dishes and scoured them with sand, Fanny set her mind to a new problem. She needed more pay from Sam than she’d earned. At least ten shillings, so she could buy bread for the journey; to sustain her in Philadelphia once she got there. It seemed a little enough thing for Sam to give her the bit she was owed, but something told her it would mean trouble to get more.

The amount of money Fanny needed would buy a pair of shoe buckles in Ipswich. It was frustrating to think her freedom was dependent on her begging, borrowing, or stealing such a paltry sum; but the ferry-man would not take her without payment. Worse, Fanny was starting to think that Samuel was growing suspicious; for he was asking many odd questions.

They were trifling questions that he asked, unmemorable details like whether her master had any brothers, or sisters, or what his wife’s name was, and how old was she. Fanny noticed it was

purposeful after the first time or two; no one would really have such an enduring interest in their servant's family life. Sam wore a mask of innocent interest when he asked his questions; so that Fanny would seem surly not to answer him. Fanny had been called 'surly' a time or two in Ipswich; and surly servants were often the best remembered. She had little choice but to answer; to spin yarns about 'Master White' and his family until Sam grew tired of them.

With so many details, it was getting trickier to keep her story straight. Fanny realized she told Madeline just now that Master White was a preacher, but told Sam he was a lawyer. Fanny hoped Sam wasn't asking Madeline the same questions he asked of her; comparing the answers Fanny had given to each. But if he had proof, he wouldn't be asking questions, would he?

He suspected; that was why he was testing her so oft. But he didn't have proof yet, and Fanny had seen him with a child. What Sam did with Madeline was a high crime of the hanging sort. She suspected Sam might quail if she threatened to tell of what he did; as she had threatened Gabriel. And he was a real witch, Fanny thought; not some swindling child-raper.

Fanny put the plates away herself and Madeline handily finished her little corn husk doll. Fanny let her go early to play with it, and wiped down the table and swept the floor.

By the time she was getting done, Samuel Shepard was at the door. He knocked, and said;

"Hello! Evey? The door's stuck!"

Fanny set aside the broom and came down the hall. She could hear the jangling of keys in the lock, and indeed the door was stuck; she'd barred it after the lodgers were gone for the day. She felt safer with it shut, so that she would know who was coming and going from the house.

"Just a minute, Sam!" She said, steeling herself. She would talk to him about it now, while she had the opportunity, and not leave it off until to-morrow. And not just for herself; there was Madeline

to consider. Being free meant she had a responsibility to stand up to Sam, for Madeline did not have that luxury. She put the board to one side and opened the door for Samuel Shepard.

“Don’t bar the door next time. Our lodgers need to come and go as they please.” Sam said.

“Yes sir.” Fanny replied. “I’ll take your coat.” She said, showing him the deference she had shown to John Winthrop, as if he deserved it.

Sam seemed pleased with the gesture. He handed it to her, and she hung it in the kitchen; on a set of hooks by Samuel’s bedroom door. Sam followed her down the hall, and went into his bedroom.

He made to shut the door behind him when Fanny asked; “Sir, might I have a word?”

“Aye, Evey. You may.” Sam said, holding the bedroom door open. Fanny entered and shut it behind herself.

Sam’s bedroom smelled of dirty clothes and sweaty blankets. The bed was small and shoved off to one side, with straw poking out of the sack cloth mattress. The quilts were threadbare, made of patternless patchwork, in whatever scraps of fabric the quilter could cut to suit. To one side, a tiny writing desk was overwhelmed by large business ledger, the accounts of the lodgers; going back years. Another volume on the top of the desk contained accounts from the previous decade. There was a strongbox in the corner, near the bed.

Sam took the only chair in the little room, one with a wicker seat and back. Fanny stood, rather uncomfortably, between him and the door. With the door closed the room felt very small.

“So, what was it you wanted to ask me, Evey?”

“I need a pay advance. Ten shillings.” Sam looked confused with this, as if it was a tremendous favor she asked of him.

“Why, that’s two week’s pay!” he said. “I can’t. You’ll get paid when the work is done.”

“I need it badly.” Fanny said.

“Wherefore?” Sam asked. “You’ve got your room and board covered. If you want a new dress, just save up your money.”

“It’s not a dress I’m needing.” Fanny said, annoyed. “I need the money up front. You’ll get the work, I promise thee.” It was a lie; she would be gone with the money on a ship to Philadelphia.

“Then you’ll be here to get the money.” Sam said, seeing through her ruse. “And that’s final. If you’ll excuse me, Evey, I need to settle the accounts.”

“Just a minute,” Fanny said. “I saw you with Madge in the pantry the other day. Give me the ten shillings or I’ll tell the captain of the guard.”

“You’ll do no such thing, Fanny Winthrop. Now get back to work.”

Fanny was stunned, but did not move an inch. “Whose name is that?” She asked.

“Give it up. There’s news from Ipswich. A likely Negress of five and twenty fled, wearing a blue dress and a black cloak; surly of temperament and with a huge arse. I’m paraphrasing, mind you. Belonging to none other than John Winthrop, the divine light in the West. I suppose it’s that black magic that lets you fool so many, so often.”

“You interfere with children. It’s a blacker sin than mine.” Fanny said hotly. “Now give me my ten shillings.”

“I’ll make you a counteroffer.” Sam said. “You’ll work for nothing and I’ll hide thee from the Governor’s man, when he comes. Now get back to work, slave!” He said.

It wasn't the worst offer imaginable. If not for the insult, Fanny might have softened; and thanked Samuel for his mercy. But he called her a slave, and the word rankled Fanny like a slap in the face. She could feel the rush of anger in her blood, and her pulse quickened.

"What did you just call me?" She asked, her voice silky.

"Slave. That's what you are; all Negroes are slaves." Sam Shepard said.

Fanny knew what she was about to do was foolish, but could not restrain herself. She kicked the chair on which Old Sam Shepard sat, and shouted, "I am *not* a slave!"

The chair was frailer than the man. The wicker holding it together split and shattered; Sam toppled to the floor. He looked up at Fanny, livid; he would strike her for her impudence.

She saw Sam move, and made no effort to block him. The blow bounced off of her body like a chestnut off a stone wall and Fanny smiled, showing her pretty, white teeth. Samuel could not overpower her, and he knew it. The old man cowered in her shadow.

Fanny pushed him easily, onto the legs of what had been his chair. "What was that you called me?!" She said, angrily. "Say it again!"

Sam grabbed for a piece of the chair, brandished the broken wood at Fanny like a spear. "Slave! Stay away!" she said. "Stay back or I'll beat thee!"

Fanny ripped the stick of wood from his arthritic hands and broke it over her knee. "The hell you will. Give me the key to your strongbox, old man."

"No!" He said, reaching for where he kept his key ring.

"Give it here!" Fanny snarled. She grabbed for his hand, and roughly jerked it towards her. He cried out, like a child who had just been bested in a schoolyard scuffle. Fanny slapped him in the ear.

“Quiet down.” She took the keys from him, and found the one for the strongbox. Fanny opened it and grabbed a handful or two of gold coins; a good deal more than ten shillings.

As she robbed him, Sam groaned softly in pain, cradling the arm Fanny had jerked on. “My shoulder.” He wept. “My God, my shoulder!” The cries annoyed Fanny with their impiety.

“Hush.” She said. “Lest I give thee aught else to cry about!” She left the bedroom and slammed the door behind her, for a moment moving as forcefully as John Winthrop in his own manse.

Once the door was closed and she heard the old man weeping, Fanny’s ferocity vanished like a specter. Madeline was nowhere to be seen; she had hidden herself. There was no time for goodbyes, Fanny knew; and once Madeline saw what happened, Fanny wondered if she would hate her for it. She ran from the boarding house, as she had run from Ipswich Town; the money jingling in her pocket next to the ticket to Philadelphia.

At first, Fanny ran out of the city, towards the forest. She caught her senses, and turned. If she went that way, they would take her back to Ipswich; they would send out men with dogs and horses to hunt her down. She had to be cleverer than they. Forcing herself to breathe slowly, she walked back down the Boston Road. It would be safest there, she thought; she could hide amongst the other servants. She prayed that Gabriel’s spell held fast, that she had not completely broken it when she answered to her true name.

Fanny’s way took her past Sam’s boarding house again; it seemed as if nothing was amiss. Perhaps two minutes had passed since her leaving. But Madeline was nowhere to be seen. Fanny followed the road to the center of Boston Town, permitting herself to go at a decent trot. She ran onto the long wharf, where she had bought her passage. The Pilgrim’s Rose was there, waiting for her, if only she could sneak aboard. She approached the red ship, and too late saw the three militia men hanging around it. They noticed her when she got close, sharing a look between them that said everything.

“Hey, you there!” one of them called. Fanny sprinted back down the wharf, losing them amidst the bustle and traffic of King Street. But they had certainly seen her. She ran through the import/export market, past the tobacco auctioneers and sugar traders and rum sellers, past the noticeboard with its thousand advertisements. Something caught Fanny’s eye and she stopped for a moment. Though she could not read it, one of the notices had an illustration clearly meant to be a drawing of her. She needed a new identity, quickly.

Amongst the crowd of people busily trading and preparing for the Sabbath, Fanny espied the guards, looking for her. She slipped away without them seeing her, running uphill into the mansion district; where the clergymen kept their homes. Perhaps she could hide in an empty shed until nightfall and then stow away on the ship. For now, she needed to disguise herself as someone else’s slave.

The neighborhoods were busy on a Thursday afternoon. Smoke drifted up from the back yards, as women dipped candles, made soap, butchered meat, and did the washing. Fanny slowed her pace, so that she would not identify herself with her haste, and walked purposefully. When she passed by one house, she saw an empty basket on the other side of the fence, unguarded. She picked it up and carried it for a prop; and walked deeper into the maze of manses.

Fanny had enjoyed the manses before, but now each one carried an air of foreboding. They each were unique, and clearly not hers. At best, she would have a few minutes inside before someone noticed the intrusion. Out would have been the better way, she thought; out to some farm shed or deer stand checked once a day at most. Now she was trapped in the city, and the minutemen were aware of her presence. In her soul turned a sinking feeling: she had less than ten minutes of freedom left.

Fanny went deeper into the residential district, looking for a good place to hide. She turned again, and looked for another way. But it was a dead end, with three manses facing each other at the end of the road. Fanny picked the one with the wanest plume of smoke coming from the chimney.

“Hey!” A man cried in the distance. “You there!”

Fanny did not look to see whom they called. She opened the gate to one of houses and went to the back yard, pretending not to be a trespasser.

There was a new-looking trellis in the back yard of the manse, at the base of which some ivy had been planted. A window at the top of the trellis was open; letting in the fresh breeze. This house was certainly occupied, Fanny thought; but perhaps I can hide in a closet until the danger passes.

“You there!” The man’s voice cried, a little closer now.

She had no choice. Fanny climbed, and hastened through the open window.

The room in which she had climbed into was bare, but for a bathtub and a dressing screen. A white wig was flopped over the screen, as well as some lordly clothes. A naked man of two score years ducked behind it. He looked quite astonished to see Fanny.

He cried, “Hey!!!” as if Fanny were a cat up on the table, where she knew not to be.

She darted from the naked man’s room, and encountered his man-servant in the hall. He was English, young and thin; carrying a kettle of steaming water up the stairs for his master’s bath.

Fanny tackled him and pushed him back down the stairs, looking for any way up or out. The serving-man screamed; Fanny hoped she had not scalded him badly. Fanny entered another room, a bedroom; and opened the wooden shutters to the window.

From the window, Fanny saw the militia men were coming to the door. They cried out to see her above. She slammed the shutters closed and went to the other side of the room, and opened that window. She could climb here; so Fanny climbed onto the roof.

Trembling, she crawled along the roof line, as the men came into the manse. I have to keep running, she thought as she went; if I look back, I will be lost.

Two stories seemed further going down than it had going up. Fanny carefully sidestepped, trying to find a handhold. She lost her footing, and knocked loose one of the slate roof shingles. It clattered to the ground and shattered like a china plate. Don't look at the ground, she thought: the magic is with me.

"She's on the roof!" one of the men cried, running around the manse. Fanny heard the report of a musket, then a few of the shingles near her foot exploded and fell. They were shooting at her!

She scrambled over to the other side of the roof, facing the street, and crawled across the length of the house, to where it most closely abutted the next. The men chased her, the gun was still pointed at her. This house was surrounded. Her only hope was to flee from roof to roof – was that possible?

She had to jump; it was her only choice. On the other side lay death. The world started to lurch before her, and Fanny leaped, praying for Gabriel to guide her in the air.

Fanny crashed into the neighbor's roof like a cannonball, pulling off the gutters on the way down. She was falling, she thought, though for only an instant before she hit the ground.

Chapter Fourteen

The witch wasn't dead yet. Holding her in his arms, the both of them splattered with fluids and vomit from the ordeal of force-feeding her, Hardship could still feel Asenath's breath on his fingertips. Whether his antidote had worked or just bought them some time was beyond Hardship's ken. It had saved his skin a time or two, but this poison was stronger. The witch hunter thought of Gabriel Bishop. Bishop could reverse this poison; if he brought Asenath's body swiftly thither.

Her question was still bothering him. "Badger. Like I would just stand here and let you die. And what good did it accomplish, hurting yourself? And why lie about it after I caught you? Pure spitefulness. You're a bitter old badger, that's your vice."

Asenath was unresponsive to this criticism. He searched her pocket, in search of some cloth to clean off her face. As he did so, he felt a hard form under his fingers. He found the pocket's mouth and got hold of a vial of black liquid. He held it up to the light, then pocketed the bottle as evidence.

There was no time to waste. Hardship scooped up Asenath's body, carrying it over his shoulder. Her weight swayed as Hardship stood up, limp as a slaughtered pig. She wasn't too heavy.

Hardship carried her down the stairs of the High Horse and set Asenath on the steps, and mounted his horse. As he did, he heard a whinny from Asenath's stable. Someone else would have to see about her livestock, Hardship thought as he mounted his own horse, holding Asenath over his shoulder.

He spurred his horse ferociously, and cried "Aye! Gidyap!"

Hardship sped off, relentlessly pushing the mount through its paces. Asenath's body was pressed against the side of his head, so that Hardship could hear her heart beating, her chest moving

with breath. It reassured him somewhat, although they were not in Andover yet. The witch hunter held tightly to his prize, so that she would not fall.

The frozen countryside spread out before Hardship and Asenath like a white ocean, from which black trees poked up like ship's masts, and great stone whalebacks poked out from the hillsides. The fields of Ipswich were smooth as canvas sails, dotted occasionally with the tracks of deer and foxes. Here and there Hardship saw men on the road, or in the fields, their forms distant but distinct. Hardship sped onward, past fields and farmhouses, the tranquility of the scene lost to him as he raced towards Andover at breakneck speed.

His destination was six miles from Ipswich, across the river. But because there was only one bridge, Hardship had to make a dog-leg. He would not risk riding across the ice; on foot, maybe, but they were too much weight for the melting ice to bear. It added a bit of distance to the trip, and Hardship kicked his horse to gallop faster as it tried to slacken into a canter.

They came to the bridge, guarded on this side by a man from Ipswich. He cried, "Halt!"

Hardship stopped, and the guard came towards him. His hat was angled against the sun, and looking down at him Hardship could not see his eyes.

"I need to cross immediately," Hardship said. "This is urgent business of the Governor's."

The guard looked at the face of the woman Hardship carried. "So the rumors were true."

"What rumors?" Hardship asked.

"Sam Wheelwright said Governor Winthrop sent you to kill Asenath, and here you are."

"Sam Wheelwright is a drunk and a meddling idiot." Hardship said. "Let me pass."

"Oy, I don't blame you. She needed to be put down."

Hardship was already leaving, galloping across the long bridge. But the man's words stuck with him, thinking of Asenath's motive. Did she hurt herself because of me? The thump of hooves on the timbers sounded like a peck of chestnuts falling into a barrel.

Asenath was still alive when Hardship got to the gates of Andover Town. The guards there also took interest in what he was carrying, but no one actually dared to stop him. Hardship hastened to the gaol's gate. This red-brick, drafty monstrosity had been designed to double as a redoubt for the townsfolk if the palisades were overrun. Its defenses were only semi-functional. Hardship cried out;

"Hello! Rackman! Open the doors!"

A moment later, Rackman opened the peeping window. He shut it, and presently the sally port creaked open, to admit the rider and his burden. Hardship felt it was interminably long. His arm ached from holding Asenath like a sack of grain, but he dared not adjust her now.

Hardship rode inside, and dismounted from his horse. He landed softly on his feet, Asenath's body flopping on his back and shoulder.

"Who's this then?" the gaoller asked.

"Asenath Black." Hardship said, as if it were a swear.

Rackman took her hand, lifted it, and let it fall. "She seems dead."

"She's still breathing. I rode like hell to get her here in time. I did what I could, but she needs to see Bishop right now."

"What happened?" Rackman asked, bringing out the chair from his guard post. Hardship gently transferred Asenath's body into it. Her arms lay akimbo as she settled into the chair.

"She poisoned herself, just after I thought I'd convinced her to be a good girl and surrender."

Hardship took the poison out of his pocket, and showed it to Rackman. "See what I say."

Rackman turned the bottle over in his hands, then passed it back. "Why'd you let her do it?"

"I didn't. She must have taken some while my back was turned."

"I guess it's that black magic snookered you in." Rackman said.

"Aye." Hardship said, guiltily. "She had me going 'til the last. I actually felt sorry for her." What Hardship didn't say was she could have poisoned him just as easily. Minutes earlier he had accepted breakfast from her. He resolved to be more careful taking food from suspects in the future.

"So you think Bishop can revive her?" Rackman asked.

"He'd be a real bastard if he let her die." Hardship said. "Seeing as I brought her all this way."

Rackman was skeptical. "Bishop's been in a state since yesterday. I think his power's fled."

"What kind of a state?" Hardship asked.

"A weird trance." Rackman answered. "He claims it's a meditation. But he fought with his thrall yesterday and lost."

"Damn." Hardship said. "For whom else could we send?"

"The Andover physician." Rackman answered. "If he's not shut his shop and gone to the Squaw's Fire, he could do her a bloodletting."

"I don't have that kind of money." Hardship said. "To the sorcerer, then."

"As you like." Rackman said. He picked Asenath up to carry her. "She doesn't weigh much."

"Maybe she's got hollow bones." Hardship joked. Rackman juggled Asenath's body into one arm as he got his keys. He handed them to Hardship, who unlocked the doors as they went.

"So how did an unmarried yeoman like you become a witch hunter for the court?"

"Officially, I'm just a lay officer." Hardship said. "But Governor Winthrop chose me for my tracking skill. In Deerfield, I hunt bears and cat-o-mounds. I also find runaway slaves."

"Any military experience?" Rackman asked, unimpressed.

"I fought at the Battle of Ashe's Ford."

"Oh. Did you kill any Indians there?"

"Yes." Hardship said, without elaborating.

They stopped in front of Bishop's cell. The sorcerer sat cross-legged, facing the corner. He was deeply entranced, wandering in a world only he could see. The two guards entered the cell, but Bishop paid them no attention; he did not even acknowledge they were there.

"How long has he been like this?" Hardship asked.

"A day or so. Don't get too close." Rackman said, laying Asenath's body down. "He's a possessor, and a conjurer."

"I've heard about what he can do." Hardship said. "I can handle this. Leave us, Rackman."

The gaoller left Bishop's cell, and locked Hardship inside. He passed the keys through the bars, so that Hardship could see himself out when it was finished.

"It's the fifth one from the chain link. The bronze one, yes." Rackman left, and went back to the sally port to mind the gates.

Hardship let Rackman go, not disturbing the silence the sorcerer had so carefully cultivated. He knew Hardship was here. His curiosity would overwhelm him soon, and he would speak. But for a long moment, Bishop seemed to analyze the situation he had been presented with within the bounds and transformations of his meditative state. Hardship was being watched by many eyes. He maintained his silence, to draw Bishop out. Finally, he said: "Wherefore art thou come, witch hunter?"

"I brought thee a visitor. If you don't help her she's going to die." Hardship used "thee", hoping to stir up his spirit with it.

"...Is it really Asenath?" Bishop asked, still not looking.

"'Tis she." Hardship said.

Bishop turned to face them. His eyes were yellow, and brightened by degrees when he beheld the witch's lifeless form. He approached Asenath then recoiled. "What did you do to her?"

"Nothing." Hardship said, trying to calm him. "She did it to herself."

"Liar!" Bishop snarled, jumping to his feet. "What happened, you bastard?!"

Bishop was getting agitated. "Calm down. If I hadn't been there, she'd be dead."

"No! Asenath would never kill herself! You're lying to me!" He set upon Hardship, reaching for his neck. "You're all lying to me in here!"

"Easy! Easy!" Hardship said, pushing him away, holding his body at arm's length.

"No! I'll kill you for this!" Bishop cried, and redoubled his efforts to strangle Hardship; swiping and scrabbling for him like an angry tomcat.

The witch hunter reached into his pocket for the poison, as Bishop's untrimmed fingernails clawed his cheek. "Gabriel, stop! Look here! Tell me that's not your Asenath's mark on the label; that

this isn't the kind of bottle she uses. The poison was of her own making. She killed herself rather than be arrested. I'm trying to save her, if you'll help me." He held it up for Bishop to see. "Gabriel! Are you listening yet, or are you going to keep making an idiot of yourself?"

The attack slowed, then halted. Bishop's rage dispersed like a wave on a beach, and he retreated to Asenath's body.

"I..." Bishop said, about to apologize. "This is all my fault."

"If you revive her, that's all the apology I need." Hardship said suggestively.

"Revive her with what?" Bishop asked. "I have no medicines. I have nothing."

"Conjure a spell, then." Hardship said. "Draw a magic circle, and say the words."

Bishop stared Hardship down incredulously. "Draw a magic circle?"

"I know you can." Hardship said. "Everyone knows you can."

"Then everyone is wrong." Bishop said. "Take her away. There's nothing I can do."

"Is there something you need to cast the spell? Power? Materials?" Hardship asked, feeling brushed off by the former apothecary. "She said you exceeded her in power. You must know a spell."

"She said that?" Bishop said, sounding ill. "Please, take her away. I don't want to watch her die."

"So save her, then." Hardship said. "The choice is yours, Gabriel. I don't know how much longer she'll hold on, so you'd better get started."

"What choice? I have no medicines here, and know naught of magic circles."

"Don't play innocent, I saw that fire you set. It rained ashes in Deerfield the next day. And that slave you liberated has vanished into thin air, but you can't revive your own mistress?"

"It's true." Gabriel said. "The Spirit is fled from me."

Hardship went for Bishop's heartstrings. "Asenath hurt herself to protect you."

"I know. But I can't help her." At first, it sounded like Bishop was laughing, but then it became more congested, and took on a sobbing quality. "She's going to die, and there's nothing I can do."

Hardship listened to him weep awhile, uncomfortably. "Jesus Christ, Bishop."

Bishop became inconsolable. Hardship waited another half minute, finding the pitiful sound of it unbearable; like listening to someone trapped inside a well.

"Stop weeping. You're making a scene." Bishop's wailing became more acute.

"Gabriel, stop. This is embarrassing." Bishop clutched at Asenath's body, touching her neck, her heart, her face. He cried and whispered her name, begging for her forgiveness in the World to Come.

"Prithee." Hardship asked. "Will you get your bonnet straight and revive her, already?"

"Leave!" Bishop howled. "Now!"

Hardship sensed Bishop might get violent again if he kept on provoking him. "I don't know how much longer she'll live. If you're going to change your mind, I would do it sooner rather than later." He let himself out of the cell and turned the bolt behind him, leaving Bishop to his mistress' body.

When Hardship got to the sally port, he saw Thomas Braithwaite and Rackman; they were engaged in intense conversation. It ended when they saw Hardship, and Braithwaite marched over. Rackman gave Hardship a look, as if to ask 'what took you so long?'

"Care to explain what's going on, Cole?" Thomas asked. "There's a rumor spreading: the men say they saw you crossing the river carrying Asenath Black's body on your back. Is it true, sirrah?"

"Aye, Mister Braithwaite." Hardship said, knowing Thomas's fondness for titles. "She poisoned herself. I found poison in her skirts. Her brewery-mark is on the bottle."

The clerk was unhappy with the news. He hugged his velvet cloak around himself, causing his longish blond hair to cast about. Thomas acted higher-born than he really was, he thought, but in these soiled clothes Hardship felt distinctly peasant-ish. "Tell me exactly what happened."

"I questioned her this morning, and served the warrant for her arrest. Everything was going according to plan, but then she asked me if she could take a drink before we left."

"Why on Earth did you let her do that?" Thomas Braithwaite asked, interrupting him.

"She said she was a tippler. I thought she was surrendering. It was a lapse, no doubt."

"Indeed." Thomas said, pensive. He clicked the heel of his shoe on the floor. It was distracting, and caused Hardship to look at his shoes. They seemed expensive, and probably Dutch. "Did Asenath reveal anything of the girl's location?"

"Judging by the way she was rambling towards the end, she probably doesn't know anything. And I've searched every acre of Hampshire Valley for a hiding-place and found none. The trail from Ipswich has gone cold."

"Lord have mercy," Braithwaite said. "There's no telling where she went, is there?"

"She's probably dead." Hardship said honestly. "Either intentionally, or by the elements."

"Don't say that." Thomas cautioned him. "We have to find her."

"Any luck on getting Bishop to tell you?" That would be the easiest solution.

"Oh, he definitely knows." Thomas said. "And *he* acts like she's still alive." Hardship didn't have the heart to repeat himself, but personally doubted Bishop's interpretations had much factual value.

“Well, there’s that.” He said agreeably, before changing the subject. “But why would Asenath poison herself rather than tell us what she knew? Bishop isn’t powerful enough to make her do it, not presently.”

“I wish we knew.” Braithwaite said. “Will she live?”

“Possibly.” Hardship said, not wanting to make a promise he couldn’t keep. “I did what I could, and Bishop’s with her now. If anyone knows anything about undoing the poison, it would be him.”

“The governor said isolation, except for trial business.” Reading Thomas’s face, it was obvious he was wroth with him, though he had no reason to be. Now was the time to throw the clerk something meaty, to sew the case up nice and neat. Hardship sensed that if he did that, he could come out of this with a nice purse and a fine name in his own right.

“He’s not going to get through to her now.” Hardship said. “Here’s an idea for you, sir: leave her there, and come back at midnight. If you do that, you can catch Bishop practicing his magic.”

Braithwaite considered it the idea and took it up as his own. “This would require Governor Winthrop’s approval.”

“Are you saying you want me to come with you?” Hardship asked. “I can.”

“No. I’ll deal with him myself...” Thomas trailed off, giving Hardship a moment to feel annoyed at being excluded from the Governor’s dealings. Bishop had gone from mourning softly to loudly again, and the racket was now audible, for listening ears. “What’s he doing now, Hardship?”

“Weeping over Asenath’s body.”

“Is that magic, then?” The clerk asked, distracted by the wailing and lamentation.

“No; I think I hurt his feelings.” Hardship said indifferently.

"It sounds like Sarah Winthrop." Braithwaite said, disturbed. "Tomorrow is her atonement."

"Winthrop's making her do atonement?" Hardship asked. "Huh. She's not particularly fetching."

"What's that got to do with anything?" Thomas said.

"It's usually the fair ones who get atonement for fornication. Just a fact." Hardship said.

"Her body and aspect are meet." Thomas said, as if in Sarah's defense. "It's just that her brother is so much handsomer. That reminds me; I need your help. You will be part of her escort party."

"She was pretty plain when she was sixteen." Hardship said. "I don't know if I'm interested."

"I don't care if you're interested." Thomas snapped. "Things have gone awry with this witch trial. Weird things have happened in the square around Bishop, and stranger visitations came to me last night. I fear worse may come before this is done. I'm not taking any chances on the commons tomorrow, not with Winthrop's daughter in my custody." He was trying to maintain composure, but his eyes were wide and reactions sharpened by panic. "Are we understood, Hardship Cole?"

"Yes, sir." Hardship said. "You seem disturbed, though."

"Excuse me." Braithwaite said. "I was overcome."

"The fault is mine." Hardship said. "Asenath disarmed me. Let me face the governor with you, and I'll bear witness. It'll spare thee some heartache."

"Thank you, but no." Thomas said. "I need you at the palisades and enforcing the curfew. This town stays buttoned down until the trial is done. Keep the poison, you'll need to show it in court later. I'll tell the governor what you told me. Oh, and for the love of God, stay away from Silas Winthrop."

"You mean Silas the Evangelist?" Hardship asked. "Why?"

“He might try to fight you before you testify.” Thomas said, deadpan. “Go, you’re dismissed. I have a long night’s work ahead of me.”

Chapter Fifteen

Gabriel Bishop was drowning. John Winthrop pushed him off the dock and into the river, while everyone from Ipswich and Andover watched from the banks. He heard Silas Winthrop scream his name as he went down, could see the clerk's shadow wavering above him. He saw a dot of crimson on the bridge to Andover and knew Sarah was watching. Water filled Gabriel's nose and mouth, the silvery membrane of the surface sloshing around his nose and eyes. Sometimes, he would get half a breath of air, coughing and spitting before he slipped beneath the waves again. Gabriel bade himself be still, said to himself it would soon be done.

Yet he fought for the surface anyway, even as he was losing. His fingertips barely troubled its silvery ceiling, his heartbeat rapid as he sank by inches. Standing on the dock, the governor watched Gabriel drown, his ugly face warped the more from the ripples on the surface. Gabriel sacrificed his final breath in a silent scream, a silvery gasp that billowed away from him. He sank to the bottom as he flailed away the last moments of his life.

The clang of the door to the sally port dislodged Gabriel from his slumber, and he fell back into his body, tense and sweaty. My God, save me, he thought, lifting his head from Asenath's lap, hyperventilating. There was nobody to fight, and nowhere to flee; he was alone but for Asenath's body cradled in his own. Gabriel checked her. She was still breathing. Someone was coming for them. A light flickered off the walls as its bearer approached. Gabriel could hear his footsteps.

"Silas... is it thou?" Gabriel asked fearfully, still shaken from his nightmare.

"No." said the voice, as it came closer. It was the clerk.

"Thomas Braithwaite? Why art thou come?" Gabriel asked.

"To speak with thee." Thomas said. The candle cast harsh shadows across Thomas's face and hands, so that a sliver of him was lit brightly and the rest was obscured in shadows. The candle flickered like the trembling of a human soul, spilling shards of light over Thomas's hands.

"Thou wasted an hour. I haven't changed my mind." Gabriel said. "Leave me."

"It's not about that." Thomas said. "Sarah Winthrop was here for you yesterday."

"What?" Gabriel asked. "When?"

"After meeting. At the prison walls. She prayed for you, and wept."

Gabriel considered this for a moment. But it couldn't possibly be true. "No. Sarah testified against me. She wants me to die."

"It's the truth." Thomas said. "She loves thee yet."

Gabriel wished the clerk would go away. "Why art thou come, Thomas?"

"She's going to the scaffold tomorrow for fornication. Winthrop would break her free of thee."

"That's not true, either." Gabriel said. "Sarah's his favorite, he wouldn't shame her."

"It was your name she screamed when the governor pressed her."

"Then the court shall have its verdict." Gabriel said, dismissively. "Leave me to my dreaming."

"I know that she lied, Gabriel. Sarah wasn't really possessed. She just pretended to be so Governor Winthrop wouldn't make her answer. But Winthrop will force her if you don't confess."

"This is a ruse." Gabriel said, stubbornly. "Sarah wouldn't admit to fornication is because it's the truth. I never touched her. And I'm not going to confess because John Winthrop wakes me with an empty threat. Now leave me, Thomas. I would dream of better things."

"Wilt thou see her before she does atonement?" Thomas asked. "It would succor her pain."

"Wherefore, what good would it do?" Gabriel asked. "In a fortnight, she'll still be a fallen woman and I'll be dead. My words won't change anything about that."

"She could forgive thee thy trespasses." Thomas reminded him.

"She could, but she won't." Gabriel said. "This is Sarah Winthrop. If anything the meeting will salt the wounds I gave her. I shan't put her through any more distress on my account."

"Did you ever love her?" Thomas asked.

Gabriel silently took the question and turned it over in his heart for a moment, thinking that he shouldn't answer. But he answered Thomas anyway.

"I think so." Gabriel said. "She's the only person I've ever seen stand up to John Winthrop and get away with it. She's smarter than Silas, and steelier too. I know that she loved me better than love I her. Still, I would have married her, and kept my vows."

"You could marry her yet." Thomas reminded him. "If thou confessed."

"No." Gabriel said. "Maybe once, but no longer."

"Thou hast not possessed her. Why then wouldst thou speak on her behalf?" Thomas asked.

"I know my own foster sister." Gabriel said. "I know she hates me for what I did."

"She hates thy actions, but not thee." Thomas parried. "She loves thee yet."

"If Sarah knew what kind of man I was, she would hate me as Fanny doth." Gabriel said.

"And why doth Fanny hate thee?" Thomas asked. Gabriel didn't answer, and Thomas said, gently, "I won't tell John Winthrop. You have my oath."

Thomas's blonde hair was curly, and thinning. He had trousers dyed goldenrod to match his hair. Gabriel recalled that the Braithwaites had once been Quakers, until John Winthrop exiled their patriarch. "Thomas, listen to me. I forced her. She never loved me. She was scared of me, and I didn't want to see it. That's why she asked me to set her free, she wanted to get away."

"You mean, you offered her violence." Thomas said, confirming Gabriel's meaning. The words stung him like arrows.

"Yes." Gabriel said. "That's what happened."

"How many times, Gabriel?" Thomas asked him.

"Six. No, seven. It was seven. She didn't resist; but I knew I was forcing her."

"So that's why you set the fire." Thomas said. "You owed Fanny a debt."

"Aye. I was such a knave, Braithwaite. Wherefore should anyone want to forgive me? Wherefore would Sarah forgive me, if she knew?" Gabriel asked, desperately.

"Ask not wherefore." Thomas said. "Sarah loves thee. Why dost thou refuse her?"

"I don't want her to see me like this." Gabriel said, gesturing to the cell, the body in the corner. "There's a chamber pot in here. It's vile."

"You could receive her in the interrogation room." Thomas reminded him.

"No, Braithwaite. That's not the point. I can't face Sarah after what I did, and I can't help her. The least I can do is not fill her mind with apologies before I go. I deserve to be hated for what I did; for the fire, and the mark, and the lying. Especially the lying; I lied so often. I lied to everyone. The river is what I deserve, for it might wash me of my sinning."

As Gabriel spoke, he saw Thomas wave the light before him, his eyes peering into the darkness to resolve the shadows. He pointed at Gabriel's right eye. "Your spectacles are cracked."

"Silas." Gabriel said. "He exhorts me daily to confess."

"He hits you in the eye and yet still you suffer him?" Thomas said. "That is queer."

"Art thou a Friend, Thomas Braithwaite?" Gabriel asked.

"You mean, a Quaker? My family used to be. But not me." Thomas said.

"I used to think that too." Gabriel said. "But the Spirit wouldn't leave me alone."

"I've never been contacted by the Holy Spirit." Thomas said. But there was some reluctance in the clerk's eyes. He changed the subject. "Sarah needs you. If you love her, you would see her."

"Prithee, don't bring her here." Gabriel said. "There's nothing I can say to her."

"It isn't about thou, Gabriel, it's about her. She lied and it weighs heavily upon her. Give Sarah this chance; she could yet be made whole if she freed herself."

"Why press me so?" Gabriel asked. "Is this some kind of a witch test? Why else would it be so important to thee that I received Sarah Winthrop before her shaming?"

"After Sarah screamed thy name, I thought I saw a man's soul in thee. I would lead both of ye towards redemption, if I can."

"Is this the part where I'm supposed to confess?" Gabriel said. "It's my life and my choice, Thomas. Leave me."

"But it isn't just your life. It's Sarah's life, and Fanny's life, and Asenath's life. Don't shake your head at me, Gabriel; hear the names. What price have these women paid so that you can die innocent?"

"I never said I was innocent." Gabriel said. "I only said I'm not a witch. And there's no way I can help them from in here. I don't even have medicine for Asenath."

"You're lying again." Thomas said. "You won't confess and it forces John Winthrop to be forceful. Wherefore, Gabriel? If you did, it would spare Silas and Sarah both."

"I can't see her." Gabriel said, weakly. "I don't know what I'll say."

"Think thee on it for a time." Thomas said, drawing out pencil and paper. "And write it here."

Gabriel took the materials, sensing a trap. "Why? Wilt thou read what I write in court?"

"No." Thomas said. "Keep the pages once you're done, or destroy them. But whatever you do, hide them carefully, even from Silas. You're not supposed to have them."

Gabriel put the materials in his coat pocket. "Thank you, Mister Braithwaite."

"So you will see her tomorrow? When she comes?" Thomas asked.

"Sarah." Gabriel said. "Aye, I'll see her, if thou would answer me one question."

"What is it?" Thomas asked.

"The witch hunter came this afternoon. With her." Gabriel said, gesturing to Asenath. "And he told me to draw a magic circle. I wonder if thou meant to catch me at magic."

"Only if you were guilty." Thomas said.

"I thought Winthrop picked thee because thou would find me guilty." Gabriel asked.

"I used to be sure you were guilty." Thomas admitted. "I've made mistakes; kept secrets and told lies. I believed Sarah's motives for perjury were selfish until I saw her at the gaol. And Governor Winthrop, last night he said..." Thomas trailed off. "I ought not speak of it."

“God be with thee, Thomas Braithwaite.” Gabriel said, as a farewell.

“And to thee, Gabriel Bishop.” Thomas bowed, and took his light with him from the gaol. They would be seeing each other in just a few hours. Once he was gone, Gabriel had to feel his way around the cell, as his eyes readjusted to the darkness. He crawled back to Asenath’s body.

She might wake tomorrow, or next week, or not at all. Gabriel cradled her closely for warmth, in a way he’d never do when she was awake; not even when he was her apprentice. If she became cold, she was likelier to die, and Silas had not come by with the brazier. The moon, white and waxing, shone a pale ray of light through Gabriel’s little window. Holding Asenath under his coat, he inspected what materials Thomas Braithwaite had given to him: one lead pencil and three sheets of parchment.

It was surely a trap. Braithwaite meant for him to write Sarah a letter which he could later read and show to John Winthrop. Nevertheless, Gabriel felt compelled to write something anyway; something which Winthrop and Braithwaite would find useless but which Sarah might cherish as a farewell. The opportunity to make peace with her before his death glimmered in Gabriel’s mind, spurred him with its promises of holiness. Thomas is right, Gabriel thought: I owe this to her. I could cleanse myself with this letter, but not in the way he thinks.

Gabriel bowed his head and fell silent, waiting for the Holy Spirit to fill him with the word. He had to keep sweeping off the fear that it would not speak to him; for the yammering of his soul would drown out that still, small voice. An hour later it came to him and told Gabriel what he would say.

There were three pages; Gabriel decided to use all of them. He folded the first sheet in half and began to write. Gabriel realized that this was good-bye, and so tried to write prettily. But most of the words were raw ones, an apology for a litany of deceptions. The more he wrote, the less Gabriel understood why anyone would forgive him.

The words came to him a little easier when he apologized about the courtship. He was able to write that he hadn't been false, that he would have married her. He wrote for a while on how he had never believed, even then, that anyone could really love him.

Gabriel wrote to Sarah that he was sorry it had to be her. He didn't deserve a man like Sarah, but a better man would, someday soon. That man would not judge her for his actions, and would see the person she was instead of the person others called her.

He was sorry about ravishing Fanny. Gabriel put this into words as plainly as possible, so that Sarah might understand what that it wasn't her fault: the responsibility was solely his. Gabriel begged Sarah not to blame Fanny for what happened, confessing he would have been an unfit husband for either of them.

The words filled the page as minutes filled the hour. Too soon Gabriel found himself running out of space, out of time. As he finished his letter to Sarah, the sun rose and began illuminating the cell in daylight. Gabriel read what he wrote and proofread it, occasionally scratching out a word or fixing his spelling. He sharpened the pencil against the bricks and kept writing.

The pencil got dull again and Gabriel put the writings away, remembering Thomas's warning to not let Silas see them. Gabriel ran his fingers through his hair. It felt greasy. He washed his hands and face as best he could, and checked on Asenath. She lived yet.

Some more time passed, and the interior of his cell became lighter and lighter. The sun rose, its light diffused by a thick blanket of clouds. A rooster crowed, then another. Gabriel heard Thomas Braithwaite and Sarah in the sally port. He waited until Silas brought him his irons, unlocked his cell, and took him to the interrogation room.

Chapter Sixteen

Sarah Winthrop did not break her fast the day of her shaming. She waited in the hall while Silas quickly ate of something cold. Father was in his room, writing with the door closed. Sarah knew better than to disturb him by saying good-bye. She pulled Silas's cloak over her shoulders as she waited in the hall of the manse. The smell of her brother's coat was more comforting than Sarah had expected it to be. He would stand with her, protect her from facing the townsfolk alone on the scaffold. Thinking of it made her dizzy with fear – for it was the people whose trust in Father was shaken, and putting her on the scaffold was his way of paying for it.

Sarah felt tired, but sleep had eluded her, and even a hot bath the night before hadn't helped. Silas returned to the hall and took a seat next to Sarah, his countenance austere and troubled. She leaned against his shoulder and Silas readily put his arm around her back, comforted to be comforting her. Sarah wished that they didn't have to leave. A prayer thanking God for this day of Creation passed her lips very bitterly. After a moment of silence, Silas replied "Amen."

A quarter-hour later, there was a knock on the door. She stiffened, and Silas rose and answered it. It was Thomas Braithwaite. He looked sleepless and troubled, too; they were all birds of a feather.

"Good Morning, Mister Braithwaite." She said, although she meant 'the Devil take thee.'

"Sarah," Thomas said, as Silas came down the hall to meet them. "Silas."

"Thomas." Silas said, rudely. "Let's go." He was looming over the clerk, trying to cow Braithwaite into intimidation. Although it should have been effective, the clerk seemed unimpressed.

"I would take her thither by myself." Thomas Braithwaite said.

"No." Silas replied. "I'm not letting you alone with her."

Thomas pursed his lips. "Let's talk about this outside." He said. "Come along, Sarah."

The three left the manse. White smoke puffed up from the chimneys of the houses. It was snowing lightly, sprinkling Sarah's collar with ice. The morning light was weak, gray, and ghostly.

Once they were well away, Thomas said to Silas, "Gabriel sent for me last night. He asked if he could see Sarah, before the shaming."

"So?" Silas said. "Gabriel asks for a great many things. Snake-weed, pencils, river rocks. I don't give them to him. You shouldn't either." Silas had been acting this way since yesterday afternoon. Though he would not speak of it, Sarah was sure he had fought with Gabriel.

"There's something else you should know." Thomas said to Silas. "Asenath Black's dying. Gabriel's vulnerable. If you want to force him to confess, now is the best time to break him."

"I heard about Asenath." Silas scoffed. "Father said he thought he hired a professional."

Braithwaite flushed red at the insult. "Hardship wasn't ordered to kill her."

"Surely. But Rumor makes her rounds." Silas said. "Take care, Thomas Braithwaite."

"She poisoned herself." Thomas said. Silas laughed a little. "No, really."

"What's your angle?" Silas asked, changing the subject. "You think Gabriel is guilty."

"Your father ordered me to try and secure his confession if I can. And this I think is our last, best chance at it. Bishop's nerves are frayed. When I spoke to him last night, he regretted the tryst with Fanny. He wants to be forgiven, and Winthrop is not eager for the spectacle of a public drowning."

"You said Gabriel was an empty shell inhabited by a demon wizard. You tried to hit me with a shovel. If you weren't looking towards Election Day you wouldn't even be here." Silas said. "Don't bother pretending, I know your ruse."

"This isn't about me." Thomas said, becoming irritated. "When you came to my room, Silas, you were willing to join Gabriel in prison rather than testify against him. Was that a ruse?"

"I still would. But this isn't about me." Silas said. "It's Sarah he wants to see."

The two men stopped, and turned to Sarah Winthrop in the snow. She looked from her brother to the clerk, thinking one of them had something more to say. But instead they waited expectantly.

She asked, "Do I have to?"

"Only if you want to." Thomas said. "He said he loves thee, Sarah; and that thou loved him better than he could love himself."

"That sounds like something Gabriel might say." Sarah said. "I don't think he said it, though."

"Hear it for yourself." Thomas said. "Go to him."

"You spoke to me kindly at the gaol. Now I see why." Sarah said. "I don't trust you either."

"I'm no straw-man for your father. Really." Thomas said, when Silas glared at him. "Sarah, when your father gave me this task I censured him for his cruelty. If it were up to me, you wouldn't do atonement at all."

"Yet here we are." Sarah said. "Servants to father's designs."

"It's God's will, not your father's, that you must take atonement today. Only you can press Gabriel into confessing to what he did. Your forgiveness would spare him in the world to come."

"So you really will put him to the river, then?" Sarah asked.

"I'm to begin preparations for it." Thomas said. "Assuming nothing changes."

The red gaol was advancing slowly towards them as they walked, growing in dimensions and detail as they approached it through the snowfall. A week ago Sarah knew what she would have chosen; but now, she lingered, entertaining what might happen if she saw him. It might be her last chance to get answers; and certainly her only chance to say goodbye.

She could not refuse. "I want to see him again."

They came to the gates of the gaol. Thomas knocked hard on the wooden gates. A man she didn't know answered the door. His hair was cropped close, and he seemed incredibly cocksure.

The gaol was as icy within as it had been without. Silas and Thomas left to fetch Gabriel and ready the interrogation room. The man who let them in went back to his chair. He was whittling a stick, his musket casually leaned against the wall. It was an imported gun, with fancy rifling.

The gaoller glanced at Sarah, and then held his gaze. She could tell from the way he was looking that her bath last night had made her bonny and fair.

"Good morning," Sarah said, though she meant 'stop staring at me.'

"Good morning," The man said, going back to his whittling. "You got prettier than when I last laid eyes on thee, Sarah Winthrop."

"Do I know you?" She asked, in no mood to entertain hangers-on.

"Name's Hardship." He said. "Hardship Cole, of Deerfield. I'm a hunter by trade."

"I thought Father hired you to capture Fanny." She said. "You're not doing a very good job of it."

"Sometimes a hunter seeks, and sometimes he has to wait." Hardship said cryptically. "Your Negro maid will turn up eventually; I promise you that."

"T'would be better if she were never found." Sarah said. "For her own sake."

“Perhaps.” Hardship agreed, whittling. “But there are worse men out there than John Winthrop. Take your Gabriel, for instance. Is he as skilled with his wand as he is with his tongue?”

“That’s lewd.” Sarah said, disgusted. “Are all Deerfield men so vulgar?”

“No.” Hardship said, grinning at her wolfishly. “Come see me once the shaming’s done.”

“If God wills it.” Sarah said, though she meant ‘I hope you die before then.’

She would have made her contempt more obvious, but at that very moment, Thomas Braithwaite came back to the sally port and said “Sarah. He’s ready for you.”

“God be with thee, Sarah Winthrop.” Hardship said. Something about him sat wrongly with Sarah, like a badly cut puzzle piece. She wanted not to see him again; but suspected she would.

She went to the interrogation room with Thomas, a walled chamber just inside the south wing of the gaol. When they got there, Silas was taking off Gabriel’s chains.

He had lost some weight. There was a bruise over Gabriel’s cheekbone; his spectacles had a thin crack in the lenses. He looked washed-out, as if the gaol was bleeding all his color away.

“Sarah.” He said. “How long has it been since last I saw thee? Eight... no, nine weeks?”

“Nearly two months, yes.” Sarah sighed. She looked at Gabriel, remembering that last encounter. He had turned at the manse at nine o’clock; she met him in the parlor. They had been lucky Father wasn’t home. “You said I looked like John Winthrop in a dressing gown.”

That was aggressive, she thought too late. But it was also the truth, wasn’t it? Thomas Braithwaite offered her a chair. Sarah took her seat, feeling dizzy. Silas and Thomas remained standing.

“Leave us.” Gabriel said to them, as if he were yet the best apothecary in the village.

"I can't." Thomas said, but Silas touched him on the shoulder. Thomas looked up at him, and Silas motioned towards the door. If Gabriel helped, the clerk could easily be ejected from the interrogation room.

"Come on, Braithwaite." Silas told him. "We'll be waiting outside the door." He said to Sarah.

Silas led Thomas without, and bolted the door behind them. They would stay close by, listening to what was said through a cutaway in the door.

Gabriel fidgeted, taking some bit of paper from his pockets. "D-dear Sarah", he said, reading from his script. "When last we parted, I had no time to say goodbye. I decided to write this letter so that I might say it now in a way that shall endure beyond my death."

Disappointed, Sarah said; "Braithwaite brought me all the way here when he could have just delivered a letter?"

Gabriel looked to her, and then to the letter, pondering whether to go on reading it. His hazel eyes flickered on the words, then on her, then back to the words. "Everything that happened was to my great regret. I never meant to hurt thee. That was never my intention..."

This was unbearable. "Can we please just talk?" Sarah asked.

"I-It was never my intention to hurt thee..." he said, repeating himself.

"Gabriel, look at me!" She said, tearing the script out of his hands. He flinched, but didn't resist. Those big hazel eyes met hers, pupils widening as they maintained eye contact. Gabriel's stubble was faintly golden in the sunlight. Even now, she could see it – could see why she'd given her heart to the witch without putting up a fight. He had known from the very beginning that she desired him.

"I'm sorry." Gabriel said, finally. "Winthrop would have thee atone for my sins."

Sarah crumpled the script in her fist. "Answer me this. It's not true, is it? You didn't, did you?"

"No." Gabriel said. "I swear, I never touched thee. I'm not the sorcerer you think, Sarah. If I were, I'd rain hellfire o'er New England before I let Father do this to you."

"You already did that trick for Fanny. I don't think you can do it twice."

"It's not like that." Gabriel protested. "I owed her a debt."

"For what, her seducing you? Was this some tit for tat arrangement?" Sarah said, her voice sounding authoritative. "Or is liberating Negro whores the Quaker lifestyle?"

"Stop it." Gabriel said. "This isn't her fault."

"Why did you choose her over me?" Sarah asked. "Why did you sell me so cheaply?"

"I didn't sell thee for anything." Gabriel said. "I swore an oath... I had to keep it."

"That's not an answer." Sarah said sharply. "Why did you choose her over me?"

Suddenly, he couldn't look her in the eye. Clearly, he had been sick with grief for the past fortnight over what had happened. "It's not that simple." Gabriel pleaded. "Freedom was the only thing she wanted. It was the only decent thing I could do for her. I didn't have a choice in it, please believe that. It's the truth."

"Is she dead, Gabriel?" Sarah asked. "Is that why you won't confess?"

"No." Gabriel said again. "Well, I can't be sure. But I don't think Fanny is dead."

"It would be better if she were dead. I can't forgive her."

"Sarah, no. Hate me for what I did, not Fanny. T'was I who did thee wrong."

"Fanny's as complicit as you are." She said, angry. "She concealed it from me."

“And that’s my fault too. I told her not to tell thee.”

How long had this been going on? Did Gabriel only court her to get to Fanny? Was the whole courtship a ruse? For a moment, Sarah was at a loss for words, and just stared at the man she would have married, horrified at the path he had chosen. Finally, a question worth asking came to mind. “Does she know magic too, or were you using her, just like you used me?”

“I don’t know any magic, Sarah. I’m just a liar, and a fire-starter.” He looked so tormented by his guilt. She wished they could go back, forget about all this – but his transgressions were beyond forgiveness. Her gaze lingered on Gabriel’s lips. How could something so sweet say such bitter things?

“You’re lying.” She said. “Nobody could do what you’ve done and lived, if not for magic. You’re in it to use me, to use us. You’re a sorcerer. You were always a sorcerer. Weren’t you?”

“No.” Gabriel said again. “If I was, I would undo what will happen to thee. But it’s out of my hands. There’s nothing I can do to stop this.”

“That’s not true.” Sarah said. “Confess, and Father will take mercy on both of us.”

“I can’t.” Gabriel said. “I’m not the witch he thinks I am.” He took her hand, imploring her to believe him. Sarah was powerless to withdraw from his touch. This might be the last time she would ever touch him. She grasped at Gabriel for dear life, feeling the tides change beneath her once again.

“Liar!” Sarah cried. “I saw what you did. Everyone knows it was you. No man could do what you did and survive, if not that magic keeps you. So why not admit to it?”

“What good does it do thee to believe I’m a sorcerer?” Gabriel said, losing his patience. “Does it make what happened easier to accept if magic and evil demons are to blame? Is it easier to believe I’m a sorcerer who possesses and enchants, instead of a flawed and sinful man? Does it absolve thee? Is that the reason for this dramatic fantasy thou made up, so thou can remain a blameless victim?” Gabriel

said. "I lied to thee, and thou believed me. I deceived thy heart and promised my hand. Anyone could do what I did. Hate me if thou would, but don't blame it on magic."

His eyes were shining and his voice trembled. He was the same person as he was before, who he'd always been. Sarah tried to hold onto her anger, as it slipped away from her. She was crying now, tears were falling. She quailed to think how Gabriel would look, after they pulled his body from the Connecticut. "But why?" Sarah asked, trying to keep her composure. "I loved you."

"It was the name." Gabriel said. He wiped a tear away, leaving a smudge of grime on Sarah's cheek. "Winthrop wanted better, and he had it right. I am unfit to husband thee. I couldn't bear to live that life, to watch Silas become him, step into that role. That was what would happen."

"We could have just moved away." Sarah said miserably. "Started over again, like Anne Hutchinson did after Father exiled her. There are other settlements."

"And other husbands." Gabriel said. "Why me instead of them? I am not so special."

"It was your name." Sarah said. "I wanted not to be a Winthrop, either."

Gabriel sighed. "There's no point in telling thee what might have been. All I want now is to die speedily at the water test, so that I may quickly be forgotten."

"I won't forget." Sarah said, like an oath. "I'll remember you forever."

"Don't do it for my sake, but for thine." Gabriel said. "Be free of me."

"How is it you can ruin my life, and yet I still feel sorry for you?" Sarah said, wavering. "You're a sorcerer for certain. Aren't you? Tell me one way or the other. I have to know."

Gabriel gazed into her eyes, sadly, and tried to answer her in prayerful silence.

“No. Stop that.” Sarah said. “My life is ruined. Nobody will marry me after this. I may as well be Fanny: now I’ll never escape the manse. Father will never let me leave.”

“He won’t live forever.” Gabriel said. “Thou could survive him yet.”

“That could be years from now.” Sarah said. “And even if Father died, Silas would be there.”

“I should have freed thee.” Gabriel said. “I see that now. But don’t despair, Sarah. Things can change in the blink of an eye; only God knows what’s in store for thee. Please don’t live the rest of thy life thinking of what could have been. That’s my task.”

“I don’t have much choice in it.” Sarah said. “My life is over.”

Then both of them were silent for a long moment.

“I’m sorry.” Gabriel said finally. “One day, things will get better. I promise thee.”

“That’s not true.” Sarah said. “Nothing will ever be the same.”

“Don’t say that.” Gabriel cautioned her. “Father would forgive thee, in time.”

“That’s easy for you to say.” Sarah said. “You won’t have to wait for it.”

“I can’t confess to spare thee.” Gabriel said. “It would be a lie. I can’t do it.”

“Then there’s nothing more for me to say.” Sarah said. “You’re hanging me out to dry.”

Gabriel’s hazel eyes flickered with regret, the bright yellow motes and dark freckles in his irises reminding Sarah of sparks in the fireplace. It was no use – there was nothing but destruction for her here. She turned away, and called for Silas and Thomas to come take her away. A moment later, they came. Thomas Braithwaite took Sarah by the arm, casually, but with a firmness so that Sarah knew she would not be able to pull away easily. As they left, she heard Gabriel say “God be with thee.”

His voice sounded defeated, his powers fled. Sarah went with the knowledge that the Sorcerer of Ipswich wasn't in any position to aid her. Braithwaite, up close with his arm in hers, looked livid. He was chagrined, angry that she hadn't gotten Gabriel to break. As they went, she asked the clerk: "You didn't really think I would forgive him, did you?"

Thomas sighed. "No. But I thought thou might employ a softer touch."

"Then you don't know me very well." Sarah replied, marking a clear boundary with her contempt. Thomas looked insulted – these were not the sort of words he was accustomed to hearing. She stared back, daring him to rebuke her. Thomas looked like he was about to say something, but then thought the better of it, looking more and more chagrined.

She sneered. Thomas had finally figured out John Winthrop wasn't the righteous hill-top prophet and model of Christian charity magnified in his famous sermons. The convert was learning, too late, that Father would make him into his servant, just as he baptized Silas and her as servants, just as he had relegated Fanny and her mother to perpetual servitude, to be redeemed only in the World to Come. Had Thomas also realized her atonement would serve to consolidate Father's control over her? Or that Father had asked him to do it to increase his control over Thomas himself? Did he know that even if he were elected governor, Thomas would remain a servant? The clerk was a few steps behind, but he didn't have the benefit of understanding that came from being made in Winthrop's image. Only death could liberate them from Father's power – but even then, his legacy would remain to haunt them.

Sarah thought about sharing what she knew with Thomas, but it was too late. They arrived in the sally port, and that lewd yeoman was back, along with Silas and Asenath Black's house Negro. So she kept her silence, and tried to still her rapid heartbeat. As she took an inventory of herself, Sarah realized Gabriel's three-page letter was still crumpled in her fist. She tucked it in her pocket – just a piece of trash, to be disposed of later.

Chapter Seventeen

Asenath Black woke up alone, and wondered where the hell she was. It was a cell, to be sure; one wall was made of iron bars, and the other three of red bricks. The furnishings were limited to a chamber pot and a pitcher of water. There were some men's clothes on the hooks, and Asenath herself was lying in a bed of straw. At the end of the hall she was being kept in, Asenath could hear what sounded like a young woman arguing, and a man's replies, too indistinct to be heard. Her head ached, and Asenath closed her eyes again, rolled over, and wished they would argue a little more quietly.

They didn't; and presently Asenath recognized the voice of the woman as belonging to Sarah Winthrop. She was being led away somewhere, and things got quieter. Asenath wondered if that meant she could go back to sleep.

But there was another shuffling in the hall; a familiar one which set Asenath's heart on fire. Those could only be the footsteps of her apprentice; and thinking of the men's clothes on the hook Asenath realized this had to be Gabriel's cell. If she kept wise, she might see him now.

The chains clinked merrily as two men walked down the hall. Asenath lay back down and shut her eyes, hoping that she was in roughly the same position as before. Her pulse drummed uncomfortably in her head, an after-effect of the poison.

Pretending to be asleep, Asenath heard the creak of the cell door opening. She opened her right eye a crack and saw Silas Winthrop unchaining Gabriel, and taking the manacles with him.

As Silas was locking the door to the cell, it seemed he might say something, but was interrupted by the unfamiliar voice from before, which shouted at him;

"Silas! I need you in here!" And the Winthrop lad dashed away down the corridor. Gabriel sighed to hear the ruckus; it had something to do with him.

Gabriel sat down next to Asenath, crumpling against the wall like a scarecrow. He sighed, and then hearkened to her, leaning over her, touching her neck in search of a pulse.

"You really do care about me." Asenath said, opening one eye.

Gabriel gasped, and jumped to one side. His hazel eyes were big like a cat's. Asenath had gotten him good that time. "My God," he said, "Asenath. Thou scared me half to death."

"I've been doing a lot of things half to death lately." Asenath said, opening the other eye. She sat up, and Gabriel brought her some water. She felt weak, but could move without assistance.

"How long was I gone?" She asked.

"Three nights, and two days." Gabriel said. "I didn't know if thou would wake."

"I must have made a mistake with the potency." Asenath said. "Or... oh, yes. Hardship made me vomit. He filled a teapot with salt water and damn near drowned me with it." She touched her head, trying to soothe the pain. "Christ, what a hang-over I have."

"Who's Hardship?" Gabriel asked.

"Cole. You know. Close-cropped hair? He's a tall, dark sort of man; he moves like a stag." Asenath said, gesturing. "He carries a fancy musket. He's the one who arrested me."

"Oh, him." Gabriel said. "Then I owe him an apology."

"Why?" Asenath said.

"I thought it was his fault. He asked me to do magic to revive thee and I said I'd burn his house. He told me to draw a magic circle. I thought it was some kind of a ruse."

"Having seen him attempt one, I can say Hardship's only middling at ruses." Asenath said. "And if he was going to kill you, he'd be polite and shoot you without much talking."

"Oh. He's one of that lot." Gabriel said, disdainfully. "Country people."

"So was your father. And you, too." Asenath reminded him. "You should've stuck with beer, Gabriel. One doesn't need a sterling reputation to be a brewer. Your wares practically sell themselves. That's why I got into it, after William passed away. Nobody trusted me with anything else." Asenath took Gabriel's black pants and put them around her shoulders, as a replacement for her shawl.

"It was distasteful to me." Gabriel said. "I'm sorry, I should have listened."

"You always say that, but you never learn." Asenath said.

Gabriel smiled at her, chagrined. "I'm pleased to see thou living, Asenath."

"I'm not." Asenath said. "Where are we? Andover?"

"Yes." Gabriel said. "Listen, this is important. Once Winthrop knows you're awake, he'll make court arrangements and ask how you plead. Thou ought to confess to witchery."

"Why me, and not you? I didn't go setting any buildings on fire."

"But Hardship saw thee drink the poison. Braithwaite could make a case of that. If thou wouldst confess, the story is up to us. Just say the words I tell thee, John Winthrop will be caught in his own web. He'll cut you loose and hang me for a sorcerer."

"What would I say?" Asenath asked.

"Tell them I was a changeling from the start. Tell them my Quakerism is a front for devil-worship; they'll believe that. Tell them I possessed Silas and Sarah, and that I threatened to do the same to thou, if thou would not keep my secrets. Tell them thou saw me with the Black Man. Say I signed his book and drank from his cup. Say whatever you have to, Thomas knows what he wants to hear."

"What if they ask me where Fanny is?" Asenath asked. "I don't know the answer."

"That's not necessary." Gabriel said. "Tell the governor thou opposed me. Then it's all on my shoulders. And it's close enough to the truth to be believable."

"I don't like this." Asenath said. "A lie's like a wrinkle in a patchwork quilt. The more you work it, the worse it looks. I would not embellish it, knowing the truth of who you are."

"The risks are just too great." Gabriel said. "If they convict thee for witchcraft they'll take away the High Horse, and Caesar, too. I'm not worth all that; I only meant to sacrifice myself."

Just then, there was a distant cry, of a throng in the square. They were cheering for something.

Gabriel got up, and went to the window of the cell. The light was bright on his face, and Asenath noticed how much the young man had aged in the span of a month. He looked like an embattled physician, fighting a plague which could not be cured.

"What's going on out there?" Asenath asked.

"Sarah Winthrop's doing atonement." Gabriel said. "John Winthrop humiliated her when she testified against me, and now he's put her on the scaffold. This is all my fault."

"I already said this in November, but..." Asenath began.

"I know. I should have married her." Gabriel said, watching Sarah in the window.

"I told you you'd regret what you did with Fanny once she was gone. Out of sight, out of mind."

"I was terrible to Fanny." Gabriel said. "I forced her."

"Don't be so fatalistic." Asenath said. "It's not like she put up much of a fight."

"It doesn't matter with slaves." Gabriel said. "They can't really say no."

"Is that how you think of it?" Asenath asked Gabriel. "I think you knew she wouldn't tell anyone because Silas would beat her if she did."

"Silas did beat her, Asenath." Gabriel said. "And me too, once he found out."

"Come thee away from there." Asenath told him, leading Gabriel away by the hand. "You can't help Sarah now by watching."

Gabriel let her lead him away, and they seated themselves on the straw bed, where it was a little warmer. "No, I should bear witness." Gabriel said, and he tried to go back to the window.

Asenath held his arm and kept him seated. "Shh, shh." She said. "There's nothing you can do."

"I was talking to her just a few minutes ago." Gabriel said. "She wouldn't forgive me."

"I know. I heard you two at the last." Asenath said. "It woke me from my dreaming."

"I'm not sorry to have woken thee." Gabriel said. "I can't let anyone else suffer for my crimes. Promise thou wilt condemn me as a witch, so that John Winthrop can't accuse thee."

"But if I do that, they'll hang you for a sorcerer." Asenath said.

"If John Winthrop didn't hate me so, he would have had me hanged a month ago for arson. He keeps me around to make an example of me." Gabriel asked.

"That may be." Asenath said. "But it was never your intention for the fire to grow so large. Maybe Providence burned the meeting house, and you were just its instrument."

"It's Providence that saved thee from the poison. I won't squander that chance for myself." Gabriel said. "I won't let anyone else suffer on my account. Promise me the confession, Asenath, I beg of thee. Thou opposed me from the first, pay not the wages of my sinning."

“Art thou certain, Gabriel? Governor Winthrop and I are of an age. Thou might live longer, if thou art not hanged.”

“If my life were so important, I never would have set that fire.” Gabriel said.

Asenath unwillingly entertained Gabriel’s reasoning. “I still don’t like this,” she said finally. “It is not meet, lying under oath to save my own hide and household. Putting my apprentice to the river for my own sake. Perjury like that stinks in God’s nostrils.”

“What’s meet and not meet is irrelevant.” Gabriel said. “Just look out the window if thou would see an example of how easily these enlightened people turn on their own.”

Asenath sighed. “Gabriel, do you know why I wanted to adopt you after your father died?”

Just then, the door to the wing of the gaol was unbolted. Gabriel put his hand over Asenath’s mouth, and she silenced herself. With a fearful nod, Gabriel gestured for her to lie down. He went to the window again, as if to watch the shaming. Asenath closed her eyes, listening to the gaoller’s footsteps.

“I brought you some bread, Bishop.” The gaoller said, sliding it into the cell.

“The bread of the land. I thank thee for it, Rackman.” Gabriel said.

“What’s that she’s got ‘round her shoulders?” Rackman said, presumably about Asenath.

“My spare clothing.” Gabriel said, trying to sound casual. “She seemed cold.”

“You picked her up to wrap it ‘round her back?” Rackman asked.

“Yes.” Gabriel said. Then there was a strange pause, which Asenath couldn’t interpret. She slowed her breathing, and tried not to betray her wakefulness.

There was a jingling of keys in the door to Gabriel’s cell. “Rackman, don’t come in here. I’ve had enough for one day.” Gabriel said.

"I'll be gone in a minute." Rackman said, closing the cell door behind him. Asenath could hear his steps as Rackman approached her and knelt, close enough that Asenath could smell his breath.

"Keep away from her." Gabriel said, with an edge of worry in his voice.

"Why?" Rackman said. "Is there some reason I shouldn't touch her?" Rackman picked up her arm and straightened it out, then let it fall. Asenath let it fall limp.

"Is there some reason thou would molest the body of my teacher as she sleeps?" Gabriel said, in that measured voice Asenath knew meant he was concealing something.

"So she sleeps, hmm?" Rackman said, pinching Asenath hard on the tit.

Asenath couldn't help but wince. She drew in a breath sharply, but kept herself from crying out.

"She winces." Rackman said.

"She may wince if you pinch her." Gabriel said. "Let us alone."

"Quit lying to me, Bishop. I saw her when Hardship brought her here. She's not the same now. Wake up, Asenath." Rackman said, shaking her. "Come on, stop pretending. I saw you wince."

"Leave her alone, Rackman." Gabriel said, warning him.

"Oh please. Let's not get thee any more bruises." Rackman said. "Stop faking, Asenath." But Asenath didn't, so Rackman started slapping her face; not hard, but hard enough to get a reaction.

"Stop that!" Gabriel said, getting angry. "Stop touching her!"

"Asenath, if I immerse your head, will you stop this childish ruse? What if we use the chamber pot?" Rackman said.

"Step off, Rackman!" Gabriel said. "Let her alone or... or I'll curse thee!"

“Shut up, Gabriel. Your power’s fled.” Rackman said smugly. “What if I take you to a private cell, hmm, Asenath? How far are you willing to take this game, I wonder?”

Asenath was about to surrender when she heard a smack, and the sound of breaking ceramic. But she felt nothing; it was Rackman who’d been hit. She felt a drizzle of cool water on her cheek, and then hot blood. The weight of Rackman’s body slumped over onto hers without a struggle.

Asenath opened her eyes to see Gabriel holding the broken handle of the water pitcher, eyes burning with rage. Rackman was crumpled on top of her, limp as a dead man. His head looked as if it had been split open. Gabriel stared at the broken pitcher’s handle, and at Rackman’s unresponsive body; hyperventilating like a wild animal.

“Gabriel.” Asenath whispered, struggling to get out from under Rackman’s weight. He stared back at her like she was speaking Chinese. “Gabriel. Gabriel, Help me up.”

After a moment, he understood; and heaved Rackman over to his side. Asenath scrambled to her feet, the front of her dress stained with drops of Rackman’s blood.

“My God. Is he dead?” She asked. Gabriel was stunned, his hands resting on Rackman’s body as the apothecary drunk in what he had done. “Gabriel, is he dead?” Asenath asked again, calling him back. Gabriel snapped into action, compelled to respond to the bleeding man.

He knelt down, and felt the wound with his fingers, checking it. Gabriel parted the hair to get a closer look. His expression was pensive, unreadable as he worked.

“He lives yet.” Then Gabriel retrieved his black shirt from the hooks, and pressed it hard against the gash in Rackman’s head. “It’s just a flesh wound – his bones aren’t broken.”

“We should get his keys and leave.” Asenath said. “Don’t worry about him.”

Gabriel shook his head and kept working. "Someone would see us." He kept pressing until the bleeding was staunch, and the shirt was partially saturated.

"You shouldn't have attacked him, Gabriel." Asenath said. "That's not like you."

"Yes it is." Gabriel said. "I do bad things. That's why I'm here."

"That's not true." Asenath said. "If they knew what I know about you..."

Her apprentice gave her a long, disbelieving look, then returned to his patient. Gabriel searched in Rackman's pocket for something, and retrieved a little container of smelling salts. He opened them and put them under Rackman's nose. Asenath wondered how Gabriel knew they were there.

The gaoler came back to life like a bear waking up from a nap. He heaved to one side, got to his feet. Rackman looked at Asenath, then Gabriel; then the pieces of broken ceramic and drops of blood on the floor. He put things together.

"Bishop." Rackman said, touching his head, seeing the blood. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"I have some power yet." Gabriel replied, his eyes glimmering like topaz in the dimness of the cell. The head wound had Rackman thinking more carefully about how to handle Gabriel.

"I'm taking you to the dark cells." Rackman decided. "Until the governor can see to thee."

Gabriel didn't resist as Rackman chained him. "Asenath. Remember what I told thee. Confess." Asenath nodded, knowing Gabriel's path was chosen].

"That's enough talking." Rackman said as he led Gabriel away; and Asenath was left alone again in the cell.

Chapter Eighteen

Thomas Braithwaite observed the crowd which had gathered to watch Sarah Winthrop's atonement, as they had to watch Gabriel on the first day of his trial. He had heard them the first day from the meeting house and assumed it was country folk; farmers and yeomen, who had little to do until the snows melted. But walking in their midst, Thomas noted most of the people gathered were from the middle class. They had closed their stores and brought their families to bear witness. They crowded close to get a glimpse of Sarah as she walked to atonement.

Thomas shouted "Make way, good people, make way!" to clear a path.

The merchants seemed chilly in their moderately fine clothing, and Thomas remembered that Gabriel had been like them once. Was that why so many had come today? Thomas tried not to think of it, and refocused himself to the task at hand. There was no point in reviewing the mitigating factors in the case. Bishop had elected the water test; God would elect his verdict accordingly. There was probably nothing he could do to force a confession at this point.

He had never lied to himself like this in Boston. Thinking of his home by the port, Thomas wished he had stayed there. Stranger things happened in the Valley; like the falling star he had seen two nights ago. Looking skyward, Thomas could almost see it streaking across the heavens now, falling and breaking down upon them like cannon fire; the sight of it vivid in his memory. It reminded him of the letter he had written to his wife, then burned.

Thomas had written heretical things in it, about Quaker patriarchs and the Holy Spirt. He had condemned John Winthrop, accused him of villainy and abuse. Marie had been right about him all along, and he was a damn fool for not listening to her. But it wasn't too late to extricate themselves. They could leave for Philadelphia, and never look back. They would be given the respect they deserved there.

But before the ink was dry, Thomas decided it was all a mistake, that he must have been mistaken. So he burned the words, and tried not to think of them. Thomas felt his heart trembling, as the letter burned again in his imagination.

He looked to Sarah Winthrop. Her black eyes shimmered like hot coals, the way John Winthrop's did when he gave his sermons. Silas whispered something to her, but Sarah pretended not to hear him.

Thomas had brought Hardship Cole and Caesar the Negro along with them for protection. As they proceeded across the commons, Caesar tapped him on the shoulder. He whispered to Thomas:

"Any word about Asenath? Rackman won't let me see her."

Thomas shook his head and whispered back; "God willing, she will wake."

The slave's ebon eyes despaired of their hopefulness. "I prayed since she came here. I wish the Lord had answered me."

"No, you don't." Thomas said. "The call of the Lord is a fearsome thing." Caesar looked as if he would hear more; but they were at the scaffold already, and Thomas didn't want to think any longer about the voice he dared not name.

The atonement party climbed the steps up the scaffold; a platform about the height of a man's chest. The murmurs grew more intense as Thomas, Hardship, Silas, and Caesar the Negro took their places around the accused woman. Silas was wearing his clergy collar, and the crowd murmured in expectation that he should speak some words. Silas humored them and said:

"In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and of God the Holy Spirit: Amen." The crowd muttered discontentedly over this laconic prayer, so that Thomas had to wait for them to stop gossiping.

He waited one moment, then two. Impatient, he cried: "Hearken, good people and attend! Yea, hearken! Your sister, Sarah Winthrop, climbs the scaffold in atonement for her sins."

Thomas turned, to address her directly. "Sarah!" He cried, over-loudly so that the crowd would hear him too. "Dost thou know thy sin?"

Sarah shook her head no.

"Thou art accused of knowing Gabriel Bishop, the accused apothecary."

Sarah watched the crowd, her black eyes burning. She paid Thomas no mind, and he cried out again; "Sarah Winthrop! Dost thou repent thy error?"

Sarah Winthrop shook her head vehemently in refusal. Silas watched; his face lined with anguish in the same pattern as John Winthrop's wrinkles.

"Thou denies it!" Thomas said. "Hearken, Sarah! For our mortal lies are frail indeed when the Holy Spirit tests them. Hast thou known Gabriel Bishop; the one they call the Sorcerer of Ipswich?"

Again Sarah denied him. Even silent, it was plain she held the charge was false.

"Prithee." Thomas said, lowering his voice a bit, "Why protect him?"

Sarah answered not; the clerk kept talking.

"If thou concede the fault, God would forgive thee. That is the purpose of atonement."

"I never knew him." Sarah cried in response. "I know no other truth than that!"

The crowd was stirred up with her words, so Sarah repeated, brazenly, "It's true: I never knew Gabriel; nor any other man! I swear it by the Word!"

Silas roared back at her; “Woman! Transgress not beyond the Lord’s mercy! Though the cup of humiliation is bitter, its contents are wholesome. Drink of its salvation or know thy undoing!”

It sounded like something John Winthrop would say. Thomas looked to Silas, as if to tell him he shouldn’t have said that. Silas’s gaze seemed to reply that he would take the lead, and get Sarah to admit to the sin which Thomas could not. He allowed it.

“Sister!” Silas cried again, entreating Sarah. “Choose thee not perdition for the sake of pride. No man is a body of faith unto himself; separated from the body of Christ they all perish.”

Sarah heard, but did not turn her eyes towards Silas.

“Sarah!” Silas pleaded. “It is not so bitter a sin that thou must carry its burden alone.”

But it was no use. Sarah would engage with him no longer; had closed her eyes and begun a silent prayer. For some minutes she ignored Silas, no matter what he said. It roiled the crowd some more. They hissed and made crosses at her, urging Braithwaite to intervene.

The clerk wondered if three men to stand guard was sufficient as the chatter turned to discontented grumbling.

Close to his feet, an old woman complained “She gets it too easy! Bring the hussy down here and we’ll show her atonement!”

Another gossip rejoined her, “Yea, bring her down!” Thomas opened his psalter to find a suitable prayer to calm them, but every page seemed to open to an inappropriate selection.

Thomas fumbled the book as he sought a better psalm; it fell from his hands. Stooping to pick it up from the scaffold, Thomas felt the wooden deck listing beneath his feet, like that of a ship’s. The feeling of being set adrift filled Thomas’s heart with dread as he took back the book, and kissed it.

“Sarah Winthrop! Answer to your crimes!” Silas roared at her, sounding very distant.

Thomas’s heart told him to stop this now, but he was powerless to do so.

Meanwhile, Sarah Winthrop was elsewhere, as deaf to the chaos brewing around her as she had been to Thomas’s call when he saw her weeping. She stared sightlessly into something vast and imperceptible.

Thomas drew closer, trying to shut out the mob and see what she saw. But it was not for him.

“Sarah!” Thomas cried, the words sticking in his throat. “Sarah Winthrop!”

“It’s useless.” Silas cautioned Braithwaite. “She’s possessed again.”

“Hussy!” The old gossip at Thomas’s feet cried. “Bring her down from the scaffold and we’ll see if she’s possessed or not!” Other women’s voices in the crowd agreed with the suggestion, volunteering to pinch Sarah and tear at her fine clothes to stop the ruse.

Thomas pretended to ignore these suggestions; as if he had a better idea. He approached Sarah Winthrop, pinched her gently and prodded her to no effect. As Thomas did so, he felt a jealousy awaken in his heart that Sarah could hear the call Thomas dared not heed. It was not for Sarah, he thought; she had stolen it from him!

Thomas shook her roughly and cried “Sarah Winthrop!”

The third repetition of Sarah’s name broke her free. Her black eyes fixed upon him as she was brought back into herself. As the Spirit left her, Sarah momentarily beheld Thomas through God’s eyes; which rounded in horror at the knave who stood before her.

In that moment Thomas realized it was he for whom this atonement was intended. The lie Sarah had told out of need Thomas kept for convenience; and used to the fullness of his purposes. The Spirit

tried to warn him, but Thomas had cleaved unto the knowledge he knew was wrong; cleaved unto the fences in the Word, hoping for protection. He had sinned against God: now Sarah Winthrop pronounced his punishment.

“Seven years, Thomas Braithwaite.” She said quietly. “And seventeen witches.” Then Sarah trembled, and collapsed to the floor of the scaffold. Hardship Cole caught her, arresting her fall.

The words set into the clerk’s mind like molten bronze into a cast. Seventeen witches in New England? But how? Thomas had thought two was one too many. It didn’t make any sense, he thought, it couldn’t be true. But the Holy Spirit had spoken, and Sarah lay fainted on the floor of the scaffold.

As Sarah fell the crowd cheered; although the old woman at Thomas’s feet insisted Sarah was still pretending. Their chatter was disorienting, like being surrounded by scores of cowbells; their clanging precluding coherent thought. Thomas thought he might faint, too; but he steeled himself and overcame the impulse.

Meanwhile, Hardship touched Sarah’s hand, trying to wake her. Her complexion was white and smooth compared to the hunter’s swarthy skin.

“She’s fainted.” Hardship said to Thomas. “Do you have smelling salts?”

“No.” Thomas said weakly. “Rackman does. Caesar, fetch him here.” The servant was about to comply when Hardship interrupted, staying Caesar’s hand.

“We need to take her inside.” Hardship said. “Feel her skin. It’s very cold.”

Caesar knelt down to touch Sarah too. He held her wrist, and his expression turned grave. “Weakened. She has such a thin little heartbeat.”

Just then Thomas felt Silas's hand on his shoulder. "I haven't seen her eat in two days." The lad whispered into his ear.

"What? Why didn't you tell me?" Thomas whispered back; then called out, "Caesar, it is not meet for you to be touching her."

The servant backed off immediately, crossing himself for his uncouth behavior.

Thomas stood there on the platform, at a loss for what to do. As the minutes dragged on, the crowd got rowdier. They wanted Sarah to awaken and confess her sin, but that was impossible.

Thomas realized they could either extract themselves now, or fight their way through; as Silas, Rackman, and Caesar had when they brought Gabriel to the meeting house. He made the choice.

"Silas, Hardship. Take her." Thomas said, spurring his men to action. "Caesar, to me. Be ready to drive them off." The servant nodded in assent, as the party of men took Sarah's body up, Silas holding her arms and Hardship her legs.

As they prepared to take Sarah inside, the crowd roared in disbelief she was being rewarded for her fainting. The old gossip cried out again that Sarah was faking it, and the merchants crowded round to see Sarah for themselves. Thomas roared; "Make way, people! I said, make way!"

Thomas led the men into the crowd, which pressed even closer to them than before, everyone shoving to get a look at Sarah. Those who got a glimpse of her were convinced of the worst, the word 'witch' hissed its way across the crowd to Thomas's ears.

"Make way!" Thomas shouted again, shoving a man to one side. The man shoved him back, but they made way; working their way through the densest part of the crowd and through to the other side. The mob pursued them at a distance, like a funeral procession.

At the edge of the commons Caesar borrowed a wheelbarrow from Rackman's oldest son-in-law. Silas and Hardship placed Sarah in it. Her arms were folded over her chest, and her legs akimbo as they wheeled her back to the gaol. Behind them, Thomas could yet hear the discontented murmurings of the throng; and he spurred his party to move faster.

As they approached safety, Sarah awoke and murmured, "Whither... what?"

"Shh, sister." Silas said, steering the barrow. "Don't get up, you'll just hurt yourself again."

Sarah's hearkened to her brother's face, and nodded. She had come back fainter than she had been before. Caesar pounded on the door, and after too long a wait, Rackman answered it. He was holding a cloth to his head and shuffled drunkenly as he walked. He chained the gates fast behind them. The angry rabble of the crowd diminished, but not by much, as they withdrew behind the gaol's fortifications.

"What happened here?" Thomas said to Rackman. "There's blood on you."

"Aye." Rackman said by way of explanation. "Asenath's awake." He said, while Silas wheeled in Sarah, and laid the wheelbarrow to rest.

Thomas thought Rackman might elaborate, but he did not; so the clerk said "Praise Heaven. But how did you get that cut on your head?"

Rackman sighed, as if this was very embarrassing. "Bishop attacked me when I went to separate them. I had to fight him off. He's downstairs now, in the dark cell. I left Asenath in his old room."

The news of Gabriel's rebellion made Thomas want to keen with frustration. He'd woken Asenath, after he said he couldn't. Giving him access to Sarah Winthrop to draw him out had been a mistake, albeit one of evidentiary value – she was clearly under the effect of some spell, and Gabriel's power had increased, allowing him to restore Asenath. Did Gabriel make me doubt him so I would bring

them together – but why then had he been opposed to the idea when I suggested it? The clerk wondered if Gabriel meant to spoil Winthrop's endorsement of him; but that didn't make sense. Gabriel didn't give a damn about the election, he only wanted to force his case to execution. That, and saving Asenath from her death, must have been his motivations. I should have put him to the river when he asked for it, Thomas thought, now feeling that his doubts about the Quaker mongrel were very risible indeed. Now Rackman was injured, Sarah was sickened, an angry mob was at the door, and Winthrop was not here to lead them. Thomas forced himself to quell the rising fear, to control himself and thereby control the situation. Stonily, he asked the gaoller "Is your injury grave?"

Rackman took the cloth from his head, and winced. "I feel dizzy. But the bleeding's stopped."

"You're probably fine, then." Thomas said. "That must have been a lucky swing."

"Aye." Rackman said. "I didn't think he had it in him."

"He's playing us for fools." Thomas grumbled, as Silas helped his sister from her barrow. Outside of the gaol, Thomas could still hear the murmurings of the throng. They awaited a formal dismissal. Or, to be more accurate, a chance to bawl him out for not getting Sarah's atonement. Gabriel would have to wait until they were dealt with.

"My God." Thomas swore, his breath making clouds of steam in the sally port. "Christ, what a mess." He turned to Sarah and said "You've really done it now."

"Done what?" Sarah said, still recovering. Silas glared at Thomas, warning him off.

"Don't play innocent." Thomas said. "I heard everything you and Gabriel said."

"Braithwaite, that's enough." Silas said, looming over his sister protectively.

"The hell it is!" Thomas said angrily. "Seven and seventeen? Tell me what it means!"

“Seven, seventeen...in which book?” Sarah asked, thinking Thomas meant scripture.

“Come now, Sarah! Seven years and seventeen witches. So spake thee on the scaffold, just before thou fainted.” But Sarah was addled; she just shook her head in response.

“She doesn’t remember, Braithwaite. Let it go.” Silas said. “We have to go outside and deal with the throng; and Father needs to be informed of what’s happened.”

“No!” Thomas cried, drawing himself up to rival Silas. “She was touched by the Word, I can feel it. If we don’t stop now, the plague of witches she predicted will come to pass. I must question her.”

Silas sneered at him, and his gaze spoke volumes to the clerk. Silas knew how Thomas strived and climbed to claim what should be his by pedigree, and his glance suggested that he would not be deposed as easily as Thomas had imagined. Catching a glimpse of his reflection in Silas’s eyes, Thomas saw a knave dressed in clothes above his station, plotting to steal that which he did not own, and who would attack the moment his enemies’ back was turned. Perhaps it was the smallness of the image or its perspective, but for a moment, Thomas’s reflection looked quite a lot like Gabriel. The clerk quailed, and Silas could sense his fear. He grabbed the clerk by the arm and forcibly dragged him out of the sally port.

Silas must not have heard what Sarah said, Thomas thought, or if he did, he hadn’t believed her. Stumbling to keep step as Silas dragged him away, Thomas could feel Silas’s anger constricting his body, could see it twisting Silas’s features into a caricature of his father. His gaze was burning with anger; some of which had found its outlet in physical confrontation, but most of which Silas buried and turned against himself. Thomas tried to squirm away, but Silas held him fast. In his grip, the clerk could almost feel Silas’s anguish as if it were his own.

“Since you’re the one in charge here, you’ll have to come with me to dismiss the crowds,” Silas said, “and then, you’re coming with me to see Father. You can explain to him what happened.”

Chapter Nineteen

Around noon John Winthrop looked up from his Bible to see the sky had become dark and mournful once again. Deep snow would fall tonight for certain; and John thought of Fanny without in the storm. The manse was quiet. He felt as alone as she must now, out there in the woods.

John prayed for her safety; lifted up his prayers so that God would deliver her back to him alive and whole. Each frozen finger and toe would be a mark against him; a reminder to John that it was he who let this happen. If she was dead, it would mean John's own place in Heaven was lost. He cast an eye towards his desk, pigeonholes stuffed full of correspondence about bridges and roads, of shipments and goods; his life had been focused on urgent, worldly things but not his family. The fault was his, though John pleaded with Christ to take mercy. Fanny deserved not to die for his sinning.

It had been twenty-one days since she fled Ipswich. How long could someone camp in the wintry forests and hope to survive? Hardship would not answer the question directly; and John suspected the worst. Every week John sent messengers to Boston and Springfield, and had gotten back his missives one-for-one. Fanny was disappeared, as if into thin air. He could have blamed Gabriel, or Thomas, or Hardship, but John chose to blame himself. If he just had been more a more attentive master, his servant would have never run away. Now Fanny's life weighed on John's conscience.

So certain was he that Fanny had already met her death from exposure, that John had not even opened the most recent pair of letters from Boston. For a day and a night they had stood upon his mantelpiece like paper headstones. He wanted not to read these; wanted not to know the grim details contained within. Like ill omens, they did not disappear for John's ignoring them. Now, he took up the messages. John took one, broke the seal on the envelope and unfolded the message. It was from the Master at Arms of the Boston militia.

To our most merciful governor, it began, and John cast his eyes over all the pleasantries of dates, names, and formal titles. *We have located the fugitive Negro servant of whom ye wrote,* it said.

John's heart leapt into his throat. Unwilling to let himself rejoice just yet, he read further.

She was apprehended today for thievery & diverse mischief. She was caught after robbing the strongbox of Goodman Samuel Shepard, an innkeep and widower, and injured him about the shoulder. In her flight your servant also invaded the manse of Mister Charles Townsend; disturbing Townsend at his bath and scalding his man-servant with boiling water. She heeded no warnings, so we were forced to take up arms against her.

The words pained him worse for being so unexpected. Not dead of cold, but shot in Boston, stealing and breaking like a common criminal. It was he who let this happen, John thought.

She was chased up Townsend's roof, and crawled along the gable to evade our men. We fired a warning volley & the fugitive leapt towards the neighbor's roof, and fell. But when she jumped, Providence set out for her a hay pile, left high & meant to furnish the stalls that very day. This hay pile did catch your servant in her fall, knocking her senseless in the landing.

A hay pile? John could hardly believe it. By grace, Fanny was alive. He kept reading.

To our amazement, the woman is unharmed. We examined her briefly and found her bones unbroken. She woke after a few minutes & walked within the hour. On her person was naught but the enclosed document and two pounds, fourteen shillings of silver. These we restored to the man from whom they were stolen. I did release the woman to the custody of the Boston gaol, to arrange for her transport home. All charges have been withheld; in deference to your right. May the Lord shine his light in the West, and all know it for a beacon of enlightenment.

Goodman William Cooper, Master-at-Arms

Appended with wax was a slightly careworn writ of passage, from Boston to Philadelphia; made out for a certain "Evey White." The date of departure was today. Fanny was to sail aboard the Pilgrim's Rose to Philadelphia. She had meant to leave Massachusetts for good.

John set Fanny's ticket to one side and tore into the next letter, knowing now it would concern the details of Fanny's return.

This letter was less pithy, a meandering two pages of flattery and wheedling for board and transport monies. The page had been written on front and back in very small letters, with highly rustic penmanship and abbreviation.

John sighed in exasperation as he read the illiterate letter. He would have to pay these 'fees', though they were nearly equal to that which Fanny had stolen from that widower. At least she was warm, John thought; or at least, this man said she was. Thomas would be given instructions to verify Fanny's condition before disbursing any promissory notes.

John set the letter aside, and turned his thoughts to other worldly matters, like Hardship Cole. The witch hunter had been on guard duty ever since his wild ride across Hampshire Valley with Asenath in tow. Now that Hardship's purpose was widely known, John was loath to use him again. After what happened to Asenath rumor had filled in the story of Hardship's ride with black details of conspiracy and summary execution. After all, it was not so long ago that godly men in England had been tortured and persecuted in secret by agents of the King.

John had heard of Asenath's poisoning from Thomas. It was a blunder, letting her drink anything; although Hardship's quick action had spared Asenath her life. Now she lay in Gabriel's cell, an enticement to further witchcraft. It was all well enough, John thought, yet he liked it not that Hardship made these choices; and that Thomas endorsed them without his consent.

What had happened was unchangeable, John thought; and arguably the result of his own directives. He had underestimated just how far Asenath would go to protect Gabriel, underestimated the amount of witchcraft she knew. But he wasn't exactly surprised that it happened. She had lived her entire life this way; arbitrarily opposing the stewardship of men who knew better. Perhaps she would do him a kindness and die, he thought, rather than force John to put her through trials and witch tests. But maybe if she awoke, she would confess. After all, she'd proven herself a witch already.

John Winthrop got out his own writing materials and began to write the men who had found his lost servant some words of acknowledgement and thanks. But presently, John heard the sound of men walking towards the manse, and set his pen aside. It was Silas and Thomas Braithwaite. Their shadows passed over John's window, as they headed towards the kitchen door. They knocked and Brydie opened it. John heard her exclaim:

"Silas, your face!" John lay his letters to one side, and headed for the kitchen.

By the time John Winthrop had gotten there, Silas was looking around for something to press to a cut on his cheek. Out of the chill it bled freely, drips of blood staining his white shirt and clergy collar. Thomas Braithwaite had collapsed on a stool by the fire, his head in his hands as if he would presently pull out his goldenrod hair by the fistful.

"What's all this?" John asked. "You two are supposed to be at the scaffold with Sarah."

"There's been another incident." Thomas said, without looking up. "Sarah fainted during the atonement, she's in no state to continue carrying out her sentence."

"How is that? Is she taken ill with something?"

"I don't think so." Thomas said. "I think she was certainly possessed this time."

"You don't say." John grumbled, feeling that God had punished him once again for being such an inattentive father to his children. "Silas, what happened?"

"Sarah's been fasting for at least a day and a night." Silas said, taking some corn husks to his wound. They weren't very absorbent. "She denied everything on the scaffold; and fell into a shaking fit. Braithwaite saw it better than I did."

"Braithwaite, is this true? What did you see?" John asked.

Braithwaite took his hands from his face; he was pale like he'd seen a spirit. "Yes, it's true." He said. "She made pronunciations, about seven years and seventeen witches."

"I see. What do you make of it?"

"I couldn't say." Thomas said. The clerk seemed taciturn for the first time in his life.

John wanted more details. "Where is she now?"

"Resting at Andover Gaol." Thomas said. "I'd wait til the angry throng clears out to move her."

The housemaid Brydie was taking all this in with wide eyes; looking from Thomas to John and then to Silas, who was dripping blood on the rug. The gossip seemed half-frightened and a little excited, as if knowing the value of this conversation in her red-ringed head.

"I should like to speak to the both of you in private." John Winthrop said to Brydie a little pointedly.

Brydie set her implements to one side, and curtsied obediently. "Yes, governor. Here, Silas." She said, handing his son the most charred potholder. "To see to your wound."

The servant left the kitchen. Soon, John would need to find another position for her; to sell her contract to someone else. He waited for Brydie to get safely out of earshot before he spoke.

John spoke in a low voice. "Thomas. Tell me everything, from the beginning."

The clerk sighed from his place by the fire, not meeting Winthrop's gaze. "We brought her to the scaffold. She denied the charge. Silas and I exhorted her. She became unresponsive. I called her name, and the third time she made pronunciations. Then she fainted; and could not be roused. She had to be carried back to the gaol in a wheelbarrow."

"There's something else you should know, Father." Silas interrupted. "Asenath Black awoke during the atonement. Gabriel attacked Rackman lest she be separated from him."

John Winthrop let the words hang in smoky kitchen for a moment. They had been together. Gabriel's power had been restored – if indeed he'd ever lost it. His anger deepened as he looked at Thomas, whose body seemed closed tight like a mollusk. He knew it had been an oversight, and John could feel his fear, but it wasn't enough. For a moment, he had to fight to maintain mastery of his emotions, to not scream at the clerk for underestimating Gabriel.

Finally John said, "There's blood on your collar, Silas. How were you cut?"

"There is?" He said, looking down at it. "Oh. It was the witnesses, at the gaol. They think Sarah's pretending again. One of them threw a bottle at my head."

"Give the garment here." John said.

Silas untied it fondly, and looked bitterly upon the stains; knowing what was about to happen. John took the collar and tossed it in the fire. He let Silas watch it be consumed and then said, "You're excused."

Silas left the kitchen, and John heard his son's footsteps on the stairs as he retired to the bedroom he and Gabriel used to share.

John turned his attention to the other problem in the room. Thomas was certainly concealing something from him. John had sensed it when he'd told Thomas of the charges, but now it was evident in the clerk's posture, his expression. He was pale, and a haunted look lingered in his eyes.

"You've been having visitations too." John said, recognizing the symptoms.

Thomas gasped, "How did you know?"

"I can always tell." John said. "Do not hide from me, Thomas Braithwaite. What came for thee, and wherefore? When didst thou see it first?"

"Two nights ago." Thomas said. "On the way back from supper."

"Was this during the starburst?" John asked, having heard reports of its brilliance.

"Aye." Thomas said. "But let me not speak of what came for me."

"Why not?"

"It's heresy. It was like cannon fire, or flaming hail. But it spoke to me, John; I fell to the ground and could not rise, for I was in its grip. It looked into my heart and knew me false. It told me to open my eyes, and I thought I would go blind, or die."

"You think you saw the Holy Spirit." John said, recognizing the Quaker terminology and the individual nature of the visions. "It's Gabriel again. He's gotten into your mind, too."

"No." Thomas said. "My mind is clear. It was the Word which came for me."

"Ridiculous." John said. "An aspect of the Trinity appeared in my front commons, but only to you, and in the middle of the night? It's a ruse; Gabriel's trying to distract you."

"But it came back today, and into Sarah." Thomas said, shaken. "It said, seven years and seventeen witches. It's written in the future now, I could see it."

“Seventeen witches? Nonsense.” John said, shaking his head at the number.

“I don’t know what it means either.” Thomas said. “It seems impossible.”

“The Lord isn’t speaking to you, Braithwaite. Gabriel is, directing these tempting messages at you in the guise of the Word. He’s gotten into your mind, tapped into what will frighten thee most. He’s trying to undermine your faith, to weaken you. Don’t give in to the ruse.”

“No.” Thomas said. “If thou had only seen it for yourself, Governor...”

“This is a test of your faith, to see the Quaker heresies for the witchcraft they are.” John Winthrop interrupted. “You’re in the grip of a sorcery. The Holy Spirit never appears to just one man.”

“But it held me in its hand.” Thomas said, shaken. “It called me by my name, and I cried out for it to leave me. It could have taken my life then, but it let me stay.”

“This weakness has to do with your family, I think.” John Winthrop said. “Your father Asa fell prey to similar delusions of grandeur. Gabriel will utilize any weak point-”

“It wasn’t Gabriel!” Thomas cried for the whole house to hear. “That two-trick sorcerer doesn’t give two bits about me, or your daughter, so why would he bewitch us?!”

John exhaled, and let Thomas’s exclamation settle in the air as he fought to his own impulse to smack the clerk across the face for insubordination.

“No wonder Sarah made pronunciations on the scaffold.” John said scornfully. “I should have listened to you at the start and drowned Gabriel; now listen to yourself. Thou art his servant, yet wholly unaware!”

“No.” Thomas said fervently. “I am a servant only to God. I swear it on the Word.”

"Thou cleavest unto visitations; which come to thee in the proximity of a sorcerer! That's too foolish even for Silas!" John said.

"It is not foolish!" Thomas fired back. "Foolish was denying its call in loyalty to thee!"

"Asa told me something similar, before he followed Anne Hutchinson." John said.

"Thou would threaten me with exile." Thomas said, astounded. "I see how it is."

"Oh, and how is that?" John said, sarcastically. "What would God hide from me but reveal to thee? Enlighten me, Mister Braithwaite, of the holy mysteries revealed to thee."

"I can't answer these questions any longer." Thomas said. "This trial has gone to hell since the first day, and it's because we're framing Gabriel as something greater than he truly is. I feel the weight of it upon me. I told lies, manipulated those who trusted me. I want to wash my hands of this."

"You're a secret Quaker." John said. "Thou ought to be dismissed from the clerkship, and your hunting-man Cole sent back to Deerfield to shoot cats; or whatever it is that he does."

Now Thomas's soul was on display in all its desperation. The clerk said "I agree, governor. My mind is full of doubts and falsehoods. Take this cup from me."

"I wish that I could." John said. "But if I dismiss you now, I will have to declare a mistrial. Gabriel will walk free because of your doubting him, and doubtless someone else will come to harm from his sorceries."

"The only sorcery we know he knows is the pox-charm." Thomas said.

"Shut up." John said curtly. "I wasn't done speaking. I was mistaken to trust you as I have, but for the moment it seems we're in the same boat. I will not countenance failure on the basis of your religious crises. Here is what you will do. You will see Gabriel through to his water test and return to

Boston forthwith. You will not seek the magistracy this year, or ever. You shall not make any writings about what you've seen, or of this trial."

"Yes, governor." Thomas said, looking as if he wanted very badly to leave the room.

"One last thing before I dismiss you." John Winthrop said. "I've received word from Boston. Fanny has been found. They're bringing her here in a cart. Take your hunting-man Cole and meet them on the Boston Road. Ye shall leave by dawn tomorrow."

"Thy will be done, governor." Thomas said. "And I'm sorry, for everything."

"Your apologies are worthless. Get out of my house." John said. Thomas obeyed, leaving quickly through the side door.

John sighed, and worked at a headache growing behind his temples with his fingertips. Even Thomas had been turned against him, and his list of trusted persons grew short. When would God be finished testing him? John spotted a cup of tea and took a sip, but it was stone cold and bitter. He set it to one side, and cried "Silas!"

John could hear the creak of the stairs as Silas obeyed him. "Here I am." Silas said, as John met him in the hall.

"I need you to come with me to fetch your sister. And wear a bloody cloak or you'll freeze to death. Not that one, Silas." John said as Silas reached for Sarah's red one. "Are there no others? Very well, take my spare."

The two men left the manse, Silas following John in the manner of a kicked dog. John stole a glance at his younger son, thinking on what Braithwaite had mentioned. Silas's soul must be starved for comfort if he intruded on Thomas to confide in him. Perhaps now was the time to reconcile.

After a few minutes of walking, John broke the silence. “There’s word from Boston. Fanny has been found.”

“Praise Heaven.” Silas said. His eyes were red from weeping, although the bleeding had stopped.

“Thou art angered with me.” John said.

“Nay.” Silas said. “Thou warned me. I profaned my badge of priesthood. I’m not meant to be a preacher, everything I say just makes things worse.”

John considered what his son meant by that. “It was thy sermon in Ipswich sent an angry mob towards Gabriel’s apothecary, was it not?”

The memory wounded Silas like a spear-point. “It was.”

“Silent are the wise. You will learn, Silas.” John said.

“No. I should give up hope; I am no learned minister like thou.”

“The words of an evangelist can be difficult to accept. Jeremiah was driven from Jerusalem.”

“I didn’t start that nickname.” Silas said. “It’s vain; I don’t like it.”

“Hardly. You’ve only kept the commandments and demanded others do the same. You serve them better than they know, by insisting that even Gabriel’s rights be respected. That’s what being a leader is about – to provide the people with what they need, even if it isn’t what they like. And a day will come when they thank you for it, and appreciate your wisdom.”

Silas stopped, and looked his father in the eyes. “You’re not angry with me.” He said.

“No, Silas; I know why you defended Gabriel.”

Silas's face suddenly folded, like a piece of parchment being crumpled. He lurched, then crashed into John, embracing him. Silas held on for dear life, burying his bloodied face in John's cloak to stifle his emotions. The poor boy was trying very hard not to cry.

"It pays mean wages." Silas said, his voice muffled. "Everyone hates me."

"I know." John said. "The townsfolk mock you now. And Gabriel pains you too; I can see that. It is because of your great faith that you do not abandon him."

"Gabriel is evil." Silas wept. "He just assaulted Rackman this past hour. And he forced himself onto Fanny, months ago before all this started. I knew, and I let him touch my sister after that!"

"He's a sorcerer; he ensnared you with his words." John said forgivingly.

Silas shook his head. "No. I still don't believe that. It was me; I'm responsible. I wanted so badly for Gabriel to be innocent that I was willing to believe anything. But he's not the person he once was. You were right about him all along, and I was too stubborn to listen."

"The fault is mine too. I brought him into our house." John said. "Join me, Silas; and redeem yourself in God's eyes. It was no punishment that your collar had to burn today, but an atonement. Dost thou remember, when I told thee of atonement?"

"Yes, Father." Silas said, containing his emotions. "Thank you for burning it in front of Braithwaite. That was deserved. I shall never be a preacher; I am not fit for the task."

"There, there." John said, disentangling himself from Silas. "Braithwaite's not as godly as you'd think. He lies; and he said that he attacked you in his room. You didn't tell me about that."

"It was nothing." Silas said. "I deserved it – he thought I was possessed, with reason."

"Don't listen to him. He's a half-quaker and the son of a madman."

"But you said-" Silas said, wiping tears from his eyes. "You said he'd be governor someday."

"I was mistaken. Braithwaite is unfit for the position he holds, let alone a higher one."

"Does you mean that you would have me take his place?" Silas asked, disbelieving.

John affirmed his son with a nod. "Silas, you can serve this colony better as the governor than as a preacher. I can see you love the common people, and I promise someday they will understand you. I can show you how to lead them. It was something I should have done a long time ago."

Silas seemed to accept this, although he looked conflicted. "What would you have me do?"

"See this witch trial through to the last; yea, even to a double hanging, if that must be. Wilt thou see justice done? It's what Gabriel would have wanted, before he lost his soul to the Black Man."

Silas thought about it, and said "I don't want to be the one to have to kill him."

"You won't be. That kind of work is for Rackman and Cole to handle. You would only watch over Gabriel until the day arrives; to attend to him, as you have been doing."

"Do I have to bear witness, when we put him to the river?" Silas asked.

"I'm afraid so." John said. "It will end his dominion over thee."

"I can't." Silas said. "If he just confessed, we could exile him."

"The time for a confession is past, son. Gabriel's been given half a hundred chances to make it right with us; but he's chosen this way. If thou truly art his friend; thou shalt honor his wishes."

"That's true." Silas said. "I'll do it."

"Thou art merciful, Silas." John said. "Remember that this is what Gabriel would have wanted."

Silas nodded, though his eyes were streaming tears. "I know." He said, quietly.

"He's gone. What remains of him is an impostor, not the man you knew and loved."

"Yes." Silas said. "Only, one last thing."

"What is it?" John Winthrop asked.

"Do it soon." Silas said. "I can't suffer him to live much longer."

"Mercies upon mercies." John said. "Thou wilt make a fine governor, Silas."

Chapter Twenty

Hardship Cole was awoken from his slumber by Caesar the Negro an hour before dawn. There was a searing pain in his head; Hardship felt someone prodding him.

“Hardship. Mister Hardship, are you awake yet?”

“Ugh.” Hardship said, opening his eyes. He was in an empty stable, thankfully a clean one. How had he gotten here? Hardship sat up, but when he did the pain in his head redoubled.

“Ohh.” Hardship moaned, flopping back onto the straw. “That witch mistress of yours cursed my drinks, Caesar. I’ve been poisoned.”

“I think you just had too many.” Caesar said. “Thomas Braithwaite’s here to fetch you. He says it’s on the governor’s business.”

“Fetch me?” Hardship said. “Wherefore?”

“They found Fanny, you’re to come escort her up the Boston Road.”

“Nay.” Hardship said in disbelief. “That black bird is gone. Dead, you know?”

“She was found alive.” Caesar said. “In Boston.”

“I don’t believe it.” Hardship said, finding his hat. “Doing what?”

“I heard she beat a white man and stole his money.”

“Feisty. But I guess you’d have to be to sleep with witches.” Hardship said, looking for his hat.

“I guess she meant to leave. Perhaps she lost heart, and surrendered.” Caesar supposed. “Or maybe she got too far away for Gabriel’s enchantments to work.”

“Christ, you don’t know the first thing about this, do you?” Hardship said.

“Asenath sent me here to appease Winthrop. So perhaps not.”

“Away with thee, black devil.” Hardship said sarcastically. “Tell Braithwaite I’ll be along.”

“Don’t fall asleep again. This is the second time I had to wake you.”

With that, Caesar let him be. Hardship heaved himself upright, and held his head in his hands for a moment. He couldn’t even think with his head aching like this.

Hardship went to the water trough for the horses and dunked his head in it to rouse himself. He washed his face and drank a few icy handfuls of it. It was refreshing; Hardship filled his skin for the ride. Had anyone seen him last night? Hardship checked his reflection in the trough, the headache coming and going in waves. There were dice in his pockets. Had he gone gambling with Sarah Winthrop?

She had looked so bonny for her atonement; cultivated as a hothouse rose. This part Hardship remembered; they left the gaol before her brother and father came back from the manse. But whither had they gone? The memories were blurred and fragmentary; as if Hardship had dreamed them. He saddled his horse, trying to remember, tasting the remnants of cider on his breath.

He felt through his pockets, and found a small apple for his breakfast. Hardship polished it on his shirt and took a bite. The fruit was sweet and woody. Gnawing on it, Hardship sorted through his pockets and purse, all of which were in order. But something was missing, which nagged at Hardship’s aching mind. It wasn’t his musket; that was locked up safe in the armory.

Try as he might, Hardship could not recall what was missing. He mounted his horse and rode it through the sally port. Rackman let him through with a knowing wink, as if to say he had seen him and Sarah leaving. This made Hardship worry more.

Thomas Braithwaite sat on his pony, looking like a blonder, younger iteration of John Winthrop. He was no more pleased to see Hardship’s puffy countenance than Hardship his.

“Good morning to you, sirrah.” Thomas said.

“Certainly an early one.” Hardship replied.

“Don’t have to tell me that.” Thomas said. “I heard your ruckus when they kicked you out of the Squaw’s Fire. It woke me.”

“I was at the Squaw’s Fire?” Hardship asked.

“Don’t remember? You must have been stewed, then.”

“I do feel stewed.” Hardship admitted. “What was the ruckus?”

“You were sure someone lifted from your pocket.” Thomas said. “Speaking of which, we’ve got a captive to collect.”

“Aye, let’s be off.” Hardship said.

The men rode through the town, the sound of hoofbeats muffled against the snow pack. Hardship pressed his hand to his forehead and the pain momentarily abated. The witch hunter focused on that, trying to draw the pain out from himself.

Why had he been at the Squaw’s Fire? That place was too pricey for Hardship’s blood. Still, Braithwaite had heard him. As the men rode through town, certain women fixed Hardship with curious glances, as if reading the story of his night out on his clothes and face.

Let them think what they will, Hardship thought. He was more concerned about Sarah. What if he’d done something foolish with her? Hardship searched his memories, but couldn’t remember either way. Then, he felt badly; the girl deserved no more evil upon her head. Hardship prayed for Sarah Winthrop then, that they really had only gone gambling.

As they approached the gate, Thomas broke the silence. “Hardship, may I ask you something?”

One of the guards opened the gate and the two men rode out of the village, leaving the high wooden palisade behind them.

"If you will." Hardship replied once they were out of earshot.

"Could thou have found her?" Thomas said. "Fanny, I mean."

"Perhaps if I was in Ipswich when it happened. But by the time I arrived, the traces were gone."

"I suppose Gabriel was telling the truth about freeing her." Thomas said, sounding conflicted.

"Don't call him by his first name." Hardship said. "It'll increase his power over thee."

"Gabriel's powers are fled." Thomas said. "Something stinks in this case, Hardship. Yesterday, Winthrop threw me out of his manse, saying I was possessed. He seems intent on killing him now."

"To what end?" Hardship asked. "I thought he wanted a confession."

"I don't know. It may have to do with Fanny's escape. She meant to leave the colony for good."

"I wonder where she got the money for that." Hardship said. "The forest is a hard place to travel in midwinter. Fanny would have left some traces, been seen in the towns, or on the road. It's not like there are many Negroes between here and Boston."

"Maybe we missed something." Thomas said. "Gabriel must have left a clue."

"I don't miss clues, Braithwaite." Hardship said. "Unless she's a master escapist, Fanny couldn't have gotten further than Salem Township without somebody noticing her."

"So thou assumed she was hiding nearby." Thomas said glumly.

"I assumed she was dead." Hardship replied honestly. "And then she just reappears and gives herself up in Boston? It doesn't make any sense."

"It's not like she surrendered." Thomas said. "Fanny had to be chased. She pushed Townsend's serving man down the stairs and tried to jump across a roof."

"Aye, that's magic to be sure." Hardship said. "Either Fanny's a witch herself, or she's Bishop's confederate in his sorcery. That's my opinion; now I have a question for thee." Hardship said.

"Shoot." Thomas replied.

"Why do you think Bishop's innocent?" Hardship asked, taking Thomas aback.

"I never said he was innocent." Thomas said. "I wanted to put him to the water test right away."

"But now you have doubts." Hardship said.

Thomas hesitated. "Some things have changed about the case since then."

"Like what?" Hardship asked.

"Sarah Winthrop lied on the witness stand." Thomas said. "She admitted it to me later on."

"What'd she lie about?" Hardship asked. Thomas looked embarrassed.

"She pretended to be possessed by Gabriel in front of the governor and a whole gallery of witnesses. I was there, and I knew it as falsehood; but did nothing. I'm sure others do, too."

"Was it like yesterday?" Hardship asked, thinking of Sarah's faint on the scaffold.

"No, that one was real." Thomas said. "I think Winthrop knew he made her bear false witness. Yet also used it as a basis to make Sarah do atonement. He's perjuring himself for no reason, and it makes me wonder if Bishop isn't just a Quaker apothecary with bad luck and a worse reputation. But Winthrop's not interested in hearing reasonable doubt."

"What a badger." Hardship swore. "I might have stayed in Deerfield."

"And I in Boston." Thomas said. "But we're here now."

"I have a second question." Hardship said, as they passed by the crossroads, taking the route east to Boston. "Do you think she fancies me?" Hardship asked.

"Who, Sarah Winthrop?" Thomas said. "Did all the milkmaids in Deerfield tell you to get lost?"

"Girls like me, Braithwaite." Hardship said defensively. "And now that she's fallen, Sarah's fair game for men like myself. You think you could pull a string or two for my sake?" Hardship wanted to know exactly what they had done, to hear it from Sarah herself that all was well.

"Don't bother." Thomas said. "I'm sure she spurned you last night."

Hardship was silent for a moment, too chagrined to speak. They rode onward, and in the distance there was a bang from a musket. Hardship wished he was out hunting now.

After a while Thomas Braithwaite said "You really don't remember, do you?"

"Not really, no." The two men rode onward for a moment, the silence increasingly awkward between them. "The damn thing is, Braithwaite, I know I lost something last night; except now I can't remember what it was."

"Was it something important?" Thomas asked.

"Yes." Hardship said. "I remember that much."

"Was it your keys? Your purse?" Thomas asked helpfully.

"No." Hardship said. "I think I gambled last night, but my purse is the same."

"You play cards?" Thomas said incredulously. "That's a devil's errand."

“Dice.” Hardship said, a little miffed. “It’s just a good bit of fun, Braithwaite. The devil is drink, making me forget where I’ve been and putting this awful pain in my head.”

“Maybe Asenath did it to humiliate you.” Thomas said.

Asenath’s name recalled for Hardship the thing which was missing. The poison was gone, he realized; the one Asenath used to poison herself. Hardship checked his pockets again, hoping it had just been tucked into an odd one. But it wasn’t there any longer.

“Did you remember what is was you lost?” Thomas asked.

“Er, no.” Hardship lied, not wanting to tell the clerk he’d lost a bit of key evidence. “Just thought I brought my psalter.”

“I thought you hated reading.” Thomas said.

“It’s difficult, the letters and words all dancing around on the page. But I can read a psalm.”

Braithwaite snorted like Hardship was making it up.

“No, really.” Hardship said. “The words just won’t hold still.”

“I wonder how far up the road these people are.” Thomas said, changing the subject.

The two men climbed up a huge hill, towards the trading post at Matthew’s Farm. As they went, Hardship thought about the poison. He would have to make a facsimile for Asenath’s trial tomorrow. If he made it convincing, no one had to know Hardship lost the real article.

“I see something up ahead.” Thomas said after a few minutes. “Over there.”

Braithwaite pointed. Four men and a team of oxen were pulling a cart.

“Well, it could be them.” Hardship said. As they got closer it was apparent that this was indeed the party whom they were seeking.

One man in the group rode ahead on a horse, and the other three minded the cart behind him. The mounted man’s breastplate glimmered in the winter sunshine, and he carried a halberd for self-defense.

“Hello!” the mounted man cried; with a voice that said he was from Boston.

“Hello!” Hardship cried back. “Are ye the gaollers?”

“Aye that we are.” The other man replied, “With a captive for the governor’s judgment. Are ye his agents?” They had come together now; Hardship’s horse dropped its head and began to paw at the frozen earth for something to chew on.

“Cooper!” Thomas exclaimed, recognizing the man. “It’s good to see you again. We come with the governor’s blessings, and his promissory note.”

“Braithwaite, I didn’t recognize you.” Cooper said. “Aren’t you supposed to be in Andover?”

“I am, just not at the moment.” Thomas said. “Winthrop sent us to relieve you; the captive will proceed immediately to judgment.”

“It’s always swift justice in the West.” Cooper noted. “She is as I said in my letters. But come, look for yourself.”

The cart had arrived on the scene now, with Fanny chained to it. A Welshman rode in the cart as well, as Fanny’s attendant. “Dennis! Unchain the captive!”

Dennis, the servant in the cart, unlocked Fanny’s bonds. With his help she dismounted, and came towards the men.

"So you must be Fanny." Hardship said when she stood before them.

"I am." Fanny said, her eyes lowered respectfully.

Fanny was unwashed, and she wore the same dress she had escaped in; but otherwise she was in fair condition. She must have a different given name, Hardship decided; a Christian name Winthrop used for her. 'Fanny' was much too descriptive, he thought, chuckling at his own joke.

"Hast thou been kept warm, Fanny?" Thomas asked.

"Yes, sir." She said. "These men were very gentle with me."

"Good." Thomas said, retrieving a filled-out promissory note and a quill. The governor's signature graced the bottom of the page, along with a space for Braithwaite's endorsement.

"Is it in the amount specified?" Cooper asked, his eyes shining with a bit of avarice.

"It's whatever was agreed upon; er," Thomas said, checking the document and getting his writing materials. "Six pounds, ten shillings." That was much more than he was getting paid, Hardship groused to himself.

Thomas signed the note, juggling his ink pot and the note in one hand over the shoulders of his horse. "Blow on it, I haven't any sand." Braithwaite said. "Mind it doesn't smudge."

"They'll probably cash it even if it did." Cooper said, blowing on the number approvingly.

"Dennis, unlock her manacles. And when he get home, I'll buy you a new set of clothes."

"Hardship, bind her to your horse." Thomas said.

"Aye, Mister Braithwaite." Hardship said, then dismounted and took a bit of rope from his saddlebag. He secured the captive to his saddle, so that she would walk alongside. Fanny's shoes looked nicer than the usual fare for slaves, and sturdy enough for a bit of walking in the snow.

"I suppose we're done here." Thomas said.

"Aye." Cooper agreed. "Are you returning home soon? Thy wife despairs of thee."

"I know it." Thomas said. "I keep meaning to write her. Tell her I'll be home soon, would you?"

"I shall." Cooper said. "God be with ye, Thomas Braithwaite."

"And with thee." Thomas replied. "Travel safely, it's a long ride."

"Not so long." Cooper said. "I've family in Salem. We'll spend the night there and proceed to Boston in the morning."

"Well, that's not too bad." Thomas agreed. With that, the men from Boston said their farewells, and Fanny went with the governor's men.

Chapter Twenty-One

It was about four miles from here to Ipswich, but Fanny wished it was further. The uncertainty of what would happen when she returned to Ipswich hung over her head like a sword. Where was Silas? It didn't seem meet that he had not come to get her. Did it mean she too was suspected?

The blond man, who had signed the promissory note to redeem Fanny was gazing at her as they went, as if he wanted to say something.

Finally he said from horseback, "I don't suppose we've ever met."

"Actually we have." Fanny said. "You're Thomas Braithwaite, the clerk. The governor invited you to the Boston manse last year. You stayed over for a day and a night."

The clerk seemed surprised. "I did. When did we meet, again?"

"At supper. I served the meal."

"But of course." Mister Braithwaite said, chagrined. "How could I have forgotten?"

The scruffy man holding the rope said "What about me? Do you know my face?" She didn't, and Fanny wished he would speak more softly. He was talking right into her ear.

The clerk shot him a withering stare. "Hardship, I'm trying to interview a witness."

The yeoman, evidently Hardship, replied "What, is this some official to-do?"

"It is a court matter." Braithwaite said, as if Hardship wasn't taking it seriously enough.

"I thought the governor wanted that book shut." Hardship said, in a discouraging tone. "The mission was to find her, and now she's found. Don't go digging our graves here, Braithwaite."

"Will you please be quiet and let me talk to her?" The clerk said.

There was quiet as Hardship disengaged, looking a little snubbed.

Fanny guessed what the men were thinking about. "Is it about Gabriel?"

"Yes." Thomas said. "He's going to be put to the water test."

"Don't do it." Fanny said. "If you put him to the river, he might escape."

"Why do you say that?" Thomas said. "Have you seen him at his magic?"

It sounded like an accusation. But Fanny answered truthfully. "Yes. Listen, you should know that Gabriel and I... I've known him. I didn't want to do it. But Gabriel kept insisting."

"Yes." Braithwaite said, pensive. "Bishop told me what he did."

"He said I'd be sold if I told anybody. I was too frightened to breathe a word."

"It's not your fault, Fanny." Thomas Braithwaite said gently. "You were wise not to refuse him."

"But I did refuse him! I refused him so many times; but he wouldn't leave me alone!" Fanny cried. The words rang out louder than she expected, echoing into the frozen hills. "Gabriel can't take no for an answer. He's willful, insistent like that."

Hardship gave Fanny a look that said that didn't prove anything.

"Why didn't you tell the Governor what Bishop was doing?" Thomas asked.

"I was afraid to." Fanny answered. "At first, I was afraid he'd sell me like Gabriel said he might. Later on, I feared that Gabriel would retaliate if I did; I thought he would hurt Sarah or Silas. I heard the rumors he was a witch, saw the works in his shop. He knew I couldn't warn anyone about him."

"There are some that think you Gabriel's confederate. A witch yourself." Thomas said, plainly talking about Hardship, and possibly the governor as well.

"Don't mistake me, Mister Braithwaite." Fanny said. "I was born here in Massachusetts, and lived with the governor all my life. I know nothing of African black magic; and neither did my mother."

Thomas and Hardship said nothing, instead trading knowing glances between each other.

"Does the governor think I'm a witch?" Fanny asked fearfully.

"...No." Thomas Braithwaite said, not lying. "But how can you be sure Gabriel is a witch?"

"I saw him on the night of the fire; but he wasn't Gabriel that night." Fanny said. "He let the Black Man go walking in his skin. When he said farewell, he gave me instructions of what to do, and told me of what would happen next. All of the predictions Gabriel made that night were correct. I saw the fire he set on the meeting house, and I could see the Devil dancing in the flames."

"Wishes offered to the Black Man always come at a price." Hardship interrupted. "Bishop must have really loved the wench to take it on himself."

"That's what he said." Fanny agreed. "I don't love Gabriel. He scares me."

"There's just not enough evidence, Fanny." Thomas said. "Sarah lied during her testimony; and Silas defended Gabriel. And now that Asenath's accused, she'll probably deny everything..."

"I'll testify against him." Fanny said, interrupting.

"You want to?" Hardship asked, giving Thomas a pointed look.

Then Fanny said "I promise I'll be true. I swear it, by all that's holy."

"It's unusual to let Negroes bear witness." Thomas said.

"I can give you what you need to hang him. Please."

“What if you’re telling me tales?” Thomas said. “I can’t let you bear false witness in order to exact revenge on Gabriel for what he did to you, awful as it was.”

“I don’t want revenge for that.” Fanny said. “Really. And I never tell stories; this is the truth.”

“You’re certain about this?” Hardship interjected. “Once you go to the court, there’s no turning back. You’ll have to see him, and say what you know while he watches you.”

“I’m certain.” Fanny said. “Gabriel put a curse on the Winthrops. He signed the Black Man’s book, sold his soul for that fire. Justice is the kindest thing I can offer to him now.”

Thomas seemed impressed with her answer. “Very well, Fanny. You’ll have your day in court.”

The horses clopped homeward, Fanny alongside them. These were woods which Fanny knew well, becoming more familiar as they approached Ipswich Town. She spotted the High Horse standing proudly on Hurdle Maker’s Hill; sunlight glimmering off its window panes like the scales of a sleeping dragon. It was shut, and Fanny remembered what Mister Braithwaite said about Asenath being accused as well. What she did must have been bad, if it warranted arrest.

Braithwaite and Hardship rode past the tavern, and bore left at the fork, to the bridge to take them across the Connecticut River. “The trial is being held in Andover.” Hardship explained, when Fanny looked down the road to Ipswich questioningly. “You’ll meet the governor on the scaffold.”

As they went, Fanny counted the blessings she had enjoyed as a servant of the Winthrops. She had lived inside the walls, and men watched over her to keep her safe from harm. The governor even let her eat at the table sometimes, after grace was said. She could see them now in the candlelight of dinners past; Silas, Sarah, and John Winthrop, their patriarch, eating meals she had prepared. They were as close to family as Fanny had left, good masters; but she had cruelly pushed them away.

Now, she regretted her designs on independence, just as Adam must have regretted eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge. She knew now how foolish she'd been, to feel sorry for the girl Madeline, to get a position anywhere in Boston. She should have stowed away on the next ship out; not waited, not let anyone see her face. Now the spell was broken, and Fanny was a slave again.

As she followed the horses, Fanny promised God to become a more perfect servant than she had been, if only the governor would give her a second chance. She clasped her hands tightly, hoped God would hear her prayer. But the heavens were silent, and Fanny feared she was forsaken.

They went over the bridge to Andover, getting a glimpse of the frozen Connecticut River. The ice was thinner than it had been a month ago; freezing and thawing in sheets. There were a few holes kicked into the surface, as if someone had tried their hand at ice fishing. Water splashed merrily around them, revealing the strength of the current below. In a month or two the ice would be broken up, and the ferrymen would come from Springfield to transport meat and produce south.

The guards on Andover side of the bridge let them through; the tops of their halberds nearly level with the men on horseback as they passed. One of the men put his hands up to his mouth, trying to warm his fingers through the gloves. It had been getting steadily colder all day.

The Andover palisade came into view as they left the bridge behind them. The town of Andover itself was concentrated on the topmost part of the rise, buildings huddled close around the meeting house. Fanny could see the steeple, and wondered if this would be the last time she laid eyes on it. The palisades grew from tiny bumps in the landscape to thick, rough-hewn wooden walls twenty feet high. A watchman waved to Hardship as they approached, following the path to the village gate.

The gates were manned, as usual, by two guards; one within and one without. On any given day, a dozen men patrolled the walls in shifts, watching for Indians.

Fanny was too little to remember the last time Indians had overrun the fortifications, but it had happened. It had been a real massacre; braves killing, pillaging, burning. The Winthrops were lucky to have survived. After that, the governor built up the wall to twice its original height. Nowadays, few were foolish enough to challenge the palisade but a rabid wolf or lone bear. The Indians had mostly moved on, making their camps deeper in the forest interior.

Fanny passed through the gate, into Andover Town. It was only slightly nicer than Ipswich, a collection of two score modest cottages. Where it could be afforded, the doors were reinforced by iron bolts. The riders headed towards handful of taller and finer manses, erected by men of standing from England. One of those was Fanny's house, or at least it had been.

When they arrived at the town commons, a crowd awaited them. A few merchants had moved their carts to the fringe of the commons, selling hot tea and cider to the assembled townsfolk. On the scaffold was the governor, seated on a camp stool. Silas stood behind him, his psalter in hand. They looked as if they had been waiting for some time, taking the opportunity to lead the assembled witnesses in prayers of repentance and humility.

Fanny felt her heart racing and she clasped her hands again, willing God to hear her prayer. Fanny trembled as the governor's figure grew to life-size.

She knew it, she was forsaken; she could see it in his eyes. Governor Winthrop would sell her for certain. Braithwaite and Hardship pulled their horses up to the scaffold, the townsfolk giving way so they could approach.

Hardship came down from his horse and took the rope. He led her and Braithwaite followed as they ascended the scaffold. The governor rose to greet them. Silas stared at her, his gaze penetrating like that of an eagle's. Fanny's heart quailed to see it, for it held the truth of what would come.

"Fanny; praise Heaven." The governor said.

Fanny dropped to her knees, put her hands on the floor of the scaffold. "Mercy!" she cried.

"Have mercy, Master. I have sinned against thee greatly."

"Ssh. That's all past. Thomas, loose her bonds."

Hardship untied Fanny's wrists, and the both of them shared a look of bewilderment. She could have run away right there, if there had been anywhere for her to go. She stayed kneeling.

"We meet tomorrow, for Asenath's trial. Is it all settled?" John Winthrop asked him.

"Yes. Though there is one thing." Thomas Braithwaite said. "She wants to testify against him."

They both glanced at Fanny, confirming who they meant.

The governor said quietly "Then bring Gabriel tomorrow, but gag him tightly. Use the scold's bridle. Not a single word can pass his lips."

"Is that necessary?" Thomas asked. "After Fanny's through with him, Bishop won't have much to say."

"So it's damning, then? You shouldn't have doubted me." John Winthrop said, satisfied. "You're dismissed, the both of you."

The two men climbed down from the scaffold and led their horses away. The crowd murmured, impatient to hear what the governor's verdict in the matter of his recovered servant. Fanny watched his shoes from her kneeling position, but he said nothing. He must be thinking of how to tell her the bad news. She had to say something, although Fanny knew it would make no difference.

"Mercy, please." She said, too softly for the crowd to hear. "He broke into the manse. I couldn't refuse him. I was scared; please don't sell me."

The governor knelt down to Fanny's level, and took her hand, pulling her up. "It's all right now, Fanny. You're safe; that's what matters."

Disbelieving, Fanny met her master's gaze. There was no anger in it.

"Rise." John Winthrop said, pulling her back to her feet, embracing her in front of everyone. "It's I who should plead for mercy. It's by grace alone that thou art spared from harm. I thought I had lost thee forever, yet by Providence thou art returned. I should be a foolish man indeed to punish thee, for the Lord has answered my prayers. Praise Heaven."

The congregation repeated him, 'praise heaven.'

Fanny was paralyzed by the act of kindness; unused to the governor's affection. She was expecting rage; like the kind Silas was plainly struggling to conceal. "Aren't you going to have me sold?" She whispered finally. "I ran away from you."

"No, Fanny." The governor said. "It wasn't your choice. Gabriel made you do it." Then he said, projecting his voice over the crowd, "Yea, when Joseph's brothers came to Egypt he pretended not to know them. But the will of the Father is forgiveness; and Joseph wept in private for deceiving them. Let me not make the same mistake."

It couldn't be. John Winthrop was absolving her. The governor laid his hands on Fanny and gestured for Silas to do the same. The Evangelist touched her on the shoulder, unwillingly.

"Praised be the Lord God, who returned to me my servant, as Jacob was returned his son. And bless thee, Fanny; may the Father bless the works of thy hands, thy loom, and thy kneading-bowl."

Fanny's knees wobbled, willing herself not to fall. If she fell, it would be a bad sign. She reached out her arm for Silas, gripping him tightly for support. "Thank you," she said, barely able to breathe.

“Not me, Fanny.” The governor replied. “It is the kingdom of God which hath absolved thee, just as the hand of the Lord guided thee astray and safely homeward. I had nothing to do with it.”

He wasn’t going to sell her, or have her whipped, or anything. All would be just as it had been. Fanny could scarcely believe her fortune, as the governor led the townsfolk of Andover in another prayer. Fanny joined them midway through the creed, so stunned was she by the great mercy of Governor John Winthrop.

Once the prayer was done, the governor descended from the scaffold and the crowd began to break up in earnest. Fanny and Silas followed him homeward on foot, in the wake of the path John Winthrop had cleared for them.

Fanny caught a glimpse of Silas’s expression and wasn’t sure if a whipping wouldn’t come anyway, but it mattered not. What had happened here was a miracle. Fanny allowed the happiness in her heart to grow, for God’s mercy had spared her the auction house.

They arrived at the governor’s manse. Fanny saw smoke coming from the chimney, and wondered who had been doing the cooking and cleaning while she was gone.

When they came inside the warm manse Fanny could hear a woman’s voice in the kitchen, weeping. “Is that Sarah?” She asked Silas in a quiet voice as the governor retired to his bedroom.

“No.” Silas said. “Sarah’s out. It’s the Irish girl, what’s-her-name; Brady.”

“You got a maid while I was gone?” Fanny said.

“Not for much longer. She’s been like that since she heard the news.”

“What news?” Fanny asked.

“Father’s liquidating her contract.” Silas said. “She’s only been here a month.”

"Oh." Fanny said. "Who will hire her?"

"Hell if I know. Father's looking for someone now who has need of a house-maid. But she's unlikely to get a position in a manse like this one, especially in light of recent events."

"Silas, it's not my fault." Fanny said. "I didn't ask Gabriel to go setting any fires."

"Just like you never asked him to lie with you, he just did it." Silas said, mockingly.

"He's a witch, Silas. He could have killed me if I didn't do what he said."

"He's going to die on your account, Fanny; and perhaps Asenath too. After you fled, Father was convinced that she had something to do with it. He sent the witch-hunter after her, just to find you. After he revealed himself, Asenath drank poison out of fright, thinking Hardship was there to kill her."

"I didn't mean for any of that to happen." Fanny said. "Be reasonable, Silas."

Silas's expression darkened, and he grabbed Fanny's wrist and twisted it painfully. It hurt, but she kept silent, and met Silas's eyes with a look of repentance. "It's not my fault."

"The hell it isn't. You ran away from us. I would have sold you." Silas said angrily. "Get cooking, black bird." Silas slammed the door behind him and stomped into the snowy yard.

Fanny hoped Silas would forgive her in time, but to follow him was a fool's errand. Now it was time to begin work again. Fanny went to the kitchen, to meet the tearful maid she was replacing.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Asenath Black sat chained in the cart, in the courtyard of the gaol at half past nine on the morning of her trial. They seemed to be running late. The wind rustled through her fine white hair, making her shiver. Asenath was craving a smoke, to warm her up and calm her nerves. She'd hardly slept a wink last night for worrying and winter's chill. Silas Winthrop had come around midnight and traded back his dirtied clothing for a white wool shawl, to cover the drops of Rackman's blood on Asenath's dress. It didn't look quite right, but it would do to hide the stains.

Hardship Cole, who held the reins of the prisoner's cart, was dressed more appropriately for the weather. As they waited to depart, he chewed on an icicle as if it were a raw carrot.

"That's no good for your teeth." Asenath said, irritated, as Hardship crunched away. "You'll spoil them chewing ice like that."

"Doesn't matter." Hardship declared, eating ice. "Real men have chipped teeth. It means they sank their jaws into something tightly."

"Well, can you save it for after the trial? The sound of it galls me."

Hardship tossed the chunk of ice away. "Where are Braithwaite and Rackman? The governor said nine o'clock; it's already later than that."

Asenath didn't respond, and Hardship continued. "So. Think they'll put you to the river?"

"I hope not." Asenath said, worrying. Her confession would be mostly true, except for the lies in it; which Asenath had carefully sorted and practiced, so she wouldn't forget which was which.

“Since I’m to bear witness, I should offer thee some advice.” Hardship said. “It’ll go more favorably if you own up to what exactly you’ve been doing; just make a clean breast of it. If you’re really just a potion-crafter, Winthrop may let you off with a branding.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Asenath said.

“Why did you do it, anyway? Suicide’s a mortal sin, now you’re going to Hell for that.”

“I thought you were going to shoot me.” Asenath said. “I wanted my will to be honored.”

“I promised I wouldn’t hurt thee.” Hardship said, insulted. “In fact, I saved your life.”

“It was nothing personal.” Asenath said. “I don’t take what the governor’s man says on faith. You’re from Deerfield, you should understand how it is.”

“Deerfield stock is always straight.” Hardship declared. “We have no reason to lie.”

“You did sneak into my house, and you lied about that cat-o-mountain.” Asenath said.

“In the course of carrying out my duties. That’s small potatoes and you know it; in the grand scheme of things I’ve behaved honorably.”

“Then why did you have a gun?” Asenath asked.

“I wasn’t going to shoot you with it!” Hardship said. “I was armed for your protection.”

Asenath was about to tell Hardship she’d never needed any man’s protection, when Rackman and Braithwaite came out of the gaol with Gabriel in tow.

Gabriel looked scruffy and wild, like a thief on the road. His favorite suit of clothes had become ragged and dirty. Governor Winthrop had ordered him muzzled and heavily chained. Asenath noticed that Gabriel was wearing the scold’s bridle.

It looked curious on a man's head; but it would do to keep Gabriel silent. A bit of metal went between the teeth, to hold the tongue. The baleful look in Gabriel's eyes belied his humiliation about the device, as Rackman took his seat next to him. Rackman's expression said he would brook no excuses with either inmate after what had happened yesterday.

The clerk, whose name was Thomas Braithwaite, climbed up into the front of the cart, next to Hardship. Asenath wondered if it was the same Braithwaites who'd been driven out of Quaker Hill by the Governor all those years ago, for there was a bit of a resemblance. But why would any of them want to work for Winthrop? This Braithwaite said to the witch hunter in a low voice, "Let's go."

Hardship slapped the mule on the butt, and the cart lurched into motion. They passed through the sally port, the gates to the gaol stood open.

As they rolled away, Asenath spotted a familiar black face, peering through one of the cell windows. The whites of the man's eyes glimmered with recognition, and Asenath made a sign at him.

It was certainly Caesar, Asenath knew that smile of his. She scowled back, as if to ask him what there was to smile about. Yet his smile grew only wider, as if he was pleased Asenath lived yet.

A crowd of people had assembled in the commons, to watch the prisoners on their way to trial. As the cart approached, they became restive, surrounding it like a school of fish looking for breadcrumbs. They booed and hissed at Asenath and Gabriel, making crosses with their fingers.

Asenath recognized some of the people in the crowd as her regular clients; the bad ones, whose names Asenath kept on a list under the bar for past due tabs. She hoped Hardship had not found that list, for it would probably be evidence in Winthrop's reckoning.

"Bitch!" one of the same, a woman, shrieked from the crowd. "Put that dry old cunt to the river, and her black serving-boy too!"

“Don’t forget her apprentice! Gabriel’s as black as they come!” It was John Bradstreet. He owed Asenath ten shillings.

“Burn the sorcerer!” A housewife screeched. “Like he burned our meeting house!”

“Thou taught him devilish arts, Asenath! It was thee!” Bradstreet shouted. “Thou art a witch, and a witch-mother!”

“Aye, witch-mother!” The first woman rejoined. The crowd took up the chant, ‘witch-mother’ taking over the more mundane insults. “Witch-mother!” They cried. “Burn the sorcerer!” They repeated, stirring themselves into a frenzy. Asenath wondered if the Governor had specified a single mule should draw the cart so that their procession went as slowly as possible.

Gabriel gave Asenath a fearful glance, but she replied with a look that said ‘ignore them’. The word ‘witch-mother’ circled around the cart, following them to the steps of the meeting house, where certain watchmen had been posted to keep back the rabble-rousers.

Asenath and Gabriel were led up the steps and turned, to face the crowd for a final time. From this spot, the whole town of Andover seemed like it was carved into a little bowl, and the throng of angry townsfolk didn’t amount to a hill of beans.

From this height, Asenath realized how tenuous the foothold of the colony really was, how fragile her own position was within it. She could be hanged and it wouldn’t amount to a wrinkle in God’s plan. Asenath had thought she would die before; yet here she was, powerless but of free will.

Gabriel’s eyes flicked over to Asenath, and she met his gaze. He seemed to be telling her to stick to the plan, and Asenath just barely nodded that she would.

It was time to go inside; Thomas Braithwaite led Asenath and Gabriel to court.

The main hall was packed, the air was close with chatter. All the charter members had come to bear witness to the proceedings. A single pew had been left open in the front for witnesses. Hardship Cole took his seat there.

Since they were running late, Thomas and Asenath proceeded directly to the dais, where court was already in session. John Winthrop waited in his chair, below his pulpit, with Silas standing beside him as an attendant. Rackman chained Gabriel to a chair next to Hardship, before coming to Asenath and unlocking her manacles. For the duration of the trial she would remain unchained.

Thomas Braithwaite called out, "Order, Order! The court presents Asenath Black, accused of counts of potion-making and witchcraft on this, the twenty-second day of January."

The crowd quieted itself, as John Winthrop waited for them to attend.

"Agreed." The governor finally said. Thomas set quill to paper and began recording.

"Asenath Black." John Winthrop said to her. "Do you swear to tell the truth before God and this court, in the name of the Father?"

"I swear it." Asenath lied.

"Amen." The governor said. "Asenath Black; know that if thou would deceive me, thy life is forfeit and I will have thee hanged for a sorceress. So how do you plead?"

"Not guilty." She replied. "My apprentice Gabriel is the sorcerer you seek."

"What makes you say that?" John Winthrop asked, suspicious.

"He's..." Asenath said, hesitating. But she could feel Gabriel's eyes on her back, urging her to say the words. "Gabriel signed the Black Man's book. He burned Ipswich meeting house and stole your Negro away. He came to me after it was done and told me everything."

"Gabriel confessed unto thee." John Winthrop said, sounding amused. "Art thou a witch?"

"Not like he is." Asenath said. "I told him not to bother with this stuff."

"How do you mean?" John Winthrop said.

"I run my potion business pretty well under the table, Governor. Making medicine isn't my primary way of earning a living." Asenath said. "Gabriel was more dependent on being an apothecary to get his needs met. I told him he should have supported himself with an honest trade in addition to the medicines, as I do. Gabriel didn't take my advice."

"So you admit to selling medicines out of your road-house." The governor said, amused.

"I am under oath." Asenath reminded him.

"So art thou. What would these draughts accomplish?"

"They were medicines of every sort, for diverse ailments." Asenath said, not wanting to talk about the ones she'd brewed to cause miscarriages.

"This sounds beyond the ken of an ordinary barmaid." John Winthrop said accusingly.

"I didn't start that fire." Asenath interjected. "I would have stopped Gabriel if I knew what he intended. But I had already shunned him; after his apothecary was wrecked I cut ties. We had had dozens of squabbles before then, me warning Gabriel, him not listening to me." She said it ruefully. "I pushed him closer to witchery, I see that now. At the time, I thought it was warranted."

"Did he give you his witch-mark, Asenath?" John Winthrop asked.

"No." Asenath replied, another lie. "And if he had offered, I wouldn't have accepted it."

"So sayest thou." John Winthrop said. "But why hide your medicines from being sold in the light of day, if not because they are magical in their natures?"

“Thou would never have given me permission to do it.” Asenath said. “I’d not have started if my neighbors hadn’t asked me. That’s the truth of it. They were sick, poor, and desperate.”

“Individuals may falter, especially when the shadows of pain and death loom long; yet the Body of Christ turns itself towards righteousness.” John Winthrop said definitively. “The court calls its first witness.”

“Hardship Cole, step forward.” Thomas Braithwaite said, his quill scratching away at top speed. The witch hunter came to the Governor, and kneeled for a moment in deference to his authority.

“Hardship Cole, do you swear to tell the truth before God and this court, in the holiness of the Word?” John Winthrop asked, swearing him in.

“I do.” The hunter said.

“Tell us of the day you arrested Asenath.” John Winthrop prompted him.

“As per your orders, I sought the fugitive slave in Asenath’s High Horse. I found no trace of her, so the next morning I questioned her, and presented Asenath with Braithwaite’s warrant. She complied with it at first.” Hardship’s words sounded as if he had rehearsed them a few times; Asenath noticed he was leaving out the part where she’d seen him scavenging around Gabriel’s house.

“Then what happened?” John Winthrop asked.

“After she read the warrant, Asenath asked me for a drink. I did not refuse her. The accused poisoned her beverage with a sleight of hand, with a black poison I found in her pocket an hour later.”

“Show the court this poison.” Hardship Cole took it from his pocket, and held it up for the gallery to see. But Asenath noticed it was different, she never used a bottle with such a long neck.

“Hey now, that’s not mine!” She interrupted, though the governor stared her down.

“What did you just say?” John Winthrop said, offended.

“That’s not mine. I put the poison in a different bottle.” Asenath said.

“She’s lying.” Hardship said quickly. “Her cellar is full of bottles like these. Poison bottles.”

“My cellar is not full of poisoned bottles!” Asenath said hotly. “I only made the one, and it didn’t look at all like the bottle Hardship’s got.”

“She’s lying.” Hardship said again. “This is the poison draught.”

“Governor, this idiot burned my will; don’t believe him.” Asenath said.

“I burned your witch contract!” Hardship replied. “You screamed when it touched the flames.”

“Because it was my only copy!” Asenath said, a little shrilly.

“Order! Order!” John Winthrop bellowed. “No bickering during these proceedings! Braithwaite, strike that last part from the record.” The uproar between Asenath and Hardship was making ripples into the gallery.

“Yes, sir.” The tow-headed scribe said, blacking it out. John Winthrop waited for a moment, taking Asenath to task for the interruption. As he did, the ambient chatter of the gallery increased in its intensity. The criticism, Asenath noted, was primarily directed at the witch hunter.

“Hardship, is this the poison Asenath used?” John Winthrop asked him.

“Yes.” Hardship said definitively.

“That’s settled. Asenath, if you do that again I’ll have you removed from the court, and the trial will continue in absentia, that means without you here.”

“Yes, governor.” Asenath grumbled. “But I want to cross-examine this witness.”

“Request denied. Now be quiet.” John Winthrop said, as the gallery collected itself. “Hardship, what happened next?”

“Asenath got her drink, but something didn’t seem right to me. I tried to taste it, and she knocked it from my hand. I tasted the dregs and knew it was poison.”

“How could you tell?” John Winthrop asked.

“At first, it was just a guess. It did not much change the flavor of the draught. But once I watched its effects I was sure.” Hardship said. “It was a poison, and a crafty one at that.”

“I see.” John Winthrop said. “What did you do then?”

“You wanted her alive, so I did what I could, then brought Asenath to the sorcerer. I persuaded him to do the rest.” Hardship said with an easy smirk.

“Many of the witnesses here to-day saw you riding through the Hampshire Valley with Asenath’s body on your back.” John Winthrop said, evoking the scene which had so many so concerned.

“She poisoned herself. I was getting her help.” Hardship said, his voice resonant with truth. Deerfield people did have a tendency to play it straight, Asenath thought begrudgingly.

“Thank you for your testimony. You’re dismissed.” John Winthrop said, and Hardship took his seat at the witness bench. “Asenath. Did you poison yourself to evade capture?”

“Yes.” Asenath said. “But that is not the draught I used.”

“Prove it.” Governor Winthrop said.

“I can’t.” Asenath replied. “The evidence was taken from me by Hardship.”

"If you can't prove it, then the poison will stand entered into the record. You've admitted to lesser counts of witchcraft. You say Gabriel confessed to you. You say you wanted nothing to do with his plans. Am I to take it on faith that you're not his accomplice?"

"I was the first to tell Gabriel off about his affair with your servant. I didn't approve of it at all; I have my own Negro serving-man to think of."

"Yes, Caesar. I've noticed him." John Winthrop said.

"I was suspicious, until I found them in the cellar of the High Horse one day, thinking I would be gone for longer. I called it what it was, and shunned Gabriel. I didn't want to be accessory to that business with Fanny." Asenath said. "That was what I meant about cutting ties."

"Why didn't you come to me?" John Winthrop said, after a moment.

"You know why, John." Asenath said. "Your own son wouldn't even tell you what was going on."

She didn't realize how cutting her words were until she said them. "I mean..."

"I'm aware of what's happened." John Winthrop said, his emotions barely contained behind his usual mask of theological authority and enlightenment. "Silas put the entire community at risk because he took you witches at your word. I shall not make the same mistake he did. The court calls its second witness. Silas, go fetch her."

A second witness? The Governor's son went into the vestry and down the corridor. Asenath wondered who the governor had in mind. Hardship had only said he would testify against her. Asenath expected it would be Daniel Wheelwright, compelled to testify by the court. If it was, and the court knew she had marked him, her goose really would be cooked.

But it was not Wheelwright. It was Fanny Winthrop. The Negro woman had washed and braided her hair so it was sleek as that of a Moorish prince.

“You.” Asenath said, amazed. “You’re alive.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

"No interrupting, Asenath." John Winthrop said. "I already warned you once."

Asenath looked to her apprentice, soliciting his advice. But Gabriel was fixed upon Fanny's form, and would not hearken to her. Gabriel became like a pillar of salt, his gaze stony and paralyzed; finally grasping the vanity of his pathetic stunt. He had achieved nothing, Winthrop had bested him.

Gabriel tried to say something, but the scold's bridle held his tongue. Chained and muzzled, he could only watch as Fanny brushed past him like a stranger, and approached the governor.

"State your name." Thomas Braithwaite called out for everyone to hear.

"Fanny." She replied. "Servant of John Winthrop."

"Is that a nickname, or...?" Thomas Braithwaite asked, lingering on it.

"It's short for Frances, Braithwaite. Yes, do write that down. Let's begin. Fanny, dost thou swear to tell the truth, before God's court?"

"I swear it, master." She said. "Upon Father, Son, and Holy Spirit I swear."

"Amen." John Winthrop said. "Who is the Sorcerer of Ipswich?"

"Gabriel Bishop." Fanny said, pointing. "Over there."

"And what of this woman?" John Winthrop said, indicating Asenath. "Who is she?"

"Asenath Black." Fanny said. "She owns the tavern next door to Gabriel's shop."

"Is she a witch herself?" John Winthrop asked. Fanny looked at her uneasily.

"Not that I know of." Fanny said. "But I wouldn't drink her wares, either."

“To keep a witch’s secret increases their power. Conceal nothing from me Fanny, and speak freely: did Asenath and Gabriel ever practice witchcraft together?” John Winthrop asked. Asenath was scowling at Fanny, looking like a cat about to bite. John made a sign to Hardship, to keep an eye on the old crone.

“No.” Fanny said. “Asenath was telling the truth. She opposed Gabriel.”

“So you could hear us.” John frowned. “I thought that room was sound-proof.”

“The door was open a little way.” Fanny said.

“Very well.” John Winthrop said, although it meant he had to skip ahead in his line of questioning. “When did you first suspect Gabriel was a witch?”

“Far later than I should have.” Fanny said.

“How do you mean?” John Winthrop said.

“I heard the rumors, but discounted them.” Fanny sighed. “I didn’t want to believe it, at first. I thought I knew Gabriel, that his accusers misunderstood him.”

“What changed your mind?” Her master asked.

“Gabriel put his mark on me.” Fanny said. “He pricked me behind the knee with that damn needle of his, without even asking. I shunned him after that, until the night of the fire. At that point I didn’t have a choice. He broke into the manse, and told me we had to leave. Since I knew he was a witch then, I dared not refuse him. But I had no idea how right I was.”

“Did the Black Man possess him, Fanny?” John Winthrop asked, and she nodded.

“On that night, yes. Gabriel channeled magic far beyond his own ken. He sacrificed the meeting house and put a charm on me. As I fled nobody noticed me, and if they did, they thought I belonged to someone else. The spell was broken when I was captured.”

“Tell me what happened next.” John Winthrop said.

“Gabriel bade me run, so we ran. He took me across the river and downstream. He had readied a getaway there, but Gabriel gave the horse and pack to me. He said this was farewell. From that distance, I could see the meeting house burn. It was then I really understood what Gabriel had become. I took what he gave me and fled.”

“Why not come to me?” John Winthrop asked. “I was only in Deerfield.”

“I tried to, but Gabriel put a spell on me. I feared to return to Ipswich, I wanted only to put as many miles between myself and the sorcerer as I could. I thought the only way I could be safe is if I left Massachusetts forever.”

“Did you ever love him?” John asked, knowing the answer already.

“I wish I never met him.” Fanny said. “I told him to leave me be, but he wouldn’t take no for an answer. I thought if I gave him what he wanted, Gabriel would leave me alone.”

“He knew thee.” John Winthrop inferred. The wretchedness of it filled Gabriel’s eyes instantly, and John Winthrop felt the spark of righteousness. It was true, everyone could see that plainly.

“Yes.” Fanny admitted. “Yes, but I didn’t want to.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” John asked, after a moment. “I could have stopped him.”

“Gabriel said you would sell me.” Fanny said. “I thought you might.”

John took a moment to process this, so that Thomas could catch up to him. "Asenath Black saw you together. Did you ever tell anyone else what was going on?"

"No." Fanny said.

"I see." John sighed, glaring at Silas; who shied away from his gaze. "One last question: Did Sarah know?"

"No." Fanny said. "I kept it from her, to protect her. She loved Gabriel, and I'd stolen him away. It would hurt her more to know than for me to keep the secret. I didn't want to, but I had no choice."

"Thank you for your testimony, Fanny."

The servant curtsied to the Governor, and left the meeting house. She had a feast to make tonight, in celebration of the convictions. John Winthrop gave the room a moment to discuss what had happened, while Thomas Braithwaite fetched a new sheet of parchment for the sentencing.

"Order, Order." John called out in a calm tone of voice. "The Grand Court is about to begin sentencing. Asenath Black, do you wish to make any statements on the record?"

"I'm innocent of the charges." She said. "That is all."

At this point Gabriel should have been given an opportunity to speak, only it wasn't safe to do so. Silas looked to John instead, pleading with his father to stick to the sentencing plan they had agreed upon; the one sparing Asenath her life. John nodded back, confirming he would do so.

"Asenath Black, the Grand Court finds you guilty of lesser witchcraft, the sentence for which is a branding. However, in consideration of your testimony I commute your sentence to a marking. Thou shalt make for thyself an approved witch-sign, and wear it on your breast wherever you are seen, for as long as you live."

Asenath bowed deeply. "Thank you, Governor." She said.

"One last thing." John Winthrop said. "Thou must sell the High Horse within the next month, and never take up business in food or drink again."

"Yes, Governor." She said, trying to take this graciously.

"Not so fast." John cautioned Asenath. "I'm also sentencing you to an additional week's stay in Andover gaol. The High Horse must be sold by the first of March, or it will be forfeit."

"I understand, John." Asenath said, annoyed. "Anything else?"

"No. You're dismissed." Hardship took Asenath to the witness pew, and chained her.

Now it was time to begin sentencing for Gabriel. His life was already over, John thought; this was just housekeeping.

"Gabriel Bishop, the Grand Court finds you guilty of high witchcraft and arson in the first degree, the punishment for which is hanging."

Gabriel nodded, as if to say that was warranted.

"Art thou the Sorcerer of Ipswich?" John asked. "Admit it, the sentence is already rendered."

Gabriel shook his head no, no; the cage on his head was making him dizzy.

"May God have mercy on your soul." John Winthrop said. "I mean that truly."

Gabriel didn't respond, and Rackman took Gabriel from the courtroom, holding the chains in his fist. They jingled like bells to John's ears.

"The High Court concludes its inquiry into the Ipswich matter." John Winthrop declared; "We shall reconvene to execute the sentences. In the name of the Father, creator of justice on Earth and in Heaven, Amen."

"Amen." The witnesses in the courtroom said. Then people started getting their coats and clearing out, chattering quietly about the conclusion of the trial.

Over the hubbub, John called out. "Braithwaite, Hardship. Meet me in my chambers." The governor went ahead of them, since he had to wait over-long for everything to get started today.

A few minutes later there was a knock on the chamber door. "Come in." John Winthrop said, and Thomas Braithwaite entered, followed by Hardship Cole. They both looked a little intimidated.

"Sit down, both of you." John Winthrop said. "Let's get down to business. Thomas, did you draw up the death warrant?"

"I'm putting the finishing touches on it now." He said, setting up his quill and paper, writing things out. "They'll be ready for your signature in a moment."

"Good. Hardship, I need you to build a gallows on the scaffold, for the hanging."

"Aye." Hardship said. "I'll need one other person to help me construct it."

"Thomas can help you." Thomas looked up from his writing.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" He asked in disbelief.

"You'll help Hardship build the gallows. Is there a problem?"

"No." Thomas said, insulted. "I shouldn't refuse an honest day's work."

"I'll need wood and nails as well." Hardship said, contrary. He hadn't been paid recently.

"The gaol's got wood enough." John replied. "Rackman should know where that stuff is kept."

"What about nails?" Hardship said.

"What do I look like, a foundry?" John Winthrop said. "Use joinery to do it."

"Drilling holes and whittling pegs is a lot of work." Hardship complained.

"Well, I'll leave you to it." John said, getting up for his cloak. "Report to me once it's done."

Thomas Braithwaite stood up, blocking John's path. "Hardship, we need to tell him."

Hardship sighed, like a sail losing its wind. "I thought you said we'd not."

"Tell me what?" John said, suspiciously, as Hardship shot Thomas an angry glare.

There was a gravity to the pause, which John had grown familiar with in his life of meting out judgment against others. The silence was like a scale arriving at its balance.

"What is this servant to you?" Thomas finally said, tripping over the words.

"I beg your pardon?" John said, insulted.

"With all the money you've spent, you could have bought two Negroes, and not runaways either. What makes Fanny so special?" Thomas replied. "Why did you forgive her so easily?"

John didn't like this question. "Did the shepherd not leave his flock to seek out the one lost lamb? Would he have only rescued it if it were close by, and if the weather was fair?"

"That's not answering the question." Thomas said.

"Leave it, Braithwaite." Hardship warned him. "Don't do this."

"I would have gone to any expense to find her. As we do unto the least of these, so do we unto Christ himself." John Winthrop said, paraphrasing. "Get out of my vestry."

“No.” Thomas said. “You’re hiding something from us, Winthrop.”

“Let it go, Braithwaite.” Hardship said, terse. “Drop it.”

“Listen to your hunting-man.” John agreed. “He’s got practical sense. I’ll sign the warrant presently. God be with ye.” The two men took their leave, with Thomas sending a reproachful glance, as if to say this would not be the last John saw of him.

John sighed at his closed door, and wondered if Thomas would remain cooperative until this sordid business had reached its end. He was already starting to show the same signs of madness which possessed his father Asa; and stood to take power in Boston if John was not careful. The younger Braithwaite’s great learning in the Scriptures would protect him for a time, but that only made him more dangerous. He could remain a challenger to Silas for years to come, and only at the last would Thomas’s mind absolutely shatter. It was a bitter thing to think on, for Thomas could have made a good governor. But Winthrop could not afford to be patient with him, as he had with Gabriel. Swift action would need to be taken to discredit Braithwaite, to keep him amongst the lower classes for good.

John thought of Silas, his other successor. Although he’d pulled away from utter disgrace at the last opportunity, he was the brunt of many disgusting rumors. And at home, Silas wasn’t much better, dwelling on his sorrows and punching trees in the yard. John thought to himself that he would need to run for governor again this year, with Silas as his deputy-successor. The idea was wearisome.

In any case, John would have to find a new place to govern. Now that the trial was done, the Andover deacon would be eager to have his church back. The parlor in the Ipswich manse would have to serve as Winthrop’s base of operations, at least until spring. Winthrop thought how it would be nearly impossible for Fanny to keep the place heated and fed with all the official comings and goings, and allowed himself a ghost of a smile.

John signed Gabriel's death warrant with a flourish. His labors here were finished, he thought as he signed it; I should pack up my things and leave.

John looked around the vestry for anything else of his, but found only scraps of paper and bits of rubbish, which he swept up and discarded in the appropriate places. Gabriel's warrant was safely in his pocket; but just to be safe, John read each scrap of paper before throwing it away.

As John tidied up the preacher's vestry, he noticed Fanny's ticket to Philadelphia on the floor. It had fallen off his desk, stacked among other evidence for the trial. John picked it up and looked it over. There wasn't any point in keeping it now. He tossed it into the fire on his way out, where it turned black and kindled in a brief rush of flames.

Chapter Twenty-Four

"This is all your fault," Hardship puffed into the cold air, kneeling on the scaffold, drilling another hole into a beam. The sun would set in a few hours; Thomas hoped they'd have the gallows up on the scaffold and secured by then. "You had to open your mouth, and piss off John Winthrop again."

"I don't want to discuss it." Thomas Braithwaite said, whittling a peg. He kept one eye on the fire, where a pot of horsehide glue was melting. It smelled like a tannery as it softened.

"That girl Fanny is bad luck. I sensed it when you questioned her." Hardship said, bearing his weight down on the drill as he turned it. "And you knew talking to Winthrop about it would get us in trouble, yet you persisted."

"Hardship, you told me already." Thomas sighed, while Hardship broke through the plank again with the drill bit. "Let's just work, there's nothing more to discuss."

"I'm done. Do you have those pegs ready yet?" Hardship said, touching up the back sides.

"Not yet." Thomas said, shredding off a bit of bark carefully.

The hunter came down from the scaffold and warmed himself by the fire while Thomas whittled slowly and laboriously. Eventually he asked "How many do you have finished?"

"Four." Thomas said. Hardship sighed, took out his pen knife and picked up a stick.

"Damn Harvard boys, can't whittle pegs without it taking all damn day."

"It's not my fault." Thomas said, feeling inadequate as Hardship rapidly whittled his pegs for him. "I should declare a mistrial, before we render any sentence against Gabriel we can't take back."

"I think he deserves it." Hardship said. "I think you're making a fuss over nothing."

"The proceedings have been tampered with, and I know there's been testimony from false witnesses. I can't let that stand."

"Careful about who you're calling a false witness, Braithwaite." Hardship said warily.

"I haven't seen it for myself, either." Thomas said. "I even snuck up on him at night, when you said he'd be reviving Asenath. But he was only sleeping."

"What are you implying?" Hardship said.

"Perhaps we're wrong to be cracking Bishop into anything more than he appears to be. He deserves the water test. If he's a witch, we can still hang him." Thomas said.

"Leave it to you to say Bishop deserves the water test when we're halfway to building a gallows." Hardship said, comparing the width of a peg to that of his drill bit. It was a match; Hardship broke another branch, to start on the final peg. "Leave it be. This is what Governor Winthrop wants."

"I'm supposed to just countenance my reasonable doubt? Is that justice?"

"Justice is one way putting it." Hardship said. "Hang or drown, he'll be just as dead."

"But there is a difference." Thomas said. "That's why Gabriel won't confess."

"You spend too much time sitting inside reading books, Braithwaite." Hardship said. "They may have taught you Latin at college, but not a whit of common sense." The ensuing silence and whittling communicated a deep disdain from the Deerfield yeoman.

"I never went to the Harvard college." Thomas Braithwaite said, taking up his knife again, making a slice on the wood. "Once my father left the colony, I wasn't allowed."

"Oh yes. Asa's famous exodus." Hardship recalled. "How old were you?"

"Eleven." Thomas Braithwaite said. "I think. I don't remember anything about it." They were quiet for a time, whittling pegs in the waning daylight.

"Do you remember old Asa?" Hardship finally said. "Some called him a living gospel."

"I wouldn't know." Thomas said, irritated. "Look, I don't remember him, or anybody else from Quaker Hill. I'm no longer kin to them. Damn." Thomas grunted, dropping the peg and the whittling knife. He'd nicked his finger. Thomas sucked on it, tasting the blood.

"You cut yourself?" Hardship asked rhetorically, seeing the drips on the frozen wood.

Thomas nodded, getting his handkerchief, pressing it to the wound. Hardship picked up the unfinished peg, whipped off the last few shavings, and put it with the others.

"You're worrying about this too much, Thomas." Hardship said. "It's for the best. You'll be seen as unforgiving of Quakerism. It'll get you votes, come the election."

"The election's not what I'm worried about." Thomas said, thinking of the Holy Spirit again. Even by day, Thomas felt uneasy to be outside, as if someone out of sight was pointing a musket at his back. "Look, it's nothing. Just my personal feeling about the case."

"Well, my personal feeling about this case is that Gabriel's definitely guilty of something. I understand where the people who want to burn him to death are coming from."

"Ugh, that's barbaric." Thomas said. "Why don't you go back England if you feel that way?"

"I didn't say I agreed with them." Hardship said. "I'm all for law and order, just like you. Let's put this gallows together, shall we?"

Thomas and Hardship lined up the pieces, counting them. There were two long beams, a short beam, and two cross beams for strength, all drilled; plus the necessary amount of pegs to hold it together.

“We have to join this piece to that piece.” Hardship said, making a right angle.

“I’ll let you hammer it in.” Thomas said, not wanting to splinter a peg with the mallet.

“Fine.” Hardship said. “Hold it in place for me.” Thomas did so as Hardship matched the pegs to the holes. The fit was just about perfect, Thomas noticed jealously.

“Do you have the horse glue ready?” Hardship said. Thomas nodded. Hardship dipped a peg into the hot glue and tapped it into the pre-drilled holes. Once the glue cured, it would be strong as nails.

Hardship dipped another peg, and tapped it in, joining the gallows together flat on the scaffold. Thomas held pieces as they went, stirred the horse glue.

They waited there for the glue to cure. Hardship got a half-finished pipe of tobacco and lit it using a wood shaving. Neither man said anything for a long time, warming themselves.

Once the glue was set, Hardship screwed in the finishing touch, an iron hook on which the rope would hang. The gallows made a shape like a doorway. The condemned would hang in its lintel.

“Do we put it up now?” Thomas said. It was about three o’clock in the afternoon.

“Why not?” Hardship said. “Less to do tomorrow.”

“Where do we put it?” Thomas asked.

Hardship showed the clerk how to mount a gallows. Around the perimeter of the scaffold were a few square holes of differing sizes, strategically designed to allow poles to be stuck through it. Thomas suspected their actual purpose was to place a canopy above the scaffold in midsummer.

"Are you sure it'll fit?" Thomas asked. "They look too small for the beam."

Hardship measured, and squinted. "I could enlarge the holes a little."

Thomas let Hardship cut into the scaffold with his saw and drill, and smooth the edges with a bit of rough sand paper. The snow crunched under foot like white sugar as the hunter worked.

"Help me stand this up." Hardship finally said, gesturing to the gallows.

Thomas and he balanced the gallows upright and carried it to its place on the scaffold. They matched it up to the hole in the deck and slipped it in.

"Is it tall enough?" Thomas said, and Hardship shrugged.

"Bishop's pretty short, isn't he? You just have him stand here, on a soapbox or something, then pull the rope taught and hold it fast. Then have somebody knock the box out from under him, and it's done." Hardship said, standing in the place Bishop would tomorrow.

"It'll have to do, I suppose." Thomas said. "Let's give Rackman back his tools."

The two men dropped off the tools at the gaol. Caesar the Negro came to take them while Hardship waited outside. The wind whistled through the windows in the gaol uncomfortably, intensifying Thomas's anxiety as Caesar put the tools away in Rackman's footlocker.

"Are you watching him tonight?" Thomas said when he returned.

Caesar nodded. "Him and Asenath both. Rackman's here too, taking his supper."

"Here." Thomas said, producing a silver shilling from his purse. "For your trouble."

"Prithee, no." Caesar said, handing it back. "Not for this."

"Why not?" Thomas asked, holding the coin.

"It's the least I can do for Gabriel."

The men said their goodbyes and left the gaol. It was a dark night, cloudy so that the moon did not shine through. Thomas disliked it, and sped up to get to the Squaw's Fire faster. Hardship kept pace with him, as if unwilling to admit that he didn't want to walk alone.

"Say, Braithwaite." Hardship said. "Got any plans tonight?"

"No." Thomas replied.

"I thought there was a feast at the Winthrop manse tonight." The yeoman said.

"Yes. But I'm not going."

"I wasn't invited in the first place." Hardship said, consoling him. "Care for a drink?"

Thomas didn't really, but he didn't want to be alone, either. "Only if you do."

"If you're paying." Hardship said, "I'll get the tip."

The Squaw's Fire was full of people again, light blazing through the colored window panes onto the icy street. The two men entered, hanging their cloaks on top of other cloaks at the door.

The clerk and the hunter pressed forward through the throng. The barkeep hearkened to Thomas, who got a bottle of wine for himself and Hardship to share. With wine and cups, Thomas and Hardship began to scout out a perch for themselves.

As Thomas scanned the room looking for empty places, his gaze wandered across a familiar face. It was Brydie, the governor's servant. Thomas hadn't recognized her at first because she had been crying, her eyes red and mouth downcast.

Brydie shared a table with some carpenter men. Their guffaws had blinded Thomas to the sight of her. But then again, he had not been looking for familiar faces.

“Brydie!” Thomas called out, but she didn’t hear him over the din. “Brydie!”

Thomas pushed through the crowd, still carrying the drinks. Faintly, he heard Hardship ask where he was going, though he was only nine feet away. “I know her.” Thomas replied.

As he got closer, he could hear her sniffing. “Brydie.” Thomas said. He would have touched her, but his hands were full.

The maid heard him. “Mister Braithwaite!” She said, nearly leaping out of her chair. “Thank goodness.” She had a mug on the table, but it was empty. “I heard you rented the guest room here, but nobody answered the door... so I waited.”

“I was building the gallows for tomorrow.” Thomas said, looking askance at the tradesmen surrounding her. He took the shilling he’d tried to give Caesar and put it on the table.

“Is there room here?” Thomas asked politely.

Their beards perked up into gruff smiles, beaming yellowed teeth at the clerk as they cleared off. Hardship slipped past the tradesmen like a tomcat, taking his place at the table. “Well, well, who’s this?” He asked, removing his hat. “Hardship Cole. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Thomas wished Hardship would shut up. “Don’t mind him, Brydie. What’s going on?”

“Governor Winthrop says there’s no one in Ipswich or Andover who has need of me.” Brydie said, her voice wavering. “Including himself. I’m to be gone from the manse by the end of the month.”

“Wait, wait.” Thomas said. “What about your contract?”

“Governor Winthrop discharged it.” Brydie said. “The debt is paid, I’m free to go.”

“But where will you go?” Thomas asked, and Brydie’s defenses faltered.

“I don’t know.” She said, about to cry.

Thomas understood what Brydie meant when she said that. If no one would hire her as a servant, she would have to do something else. Thomas dared not say what, and neither would Brydie.

"I came to America to get away," she said, desperation creeping into her voice. "And now I'm in the same place here that I was there. I don't want to go back... to do what I had to do then."

"Shh." Thomas said. "That was a long time ago, and very far away."

Hardship interrupted, "Have a sup of wine, Brydie. It makes anything more bearable."

Brydie accepted the drink, and Thomas poured himself one as well. "That bastard." Thomas said quietly, to Hardship and Brydie. "That foul Winthrop bastard."

"It's not technically illegal." Hardship said. "But it is a sly move."

"It's depraved." Thomas said, feeling angry. "If the Governor wants to have his runaway slave so badly, he can keep her. She probably knows some awful secret of his, anyway."

"Probably." Brydie admitted. "Fanny's not so skilled."

"It's his loss." Thomas said a little louder. "I'll take you on, Brydie. You'll work for me, in Boston." The words came to his lips unbidden, surprising as Brydie's presence in the tavern.

Brydie's eyes shone and her cheeks flushed, disbelieving Thomas as well. "Mister Braithwaite, do you really mean that?" She asked sincerely.

"Yes." Thomas said, forcing himself to sound decisive. "Yes, Brydie. I'll draw up the contract tonight, and make that old bat witness it before morning comes."

"Thank you, Mister Braithwaite!" Brydie said, taking Thomas's hand. "Thank you so much."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Sarah Winthrop held the bottle up to the light of her window, looking at the black liquid within. It was four-fifths full, and shone like a dark gemstone. Asenath Black had just barely survived drinking a small portion of it. Hardship Cole had told Sarah all about it.

Gabriel must have meant for her to have it, Sarah thought. That was why Hardship had become so drunk, why he had shown her his dice and asked if she wanted to gamble. It had to have been Gabriel who made Sarah say yes, for she did not play games of chance. Only Gabriel could have made Hardship put up the poison as his stakes, and fixed the game so Sarah would win it. Sarah had heard the news from Silas, had seen the gallows in the square. Gabriel must have intended that she poison Rackman and sneak him away from Andover gaol before tomorrow at sundown.

Sarah sighed, knowing Gabriel was using her again. But to do it, he had put the power in Sarah's hands. Since his powers were diminished, the choice was up to her. She could empty the bottle out. She could put it in a back drawer and forget about it. Or Sarah could use it against Gabriel's intention.

Gabriel's plan would never work in the long run. Even if the Black Man himself spirited them away, there was nowhere they could go where John Winthrop wouldn't find them. And, being truthful with herself, Sarah didn't want to save him. Even if Gabriel really loved her, they could never go back to the way things used to be between them. He had used her, just as he was using her now.

What she was thinking was evil. Sarah dared not speak of these things, but looked into the poison and saw her own humiliation distilled into something worthwhile. She could kill her father with this poison. With him gone, she and Silas would be free; and everyone would lay the blame at Gabriel's feet. Then the sorcerer would be executed, and Sarah would belong to nobody but herself. No man would be master of her; and Sarah's broken heart would be like a house of her own.

She could kill her father with this poison. Sarah drew the pieces of her plan together like cut pieces of fabric, pinning them together and seeing in her mind's eye how it would turn out once sewn. No mistakes could be afforded. Everyone had to be certain Gabriel was responsible, that he killed the governor out of desperation. Sarah would have to put the poison in his hands, go to the gaol herself so that Gabriel would not interfere. She would tell him the governor was dead, that Gabriel could kill himself now or have it worse later. In his diminished state, Sarah knew she could force him.

Sarah drew her thumbnail against the poison bottle, measuring finger-widths of what was left. There seemed to be plenty enough for Father and Gabriel. Sarah prayed her hand would be steady, that her soul would remain unwavering as she carried out this justice. She prayed that Silas would not oppose her, that Fanny would not suspect her. Sarah wanted not to kill them.

It had to be tonight, if she meant to pin it on Gabriel. Sarah rehearsed how it would happen for a few hours, as the sunlight from her bedroom window waned. A light snow began to fall as Sarah went over it again. She decided how to get the poison into John Winthrop's cup. She considered how to respond if the guards questioned her on the way to the gaol. She prepared what she would say the morning after it was done. As Sarah did this, the smell of Fanny's cooking made its way up the stairs and into the bedroom, its meaty and creamy overtones alluring to the palate. Once dinner was served, Sarah would set her plan into motion.

Sarah changed clothes, put on a dinner gown. It wasn't the fanciest one in her possession; that would seem too celebratory. This one was just nice enough for the occasion, with muted scarlet piping on the bodice. Sarah slipped the poison into her pocket, squeezing the stopper and the neck so it would not leak. Then she combed her hair and checked her looking-glass. She had looked worse. Sarah rubbed her cheeks hard, to bring out the color in them. She would be seeing Gabriel tonight, after all. She wanted to look pretty when she said goodbye.

As Sarah put the finishing touches on her face, Fanny rang the iron bell in the kitchen to call everyone downstairs. Sarah went into the hall, and sat at the table. Silas and Father filed in, and Fanny took away one of the place settings. As she did, she told Sarah that Mister Braithwaite sent his regrets. Also, Brydie was out in town someplace.

"One last thing, Mistress." Fanny said, and Sarah finally met her gaze.

"What is it, Fanny?" She asked, looking at her.

"I'm sorry about what happened. I should have done better."

"Bless thee." Sarah said, contrite. "Gabriel even fooled Father. What could thou have done against him?" Fanny nodded, then slipped back into the kitchen to fix the garnishes.

Silas came into the dining room first, followed by John Winthrop moments later. Winthrop had marks of ink on his hands. He carried with him an open bottle of wine for the meal. Sarah had been counting on him to do that. When Father was at home, there was always wine in the house.

"Good evening, Sarah." John Winthrop said, taking his place at the head of the table. "Where is Mister Braithwaite?"

"He sends his regrets." Sarah replied. Father didn't look too dismayed about it.

"And Brydie?" He asked, somehow knowing she was not in the kitchen.

"Nobody knows." Sarah said. "Fanny says she left around five o'clock, and hasn't returned."

"The food smells good." Silas said, changing the subject as Fanny brought it out to the buffet, along with spoons and spoon rests with which to serve it.

"Thank you, Master Silas." Fanny replied as she placed the garnishes.

“Fanny, join us for grace.” Winthrop stretched out his hands, and Silas and Sarah joined hands with him. The servant did so, taking her place across from Sarah. Sarah reached across the table and took Fanny’s hand, completing the circle. “Let us pray.” John Winthrop began.

“Father, our times are in thy hands. We beseech thee to look favorably upon our works, and by them bring the Kingdom of God to this imperfect Creation, existing in time. Grant us this nourishment, for we are imperfect creatures, subsisting on the land. By it, fill our hearts with thy strength and our minds with thy will, so that our works may find favor with thee on the last day. Guide us tomorrow, as we enact justice against the sorcerer Gabriel Bishop. Bless the sanctity of this home and all who live in it. Give to the departed eternal rest, and let the imprisoned know the peace of the Lord. We ask in the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.” As he said the grace, Sarah took the poison from her pocket under the table. She moved slowly, silently easing the cork from the bottle.

“Amen.” Silas, Sarah, and Fanny replied. Then John Winthrop took the loaf of bread, blessed it, and broke off a piece. He passed it around the table; each took a little piece and ate it.

Then John Winthrop poured the cup of wine. He declared it was the cup of salvation, and passed it around. Silas drank from it, then Fanny, and then Sarah herself. She took a gulp, then brought it to her lap, as if looking into it for crumbs. In a deliberate motion she added about half of the poison and returned it to Father. He took it back without hesitation and drank deeply from it.

Sarah exhaled as Winthrop got up to take his portion of the food first. She closed the bottle, and hid it in her pocket as Father came back and Silas got his portion. Once it was secure, Sarah allowed herself to breathe normally. She got her plate and spooned some slices of roast beef and potatoes on to it. She took some of the carrots as well. By the time Sarah returned, Silas and Father were already eating.

“It’s good.” Silas declared, as Fanny got her portion to take back into the kitchen.

"There's more of everything." Fanny replied. "I'll be in the kitchen if ye have need of me."

"Very good, Fanny." John Winthrop said, taking another sip of his wine. He swished it in his mouth, looking quizzically at the cup, and sipped it again. "You two should have told me it went sour." He said, swallowing the wine.

"It's sour?" Silas said. "I thought it tasted fine."

"Well, have a taste again." Winthrop said, passing Silas the cup. Sarah's heart leapt in an instinct to knock the cup from his hands. She willed herself to stay put, and prayed that Silas would not drink too deeply. If God would spare Asenath, surely he would spare Silas.

Silas took the cup and drank from it. "When did thou open it?" He asked John Winthrop.

"Just now." Winthrop said of the poisoned wine.

"Maybe it's corked. Sarah, taste this." Silas said, guilelessly holding out the cup. "I can never tell with these things."

Sarah took the cup. Her hand shook only a little. "Thou would have me taste it?" She echoed.

"Yes, yes." Silas said.

Sarah pressed the cup to her lips, but let nothing pass. There was a rushing in her soul like a great wind. "I think it tastes fine. Better than most wine in Massachusetts."

"The curse of a discerning palate." John Winthrop said, taking it back. "Sometimes I really do miss England, children. Despite what happened, it is something special."

"What was it like?" Sarah asked, interested in finding a topic to waste John Winthrop's time.

"England is like the center of a world, situated on a lonely island. When I practiced law in London, I met men who fancied themselves masters of the universe, who traded ships full of sugar and

tobacco like game pieces. I knew that their fortunes could wax and wane on a tide, but never thought that would happen to me. I had my little law practice, and did not covet."

"But then the King dissolved Parliament." Silas said, adding a detail to the story.

"Yes." Winthrop agreed, telling the tale. "And I lost my position as a county judge. War was coming; for the King was a tyrant, who whipped and imprisoned godly men without purpose. We prayed for peace, but I knew worse things were inevitable. So I sold our house, raised a fleet and left for America as quickly as possible, with as many as would come with me. The rest is history."

"Would you go back, if you could?" Sarah asked. "Now that the war is over."

"I'm too old to make that journey across the sea. My home is here now." John Winthrop declared, pouring the remainder of his poisoned wine into a nearby spittoon. He came back to the table and sniffed the bottle, then looked puzzled again.

"Strange." The governor said. "The cup was corked, yet the bottle is not."

"Waste not, want not." Silas said, helping himself to a cupful. "Sarah, do you care for any?"

"No, thank you." She said, afraid too much chatter would betray her.

Silas gulped his cup of wine, trying not to think of the execution which would take place tomorrow. John Winthrop picked at his food, as if he had little appetite. Sarah wolfed down what was before her and took a second portion, so that she would not be expected to say anything. As she finished that, John Winthrop mentioned; "It's meet to see you eating again, Sarah."

"It's better than fasting." She agreed, sitting back down.

"The food hurts my stomach." Silas complained. "I wonder what Fanny did to it."

The governor began to cough, a dry, belly cough, the kind someone makes before they vomit. When the fit ended, the governor agreed. "You're right, Silas. Something is wrong with it."

Sarah looked from Silas to John again, and stood up suddenly. "I'll have a word with Fanny."

Sarah headed the kitchen, and met Fanny on the way, summoned by the sound of John Winthrop coughing violently. After a moment, Silas joined him.

"Is something the matter?" She asked. "It sounds like he's choking."

"Just some bad wine." Sarah said. "Come to the kitchen for a moment."

"Aye, Mistress." Fanny agreed, following Sarah thither.

"I hope it wasn't the spices." Fanny worried once they were safely out of earshot. "I used a light hand with them."

"It wasn't the spices." Sarah said. "Like I said, the wine was off."

"I should fetch a bucket." Fanny said. "I don't want a mess."

"Silas can handle it himself." Sarah said. "We need a different bottle of wine. The white, I think; that one is sweet. Go fetch it from the cellar."

Fanny complied, and once she was down the stairs, Sarah sprang into action. The door from the cellar to the outside was locked, to keep thieves away from the governor's victuals. If Sarah could bar this door, Fanny would be trapped down there. Sarah secured the little eye-lock, which kept it the cold drafts from making their way upstairs.

A few seconds later, she heard a banging on the other side. "Sarah!" Fanny's voice called out. "The door's stuck again!"

Sarah made no reply. She was pushing a cupboard of dishes to the door, scraping it against the floorboards. It got stuck on a loose one, and Sarah pushed it harder. A plate toppled from the cupboard and smashed on the floor.

“What was that!?” Fanny asked from the other side. “Mistress Sarah, are you there?”
Meanwhile, in the dining room, Sarah heard the sound of vomiting.

“Sarah, can you hear me?” Fanny cried, as Sarah pushed the cupboard in front of the door. She pushed the heavy wooden cabinet flush, as Fanny shouted to be heard. “What’s going on?!”

“Just stay put, Frances.” Sarah said, loudly enough for her to hear. “I’ll go fetch help.”

“Wait, what’s going on?!” Fanny demanded, “Sarah, answer me!” But Sarah made no reply, and went back into the hall. She got her cloak, and went back to the dining room to look in on Silas and her father.

John Winthrop had collapsed onto his plate of food, mashed potatoes stuck in his hair. Silas was yet lively. He had fallen off his chair, and vomited on the carpet. He was trying to get to his feet, but kept falling back to his knees. Crawling, he looked up at Sarah in desperation.

“Sister,” Silas gasped as she entered the room. “Sarah, Father is...”

“Just stay put, Silas.” She repeated. “I’ll go fetch help.” Silas’s jacket was folded over the back of his chair. From it, Sarah retrieved the keys to the gaol, to Gabriel’s cell.

“Wait, Sarah.” Silas said, grabbing hold of her ankle. “It was thee, wasn’t it?”

Sarah shook herself free of her brother’s grip. “Just stay put.” She said, and left the manse.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Gabriel Bishop was sleepless again, knowing what would come tomorrow. For his last night, Rackman moved Gabriel back to the regular cells and allowed him a pot of hot water and a tub to wash in. Wringing the dirt out of his hair, Gabriel glimpsed Thomas Braithwaite and Hardship Cole building the gallows. Once he had dried himself off, Gabriel confessed his sins and meditated for the rest of the day. At sundown, Caesar the Negro had come with a plate of beans and cornbread. The dirty plate was in the corner now, next to his empty water cup. Now, there was nothing left to do but wait for morning.

The door to the corridor opened, and Gabriel heard footsteps coming down the hall. By the sound of them, he knew it wasn't Rackman on his usual rounds.

"Go away, Silas." Gabriel said. "There's nothing for us to talk about."

"Silas is dead." The visitor replied. It was Sarah Winthrop. "Father, too."

"Dead?" Gabriel said, taken aback. "How?"

"I poisoned them." She said, approaching the cell. As she came closer, Gabriel was able to discern her form. She was wearing one of her fine dresses, the cream-colored one with scarlet trim. Her cheeks were rosy from the cold night air.

"Poisoned them?!" Gabriel echoed, stunned. "No."

"Yes." Sarah rejoined him. "With the poison Asenath made." She produced Silas's ring of keys. "They didn't suspect a thing until the very last. Now I'm here to set thou free."

"But why?" Gabriel said, as Sarah tried a key. "Thou would have me dead."

"And die thou wilt." Sarah said, moving to the next key on the ring. "But not tomorrow."

"It isn't true." Gabriel said, forgetting himself. "This can't be happening."

"Hush. Someone might hear." Sarah said, trying more keys. After a moment, she said quietly "Thou used me to the last. Thou never would have wed me. It was just a ruse, to steal from us."

"No." Gabriel said. "I would have kept my vows. I promised Fanny once she was really ours, I would set her free, to atone for what I did to her. She would have left Massachusetts for good."

"Fie." Sarah said, as she found the right key. "Thou spin'st a fine web, spider. But I know better now. I didn't come here to stay thy execution, I came to enact it myself."

"By killing the governor and breaking me out?" Gabriel asked. "How?"

"I'll say it was thee who enthralled me into killing them. That it was thee who manipulated the witch hunter when he was drunk, and got the poison into my hands. It's more than half-true, anyway."

Gabriel shook his head. "No, Sarah. No. Even if I could do that, I wouldn't have."

"Even I don't believe that." Sarah said, opening the wide the door to the cell. "Escape Andover if you dare. Braithwaite will send his hunting-man after thee. Or, drink of the poison that killed Father and Silas, and die now without a struggle. There is enough left for one more person. I thought I would give thee a choice in it."

Sarah took the poison from her pocket, showing it to Gabriel. By the color of it, it was Aconitum. If only he had not given Asenath his strongest stuff for safe keeping, Gabriel thought.

"Listen, if we hurry, we can undo this." Gabriel said. "Thomas Braithwaite will understand. He knows the governor is a cruel man, he would take mercy upon thee."

"Thomas Braithwaite couldn't decide east from west." Sarah said dismissively. "If anyone's going to be held responsible besides you, it will be Asenath. Father always hated her."

"Asenath meant that poison for nobody but herself." Gabriel said. "Truly."

"Perhaps she did." Sarah said. "Who will believe her? She's already a convicted witch."

In the darkness, Sarah looked more and more like John Winthrop in a dress.

"Let the Spirit curse thee." Gabriel said, finally. "If God hears my prayers, let him curse thee."

Sarah smiled at that. "Once you're gone, Gabriel, nothing will be able to touch me."

"Thomas Braithwaite knows the truth." Gabriel said, trying to undermine her. "I'll confess it to him. Better still, I'll call the guards right now and they'll catch thee here."

"Do it." Sarah dared him. "Nobody will believe you." The keys were held loosely in her right hand, like a flower stem. She did not expect Gabriel would attack her.

Gabriel snatched the keys from Sarah's hands, roughly pushing her away as she grabbed for them. As she fought back, Gabriel shoved her away and hastily locked the door to the cell.

Sarah pushed against it, rattling the door in its hinges. "Quiet!" Gabriel rasped at her. Miraculously, nobody heard the struggle.

Once it was shut fast, Sarah shot Gabriel a look of contempt. "This won't accomplish anything. No matter what you tell them, they'll blame you."

"I can fix this." Gabriel said. "I'll go to the manse myself, save Silas and the governor too."

"Hardship Cole will put a bullet in thee." Sarah said. "This is the end."

"Don't say that!" Gabriel said. "I'm going to get help. Just stay put."

"God be with thee, Gabriel Bishop." Sarah said sarcastically as he fled. Gabriel skulked down the hallway and into the sally port, overwhelmed with the choices he had to make right now in order to save the governor's and Silas's lives.

Rackman was snoring loudly at his post with his shoes off; his feet on the table, a clay jug on the floor next to his boots. Leaning on a barrel in the corner, in a much lighter shade of sleep, was Caesar the Negro. It occurred to Gabriel that Caesar would know where Asenath was being kept.

"Psst." Gabriel said, and Caesar awoke fully, in the manner of a servant caught dozing. "Psst. Caesar." Gabriel repeated, directing his attention.

Caesar came to the door. "Mister Gabriel." He said. "You're trying to escape, aren't you?"

"Where is Asenath?" Gabriel whispered. "I need to see her."

"She's in her cell. She wouldn't approve of what you're doing."

"Listen, something terrible is happening tonight. I don't have anything to do with it." Gabriel added hastily as Caesar's eyes widened with alarm. "Sarah Winthrop is locked in my cell. She told me Silas Winthrop and the governor have been poisoned at their meal."

"Then I can't let you speak to Asenath." Caesar said. "Thou would kill her, too."

"I'm not..." Gabriel began to say, but it was of no use. "I'm not going to hurt thee, Caesar, but follow my direction exactly. Wait ten minutes, then wake Rackman. Tell him there's an emergency at the manse and to bring Asenath thither."

"No." Caesar said. "You leave Asenath out of this."

"It's better if Asenath goes." Gabriel said. "Otherwise, Braithwaite might suspect her of having some involvement. Truly, Caesar; she may die if thou will not do as I say."

"This sounds like a trap." Caesar said. "What will happen at the manse?"

"It's not what will happen, but what has happened," Gabriel said hurriedly, "what is happening at this moment, if I do not take swift action. Please, Caesar, I've never deceived thee."

But Gabriel could hear how unbelievable his story sounded as Caesar listened to it. Disbelief and scorn were written on the slave's face like scripture in John Winthrop's Bible.

"It has to be Asenath, doesn't it?" Caesar said. "Or they'll kill her in your stead."

"I'm afraid that's exactly what will happen." Gabriel said.

Caesar went to the door to the sally port and unlocked it with his own keys. It had been oiled recently, so that its opening did not wake Rackman from his dreaming.

"Go." Caesar said, looking the other way. "We never had this conversation."

"God be with thee. And tell Asenath I'm sorry." Gabriel said, passing through the portal.

As he went from the gaol to the street, Gabriel realized he had no idea where he would go, only that he could not remain here. When Gabriel moved, he could not walk; he ran.

Gabriel sprinted for row of houses nearest the palisade, and crouched in the shadow of their eaves. He could see the torches of the guard towers from here. No unusual activity yet.

Sarah was right. If he tried to save Silas and the governor himself, Gabriel would be shot before getting a chance to explain himself. But if he turned himself in, they would not believe him any more than Caesar had. And if Gabriel left Andover, it would be too late; and the governor's man would hunt him down like a cat o'mount for killing the governor and Silas. At least in that instance, Asenath might not be held responsible for the deaths.

In that moment, Gabriel wished he was the sorcerer everyone believed he was. If a sorcerer's powers were his, he could spare Silas his life, spare Asenath from suspicion. If he had been a better person, perhaps Gabriel could even have spared Sarah her suffering. He could have resisted Fanny, resisted his own passion and feelings of love. But Gabriel was not that kind of man.

His own life notwithstanding, Gabriel Bishop wished the Black Man would come finish it for him, consume him, and leave everyone else alone. Since he was eighteen Gabriel had spat upon anything resembling the devil John Winthrop believed in; called The Black Man a fairy story. Now Gabriel desperately wished he was real, that the stories had been true. But it was too late even for that.

At that moment, Gabriel decided there was nothing left to do but flee. The idea was unappealing to him, even cowardly. Getting shot to death at the manse whilst he worked to resuscitate Silas was probably what he deserved. But if he escaped the village and let them hunt him, Braithwaite might believe him wholly responsible; not put Asenath on trial again for the deaths.

Gabriel realized he really was a coward after all. For weeks he had bravely insisted that he was prepared to die, but here he was. Holding the keys to the gaol, Gabriel thought about going back, then decided not to. At least Asenath would survive if he tried to escape. He owed Asenath that much.

Perhaps there was a reason for this, Gabriel explained to himself as he observed Ceasar coming from the gaol, heading for the western gate. Perhaps living as an outlaw was God's punishment for him, a fate worse than death. But the idea to flee took precedent in Gabriel's mind over any further justifications.

Gabriel turned his attention back to the palisade ramparts. He heard a shout, and saw the torches of the two minutemen on duty flicker and move as they were picked up from their resting places. A horn sounded, summoning the others. Soon, the streets of Andover would be full of armed men roused from their beds. Gabriel sprinted to a new hiding place, as the patrols began.

Escaping Andover was like playing a game of come and find me, Gabriel thought as he slipped back into the shadow of the house nearest to the east gate. It was eerily easy how he hid from them.

There was one man left guarding the east gate; whose name, Gabriel recalled, was Williams. His wife had died of smallpox during the epidemic, though Williams had endured it as a child and was immune. He bore the scars of the pox, which made him easy to recognize even by torchlight. The door to the house whose eaves Gabriel hid under opened, and another man rushed past Gabriel's huddled figure. Gabriel held his breath as the man hurried towards Williams, greeting him.

"Oy, Williams. What's going on?"

"Bishop's escaped the gaol. Hardship Cole is rallying the men. Stay here and hold the gate with me. Unless he flies away, he won't escape Andover alive."

"Feh. He's probably hidden himself in a hay pile somewhere." The other man said dismissively. "Bet you we'll be up half the night looking for that damn coward."

Gabriel sank behind a barrel under the eaves, wondering what he was going to do. They would see him sooner or later, he thought, his back brushing up against a chopping block. Gabriel reached out his hand and felt an axe handle meet his grip. He looked, and couldn't believe his luck. The other guard had just left his hatchet out after chopping wood with it.

Gabriel took it, misliking the weapon. He had no choice left but to use it.

Rushing forth from his hiding spot, Gabriel screamed like a banshee, wildly swinging the axe. Williams caught sight of him first and attempted to draw his rapier, but Gabriel was too quick for him. The hatchet sunk halfway into Williams' arm, breaking the bones.

Williams dropped his weapon once he saw his own blood upon the ground. The other guard was frozen in disbelief as well, as if amazed that Gabriel could attack anybody and win. Gabriel locked eyes with the other man and tackled him, throwing him against the palisade with all his strength. He fell against the icy wall head first, out cold in the snow. The horn sounded again.

“Bishop.” Williams said, holding his injured arm by the elbow. “You cut me.”

“Hold the wound fast.” Gabriel said. “Tie it off with something.”

“Wait!” Williams cried as Gabriel climbed up the ladder into the western guard tower. “They won’t take you alive this time!”

Gabriel sat on the edge of the palisade’s ramparts, and prepared for the jump to the other side. He whispered back: “I know that they won’t.”

The fall to the ground wasn’t as far as Gabriel thought it would be.

The Sorcerer of Ipswich ran from the gates of Andover, towards the river. After crossing it, he thought, he could break into some farmhouse and take some supplies. That would be enough to make it to Vermont territory, beyond the reach of Winthrop’s edicts. It was only eighty-five miles away.

There was a rising commotion in Andover, of Hardship Cole and the minutemen discovering Williams and that other man he’d hurt. Gabriel sprinted towards the Connecticut River, towards that broad canyon it carved into the land. There were guards at the bridge, so Gabriel made a dogleg, and went down to the banks of the river.

The situation there was less than ideal for a crossing, with yawning gaps in the center of the river’s flow. It would have to do, Gabriel thought; there was no time to look for a better place.

Gabriel could not afford to walk, so he ran. The horn sounded for a third time, and Gabriel glanced behind his shoulder just long enough to see torches and men approaching the bridge to Andover. Gabriel hastened downstream, to get out of their range before they spotted him. He tried the ice towards the center of the river, but it was too thin. If Gabriel crossed here, he would fall. He heard the men on the bridge shouting, felt their weapons pointed at his back. Their voices mixed with the baying of the hounds they had brought to chase him down.

Hardship Cole arrived on the scene, astride a sweaty horse. From the bridge he cried, “Gabriel Bishop! Surrender in the name of Governor Winthrop!”

They must not have checked the manse yet, Gabriel thought, wishing Caesar had taken him seriously. Now Silas really would die, and Asenath too, eventually. In his heart, Gabriel pitied Sarah Winthrop. There had been no need for her to try and match him at hurting those around them.

On the bridge, Hardship Cole gave the order to ready fire. The dogs were brought down to the ice and set loose. The pack scrabbled and yelped, warning each other of the danger.

Gabriel sprinted forward, well ahead of them. He might just make his escape yet.

Then there was the sound of a musket report, and Gabriel felt a round sear through the flesh on his back. A musket ball lodged in the wound, hot blood soaking into Gabriel’s clothes. He shot me, Gabriel thought, staggering as the witch hunter reloaded.

“Surrender!” Hardship cried out. But he could never go back. Gabriel couldn’t face them again, even as dead men. He veered towards the center of the river. Hardship’s weapon cracked into the night again. Another round seared into Gabriel’s shoulder.

Gabriel fell to the ice, hard. It shattered beneath him, the surface breaking into uneven floes as the cool waters enveloped Gabriel’s body. The last sound he heard was the scraping of dogs’ toenails on ice. He sank into the black water of the Connecticut River, its chill instantly numbing. Gabriel’s final breath shone before him like a gallon of quicksilver as his mind panicked and then itself went numb. He tried to move his limbs, but his body was slow and weak. The current was too strong for him. It whipped his body downstream, trapping him beneath the ice, and Gabriel knew it was over.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Gabriel Bishop!” Hardship Cole cried, getting the Sorcerer of Ipswich into his sights. He was sixty yards away and counting. “Surrender in the name of Governor John Winthrop!”

Gabriel didn’t hear him, or if he did, the witch paid him no heed. Hardship planted a shot squarely into Bishop’s back. He saw blood on the ice as the witch scrabbled, but kept running. Hardship readied another round. The target was seventy yards away and counting.

Someone gave the order to unleash the dogs, who crowded on the thick ice. They went tails between their legs, yelping in fear. The witch sped up, though the dogs were going slowly. From the bridge, Hardship could see that Gabriel would outrun them.

If he meant to use lethal force, it would have to be now; Hardship thought, preparing another round. He had to make this shot.

The target veered towards thin ice as Hardship drew a bead on him. He pulled the trigger.

The sorcerer fell, ice cracking into pieces underneath him, and slipped beneath the waters. Once the gun smoke cleared, there was nothing left of Gabriel but a bloody smear. The minutemen started to yell at one another, angry as an outfoxed pack of dogs.

It was a good kill. Hardship was filled with the stillness of it, as his prize flowed down the river. There was no chasing after the body, so Hardship allowed himself to smoke.

Hardship watched the men venture onto the ice, carefully, to rescue a few dogs stranded on ice floes. The clouds broke and the ice began to shine with moonlight. As Hardship waited meditatively on the bridge, Thomas Braithwaite came onto the scene, his nerves still jangling with the thrill of pursuit.

“Cole!” Thomas barked from horseback. “What the hell is going on?!”

"No need to shout." Hardship said calmly. "It's all over. Bishop's with Davy Jones."

"He's dead? What in God's name happened here?"

Hardship told Braithwaite what had happened in his church voice. "Bishop escaped the gaol. He chopped Williams's arm off, getting over the palisade. He was trying to cross the river and shake us. I shot him on the ice over yonder, see the stain? The body fell into the river."

"So you haven't been to the manse." Thomas said darkly.

"I wasn't invited." Hardship said.

"Walk with me." Thomas said, going back up the banks of the Connecticut. Once they were well away, he said; "I went there this past hour, to confront Governor Winthrop and make him sign over Brydie's contract to me. He's dead, Hardship."

"Dead? How?"

"I'm not sure, I was only there for a moment before I left to get help."

"Bishop." Hardship said. "He meant to bring the curse full circle."

"I'm not so sure." Thomas said. "Silas has also been affected."

"What about the women?" Hardship asked. "Are they dead?"

"Sarah was found at the gaol, locked in Gabriel's cell. I don't know where Fanny is." Hardship could read the suspicion in Thomas's eyes.

"Does Silas yet live?"

"For now." Thomas answered. "I sent for Asenath. She and Rackman should be at the manse."

"You think a white witch can foil a black one?" Hardship asked doubtfully.

"If it's her poison, perhaps." Thomas responded. "For now, our concern is Sarah Winthrop. She's awaiting interrogation at Andover gaol. I need thou to come with me."

Hardship got his horse and proceeded with Braithwaite to Andover Town. Everyone was awake now; had put on their housecoats and opened their windows, to ask each other what was going on. Some had heard the gunshots at the bridge. A fire brigade was checking each building, to make certain all was well.

After ten minutes riding in silence, Thomas said: "Hardship, do you think Sarah Winthrop could have killed them? It's the only explanation that makes sense."

"No, I don't." Hardship said too quickly. Then his own doubts said yes, she might have. It was Sarah who had been with him when he lost Asenath's poison, and hadn't he a bad feeling about that round of dice? The consequences of Sarah taking it for keeps twisted around Hardship's heart, like a corn snake around a rat. No, that couldn't be the case, Hardship prayed.

"You don't look as sure as you sound." Braithwaite said.

"It's nothing." Hardship lied. "She had no means, Braithwaite."

"None that we know of. But Bishop couldn't have done it. His powers were fled."

"That's your opinion. He would have escaped if it weren't for me."

"He's dead, isn't he?" Thomas asked.

"Oh, he's definitely dead." Hardship replied. "I put two bullets in him before he fell."

"Then Gabriel's spells should be broken." Thomas said. "That nothing's changed worries me."

"Don't say his first name." Hardship said. "I told you before."

Thomas sighed, as if to ask Hardship whether his job was to kill witches or repeat superstitions about them. "Regardless, I must know the truth. I need to question Sarah, thoroughly."

Thomas and Hardship rode to the gaol, where Sarah Winthrop awaited them. They came through the sally port, and tied up their horses in the courtyard. Hardship's instincts told him to get away from this place, before Braithwaite learned the truth and hanged him for it.

Meanwhile, Thomas was telling Hardship his battle plans.

"To start, let me do the talking. I'll get Sarah flustered, accuse her of the murders straight out. Then you sweep in, show her a little sympathy, and make me leave the room. Then you come tell me her confession, and we'll both go back in the room to get it on paper."

It was a ruse they'd done a time or two before. Hardship nodded, half-listening. "Surely. I still think we ought to treat Sarah Winthrop as a witness. She's the victim in all this."

"No." Thomas said as he came to the door, "I'm done handling Sarah Winthrop with kid gloves."

Sarah waited quietly in the interrogation room, her plain face set in lines of determination and fear. A pitcher of water and a cup stood ignored on the table. Sarah Winthrop hearkened to the men as they entered the interrogation, her black eyes shining like her late father's.

"Prithee, what news of my father?" She asked Braithwaite, sounding desperate.

"We'll speak of that shortly." Thomas said. "How did thou come here?"

"I thought thou would tell me. I was in the manse, and then next thing I knew I was here, alone. Caesar the Negro heard me, and brought me here. He wouldn't tell me anything."

Thomas frowned. "The real answer, please."

"The sorcerer Gabriel Bishop did magic, and switched places with me." Sarah repeated, impatient. "Now tell me where my father is. Gabriel might have attacked him already."

"He's dead, Sarah." Thomas Braithwaite said. "Silas fights for his life as we speak."

At this revelation, Sarah gasped, buried her face in her hands and wept. She carried on for a while, her howls of anguish circling around the interrogation room with an eerie timbre.

"It's not possible." Sarah said repeatedly. "It's not possible."

"It doesn't seem that way." Thomas agreed. "Gabriel was never in the manse. I think it was thee who killed them; then freed Gabriel to frame him for it. Is that what happened?"

"Never." Sarah said, disgusted. "I would never poison my own family!"

"We never said it was poison." Thomas interjected, trading a look with Hardship that said he was onto something. "Wherefore poison, Sarah?"

"It must be poison." Sarah said hastily. "How else could they drop dead like that?"

"Poison is a woman's weapon." Thomas said. "Asenath used poison."

"Then it must be Asenath behind all this." Sarah said stubbornly. "She hates Father too."

"Asenath wouldn't kill him." Thomas said, his voice keen. "How did you get her poison?"

"I'll only say this once more." Sarah said. "I was at the manse, then I was here. I don't remember anything else. And, Gabriel can scramble your memories, steal time, make you believe things that aren't possible. He and Asenath probably worked together..."

"Enough of that." Thomas said, a little harshly. "Tell me the truth of what happened."

"No." Sarah Winthrop replied, bitterly. "I can't. I don't remember."

“Be reasonable, Sarah. If thou would tell the truth, I can be merciful.”

“I don’t know what you mean. I don’t know anything of any poison.”

“Braithwaite.” Hardship said gruffly. “That’s enough, leave her be.”

Hardship had come in before his cue. Thomas gave him an arch look.

“I don’t think so.” Thomas replied. “She’s lying again, I can tell.”

Sarah began to weep now in earnest, a tone truer than the wailing from before. Thomas Braithwaite shot Hardship a third look, as if to say he shouldn’t have doubted him.

“The girl just lost her father and brother. She’s in shock.” Hardship said, playing his part.

“She’s in shock because she killed them.” Thomas replied, playing his.

“You’re accusing the governor’s daughter without a shred of evidence.” Hardship said.

“Evidence is still being collected. Would thou chance a wager on it, Cole?”

“Get out of here, Braithwaite. I won’t let you badger witnesses like this.” Hardship said, his part feeling all too real. He needed to get his story straight with Sarah, alone.

Thomas shot Hardship a theatrical look of contempt as he complied. “I’ll be in the courtyard.”

In the closed interrogation room, Hardship felt as trapped as Sarah Winthrop looked, her dark, shiny little eyes disguised to look needy and desperate. Hardship wasn’t fooled by them, either.

She waited for the clerk to get out of earshot before speaking. “It’s not how he thinks, Hardship. I didn’t have a choice about it. It had to be this way.”

“Just tell me exactly what happened.” Hardship said. “Make a clean breast of it with me.”

“Thank you.” Sarah said, looking at the table and her own hands. She volunteered nothing.

"It was poison, though, wasn't it?" Hardship said, prodding Sarah.

"I shouldn't say." She said, confirming Hardship's worst fears. "It's not your fault, Hardship; he made you wicked drunk. I wanted to tell you I had it, to give it back, or pour it out, but Gabriel made me keep my silence. I didn't have a choice. This was the only way to stop his plans."

"Ssh. Never tell anyone that." Hardship said. "Or we may both stand trial."

"For what?" Sarah asked.

"Manslaughter." Hardship said, thinking of himself. "And maybe accessory."

"What are my chances in court?" Sarah Winthrop asked. "If it came to that."

"Tell me exactly what happened, as it happened, and I can say." Hardship said, pensive.

"I put it in his wine cup." Sarah said. "During grace."

"And Silas?" Hardship exhaled.

"He drank from it by accident. I wanted to say something, but I couldn't."

"Where was Fanny while all this was going on?" Hardship said.

"In the kitchen." Sarah said. "I went there afterwards, and shut her in the cellar. I took Silas's keys. Then I went to the gaol... the guards were sleeping. I let Gabriel out, and he locked me in."

"It was under your own power, wasn't it?" Hardship asked. "Killing the governor."

"It was the only way to foil Gabriel's plans." Sarah said, her voice barely above a whisper. "If I didn't poison Father, Gabriel would have escaped and done it himself. He's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes." Hardship said. "He's gone. I killed him."

"Then the spell is broken." Sarah said. "I'm free, thank God."

“Braithwaite will go easier on you if he thinks you’re telling the truth.” Hardship said, changing the subject. “Until sunrise at least I think you should agree to plead guilty to something. It’s not forever, just until the magistrate in Deerfield gets here to sort everything out. Then recant your confession, and I’ll tell the magistrate Thomas was badgering you. He’ll believe me, he respects me.” Hardship said, praying he had enough influence to deliver on this promise.

“What exactly would I plead guilty to?” Sarah asked.

“Say you were enthralled into poisoning the governor’s cup. That you can’t remember where the poison came from, or how it came into your possession. Tell him it’s Asenath’s, that’s the truth anyway. If you’ll do your part, I can persuade him; play on his doubts.”

“I can’t do that.” Sarah said. “Even if the charges are dropped, everyone will know.”

“That’s part of a plea deal.” Hardship said, irritated. “It’s small potatoes.”

“They’ll shun me.” Sarah said. “Make me a stranger in my own home. I’ll be alone again.”

“Not forever. Just for a year or two. It’s better than the alternative.”

“What are my chances in court?” Sarah said stubbornly.

“Bad.” Hardship lied. “Thomas might hang thee if he’s allowed to prosecute.”

But Sarah was wise. “You’re misleading me. You just want to protect yourself.”

“It’s better for both of us if thou confess.” Hardship said. “But if thou won’t, I’ll have to.”

Sarah gave him a sullen look. “You won’t breathe a word of this to Braithwaite.”

“I will.” Hardship insisted. “I’ve admitted my mistakes to Braithwaite before.”

“No, you won’t. The truth is too damning. You hold what you have too dearly.”

“Sarah, if we go at odds, we will both be seeing a lot more of the inside of this gaol. If we work together, I can free us both. I’ll do what I can for thee, I swear to that. But thou must accept my help.”

“No. Tell Braithwaite... tell him I’ll take my chances.”

It would take a while longer to break her. Hardship went to the door. “He’s going to keep badgering you. He knows something’s wrong. Prithee, consider what I’ve said. I want to help thee.”

“Farewell, Hardship Cole.” Sarah Winthrop said, as he left her in the interrogation room.

Hardship met Thomas Braithwaite in the courtyard. He was looking at the sky, as if trying to read God’s plan from the underside. “Any luck charming her?” Thomas asked as Hardship approached.

“No.” Hardship said. “She’s sticking to her story, and wants her day in court.”

“I see.” Braithwaite said, sounding distracted.

“I think you’re barking up the wrong tree here.” Hardship said. “She’s not the one.”

“She is the one.” Thomas replied. “Boston has more liars than Deerfield, so I know.”

“Why are you so sure? It’s Asenath’s poison, after all. Maybe Asenath cursed Winthrop.”

“Asenath has no motive, Winthrop spared her. Gabriel wanted to die anyway.”

“I’m not denying Sarah has the motivation.” Hardship said. “But where would she have gotten Asenath’s poison? It was safely locked up with the rest of the evidence.”

“So it was.” Thomas said. “That’s the part I can’t figure.”

Hardship knew he had to be careful now. Too tentatively he said: “So maybe you’re mistaken. She hadn’t any means. And if it was her, why kill Silas? He did nothing wrong.”

Thomas looked into Hardship's eyes, searching for something that made Hardship's heart quail. He prayed Braithwaite would pass him over, but the clerk held his gaze.

"I suppose we'll have to keep questioning people." He said neutrally.

The two men went back to the interrogation room, stopping along the way for writing materials. Within, Sarah Winthrop lay collapsed on the table, her hands and feet trembling slightly.

"Sarah." Hardship said as they came into the room. "We're back."

But she didn't respond. Thomas said, "Sarah Winthrop. Get your head off the table."

She continued lying there, not hearing them. "Sarah!" Hardship said. "Now."

But there was no response. Thomas flicked her wrist with his finger to get her attention. Her hand flopped on the table, and an empty glass bottle clattered from it.

Thomas Braithwaite picked it up, examined it. It was short, clear glass, the label stained with black drips. It was the same bottle Hardship had found in Asenath's skirts at the High Horse a week before. Now, it was completely empty.

The bottle began to tremble in Thomas's grip, before shattering to pieces in it. The clerk threw the pieces on the ground, his hand bloodied from the glass. He smashed them further with his foot, destroying the evidence. Then he turned to Hardship, anger blazing in his eyes.

"Send for the physician immediately." Thomas Braithwaite said.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Fanny Winthrop lay in a pile of potatoes, cradling her injured left arm in her right. She supposed everybody had forgotten about her. They had been gone for a while. The house was eerily quiet as Fanny smelled the pudding she'd prepared burning on the fire. Something was wrong, and her instincts said to expect the worst; that Gabriel's curse was coming to its head.

After Sarah shut her in, Fanny had pushed, shouted, cussed, and kicked at the door to the cellar; heard the crashing of china on the kitchen floor. In frustration, Fanny laid a mighty punch into the cellar door, thinking she could burst the lock from its hinges.

Fanny's wrist bent painfully, absorbing the force of the blow. She staggered and fell, knocking over the candle perched on the barrel at the top of the landing. The candle rolled down the stairs and went out, leaving her in darkness.

Panic and pain preceded her sense, and Fanny headed for the other way out of the cellar, tripping over a rake as she went, jangling pain into her wrist and shin bones. Crawling back to her feet, Fanny raced to the other side, felt for the door to the outside and pressed against it. It was immovable. Panicking, Fanny pushed again and harder, but it stayed put. There was about a foot of frozen snow above the cellar door, and Fanny could bear no weight upon her injured wrist. Whimpering with pain, Fanny realized she was trapped down here.

Fanny felt her way along the walls, careful not to trip over any of the other stuff, like the plow and the hoe and that toy sled Silas and Sarah used to play with. She headed towards the pantry, nearer to the stairs, and came upon a pile of potatoes. Fanny laid her hurt wrist on a chilled potato, cold from being stored down here. She could move the joint normally, but it hurt her greatly to try. She hoped it was just a pretty bad sprain, and not broken.

Lying amongst the potatoes, Fanny thought she heard footsteps. "Hello?" The visitor asked. "Is anybody home?" Fanny heard them moving around the house some more. By the sound of it, it was just one person.

She was about to call out in reply, but then wondered if it was Gabriel; and kept silent. A moment later, all was still again, and Fanny wondered if someone had really been there, or if it was just her imagination.

More time passed. The fire in the kitchen burned low, and Fanny got used to the burned pudding smell. The pain in her wrist grew worse, then slightly better as she rested. Fanny's eyes adjusted to the darkness, and she began to see the contours of the room. After an hour or so, Fanny's heart ceased its quavering, and she wondered when somebody would come let her out. She thought about drinking the governor's wine, but Fanny decided she better not. She could be stuck here awhile.

Presently, Fanny heard the shifting creak of footsteps in the house. This time it was a crowd of people, perhaps the Winthrops returning home. "Hello?" She called out, hearing them up there.

"Hello? Can you hear me?! It's me, Fanny!" She heard more footsteps; indistinct murmuring and oaths. "Hello?! Master Winthrop? Master Silas? Is it ye?! Please let me out!"

The people left the kitchen. After a minute or two, someone returned to the top of the stairs. "Fanny?" The man called, his voice muffled behind the shut door. It was Caesar, Asenath's Negro man.

"Caesar, is that you?" Fanny called back.

"Aye. Hold tight, I'll let you out." She heard Caesar pushing furniture back from the door.

The dim light of the kitchen was bright to Fanny's wide pupils. At first, she saw it only in grey, but the colors returned. Fanny emerged from the cellar, cradling her hurt wrist in her hand.

"Welcome back." Caesar said. "It's past midnight."

"Jesus, what a mess." Fanny said, as she walked over the broken china. In her panic, thumping against the door, some of the finest plates had gotten upset and smashed on the floor. They were imported from England. "Master Silas will whip me for sure this time."

"I don't think you need to worry about that." Caesar said. Fanny looked down the dark hall, and heard the sound of strange voices in the dining room.

"What's happened?" Fanny asked, heading for the hall. Caesar stopped her.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." He said, like he was chiding a horse. "Don't go in there."

"Why not?" Fanny asked, oppositional. "What's going on in there?"

"Your master's dead, and Silas is getting decided."

"Then I must go to him." Fanny said, but Caesar stayed her.

"No, don't. Rackman and Asenath are in there, and they're both mad as hell. Gabriel's escaped; don't do anything suspicious. Thomas and Hardship are questioning Sarah at the gaol."

"Gabriel's escaped?" Fanny echoed.

"Gabriel's dead." Caesar said. "Hardship Cole shot him."

The news was unexpected. Fanny didn't know what to say at first, but then the words came.

"Praise Heaven. He can't hurt anybody else."

"What happened, exactly?" Caesar asked her.

Fanny took a moment to reply. "Sarah sent me to get more wine. She locked me in while I was down here. I think I hurt my wrist pretty badly pounding on the door."

"Show it to me." Caesar said, taking her hand; examining her walnut wrist in the firelight. "It looks a little swollen. Does this hurt?" Caesar asked, pinching the bone.

"Jesus!" Fanny yelped, pulling her hand away. "Yes, that hurts."

"Stay put." Caesar said. "Tell me where I can find stuff for making a splint."

"A what?" Fanny asked. "What's a split?"

"A splint. It's a kind of a bandage. Don't worry, it won't hurt." Caesar said, by way of explanation. Fanny showed him where the bandages were kept, made from sheets that had gotten too many stains or moth holes to be serviceable on the beds any longer. Caesar ripped out what he needed and went through the big spoons. Choosing the thinnest one made of tin, Caesar warmed it on the hearth and bent it to the shape of Fanny's arm. He brought it to her, and placed the dipping end backwards so it would support Fanny's injured hand. He held it in place and started wrapping bandages. As he worked, Caesar said:

"Fortune favors thee, Fanny. Because you were shut in the cellar, you're above suspicion. And this wrist looks like it will heal just fine, in a month or so."

"I'm not favored." Fanny said. "If I hadn't let Sarah trick me, I could have stopped her."

"I don't think anyone could have stopped Gabriel." Caesar said, winding bandages. "He had keys to the gaol. He fought his way over the palisade. Hardship Cole shot him as a last resort. He very nearly got away. Shame about the body, though."

"I want the remains burned." Fanny said coldly. "No funeral."

"That's just it. There is no body." Caesar said, tying the knot. "Bishop fell into the river."

Fanny took a moment to comprehend the news. "You mean, he's still out there?"

At that moment, someone briskly passed the window and thumped on the kitchen door. Both slaves looked at each other, daring the other to answer the door.

“Who’s there?” Caesar called out, trying to sound intimidating.

“It’s Thomas Braithwaite, clerk of court.” The visitor answered, with a voice that would brook no nonsense. Fanny let him inside, and Braithwaite brushed past the servants without salutation.

“What happens now?” Fanny asked Caesar fearfully, her voice a whisper. His dark face creased, and he looked into the low fire, unwilling to answer her truthfully.

“That fire’s going to go out if you don’t build it up. I’ll split you some wood for this next while.”

Caesar took the hatchet and went outside. After a few minutes, Fanny heard him splitting wood in the back yard. Left unattended, Fanny stole a glance down the hall.

Asenath knelt in front of Silas, whose upper half extended into the hallway. Asenath Black was holding his hand, sleeve rolled up. Silas’s skin was milky pale, and he looked like he was about to die. Rackman was looking down at Asenath, scowling at her to do something substantive.

Thomas Braithwaite ignored this scene as he examined the body of John Winthrop. Fanny came a little closer and saw her master’s hand. His body and chair were covered in a sheet, but the hand was pale and drawn, as if he’d aged ten years in a single night. He was certainly dead.

As if sensing someone watching him, Thomas looked up, and made eye contact with Fanny. She flinched, and went back into the kitchen, but he had already seen her. “Fanny Winthrop.”

“Mister Braithwaite.” Fanny said. “Can I offer you some tea?”

“No.” Thomas said. “How did that happen?” He asked, gesturing to her wrapped arm.

“I was shut in the cellar. I hurt myself trying to escape.”

"Who gave thee the dressing?" Thomas asked.

"Caesar." Fanny replied. "He made it for me just now."

"I have some bad news." Thomas said, unwilling to make small talk any longer. "Your mistress, Sarah Winthrop, died at Andover gaol this past hour."

"Died?" Fanny echoed. "Father, Silas, Sarah... Gabriel killed all of them?"

"No." Thomas Braithwaite said, uncomfortably. "I believe Sarah Winthrop was responsible for the killings. She poisoned herself during questioning, much the same as she did here."

"Oh, God." Fanny stammered. "I sensed it, or I should have sensed it. She forgave me tonight, for everything... She must have been possessed; Gabriel must have possessed her."

"That's our current theory." Thomas Braithwaite agreed. "Now that she's gone."

"It's the truth, Mister Braithwaite." Fanny said. "He was a sorcerer."

"It's irrelevant. I can't put dead people on trial." Thomas said, a bit coldly. He changed the subject. "I'll need to figure out what's to be done with thee. Where might Winthrop have kept his will?"

"In the strongbox." Fanny answered "There's a key hidden on top of the bookcase."

"What about Silas? Does he have a will?" Braithwaite asked.

"He did for a little while, but he burned it. Do you think he's going to die?"

"It's possible." Thomas said. "Which is why I need the will. I have to follow Winthrop's orders."

The two servants watched each other for a long time, the thunk of Caesar splitting wood punctuating the silence at regular intervals. "I'm sorry this had to happen."

"He's dead, isn't he?" Fanny asked. "Gabriel, I mean."

"I think so." Thomas Braithwaite said. "It wasn't survivable, what happened."

"Did you see it?" Fanny asked. "Did you see him die?"

"No." Thomas said. "But my witch hunter was the one who killed him."

"But what if it's a trick? Could he have gotten away somehow?"

"He's dead, Fanny." Thomas said, in a tone that said he'd endured enough superstition for one night. "That's the end of it. Now, I'm going to find your master's will, and read it. God willing, it'll have provisions for thy manumission."

"Yes, Mister Braithwaite." Fanny said. Thomas went to find the key to the strongbox.

Fanny decided to make some tea for herself, anyway. She put the kettle onto the fire and found a pewter cup off the floor, and then another. She put them back in the cupboard. She swept the floor, picked up the broken crockery and threw it away.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“What I don’t understand is why Sarah killed herself at the end.” Daniel Wheelwright said, leaning back in his chair, smoking. “She could have had Fanny, the manse, and all her father’s land.”

“It wouldn’t serve much good if everyone shuns you, suspecting murder.” Asenath said, pulling her needle through the hoop of stretched fabric, sewing another little black x into the design. She found the embroidery materials in Sarah’s room, where Braithwaite begrudgingly let Asenath stay. On the third day, Wheelwright had been permitted to visit; bringing Asenath fresh clothes, her pipe, and tobacco. Between them was Silas Winthrop, lying comatose on his bed.

“So Sarah feared Braithwaite would put her on trial?” Daniel suggested.

“Perhaps.” Asenath said. “But it was my draught that did this. I’m responsible.”

“No you’re not.” Daniel replied. “That stuff was out of your hands.”

“Then I’m indirectly responsible.” Asenath said, embroidering. It would make a badge when she was finished, a hand-size W to be pinned on her front. “I should have poured out what I didn’t use.”

“That’s not fair. You testified in court that Cole had the wrong bottle. I’ll bet that son of a gun gave the real stuff to Sarah Winthrop to impress her, or something.”

“Young men will do that.” Asenath said. “But Hardship didn’t make the poison; I did.”

“And you’ve done everything you could since then.” Daniel said, gesturing towards Silas. “Braithwaite asked for your help, and you co-operated. The clerk can’t have it both ways.”

“De facto governor, for now.” Asenath corrected him.

“Whatever his title is.” Wheelwright said. “Braithwaite can’t pin all this on you.”

"If Silas pulls through, probably not." Asenath said. "If he dies, who knows?"

"He's a strong lad, he'll wake up eventually. You woke up eventually."

"Hardship Cole was there with me from the start. Almost two hours passed before they brought me to Silas." Asenath said, sewing. "It was strong poison, and the dregs of it were more potent than the head. Braithwaite says Sarah Winthrop died within a few minutes of drinking it."

"It's not your fault." Daniel counseled her. "Sarah chose it for herself."

"I used to hate Governor Winthrop, you know." Asenath said. "I hated the way he bossed William around; how he tried to boss me after William died. I made the poison because I didn't want to let Winthrop win and shut down the High Horse. Maybe that's why it came into Sarah's possession."

"Impossible. You're no witch of that order." Daniel said.

Asenath held up the witch-sign she was making. "Aren't I? Gabriel turned out that way."

"Gabriel was only half the witch people give him credit for." Daniel said. "I don't like how they call him 'the Sorcerer of Ipswich' now. He was never that powerful."

"He was ambitious, though." Asenath said. "And a quick study."

"The lad was misunderstood." Daniel Wheelwright said. "Don't hate him in death."

"Oh, I don't." Asenath said, tying up the thread and cutting it off. "It's no good holding a grudge against the wind. I'm just sad for what might have been."

"From your lips to God's ears." Daniel said fondly. "I hope he takes mercy on him."

"I don't." Asenath said. "Gabriel could never have gotten away; and now because of him two lie dead and two more are getting decided. I would have killed myself instead."

“Actually, it’s three dead, one undecided.” Wheelwright said. “Williams passed on last night.”

“Well, there you go.” Asenath said. “Gabriel was better than that. He made a choice to do bad things; if I make excuses for him now I’m no better than he was.”

“Harsh words, Asenath.” Daniel mulled over his pipe. “He was your apprentice.”

“I don’t think I can hurt his feelings now.” Asenath said, threading the needle.

“The High Horse is as thou left it.” Wheelwright said, changing the subject. “I locked it up for you, but nobody’s trespassed. Only horse went missing; but he turned up in my field last Wednesday.”

“Huh.” Asenath said, stitching. “I guess he got hungry and wandered off.”

“Are you going to sell the place, like Governor Winthrop told you to?” Wheelwright asked.

“Let’s not get too hopeful.” Asenath said. “By the letter, I’m yet a prisoner of the court.”

At that moment there was a knock on the bedchamber door. “Asenath?” It was Fanny the slave. “Mister Braithwaite’s here to see you.” Daniel Wheelwright looked to Asenath. He wasn’t supposed to have stayed this long, and the room smelled like pipe smoke.

Asenath put a finger over her lips, telling Daniel to be quiet. “Send him up!” Asenath cried to Fanny through the closed door. She waited ‘til the servant was gone and hissed, “Daniel, hide.”

“Where?” Daniel whispered back, but already he was opening the closet, full to bursting with Silas’s shirts. “Jesus. Is there a tailor in the back end of this thing?”

“Just hide.” Asenath said, closing the door behind Daniel. “Don’t come out, no matter what.”

Then she hurried to open the windows, hid the pipe and tobacco in Silas’s nightstand. Asenath waved her arms, to fan out the smell. Moments later, Braithwaite came in to the room. “Asenath.”

"Mister Braithwaite." Said she, turning to face him. "Good morning!"

"It's past midday." Thomas said. He hadn't taken off his gloves, and looked as if he was in a hurry. "What's Winthrop's condition? Same as yesterday?"

"More or less." Asenath said. "He might wake, or he might not."

"I need a better answer than that." Thomas said. "Will Silas live or die?"

"I can't say for certain. Perhaps; that's all I know."

"Then how long?" Braithwaite asked. "I have funerals to do before I go home."

"Are you in some hurry?" Asenath said. "Whatever election business is in Boston, let it wait."

Thomas Braithwaite glared back at Asenath, insulted. "It's not election business."

Asenath waited for Braithwaite to finish, but he didn't volunteer any more information.

"I see." Asenath said. "Well, if Silas doesn't come around in the next three days or so he's probably fated to die. I would set the funeral date for the Governor and Sarah after that, if it please thee. But don't expect him to be giving any eulogies if he wakes up."

"Very well." Thomas said, sounding distracted. "I smell tobacco. Hast thou been smoking?"

"I think you're just smelling things." Asenath said.

"Perhaps I am. I've hardly slept. What's that stitching over there?"

"I'm making that witch-sign, as per Winthrop's judgement."

"I see." Thomas said. "If thou would attend Winthrop's funeral, I'll allow it."

"I don't think so." Asenath said. "I don't want to be seen as rejoicing in his death."

"As thou wilt." Thomas said. "I'll take my leave now; I have letters to write."

"One last thing." Asenath said, stopping Braithwaite. "Wilt thou honor the terms of Winthrop's judgment against me? My case was closed when he died. I think we both know I didn't kill him."

"I can." Thomas said. "In fact, I'll do thee a turn better, and drop the damages."

"So I don't have to sell the High Horse?" Asenath asked, surprised with Thomas's generosity.

"Keep it open, close it, sell it; turn it into a candle shop. Nobody in their right mind would drink there now, anyway." Thomas said. "For better or worse, it's thine."

"That's kinder than I expected." Asenath said. "Thank you, Mister Braithwaite."

"Well, we both know who's really responsible." Thomas said.

Asenath couldn't come up with a response to that. Thomas Braithwaite bowed, and took his leave. After he was gone, Asenath thought she ought to have said something.

Daniel Wheelwright knocked at the door of the closet. "Oy, Asenath."

She went to the door and let him out. "Did you hear what just happened?"

"Not word for word." Daniel said, extricating himself. "That closet is a tad suffocating."

"Braithwaite let me off easy. He says I get to keep the High Horse."

"Sounds like he's blaming himself, much as you are." Daniel said, refolding a shirt that had gotten loose. "I guess I might be too, if I were in his position."

"It's a lot of work for him, I imagine." Asenath said. "Governing the colony."

"Let's not go too easy on him." Daniel said spitefully. "Braithwaite could have nipped all this in the bud, but he went along with Winthrop down the garden path."

“Don’t hate him for following orders.” Asenath replied. “He’s merciful on his own.”

“He’s shrewd, not merciful.” Daniel said. “Braithwaite knows how these elections work as well as anybody. Keeping the High Horse open gets him support from farmers and skeptics.”

“Well, he’s got my vote.” Asenath said. “Assuming he runs for governor.”

“He’ll run.” Wheelwright said. “Putting Gabriel on trial was a quid pro quo. Braithwaite needed to look hard on Quakerism, and Winthrop needed to vet a successor.”

“Was Silas not good enough?” Asenath said.

“Ha! Silas would spend the treasury on bread and shoes for poor people.” Daniel laughed. “Only now Braithwaite’s out the endorsement he’d counted on.”

“Braithwaite wouldn’t be the worst governor this settlement’s ever had.” Asenath said mildly.

“No, he might not be.” Daniel Wheelwright said. “He probably wouldn’t be half bad at it.”

“Thou had better get going, before somebody else comes up here.” Asenath said. “I don’t want you getting in any more trouble with your wife.”

“Aye.” Wheelwright said. “But before I leave I want thou to promise me something, Asenath.”

“What is it?” She asked, knowing better than to say yes right away.

“Promise me you’ll be safe. Keep Caesar at thy side, and arm him. Don’t go walking alone, especially not at night. They still haven’t recovered Gabriel’s body, and it’s looking like they never will.”

“What, are you scared?” Asenath asked. “Gabriel’s bones are someplace in the river bed.”

“Just promise me you won’t. Not even if it seems reasonable.”

"Has everyone gone batty except me?" Asenath asked. "You would have me promise I won't go on any night rambles with Gabriel's dead ghost. How superstitious are you, Daniel?"

"This isn't a joke, Asenath!" Daniel said. "Who knows what curse may come?"

"I'm not joking either." She said. "He's dead, Daniel. The spell is broken."

"Gabriel may be gone, but the Devil still walks in New England; I just know it."

"I'd say you were drunk if I didn't know better." Asenath said.

"Promise me before I go." Daniel pleaded. "Please, Asenath."

"I'm not giving Caesar arms. That breaks all kinds of statutes."

"Then arm thyself, if thou would walk at night. It's just common sense."

"Fine. I promise it." Asenath sighed. "When you leave, cut out the back way."

"I'll come to the High Horse once you've returned and help get the place ready for business again." Daniel promised. "God be with thee, Asenath."

She let her old friend go with that, locking the bedroom door behind him. After a moment Asenath saw Daniel from the open window, his hunched form walking east in Winthrop's field.

Chapter Thirty

Thomas Braithwaite stood before the looking glass in the Andover vestry, preparing himself for John Winthrop's funeral liturgy. In his reflection, Thomas saw a magistrate. Surely, such a man could protect his own, Thomas thought; surely I could become the man I see here. With Silas likely to die, Winthrop's inheritance stood without a claimant. Thomas only needed to lie one last time to put it in his own hands. Yet Sarah's curse lingered as a warning: the curse of seven years and seventeen witches.

Avarice advised Thomas to take power, lest he be hunted as one of them. Desire told him he earned this, his fair share; thus it was rightful to take it. Pride murmured that Winthrop's power would put Thomas above the suspicion of others. But Thomas's conscience said he could change what would happen if the clerk told the truth of John Winthrop and Gabriel Bishop, no matter how unseemly.

The magistrate in the looking-glass implored Thomas to do it. He had lied for Sarah Winthrop enough when she was alive. If he told the truth now, she would have no more power over him. Everyone would know what had happened, and the responsibility would be out of Thomas's hands. Perhaps Gabriel Bishop's spirit would forgive him and move on. Thomas knew that Winthrop's mantle was tainted, cursed by the blood of the dead. He could throw it on the pyre and be free, if a pariah.

Thomas tied his clerical collar again, judging and being judged by the poor knave in the looking-glass. His hair was thinning; he wasn't as young as he used to be. He had little opportunity for advancement since Winthrop had privately disavowed him. He was too old to start a homestead, and too unknown to become a lawyer of merit. There were cuts on his hands, from when Thomas smashed the empty poison vial. But if he took Winthrop's power for himself, Thomas could become the magistrate; and never again allow such miscarriages of justice as he had witnessed. Yet the man in the looking glass knew better, just as John Winthrop had. He knew you, the eyes seemed to say; he knew you as I do and knew you are unfit. Thomas put on black gloves, to cover the marks on his hands.

It was not just me, Thomas reasoned. Hardship Cole had trusted Sarah Winthrop too. Hardship had confessed the entirety of it in the interrogation room over Sarah's dead body; after the clerk had come at him cursing and threatening litigation. Hardship tried to blame Asenath; Braithwaite had shouted him down. The clerk hoped giving Asenath back her little road house would satisfy her, that Asenath wouldn't bring up Hardship's lying under oath at a later date. For now, Hardship Cole was above reproach, having fixed his mistakes with a crack shot at Gabriel Bishop. It was all completely illegal, but there was nothing Thomas could do about it now.

Presently there came a knock at the door to rouse Thomas from his reflections.

"Mister Braithwaite?" It was Caesar the Negro. "It's time."

"Understood." Thomas said. Part of him wished to tarry longer, but he was already running late. Better to leave now, with yet a shred of confidence. Thomas took the eulogy he prepared and went.

Thomas came into the sanctuary hall. Towards the front, he saw Hardship Cole, looking heroic. Beneath the pulpit, John Winthrop lay in a closed coffin, his black shroud a silent censure of the proceedings. Next to him, Sarah Winthrop's casket bore a white shroud, reminding Thomas of Easter's resurrection. Beside the coffins was an empty chair, for Silas the Evangelist.

Seated in the pews and standing in the aisles and crowding in the mezzanine was every Christian man living within forty miles of Andover. Their eyes followed him across the room to the pulpit; Thomas could feel their gaze on his body like unwanted hands. Thomas searched the room for the divine presence, but all he sensed were other men and their fears. If there was to be grace in this hour, Thomas would have to create it for them. The desperation of the congregants set a new burden upon Thomas's soul. What would become of them if he told them the truth; that Gabriel Bishop was just a man, and John Winthrop just a tyrant, and that they both died deaths befitting of justice?

There was the immediate danger to himself, which Thomas had considered in the dressing room. But the real price of shattering Winthrop's legacy would be more subtle. For if holy men like John Winthrop really were tyrants, how could anyone submit themselves to God's will? If the hand of the Lord was really indifferent to evil, why should anybody keep faith? And without a God of justice to trust in, who could serve as a safeguard of peace?

At that moment Thomas wished the Holy Spirit would return, and give him the words he needed to comfort these abandoned people. But it was no use wishing; since that night on the commons, Thomas was alone. He ascended the pulpit, and looked out among the forsaken.

"The Lord be with ye." Thomas said, his voice resonating on the sounding board.

"And with thee also." The congregation replied in one voice.

"Let us pray." Thomas intoned. "Father, our times are in thy hands. Look with favor on our beginnings and forgive us our ends, as thou would bear witness to the works of our lives. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit say we Amen."

"Amen." The room echoed.

"John Winthrop was the father of this colony." Thomas began. "He brought us out of England, across the waters and hither to this land. He sacrificed his titles, his heirlooms, and his estates in the passage, as did we who followed him. Our journey was a perilous one, with faith our only surety."

The sentiment resonated with the congregation, especially with those old enough to remember their own crossing. Those too young to remember it knew the story well.

"When a storm blew Winthrop's fleet off course, he kept faith, though we had been separated from the landing party in Boston. When the crops failed, he kept his faith and fasted; and when Indian raiders came to our walls, John Winthrop prayed for deliverance. Winthrop saw us through insurrection

and schism from within, for he had no doubt of our mission here. He was the roof over our heads, the steeple of our church, and the cannon on our palisades. Defender, savior, and shield; John Winthrop heard the call of the Lord and brought us out of our affliction in England. Winthrop was sanctified in this life as a mark of his glory. Today, he watches over us, a leader amongst the Heavenly Elect.”

“We are the youth of a nation whose covenant is sealed by the Lord.” Thomas said, paraphrasing Winthrop’s most famous sermon. “We are as Jerusalem the Holy City; we are as Zion, the vault of God’s holiness. Our deliverance rests in the hand of Lord. If we lose faith, we ourselves shall be lost, our settlements a story and a by-word.”

Many in the congregation muttered ‘Amen’ to this.

“If we lose faith, we ourselves shall be lost.” Thomas Braithwaite continued, “T’was our selfishness which brought famine to our doors, our vanity which invited the Indian raiders. T’was our arrogance which engendered the schism, to think we could reinterpret God’s plan and Holy Scriptures. And this winter we find ourselves as violators once again, attracting witches with our worldliness. I beg of ye, no more, or we shall be forsaken!”

The men seemed to accept Thomas’s interpretation. They had been expecting a share of the blame, indeed, they needed someone to apportion the blame amongst them. Otherwise, the weight of it would fall entirely upon the shoulders of one man, just as it had upon Gabriel Bishop.

“It was we who killed John Winthrop. We let ourselves be persuaded, believing we knew what Gabriel Bishop really intended. Those who were deceived, wanted to be deceived; and concealed their deception in terms of tolerance and enlightenment. But the sorcerer’s enchantments had no power over those who refused to grant it! Woe betide ye who disbelieve, for this was the fate of Winthrop’s children. They killed their father, before the curse killed them. Now, all that survives of Winthrop’s legacy is we, the living.”

There was some shock amongst the men that Thomas would speak so plainly about the deaths. “Yea, they killed their father before the curse killed them. Their blood is on my hands, for I disbelieved that Bishop could work such magic from the isolation of his cell. Gabriel deceived me, and when I spoke to him I saw a man wrongfully accused. I should have hanged him at the start.”

“Woe betide the man who disbelieves,” Thomas repeated, “For his faith will rest in earthly and profane things. When he is called to account, who shall speak for him? What defense can he offer unto God for his unfaithfulness? Beloved, my voice wavers but I would bear witness, I would speak to ye as a dying man to dying men.”

“Forgive me.” Thomas said, trying to get the tremor under control. But the words he prepared began to blur together, Thomas lost his place. His vision went white at the edges, and in his blood chilled with icy terror. The Holy Spirit had come upon him again, and this time it had blinded him.

It was as if the room was filled with white smoke. Thomas could not see the walls of the meeting house, nor the pages of his eulogy. He clutched the pulpit, forbidding himself from screaming again. Why now, he thought desperately, of all times, why did you come back for me now?

But it was not for him that the Spirit had come. There was a congregation of human souls in need of comfort, and it was for them that it had returned. In the growing, uncomfortable silence Thomas asked the Spirit what it would have him do for them. But there was no reply.

“Forgive me.” Thomas repeated, speaking more to the Spirit than to the congregants he couldn’t see. “I speak of faith but know it not; just as a snake knows it has no legs. I speak of a God whom I fear. Doubt and fear clouded my judgement, and my learning was no substitute for the faith I never knew. The Lord called my name and I would not hear it; the Lord spoke and I would not listen. Today I am elevated and speak to you, yet verily I say that I am the most broken man amongst ye. Hearken so that you might learn from my mistakes; let my struggle against sin be a tale and by-word!”

The Holy Spirit's words were impressive; Thomas wasn't sure if what he was saying made sense. "We are the youth of a nation whose covenant is sealed by the Lord. He sanctifies himself by sacrificing those closest to him; he will be honored. Look upon his works, ye sinners, and despair: neither wisdom, nor might, nor earthly power can defy him. The Lord our God has written the fate of every living soul before it quickens, from inception to ending he creates who we are. Woe betide the man who disbelieves these things, for he shall be consumed. His learning cannot outwit the God of all knowledge, nor his intellect comprehend an actor greater than himself. Such a man is master of a universe that has no master. His soul spins like a broken compass, leading him in circles. Though he tries to be just, his works shall always founder: their cornerstone is himself."

Thomas was no longer speaking at all, his body was just a conduit by which the Spirit's words were being transmitted. As he spoke, he felt as immaterial as the air through which lightning passes. "We are the youth of a nation whose covenant is sealed by the Lord. John Winthrop spoke these words before to ye during the passage, aboard the decks of the *Arabella*. I repeat them now, so that his teachings may not be forgotten amidst this, the tragedy of his death. I repeat them now so that we, the living, will not lose sight of our mission here now that John Winthrop is gone. I repeat them now so that God himself will be reminded of his servant John Winthrop, whose life was undone to spare us."

"We are the youth of the nation sealed by the Lord. For it is not by bread and walls that we are preserved, but by his will alone. On any day, at any hour, in any moment, the Lord upholds us just as timbers uphold this meeting house. These joists could falter, our breath could fail us: the Holy Spirit may rest his hand on us and take our lives at any moment. We should make it our grief, then, that we have not upheld the blood of his most holy covenant! We must return, and shed the hardness which forced us, like Pharaoh in Egypt, to test the Lord of Wonders. Have ye not seen plagues enough to believe in Him? Return, ye sinners, and confess yourselves to the Lord of all things! Return, and resolve to make inviolable the branches of his Law; return to him and be renewed, as I am!"

Out of the whiteness a vision came to Thomas. In it, he saw Gabriel Bishop; not as he had been in life but as he was now, freed from the body which caused him to sin. Thomas saw Sarah Winthrop as well, having been released from her life of torment. They forgave Thomas, as they had been forgiven; their spirits were as one with the Holy Spirit in death.

“Yea, return,” Thomas said, looking blindly towards the congregants, “and come build for yourselves new lives in faith. Follow me and heed the call of the Lord, though ever I defied it. Return with me, and be made whole. Return, and the Holy Spirit shall forgive ye; return and let the spirit of John Winthrop bless ye. I can see him now at the summit of holiness, teaching the angels as he taught us on earth. Hearken and receive his blessing, on this, the day he ascended into Heaven.” As Thomas said these words the haze blinding him dissipated.

The Holy Spirit went out from Thomas Braithwaite into the souls of all who heard his words, restoring Braithwaite’s vision. The first thing he saw the congregation, kneeling before him like the sheaves of wheat in Joseph’s dreams. With new eyes, Thomas could perceive their souls, just as he could perceive their whispered confessions. Thomas stood at the summit of holiness, the world at his feet.

Thomas clung to the pulpit, dizzy from the rapid changes in his perspective. For himself, he whispered a prayer of bargaining to the Holy Spirit. He wanted to be forgiven his sins, just as he had forgiven those of the congregation. He would forgive the Spirit’s trespassing into his body if it forgave his trespasses against the Word. Braithwaite counted his breaths, his heart pounding like a mouse’s. To perceive God directly would always be a harrowing experience.

“By the grace and blessing of the Lord, may we be led towards the path of righteousness, and at length be received into the inheritance of his saints of light. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, may God’s peace endure forever, until the end of days. Amen.”

“Amen”, the congregation replied, and Thomas descended from the pulpit.

The moment Thomas's feet touched the floor of the meeting house, Hardship Cole caught his eye. He came towards him, intent on shaking Thomas's hand before anyone else could step in to offer their congratulations and opinions.

"That was very good." Hardship said, his hand outstretched. "Inspired, even."

Thomas grasped it quickly, then released it. "Thank you." He said, though he meant 'goodbye.'

"May I speak to you in private?" Hardship asked him. "It won't take two minutes."

Thomas wanted to say no. "Is it important?"

"I've heard that discretion is the better part of valor." Hardship replied.

Thomas sighed in annoyance. "Meet me in the cloakroom in an hour."

"I want to talk to you now." Hardship said insistently.

It would be easy enough to turn away, and strike up a conversation with someone else. There were a lot of men here whose hands Thomas should grasp, whose favor could prove helpful to him. But something about Hardship's look told Thomas it would be grave indeed to ignore him.

"Come with me then," Thomas said, "but quickly."

They elbowed their way out of the rapidly emptying meeting house, secluding themselves in the preacher's chamber.

"Some changes in here." Hardship noted as they came in. "Is that big looking glass new?"

"I don't believe it is. The interim preacher has been moving himself into this office piecemeal."

Thomas answered. "What was it you wanted to discuss?"

"I'll be leaving Andover shortly, and so will you. I want payment before I go."

"Winthrop paid you." Thomas said, recalling an advance and a partial payment he'd sent the witch hunter. "Your final payment is coming, I just have to get Winthrop's estate sorted out first."

"I want the money now." Hardship said. "Pay me from the Andover treasury."

"I don't have that authorization." Thomas said. "Only Winthrop could do that."

"You're Winthrop now. Pay me from the town coffer and then make the town whole with Winthrop's monies." Hardship said. "I'm eager to return to Deerfield, and will brook no delays."

"Thou hast a coarse mouth to instruct me thus." Thomas protested. "Don't push me, Cole."

"Or you'll do what?" Hardship said. "You and I are in the same boat. You'll not rock it."

"I could have thee put in irons for lying under oath. Your incompetence killed five."

"If you were going to do that, you already would have. The way I see it, this town is in arrears to me. I killed your Sorcerer when he would have escaped. In fact, I should increase my fees."

"Winthrop didn't hire you to shoot Bishop from the bridge. And for that matter, neither did I." Thomas said, meaning that what had happened was illegal. But Cole seemed undeterred.

"Don't give me that legalistic lip." Hardship said. "I want my money, Braithwaite."

"So?" Thomas said. "You and I are in the same boat, remember?"

"There's that wife of yours." Hardship said. "I might pour poison in her ear."

"It would be lies." Thomas said. "My wife trusts me more than she trusts you."

"This isn't something I want to do." Hardship said earnestly. "But I do what I have to."

"What exactly would you tell her, anyway?" Thomas scoffed. "That Winthrop rejected me? That I had to fight Silas with a shovel? Wilt thou beguile my wife with tales of incompetence and force?"

"I would tell her what's going on between you and Brydie." Hardship said. "Now about that payment. I think sixty pounds would be a reasonable amount of restitution for my labors."

"Brydie and I haven't done anything." Thomas said. "It's the truth. I've not touched her."

"You will." Hardship said. "I can tell about these things."

"She won't believe you." Thomas said indignantly. "Get out of here, Cole."

"You don't mean that." Hardship said. "There's no way you would have me as an enemy."

"Get hanged." Thomas said. "Thou would threaten my wife, but call thyself a friend."

"There's that 'thou' again." Hardship said. "Won't thou pay me my salary?"

"No." Thomas said. "Go petition the town for it, after I've settled Winthrop's estate."

"There's winter yet to come. I need money, Thomas. I have a house to keep up in Deerfield."

"Well, best be on thy way back to it. I would not delay thee." Thomas said sarcastically.

"I won't forget this, Braithwaite." Hardship said. "That election will come hard to thee, if I have any hand in it. You'll not find a single vote from Deerfield with your name on it."

"So sayest thou." Thomas said, unimpressed. "Good day, Mister Cole."

Hardship's lip twitched, an involuntary spasm of anger. He was not used to not getting his way. He bowed, and said. "Good Day, Mister Braithwaite."

"Governor." Thomas corrected him. "It's Governor Braithwaite."

Hardship gave Thomas Braithwaite a final look, estimating him like a mountain lion estimates the strength of its prey. It almost made Braithwaite flinch, but the new governor held his ground the way John Winthrop would have. "So thou art." Hardship hissed, and then was gone.

Chapter Thirty-One

Fanny Winthrop packed trunks, putting away all the linens and silverware. Nobody had told her to close up this house, but it had to be done. Neatly, she folded up tablecloths and napkins and put them in crates, some for travel and others for long-term storage. She went gingerly, careful not to bend her wrist too much or too fast. There were Sarah's clothes upstairs, too, but she couldn't face sorting what to throw out and what ought to be given away. And then there was Silas to consider.

For four days and counting, Silas had been in a sleep from which Asenath could not rouse him. The old woman said that the longer Silas slept, the less chance there was of him waking up. It couldn't be much longer now until he died, Fanny thought. Should I move crates into his room, too?

John Winthrop's will was nowhere to be found. Braithwaite had shown her the contents of John Winthrop's strongbox, identifying the deed for the house, the deed for the other house, and Winthrop's marriage certificate. Braithwaite also noted shares in ships, securities for the farm and a loan against its equity. But there was no final will and testament. In the back end of Winthrop's desk drawer Fanny located pedigrees for the livestock, her own birth certificate and the bill of sale for her dead mother. But Winthrop's will had been lost, and with it, any certainty of what he intended for Fanny.

Mister Braithwaite had advised her that if Silas survived, execution of the estate would be entirely up to him. But if he didn't – and this was becoming more and more likely – Braithwaite would have to sort it out himself. He explained that it would take some time to notify Winthrop's creditors and take inventory of the estate. Thomas showed Fanny the equity loan again, explaining this part slowly and carefully. If Silas did not live to take over the loan, parts of Winthrop's estate would have to be sold to pay it off. Fanny asked the clerk if this meant she could be sold to pay back the Governor's debts. Braithwaite's answers were vague. Still, Fanny knew there were no slaves without masters.

Fanny finished folding the table linens, and packed them. Then she got some cloths, and laid them over the furnishings in the hall. She stopped at a portrait John Winthrop had commissioned of Silas when he was fourteen. It was Fanny's favorite picture in the house. She took it down, and put it to one side. This one would come with her to the Ipswich house, so she could enjoy it for a just a little while longer.

There was a creak on the stairs. Fanny looked up, and saw Asenath Black walking down them.

"Good day." Fanny said as Asenath came into the hall.

"And to thee." Asenath replied. Pinned on her breast was the witch-mark John Winthrop had told her to make. It was large, about the size of a hand, and glittered with silver threads. A purple flower wove behind the letter 'W' as an embellishment.

"I see you finished your badge." Fanny said. "It looks pretty."

"Thank you." Asenath said. "It was kind of you to lend me the materials for it."

"They were Sarah's materials." Fanny responded. "She never cared much for embroidery."

"I could see that." Asenath said, seating herself. "At least I could make use of them."

Fanny made a noise of agreement, before going back to covering furniture.

"Closing up the manse for the summer, then? You're a bit early." Asenath said.

"Perhaps. But someone's got to get this place ready for sale."

"Thomas won't sell this house." Asenath declared. "Unless he wants to buy it for himself." The words were met with silence. It wasn't Fanny's place to appraise Mister Braithwaite's character.

"Do you fancy a cup of tea? I do." Asenath said.

"I'll have some if you make some." Fanny said. Asenath got up and went into the kitchen. Fanny could hear her stoking up the fire, putting the kettle on, finding the teapot and leaves.

Asenath returned to the living room, wiping soot off her fingers.

"So." Fanny said. "How's Caesar?" She hadn't seen him since he fixed her wrist.

"Well." Asenath said. "How's your arm? Is that splint fitting you well?"

"The splint fits me fine." Fanny said. "The wrist only hurts when I twist it."

"It will hurt like that for a few months. Bones take time to heal." Asenath said. "Come to the High Horse when I've returned and I'll give you a salve for it."

"When will you return there?" Fanny left unsaid what going back meant.

"Late tonight, perhaps. Maybe sooner. These things happen in their own time."

"Will he be in any pain when it happens?" Fanny asked.

"I have no idea." There was a moment of stillness, and Fanny wondered if Asenath was lying to spare her feelings. "I did tell him, you know. It was me who told Silas what Gabriel was doing to you."

"Oh." Fanny said. The kettle was boiling softly in the next room. "I wish you hadn't."

"It had to be Silas. John Winthrop would have had me whipped for slander."

"I mean, I wish you hadn't said anything. You just made it worse."

The kettle had boiled. Its shrieking whistle pierced the air between them. Asenath held an angry look in her eyes, as if she wanted say to Fanny that she should be grateful. Fanny gazed back unafraid, thinking of how severely Silas had beaten her after Asenath told him what happened.

"Well, I'm sorry you feel that way." Asenath said, getting up for the tea.

Fanny got out the slipcovers for the chairs and cushions. She put a cover over the window bench, which had been Sarah's favorite spot. Fanny took wooden chairs and put them up on the dining room table, and swept the floor.

As she worked there was a sharp twinge of pain in her bad wrist, enough to make her grimace. Fanny massaged at the break in the bone, reminding herself to be more careful with weighty things.

Asenath returned, teacups in hand, and placed them on a sideboard. She took her own cup back to her seat, settling in on the canvas cover Fanny had just laid on it. Asenath waited, expecting Fanny to say something more. Fanny ignored her and continued sweeping. Asenath sipped her tea, offended.

"Aren't you going to have any?" she asked a little sharply. "It's getting cold."

Fanny stopped what she was doing and took a sip. Asenath had not found the tea strainer. Fanny disliked tea made this way, but drank it anyway to appease Asenath.

"Sit with me." Asenath said. Fanny complied, canvas crunching under her weight.

"I really did try my best." Asenath began. "I did everything I could to make Gabriel leave you alone. I tried to reason with him, I tried fighting with him, I even shunned him. Nothing helped. I couldn't just pretend it wasn't happening; if I did that I would be complicit. You have to believe me when I say I had no choice about it."

"I know." Fanny said, looking into her steaming tea. "I just wish you hadn't."

"It was the right thing to do." Asenath insisted. "God forbid what happened to you happened to Caesar. They would hang him for sure, like a wild beast. I had to act, even if telling Silas pushed Gabriel closer to that edge. He was my apprentice. I trained him, so that means I'm responsible for what he did. I had to try and stop him from hurting you." Asenath said, begging Fanny to agree with her, to forgive her.

Fanny looked back at Asenath, thinking of how it happened in her house.

“Silas beat Gabriel severely after you told him. But Gabriel didn’t stop it.” Fanny responded.

“You shunned Gabriel, but that didn’t stop him either. I said no, but it was no use. Nobody could stop Gabriel; Gabriel decided when he was through. That’s why he burned the meetinghouse in the end.”

“But he wasn’t a bad man.” Asenath pleaded. “Not even at the last, when everyone was accusing him of everything. He was the same person then as ever, the same Gabriel. When I woke up, he sacrificed himself so I could escape with my life. He was a good person, with a good soul in him.”

“He wasn’t a bad man.” Fanny agreed, finishing her tea. “He freed me because he felt sorry for me. He knew what he was doing was wrong, and it tormented him.”

“It’ll get better with time.” Asenath said. “You’ll forget about what happened.”

Fanny sighed, and swirled the dregs in her teacup. “I wish I could believe you.”

Asenath was about to tell Fanny something else, but was interrupted by a thump from upstairs, like a body hitting the floor. It came from Silas’s room.

“What was that?” Fanny said, already rushing up the stairs, Asenath close behind. She called out, “Silas, is that you?”

The sound of dishes breaking in Silas’s room answered her, followed by a groan.

The women rushed in to find Silas Winthrop lying on the floor next to his bed, the nightstand overturned, and the washbasin and pitcher lying broken on the floor in a pool of water.

Silas had taken some trouble to cover himself with a bedsheet, in which he now struggled like a caught fish. “Sarah,” he muttered incoherently. “Sarah, how could you.”

“Ssh, shh, easy now.” Asenath said, putting her hand on Silas. “Let me help you.”

"No!" Silas fired back, rolling over onto the broken crockery. "You gave it to her!"

"Silas, it's me, Asenath. You've been asleep for four days and nights."

"I know who you are, Asenath Black!" Silas cried. "Get out of my house!"

Hearing her own name stunned the old woman like a slap in the face. "You're unwell." She said, finally. "You're confused. Just let me explain everything. I'm here to help you, I saved your life."

Silas grabbed a shard of the washbasin and threw it at the old woman when she got close.

"I said get out!" Silas roared, his voice betraying the pain he was in.

Fanny got out of the way, and Asenath retreated to the door. "You don't understand." Asenath said. "It was an accident. Silas, I swear it was an accident."

"Out!" Silas cried, lobbing another bit of pottery. It hit the wall, leaving a scuff mark. He grabbed another bit of sharp clay, as if he would crush it in his fist. Asenath realized it was no use, and left.

Once Asenath was gone, Silas curled up on the floor like a boiled shrimp; weeping and howling most bitterly. Kneeling on the floor, Fanny watched him, watched his shoulders heave as he drew breath. Alive, she thought, kneeling, thank Heaven he's alive! Thank Heaven for bringing my master back to me. She would have prayed more, but Silas's pained weeping demanded her attention.

"Silas." Fanny whispered, edging closer to him. "It's all right. You're all right."

"No." Silas wept. "No, Fanny, I am not all right." But he let her touch him.

"There's something you need to know." Fanny said. "Sarah's dead."

"Oh, God." Silas said, his heart breaking anew. "When? How did it happen?"

"The same night she tried to kill you, she killed herself."

"And what about Gabriel?" Silas said. "Surely everyone blames him for all this."

"Gabriel escaped." Fanny said. "Hardship Cole shot him at the river, and Gabriel fell in."

"Escaped?" Silas asked. "But how? It was Sarah who took my keys."

"She let him loose." Fanny said. "She pretty much confessed it all, before she died."

"But why?" Silas said. "Sarah wanted him executed most of all."

"Revenge, I suppose." Fanny said. "She wanted to punish Gabriel for what he did to her."

"And Father." Silas said. "And me. Oh God, Fanny, how could someone be so cold? She put her lips to the cup. She made small talk with us while she waited for us to die. She acted like nothing was wrong until the last moment."

"I don't know. She spared me, and I hurt her most of all." Fanny said, holding Silas's head in her lap. "Perhaps it was just a matter of chance and convenience, who she killed."

"Oh, God." Silas wept. "They're all dead, aren't they? Father, Gabriel, and Sarah. I don't deserve this. I should have died, Fanny, it should have been me."

"Don't talk like that." Fanny responded. "God spared you for a reason."

"Why?" Silas asked. "What was the reason? To make me suffer more?"

"No." Fanny said. "He spared you so that I wouldn't be alone in this world."

Silas thought about that for a moment, trembling again like he was going to weep. He took Fanny's hand in his, and compared them. "Oh God, you're right," Silas wept. "Forgive me, Fanny. I wanted to sell you, send you away so that Gabriel would forget about you. I should have killed him myself for what he did to you. I should have believed Asenath when she said it wasn't your fault. Oh Fanny, I'm so sorry. I was so horrible to you. Please, you have to forgive me."

"That's all in the past." Fanny said. "It doesn't matter now."

"But it does." Silas insisted. "It does matter. You ran away because you were afraid, and I didn't want to believe you were right about him. He lied to me about you, and I believed him. He really did wear me like a pair of shoes, he really did get inside my mind. And I defended him!"

"Hush, Silas, hush." Fanny said soothingly. "Don't strain yourself talking so much."

"I would have sold my own flesh and blood just to protect him. What a wretched man I am, Fanny. Why didn't I die instead of them? You and I, we're the same; but I treated you like a servant."

"I am a servant." Fanny said. "It's natural."

"No, Fanny." Silas said. "You're not a servant. You're my family, the only family I have left."

Fanny sat there, with Silas's head in her lap. He was just being melodramatic, she decided. Lots of people said their servants were like family; it was a figure of speech. So she said "Thank you, Master. I promise to work hard, to be worthy of the honor."

Silas sighed, trembling and weeping on the floor like a child.

"Here, let me help you up." Fanny said. "Put your arm around my neck, just so. On three, are you ready? One, two three. There we go. Do you want the chair, or the bed? The chair it is. Easy now. Are you hungry? Well now, you must be thirsty at least. Let me bring you some tea, I know the way you take it. And I'll bring you toasted bread, and butter. Just sit, Silas, take it easy. Anything you want, let me bring it to you; I don't want you falling again. Do you want your clothes? I'll bring you your clothes, and the tea. Just wait here a minute, and I'll be right back."

Chapter Thirty-Two

Hardship Cole alighted at the door of John Winthrop's manse, and considered again whether talking to Silas was really a good idea. On the one hand, Hardship wanted his money and some justice against Thomas Braithwaite for stiling him, on the other, he had heard Silas was prone to fits of rage. That would be nothing Hardship couldn't handle, but if it came to blows Winthrop might spurn him, leaving Hardship out of work and out of luck. Still, he had to know where Silas stood.

The curtains were drawn: a subtle indicator that visitors were not welcome. Hardship tested the door, but it was locked. Ignoring these signs, he knocked. After a few seconds, Hardship knocked again. He heard footsteps coming to the door, and the bolt coming unlatched. Winthrop's servant opened the door and gazed back at him, her dark eyes rimmed with suspicion. The hall was stacked with crates and boxes of Winthrop's possessions.

"He's not seeing visitors." She said. "Come back tomorrow."

"I'm leaving today." Hardship said, gesturing to the horse tied up behind him, saddled up with his gun, bedroll, and pack of clothing. "Can he make an exception?"

Fanny looked at the horse, then at Hardship. "Wait here." She said, closing and locking the door again. It seemed queer, Hardship thought; most doors in this village went unlocked now that the witch had been killed. What did Silas Winthrop have to hide?

A moment later, Fanny came back and led Hardship into the hall. "Have a seat." She left without offering him tea or water, and went back to packing a box in the kitchen. She is surly, Hardship thought, seating himself onto a sofa covered with canvas. Apparently, Silas Winthrop was moving out.

Moments later, Silas Winthrop came down the stairs, using a walking stick to keep himself steady. Hardship stood as Silas entered the room. "Mister Winthrop." He said as a greeting.

"Hardship Cole." Silas replied, settling into a canvas-covered chair. "Is this important?"

"I'm afraid so." Hardship said. "I'm glad to see you're alive and well."

"I'm alive." Silas agreed, gesturing to the stick. "But not well. I am, in fact, much weakened."

"Hopefully not permanently." Hardship said. "I heard you aren't running in the election."

"That's correct, I won't." Silas said. "Is that what you came to ask about?"

"If you don't run, Braithwaite will win." Hardship said. "That ought not to happen."

"Effectively, Braithwaite already is the Governor." Silas said. "And doing a fine job of it, from what I've heard. I shouldn't oppose someone who actually wants the office. I never did, which is why Father trained Braithwaite for the job in the first place."

"He's morally unfit, you know." Hardship said. "I don't want to say anything in public, but you mustn't let Thomas Braithwaite become the governor."

"Unfit?" Silas asked, brow knitting like John Winthrop's. "In what way?"

"He's having inappropriate relations with Brydie the housemaid. They were in the vestry, after the funeral. I'm sure that's why he bought her contract out from Winthrop in the first place."

"We all have secrets, Cole. If Braithwaite keeps his behind closed doors, I see no need to make them public." Silas sighed. "Do unto others, and so on."

"So, you really won't run against him?" Hardship asked. Silas shook his head no. "But you must. Even John Winthrop knew Thomas wasn't fit to become the governor, that's why he denounced him."

"How do you know about that?" Silas said. "Well, it doesn't matter now. Father's dead, and I'm not interested in becoming the Governor. If Braithwaite runs, I won't oppose him."

"But Thomas is a usurer. A liar. He cheated me out of my rightful pay." Hardship protested.

"Such a man would cheat the public coffers as he does his private dealings."

"He cheated you, you say." Silas said. "I see why you're here now. Wait a moment." Winthrop's son stumbled off into his father's bedroom, and re-emerged with a pouch of money. He threw it underhand to Hardship, who caught it, weighed it, and inspected the coins. "Keep it. That ought to be at least as much as you're owed."

"More than." Hardship said. "Thank you, Mister Winthrop."

"Silas. My name is Silas." He said, sounding very tired. "Now that you're paid, forget whatever you think you saw Braithwaite doing with his servant. It's none of our business."

"That's very charitable of you." Hardship said, pocketing the purse. "But I didn't come here for the money. I came here so that you'll oppose Thomas Braithwaite in the coming election."

"What's done is done." Silas replied. "Humiliating Braithwaite won't bring back my family, or get justice for my friend. I don't want what he has; in fact, I pray for Thomas. I will not take power from him out of spite, or because I heard some vulgar rumors about him."

Hardship took some offense. "I'm not here to grind an axe. I'm here because Thomas is a risk. He let himself get too involved in this witch trial, and his involvement led to avoidable deaths. There's a case to be made he's not the right man for this colony."

"There's a case to be made," Silas agreed, "but not by me. I was in the witch's thrall, you'll remember. Nobody should trust me to govern them, nor should I accept that responsibility."

"You know what happened to Asa Braithwaite, and his breakaway sect." Hardship said, pushing his luck. "I'd hate for that to happen to us."

"It won't." Silas said, but he didn't look too sure. "Braithwaite's never shown the signs."

"But there must be some reason why Winthrop disavowed him." Hardship said. "Aren't you a little curious why the Governor spurned Braithwaite?"

"No." Silas said authoritatively. "I'm not. My father's business was just that."

"I see." Hardship said. "Well, I'll not push you. But just think about what I said. My interest is only what's best for the community as a whole."

"I'm sure." Silas responded. "Fanny said you're returning to Deerfield tonight."

Hardship nodded. "Yes, that's so."

"I bid you safe travels, then." Silas said, standing up. "And good day." Then Silas showed Hardship out of the manse, locking the front door behind him.

As Hardship Cole led his horse out of town, he counted the money Silas had given him again. It was generous enough that Hardship was tempted to spend some at the Squaw's Fire, but he remembered that Thomas was staying there and thought better of it. On the street, men tipped their hats to Hardship and ladies blushed as he passed. Everyone recognized the witch hunter who put down Gabriel Bishop moments before he escaped for good.

Perhaps he himself should run for office, Hardship thought as he tried to buy a loaf of bread. The baker wouldn't take his money, and after some polite recriminations against such special treatment, Hardship left with his free bread. It was good stuff, too: not the day-old bread to which Hardship had become accustomed. He wrapped the rest of it in a cloth and saved it for his supper. He filled his water skin when he reached the palisade, bidding farewell to the men with whom he'd guarded the settlement. They would all vote for me, Hardship thought, as he shook their hands individually. I could certainly make a go of it, and spoil the election for Braithwaite if not win outright.

Hardship set out from Andover, as the winter sun dipped redly towards the horizon. The hunter passed over the bridge and across the wide Connecticut River. The ice beneath him shone in the light, red and gold like glass windows in the Boston church. The gap of flowing water in the center was black as the lead between the panes, steadily churning and twirling the sheets of ice. The gap between ice floes in the center of the river seemed a bit wider than it had a week ago. Spring would be here soon, Hardship thought, casting his eyes over the pleasant hills and farmland. Far away, Hardship saw a stag. The hunter watched that stag with admiration, until it fled at his approach.

Hardship passed by the High Horse, which someone had shut since last he visited. In the redness of the evening light, Hardship fancied he saw a trail of smoke coming from the building. Perhaps that old man Hardship had frightened was in there, guarding the place from Indians and curious passers-by. Or perhaps Asenath had sent her Negro serving-man ahead to hold down the fort. Hardship decided he would have to offer Asenath a better deal than Braithwaite had, if he wanted her support.

The hunter rounded a bend, and came to the fork in the road. Behind him was the road to Andover. To his right lay Ipswich, which he could just discern in the distance. The gutted steeple twisted skyward, blackened and skeletal. It was such a tiny settlement, Hardship thought, barely deserving of a meeting house. The hunter took the left fork, and headed down the forest road towards Deerfield.

The road to Deerfield threaded between two mountains, and through the woods. The shadows of the peaks grew longer and longer as Hardship Cole approached. The sunlight dimmed from red to purple as Hardship left the Connecticut River behind him, glimmering like silver. By the time Hardship reached the woods, he was riding through blue twilight, and the shadows had disappeared. The snow reflected the blueness of the twilight, until it too lost its color. Far away, a wolf howled, and then another. The hunter chattered at his horse, leading it downhill, towards the valley floor. The wolves moved on, their howls more distant each time Hardship heard them.

There were no farmhouses in these woods, nor did the Indians camp here. The hills were too steep, Hardship thought, and the risk of encountering bears too high. In the waning light, Hardship dismounted his horse and led it by the bridle, going slower but more certain of his footing. It would not do to lose the path now, or for the horse to break its leg. As Hardship walked, the coins in his saddlebag jingled merrily. The hunter passed a mile post, thinking of what he might do once he arrived at home, and slept a night in his own bed.

He wasn't scared of the woods at night. Hardship had faced down bears before, and put hydrophobic dogs out of their misery, even escaped a cat-o-mountain. Nothing in these woods frightened him: there was nothing here he couldn't kill if he had to. He felt as safe as when he left Andover.

Hardship heard a lurching crack coming from a nearby slope. He reached for his musket, but it was just another stag. It ran across the path and further down, floundering in a deep snow drift at the bottom of the hill. Hardship watched it, and decided to carry his musket with him. Just to be safe, he loaded the weapon.

As Hardship traveled home, clouds gathered overhead, blocking out the light of the moon and the stars. My eyes will adjust to the darkness, Hardship thought as the forms of the woods appeared as gray suggestions. He kept his eyes only a few steps ahead, careful to remain on the path. It was for this reason that Hardship didn't see it coming on the path.

About twenty paces away, Hardship spotted a man wearing a grey pointed hat. He carried no supplies, and no musket, either. Though he faced Hardship, the hunter could not discern his features. Hardship stopped short, watching him for a moment. He had seen him before, somewhere.

"Hello!" Hardship said. "You're a long way from where you came, Stranger."

The man shrugged, as if to say it didn't matter how far he'd come.

“These woods are dangerous without a weapon. Come back with me the way you came.”

Meanwhile, Hardship’s horse started to balk, walking backwards from the stranger in its path.

“Easy, easy now.” Hardship said, yanking the horse’s bridle. “Settle down.”

But the horse wasn’t having any of it. The animal struggled and whinnied, as Hardship struggled to keep a hold on it. The man took a step forward, and the horse bolted, twisting Hardship’s wrist painfully in the reins. “Damn!” Hardship said, as his horse cantered away. “Stupid horse.”

The man shrugged, as if to say horses do what they want.

“You seem familiar.” Hardship said, approaching the man. “Do I know you?”

But the man didn’t have to answer. As Hardship came closer, he remembered where he had seen that hat before. “Gabriel Bishop.” The hunter gasped. “But I killed you.”

The sorcerer came closer. Beneath the brim of the gray pointed hat, Hardship could see his yellow eyes. “But - I shot you down. I saw you fall.”

Gabriel shrugged, as if to agree that was what happened. He took another step toward Hardship, as the darkness around them intensified. Hardship could barely see the musket he held.

“Stay back!” Hardship cried, aiming his weapon at Gabriel’s heart. “Or I will shoot you again.”

The sorcerer inclined his head, as if to ask what it would do, to shoot him again. He came closer to Hardship, reaching out his pale hand to the witch hunter.

Hardship pulled the trigger, and the musket exploded. But the gun smoke cleared, and he could still see Gabriel’s yellow eyes coming closer in the darkness.

“I said stay back!” Hardship cried, his heart pounding. He reached for the powder and musket balls to reload his weapon, but he dropped them. In the soupy blackness, they were lost.

The sorcerer paid him no heed, closing the distance Hardship had created between them. When he came within arm's reach, Hardship lashed out with the butt of his musket, aiming it directly Gabriel's eyes, to bash the sorcerer's brains in on this dark forest path.

The blow didn't connect with anything. Hardship roared, and struck again. Gabriel raked him across the face. His nails were sharp, and Hardship could feel the blood rolling down his cheeks. It gathered in the corners of his mouth and Hardship tasted it.

Gabriel reached out for Hardship again as he swung wide, trying to smash Gabriel's face with his weapon. The sorcerer caught it in the middle of the swing, wrenched it out of Hardship's hands, and threw it away. "No, no!" Hardship cried, as Gabriel's fingers encircled his neck.

Those damn yellow eyes were so close, Hardship thought, snarling and struggling against Gabriel's cold, viselike grip. They seemed to plead with Hardship to stop resisting, to stop fighting him, as the sorcerer strangled the witch hunter with his dead hands. They filled Hardship's consciousness, as if the eyes were inside his own mind.

Hardship screamed in terror, but it came out a choked screech. Gabriel was pressing his neck, strangling him. The eyes were inside his mind, Hardship thought, the hands were inside his body; Gabriel's spirit was inside of him, choking him to death. Hardship struggled and gasped, but all he could do was look into those yellow eyes pleading with him not to resist, assuring him that soon it would all be over. Hardship lost consciousness thinking of those eyes, tasting his own blood in his mouth.

Nobody missed Hardship Cole until his horse appeared in Deerfield two days later, still loaded with Hardship's pack and the purse of coins Silas Winthrop had given him. The men in Deerfield organized a search party, and found the place on the path where Hardship lost his mount. There was some evidence of a scuffle, but only one blood trail, which was buried under five inches of new snow. They used dogs to track it, but lost the trail when it crossed an icy stream.

A week after Hardship Cole left Andover, Thomas Braithwaite was notified of his disappearance. Braithwaite organized a wider sweep of the surrounding area, sending all the manpower he could spare to search for the missing witch hunter. He spared no effort, noting that whoever had attacked Cole was likely still out there. For several weeks thereafter, people locked their doors and windows, telling each other terrified stories of highwaymen and Indian scalpers.

The conditions were uncharitable for the rescuers – heavy snowfalls impeded them on the road, and further concealed any trace of where Hardship Cole might be. After a fortnight of searching, Silas sent the men back to their homesteads, writing to Braithwaite that the chances of finding Cole's remains at this point were slim to none. Week by week, people forgot about the witch hunter who disappeared, forgot about the highwayman who attacked him. Nobody else encountered any trouble on that road, and the matter was eventually dropped.

The only real evidence regarding Hardship's disappearance was found in spring, when a traveler found his flintlock musket in a melting snowdrift on the road to Deerfield. The metal had rusted, and the stock was warped and flaking from months under the ice. The musket was taken to Deerfield, where everyone agreed that Hardship would never have abandoned it. The weapon was then sent to Silas Winthrop, who sent it to Thomas Braithwaite. On May 13, 1686, Governor Braithwaite signed Hardship Cole's death certificate, with a cause of death unknown.