



THE NECROMANCER

BY KEVIN DUNN

The Necromancer

By Kevin Dunn

First Edition

cdp
CRYSTAL DREAMS
publishing

Oshawa, Ontario

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by Kevin Dunn

Managing Editor: Kevin Aguanno
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Typesetting: Peggy LeTrent
eBook Conversion: Agustina Baid

Published by: Crystal Dreams Publishing
(a division of Multi-Media Publications Inc.)
Box 58043, Rosslynn RPO, Oshawa, Ontario, Canada, L1J 8L6.

<http://www.crystaldreamspublishing.com/>

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Paperback	ISBN-10: 1-59146-071-9	ISBN-13: 9781591460718
Adobe PDF ebook	ISBN-10: 1-59146-127-8	ISBN-13: 9781591461272
Microsoft LIT ebook	ISBN-10: 159146-128-6	ISBN-13: 9781591461289
Mobipocket PRC ebook	ISBN-10: 159146-129-4	ISBN-13: 9781591461296
Palm PDB ebook	ISBN-10: 159146-130-8	ISBN-13: 9781591461302

Published in Canada.

CIP data available from the publisher.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Afflicted

Roger Harrington's Journal—

27 December 1691- These are most grievous times. The cold has been cruel and relentless, racking our livestock and our bodies with sickness and dying; and the piracy that has been so ubiquitous of late amongst our ships has sorely impaired our commerce. I am more greatly distraught by this now that my poor youngest, Phoebe, has been stricken with the smallpox and is in need of medicine, and I fear my beloved, Martha, is falling into a similarly weakened state. She and Susanna tend to Phoebe during all the wretched hours of light and dark while I must maintain my strength for the daily hardships I endure for the good of the family. I pray to the dear Lord, our God, nightly, that we may overcome these tribulations anon, so that we may continue to spend our lives toiling in the service of Him, our most benevolent and just Creator. Amen.

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Tituba fled back through the forest as fast as her fleshy body would allow, amongst the naked trees and small bushes, down the narrow path from which she had come. The forest seemed to awaken like a predatory beast whose long hibernation had been disturbed by some intruder violating its lair. Creatures of the night hooted, whistled and squawked.

The turn at every bend revealed a new, yet fleeting, horror. Tituba rushed through the woods, her mind washed blank of everything but the image of those eyes. She couldn't seem to remember anything else—not the slightest description of any feature or garment, and not the crime which she had just witnessed. But the image of those eyes was seared into her mind and would surely haunt her until she was dead.

It was near dusk, and the black mass of clouds looming over the village, obscuring the sun, gave portent of a storm.

The wind howled.

A gust of icy air blew a few dead leaves up toward her face, which remained largely hidden under the hood of her cloak. She held her satchel close, and her garments tight as they threatened to burst open. The wind lashed at the skin of her face and hands, stinging them, making them feel as if the flesh were being raked from the bones.

She looked up into the wind, squinting into the face of the oncoming storm, as she plowed her way through thin and godless winter air, back toward the Parris home.

She arrived at the house breathless and threw open the door. The wind caught it, and it crashed into the wall. She maneuvered herself behind it, using the whole of her body, and shouldered it hard against the wind until it slammed shut.

She shuddered.

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Tituba shook the chill from her bones as she removed her cloak. The reverend and his family were dining, having already said grace. She stole a glance over at the dinner table and was confronted with several puzzled and accusatory expressions.

“Tituba,” Parris said.

She did not answer.

Her countenance was still stricken with fright, her eyes still wide with terror. Tituba unconsciously ignored the reverend.

“Tituba! Where have you been keeping your person?” he demanded.

She let out a woeful sigh, threw her cloak back on, and ran out of the house to her cabin.

Parris followed her and barged into her chambers, closing the door behind him.

“Answer me!”

She turned around.

“I beg your forgiveness, Master Parris. Please do not punish me,” she said almost desperately, her large brown eyes looking up at him soulfully.

Her plea seemed sincere and finding her in such a disheveled state, he decided not to press on. She was a good servant, and he’d never had any problems with her before, but he decided to give her a brief warning anyway, and leave it at that.

“Do not forget your duties to this household, Tituba, lest you should receive more severe reprimands.”

He glared at her for a long moment and left the room.

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Afterward, he thought he might have been too harsh with her. After all, she was human too, although he was sure that some of his associates felt quite differently about that. This whole matter with slaves was very new to him. He had never owned a slave before, and he wasn't sure he liked the idea of owning anyone, no matter what the color of their skin. They were people, complete with their own thoughts and feelings. It seemed cruel to enslave them. It seemed cruel, but that didn't stop him from acquiring two of his own. Of course, he hated the hypocrisy of his situation, but he was a very busy man, and Naomi couldn't do everything. Whether he liked it or not, he was a politician of sorts, and as such had to consider how others would perceive his actions.

He didn't like it, but he treated Tituba and her husband, John Indian, well, never taking the lash to them, and that was all he could do. A minor incident such as tonight's angered Parris because they did need Tituba, but she must have had her reasons for being so late. And, even though he was angry with her at the time, he felt no need to question her of her whereabouts. She needed her own privacy too.

Sometime later, Elizabeth, the reverend's nine-year-old daughter, entered Tituba's chambers and found her doing peculiar things, saying peculiar words. Burning candles cluttered the room. Tituba sat on the floor in the center of the room, pouring a circle of salt around a shriveled-up cock's head bound with a lock of hair, as she chanted incantations and made strange gesticulations in the air above it.

"What are you doing there, Tituba?"

Tituba, having been discovered and feeling no harm in answering the child's question, responded casually:

"Weaving a spell to banish the forces of evil which have been cast upon me."

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“What do you mean ‘spell?’”

“Ceremonies like those of meeting, but magic. The people of my land do such ceremonies to protect one’s self, or destroy one’s enemies, or make men insane with love.”

“Oh, tell me more. Do tell me more.”

And Tituba did.

That night, and every night since, until Elizabeth’s breakdown, Elizabeth and several of her friends sat by Tituba’s fireplace and listened eagerly to her tales of voodoo and West Indian folklore.

The girls learned of zombies and fortune telling; stories of babies carried off in the night for sacrifices to Damballah. Tituba taught them palm reading; divination with the dead; magic spells to steal another’s boyfriend; how to throw hexes on one’s adversaries.

“During the ceremony, the houngan looks on and leads the dance with the force of his will,” Tituba once told them. “...and we are mounted by the loa, spirits who control us during the ceremony and make us behave as they will.”

Then Elizabeth fell ill.

It happened one night late in January as she sat down to an early supper. All seemed well, but abnormally quiet. Tituba had prepared a meal of pheasant, corn, and rye cakes—a feast in those times of privation and hunger. (Reverend Parris was, up till the present time at least, still well-respected in the community, and thus given privileges not bestowed upon the less than elect.)

Parris was out getting more firewood (since he had sent John Indian to town on an errand), and they needed the wood badly. But both men were late in arriving home, and, not

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wanting the food to get cold, Naomi decided to have Tituba serve the meal.

“May I say grace tonight?” asked Abigail, Elizabeth’s cousin and playmate.

“You may,” Naomi replied.

“I wanted to say grace,” Elizabeth complained.

“Now, Beth. Abby asked first.”

Elizabeth frowned, sulking.

“You may say grace tomorrow,” Naomi said.

Elizabeth straightened up in her chair and folded her hands as Abigail began.

“Thank You, O Lord, for this food we are about to eat, that we may be strong and free of malady. And bless this home, that we may be protected from savages and cold. Amen.”

“Amen,” the rest said solemnly, crossing themselves, and then commenced eating.

Elizabeth took a bite of food. Her face grew contorted as she chewed the morsel. Her body twitched. She squirmed in her seat in spasms. Her head thrashed about, whipping her hair around while she shrieked, sobbed, and laughed madly, screaming strange words.

She sank down in her seat and collapsed to the floor, hitting it with a thud as she went into convulsions. She crawled under her chair and cowered, shaking, her teeth chattering, her lips trembling.

“Elizabeth!” her mother yelled, enraged. “Return to your seat and behave, child, lest I summon your father to issue a scolding!”

But her behavior only worsened.

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Naomi became frantic. There seemed to be something seriously wrong with Elizabeth, more serious than a mere case of misconduct. She crouched down, knelt beside Elizabeth, and raised the girl in her arms, cradling her against her bosom.

“Elizabeth, dear child, what ails you?”

Her only reply was an incomprehensible conglomeration of curses and gibberish.

Suddenly, Abigail cried out and collapsed. She writhed and twitched on the floor, saliva foaming from her cursing and laughing mouth.

“Tituba!” Naomi yelled, then turned around to find her servant standing directly behind her, gawking.

“Yes, Mistress?”

“Fetch the reverend! And tarry not!”

“Yes, Mistress,” Tituba replied, then donned her cloak and left the house.

“Oh, Lord! Let them be well,” Naomi prayed, still in shock herself.

She sat on the floor, swaying back and forth with Elizabeth in her arms, growling and struggling to get free.

A short time later, Tituba returned with the reverend. Upon seeing him, the girls screamed.

“Oh, dear God!” Parris exclaimed as he entered the room, hastily removing his coat.

“Samuel...” Naomi said dumbly, not knowing what else to say. She glanced at the afflicted girls, then back up at him, searching for reassurance.

There was none.

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Parris knelt down next to Abigail and raised her head onto his lap. He brushed her hair away from her face and back over her brow, a paragon of caring and concern. He raised his eyes to his wife sadly.

Elizabeth uttered questionable sounds, sounds like foreign words in the sour mouth of a dying man. Parris judged the words of a language he may have once heard but had long since forgotten. Words of a language Elizabeth should not know.

“I think it best I summon Dr. Griggs,” he shouted above the girls’ screaming as he stood up.

Naomi nodded.

Just then, both girls groaned and dove like wild animals at Parris’s feet. They bit his ankles and tore into the flesh of his legs.

“Lord!”

The reverend, still incredulous of this attack, struck Abigail in the face with the back of his hand, dazing her, and flung his daughter off with his leg.

“Help me put her to bed,” he said, reaching for Elizabeth.

“What torments them, Sam?”

“I know not. It is such as I have never witnessed before.”

“Oh, Lord,” Naomi said, raising her eyes heavenward. “What sins have offended You so that warrant such wrath?”

But there was no answer to her question.

The child struggled and lashed out at her mother and father, not failing a few times to claw them both with her nails as they carried her to her room and tied her down to her bed.

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“Dear God, help them,” Parris pleaded.

When both girls were restrained to their beds, Parris slipped into his coat.

“I must fetch Dr. Griggs,” he said, then left to seek the physician.

The hour it took Parris to locate the doctor and return with him was a long one. The girls only seemed to become more agitated as time passed on, and nothing Naomi and Tituba did seemed to help. Whatever was wrong with them had a firm grip, and it didn’t look like they would be getting better anytime soon.

This was confirmed when Parris and Dr. Griggs appeared. The girls’ conditions continued to worsen, and even as Griggs examined them, their screaming and thrashing increased in frequency and intensity.

“Child,” he said, leaning down toward Abigail. “Tell us what ails you so, that I may deliver you from your pains.”

“To the Devil with you!” Abigail roared in response, then cackled.

“Abigail!” her aunt cried out, cupping her hands over her mouth.

Griggs didn’t seem as shocked, however, and after some time he decided a different approach to the problem may be wiser. The doctor had made his best attempts to treat the afflicted girls, but finding his treatments ineffective, commenced an interrogation of them to uncover any clues as to the origins of their mania.

The inquiry lasted several hours until sometime after midnight, no answers forthcoming to the questions Griggs put to the girls.

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“They are most plainly bewitched,” the doctor declared after concluding there was nothing in his power he could do for them.

Reverend Parris, distraught for the girls, opened the Bible and read from the Book of Psalms as Naomi looked on, sobbing.

“Save me, O God, by Thy name, and judge me by Thy strength. Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words—”

Before he could finish reciting the verse, Elizabeth broke one of her bindings and lunged at her father, seizing the book and hurling it across the room with spite.

“Elizabeth!” the reverend hollered. His face flushed with blood. Outraged, he smacked her across the cheek, making the loud cracking sound of flesh against flesh. She glared up at him wildly, like an insane and injured animal. Parris held his hand up to his mouth and grieved inwardly, regretting the fact that he had just struck his daughter, but he knew she was without her wits and probably felt nothing. Still, he found it difficult to treat her in such a manner, and his chest pained him greatly as he re-tied her arm to the bedpost.

The doctor and the Parrises stayed up with the girls throughout the night. Parris feared that perhaps they were even in jeopardy of forfeiting their souls to the Devil.

The next few days, more girls, all of whom had attended Tituba’s strange story-telling sessions, succumbed to similar afflictions. The villagers and townspeople began to talk, and the matter, which Parris had till this time attempted to keep private, came to the attention of Judge Hathorne, who set forth a formal inquest to discover who—if anyone—was responsible for the maladies that assailed the girls.

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After a week of investigations, they seemed no closer to the truth, but of one fact they were certain: Evil had come to Salem. There was quite simply no other explanation. If the Devil did find a niche in Salem Village from which to wreak his mischief, what's a more appropriate place to start than a reverend's home? What's a more appropriate victim than a reverend's daughter? Wasn't it also a well-known fact that the most numerous cases of demonic possession occurred to nuns in convents, on God's very own hallowed soil? Yes. Evil was here. It had to be. There was simply no other explanation.

Discouraged, but not allowing themselves to be defeated, Reverend Parris and Dr. Griggs did not relent in their inquisition of the afflicted girls. For good or ill, they were determined to press on until the girls were healed.

"Elizabeth?" Parris asked.

Blood and thick gobs of saliva flowed from her mouth. Her teeth had chewed up her tongue and part of her lower lip during her fits. Her tongue now flopped around loosely in her mouth as she chewed on it and mumbled.

"Elizabeth," Parris continued. "Are you and your friends bewitched?"

A stench rose from Elizabeth's bed. Her bowels had failed her, and watery brown excrement seeped through her dress and pooled out onto the sheets beneath her, saturating them.

She barked back at him incoherently, then spat in his face.

Parris fell back slightly and wiped her rancid and bloody saliva from his cheek as he choked back his tears.

The girls shrieked in chorus, as if on cue.

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“Who torments you?” Dr. Griggs asked them, but received a reply of more shrieks and mumbling.

“I implore you! By the name of God! Answer me! Who torments you!”

At once, as if the invocation of God’s name racked them with pains compelling their answers, the girls shrieked and cried in garbled wails: “Osborne! Good! Tituba!”

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The room was dark and cold, despite the fire that Roger had just stoked in the fireplace over an hour ago. The curtains were drawn. Martha thought it best that they remain so since the skies were laden heavily with gloom—as they had been all winter—and the dead trees in view of the windows seemed too dead. The contrast between the pure white snow and the frozen brown bark and gnarled branches was a depiction of austerity Martha found unnervingly depressing, and she didn't wish to subject her ailing daughter to it. Phoebe's condition wasn't very promising, and if she were exposed to such scenes of barrenness, the sense of hopelessness thus excited would most likely have a negative effect upon her.

It was Sunday, the twenty-first of February, a couple hours past dawn. Soon, Reverend Parris would start tolling the meeting bell and the villagers—those who were able—would trickle out of their homes to attend the service. At the moment, however, Martha and Susanna were busy tending to Phoebe, sitting at her bedside, nursing her as best they could

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with cold compresses, hot soups, and warm caring as Roger looked on.

“Oh,” Phoebe moaned. “It pains me. It pains me so much.”

Her face was flushed and freckled with pustules, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Daddy?” she called.

Roger moved closer, placing his hand on Martha’s shoulder. He leaned in toward Phoebe.

“Yes, sweetest.”

“Why does it pain me so? Why must I hurt?”

At this, Martha broke down and wept. She stood up trembling and bolted from the room with her hands covering her face. Roger’s eyes glazed over, brimming with tears; Susanna’s cheeks were shiny with them. If there were any way Roger could convince the Lord that it would be better if he were wasting away in that bed and not his daughter... But it was futile to reason in that manner. Whatever fate awaited Phoebe was the Lord’s will. Roger knew that no amount of prayer would alter that painful fact. Soon, he thought, soon Phoebe will be with Him. Soon she will hear the ethereal chorus of seraphim and cherubim singing their praise of Him. Why?

Roger was angry. It seemed as if the Lord must take pleasure in seeing him and his family suffer, and now it looked as if He was going to claim her. But she was young...so young. So damned young. She was all of ten years old.

Roger chastised himself for doubting and questioning the will of the Lord and took Phoebe’s frail hand in his. Although her head had radiated with fever, it was cold now. He gazed into her face. It looked blurry and faded through the

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tears. Already, she was leaving him. He didn't want to think it, but he knew it was the truth.

He remembered the one time he had taken her fishing down at Mill Pond. She was eight then. She had caught a large spotted bass, and Roger helped her lift it out of the water. It fell off the hook before they could maneuver it into the pail and was thrashing about in the grass. She ran over to it and watched it flopping around, its gills respiring laboriously.

"Daddy?" she said.

"Yes, sweetest."

"Daddy, would you be angry with me if I tossed him back in the water?"

"Why?"

"It hurts. If he is not in the water he will die, will he not, Daddy?"

"Yes, Phoebe. He will."

"Daddy?"

"Yes."

"May I toss him back?"

"We need the fish to eat, dearest."

"I know. But may I toss *him* back?"

"If you feel so inclined," he sighed.

"Thank you, Daddy."

She picked up the fish, carried it to the edge of the pond, and tossed it back in. When she returned, she looked up at him a bit sadly.

"Daddy?" she asked.

"Yes?"

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“I don’t think I like fishing.”

“Very well,” Roger said, then took her by the hand and proceeded homeward.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, Phoebe.”

“Why must there be pain?”

Roger didn’t know then, and he didn’t know now, and his reply to her remained the same:

“I know not, Phoebe. I know not. I know only that it is the Lord’s will.” Those were the bitterest words that had ever tripped off his tongue, and clearing the tears from his eyes with his free hand and seeing her gentle face more clearly now, he wished he hadn’t said them.

The Lord. What does The Lord know about suffering? What does The Lord know about grief? The Lord knows nothing of those things, only that He knows how to bestow them freely upon His most faithful servants. The Lord is a barbarian. Only a barbarian would allow His own Son to suffer and die on a tree when He had the power to save Him.

But I love you, My son. Let not Satan get behind you. Follow Me. Follow the way of the Lord and you shall be rewarded a thousand-fold in the Hereafter. You shall reap the fruits of Eternal Life in My Kingdom, but you must have faith in Me and believe.

“Amen,” he heard himself say, and once again berated himself for wavering in his faith in God. He told himself that whatever hardships he and his family were forced to tolerate, they were a test and a purging. The Lord demands a heavy toll for entrance into His Kingdom.

“Amen,” Susanna responded, holding Phoebe’s other hand on the other side of the bed. “I love you, Phoebe. Bear yourself up strong. Be brave for the Lord. It is His way.”

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"I am most truly blessed to have you as my sister,"
Phoebe said.

Outside, Reverend Parris began to toll the church bell.

Roger looked up at Susanna.

"You best prepare yourself for meeting, Susanna.
Get you and your mother to church and pray for your sister
that she be well again. I shall stay and look after her. Give the
reverend my regrets at not attending. It cannot be helped."

Susanna kissed Phoebe's hand and rose to her feet. As
she left the room, Roger added,

"And after the service, go to town, to the apothecary,
and ask Mr. Hanford if any medicine for Phoebe has yet
arrived."

The Meeting House wasn't filled to full capacity, as had
once always been the case. Several people were sick and dying
of the smallpox epidemic that plowed its way through the
heart of New England, and many others were bedridden from
the general ailments that often afflict people during the winter
months.

The mood of the congregation was a somber one. The
church was cold and uncomfortable, and many of the people
present weren't all that well themselves. There was very little
talk other than a few hushed whispers and solemn mumblings.
People coughed and sneezed and sniffled as they awaited the
reverend to approach the altar and deliver his sermon. Word
had been circulating for some time now among the villagers
of some strange happenings around the Parris household—
possibly even diabolism—and the people were curious and
wanted to know what the clergy intended to do.

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Martha and Susanna were just seating themselves when the reverend entered the church armed with his Bible. Heads turned and people murmured through cupped hands as he made his way sullenly down the aisle. Susanna had her eyes trained on him as he passed her. Then her gaze was drawn beyond the reverend, a few pews down from her on the other side of the aisle, to where she locked eyes with Bernard Martin.

He looked quite handsome this morning, she thought. His long dark hair was brushed neatly back over his ears, allowing a better-than-usual view of his chiseled features and sky-blue eyes. She had liked him for the longest time, but ever since puberty she was shy and uncomfortable with her body and the way she looked, and she couldn't talk to him for more than a minute without feeling as if she was going to burst out of her skin. All she could do was have fantasies about what married life would be like with him. Fantasies were safe. In fantasies, anything you wanted could happen, all your wishes could come true, and no one got hurt. But fantasies weren't real, and somehow when they ended she felt even emptier than before.

But this was real. This was happening now. To her.

It was magic.

And she knew by the way he was looking at her that her feelings—her desires—were reciprocated.

This was the longest time she had ever stared at any boy, and it was Bernard. He wasn't simply any boy. He was *The Boy*. He was the one she had wanted her whole life, and he was looking at her.

Her belly felt loose, like it was hollowed out and filled with cold water. Her face tickled and burned as she felt his eyes slide subtly over her cheeks, her mouth, her neck.

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She felt as if she was going to scream. She couldn't stand it any longer, and she turned her head away and looked down.

She panted lightly, almost imperceptibly, flustered. When she looked up again she caught fourteen-year-old Johnny Bromidge leering at her with a most peculiar expression decorating his pimply face. His eyes were glazed over with indecent heat. His upper lip glistened with clear snot that oozed from his nose onto the fine brown hairs of his nascent moustache. The boy's mouth hung open slackly in a manner that bespoke of dementia or depravity, Susanna did not know which. His tongue lolled slightly out of his mouth, dripping pearly strings of saliva onto his chin as he continued to scowl at her.

Sickened, Susanna broke her stare and turned away, feeling utterly terrified. A ball of nauseating heat rose up the back of her head and into her face, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand hotly on end and turning her face bright red. Her ears buzzed. She felt faint and didn't think she would be able to remain standing until the reverend asked everyone to be seated, but somehow she managed.

Martha noticed her daughter's sudden weakness and placed one arm around Susanna's waist to support her as the other grasped her above the elbow.

"Susanna," she whispered closely. "Are you well?"

Susanna, still swooning a bit, took a deep breath and began to feel some degree of relief.

"Mother, I felt somewhat faint but have since recovered. I am much better now."

She thought for a moment of telling her mother the cause of the fainting spell but was too embarrassed.

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Somehow, she was able to raise enough courage to glance back in Johnny Bromidge's direction, but now he was compliantly facing the pulpit, appearing completely innocent, almost angelic. Seeing him this way made her doubt herself. She looked at Bernard and saw him standing beside his mother. He, too, was looking at the pulpit now.

Am I, too, becoming touched? She wondered.

"Shall I fetch Dr. Griggs for you, my dear child?" Martha asked.

Susanna looked back at Johnny. He still faced the altar...and still looked angelic.

"I am much better now, Mother, truly. Please, let us stay and say a prayer for Phoebe, so that she will be well again."

Reverend Parris stood before the altar now. He genuflected, crossing himself, and rose to the lectern.

"You may all be seated," he said.

The congregation sat.

"Yes," Martha whispered in Susanna's ear as they sat down. "And a prayer for you that you remain fit and resistant to the smallpox, which your poor sister has been so unfortunate to be stricken by."

A hush spread over the congregation as the reverend cleared his throat and prepared to address the people.

"I shall commence our Sunday Mass anon," he said gravely, "but first I feel it necessary to speak of that which many of you have heard already. Less than two fortnights ago my beloved daughter, Elizabeth, and her cousin, Abigail, took ill with fits. Not long thereafter, other young ladies were also similarly afflicted. Dr. Griggs has performed the most extensive examinations of these tormented souls and found

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no natural cause for said affliction, thereby concluding the likelihood of demonic intervention.”

Several women, upon hearing this, gasped and cried out; a few others fainted. But Parris continued nonetheless.

“—it grieves me verily that such is our lot to have the very Devil himself in our midst. We have endured much suffering as of late, and this new information seems most discomfiting, but we must bear ourselves up as a community to oppose the evil the Lord has deemed well to pit us against! Our faith must continue to hold fast in the Lord, our God, that He may deliver us with speed and strength from His most fervent adversary—”

As the volume of Parris’s voice rose, he shook his Bible at the congregation with a sense of purpose he hadn’t had in many months. He had felt the reigns of his authority slipping from him during that time because of the property disputes and his less-than-honest part in them, but now, seeing the terror on his flock’s faces and the impact each cleverly and enthusiastically inflected word had on them, he felt his grip on those reigns strengthening once again. He felt stronger.

“—and our inquisitions of those afflicted, which I mentioned, have produced the names of their alleged tormentors. It is the intention of the clergy to arrest said tormentors so that they may be brought before His Majesty’s tribunal and tried for the crimes of practicing witchcraft and those damnable black arts of which the Devil gives license; and also sedition against the Lord and the people of Salem. These heathens must be cast out!”

He punctuated every rising syllable with a sweeping arm, a shaking fist, a clutching hand, until he could see the fear pouring out of their eyes, feel them clinging to every word he uttered...and to him, their link to God. He knew they were his.

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“—it is my most sincere endeavor to see that the clergy and the people of Salem wrest all of Evil’s agents from our midst like so many worms. For, by means of knowing the cause, we may have the cure. In this, we shall not be passive victims. We shall join together, as one people, as one holy fist of God, and be strong! And with the Lord’s aid we shall beat Satan’s legions back into the infernal pit of hellfire that is their rightful domain from whence they spawned! Amen.”

To this, the reverend received great applause. He had worked himself up with indignation, and despite the cold, had broken a sweat. He trembled slightly from the excitement he experienced as a result of delivering his arm-flailing, Bible-pounding sermon. It was well received, much more so than he had hoped it would be. With the will of the whole village behind him, he suddenly felt invincible. They would appreciate him more now, knowing that without him and the church they would be subject to the same fates that befell his own daughter and the other girls. Now their very souls were at risk of being damned, and they were scared. He could sense that, and that was good. They were scared, and the only place they could turn was to the church—to God.

A few days later, Melissa Bromidge, Johnny’s big sister, left her room and went out back to the outhouse to relieve herself. It was an unusually warm and sunny morning. There were even a few sparrows warbling in the barren treetops. Intimations of spring. It would be good to see the trees full and green again.

The latch on the inside of the outhouse’s door had been broken a week now and everyone who wanted to use it was supposed to knock first before entering; but Melissa had to go desperately, and she forgot to knock today.

The Sermon

She threw the door open and caught Johnny sitting down on the commode with his trousers around his ankles and his hand locked hard to his erect penis with a fistful of lard. The same demented expression that Susanna Harrington saw when she looked at him in meeting was there again. His hand had been sliding furiously up and down the shaft of his member as he chanted Susanna's name softly when the door opened. Now it stopped.

Melissa hadn't heard him chanting Susanna's name until she opened the door, but when she did hear it she knew immediately to whom he was referring, and that made her feel the horror all the more. Melissa and Susanna had been playmates growing up—best friends. They weren't that close now, nor did she expect they would be in the future, but they were still friends. They had merely drifted apart over the years. She knew that was unusual for people living in a small village like Salem, but it seemed natural enough to them...until now.

Now, with all the talk of demons and witches, she wondered if Susanna might have taken a darker path than herself. Melissa shuddered at the thought, and her bladder voided itself down her legs, warming them.

Johnny froze, looked up guiltily, then glared at his sister. She screamed, slammed the door shut, and ran into the house to tell her father.

The Necromancer

CHAPTER THREE

Witch-Hunt

Roger Harrington's Journal—

25 February 1692—Phoebe exhibits no signs of improvement, and I fear the pox that has cropped over the whole of her body has spread now to Martha, as she is dreadfully stricken with fever and aching. O, how I beseech the Lord many a dreary night to be merciful and spare my family, but alas, there is no respite. The blight has been severe this winter past with no sign of abatement. The food supply is greatly diminished; several of the livestock are dead or dying of disease and are not fit for consumption. The smallpox continues to plague New England and seems to strike a new victim with the passing of each day. I sense most of the good people of Salem are greatly distraught by this prolonged state of privation, and I suspect the worst has not yet befallen us as there have been rumours of witchcraft.

The Necromancer

A small assembly of townspeople had already gathered in front of Salem Prison, having heard of the previous night's arrests. It was Tuesday, the first of March, but the severe winter weather was still strong and showed no signs of abatement. The sky remained ashen and bland with overcast. The wind howled and whistled chronically through the naked boughs of elms and sycamores, down Prison Lane to the large wooden building where three women were held on accusations of witchcraft.

The gathering of people before the prison consisted mostly of bearded men clad in severe dark garments and black, steeple-crowned hats; and a few women, dressed in similarly drab vestments, but wearing bonnets or hoods. All were bundled-up in several layers of clothing. Most shivered, fidgeted, or paced to keep warm.

Reverend Parris walked solemnly down the street toward the prison accompanied by Judge Hathorne, Sheriff Corwin, and the Reverend Ambrose Blayne, who had only arrived in Salem the previous autumn and was reputedly well versed in demonology, witchcraft, and witch-hunting, having read the *Malleus Maleficarum* and other such treatises. It was rumored that he was notoriously successful in his application of their teachings.

As the four men approached the building—Judge Hathorne, limping slightly with the aid of a polished oak cane; Reverend Parris, pressing a Bible close to his chest; Reverend Blayne, holding a much larger, much older looking tome—the assembly fell silent and broke up into two groups, clearing a path to the prison.

No one spoke. The silence unearthed the grave sounds of their shoes grinding pebbles into the road, then clopping onto the wooden planks as they mounted the stairs, unlocked the iron-clamped door, and entered the building.

Witch-Hunt

They proceeded downstairs to the dungeon. The guard was slumped in a chair, sleeping next to a rusting potbelly stove that contained a dying fire. Corwin gave the man's shoulder a shove, almost pushing him off his seat.

"Wake up, William," he said. "We have further inquisitions to make."

William Cranley looked up at four men, then yawned, groaned, and rose to his feet groggily to open the door for them, but Hathorne had already slid the bolt back and opened it. Before William was able to stand fully erect, Corwin had snatched the keys from him and crossed the threshold with the others.

They walked down the hall, passing several sad-looking male and female prisoners, some of which grabbed through the bars at them, begging for release. One of the prisoners clutched Hathorne's coattail and tugged at it forcefully, almost bringing him to the floor. The judge regained his balance, spun around, and, glaring indignantly, stuck his leg through the bars as the man pulled away and booted the offender in the teeth. The man fell back, throwing his hands up to his face.

"You know better than that, Nathan," Hathorne said, then continued down the hall as the prisoner nursed his bloodied nose and mouth.

Sheriff Corwin and the two reverends had already halted before Tituba's cell and were critically looking her over. Hathorne strode over and followed their gaze to the lumped figure curled up on the floor in the corner of the cell, a model of desolation.

"Tituba," Parris said.

There was no response.

"Tituba," he repeated.

The Necromancer

She raised her head slowly and looked up at them. Recognition and surprise registered on her face. Of course, she knew who they all were. Salem Town and Salem Village were small, and by nature everyone knew each other. Only the most adept could conceal themselves or their doings from public scrutiny. Typically, if two people were having an affair, it wouldn't be long before that affair became common knowledge.

But Tituba's look of recognition stemmed not from such trite town gossip, but from something darker, a brooding fear that had settled in her subconscious and was now resurfacing as she peered into the cold blue eyes of the man with the tome.

She didn't scream, although every particle of her being yearned to do so. No. It could only worsen the situation at this point. As it was, she felt certain she would meet her fate hanging on the end of a rope on Gallows Hill. She didn't know how the law worked, but for the moment she deemed it prudent to remain silent.

"Reverend Parris and I were at her half the night," Hathorne admitted. "Yet she refuses to confess her wickedness and damned devotion to the black arts."

He looked at Blayne.

"We thought a man of your learning and experience may fare the wiser."

"Hmm," Blayne nodded then motioned to the cell door.

Corwin jingled the keys around, searching for the right one, and unlocked the door. Blayne stepped inside and advanced toward Tituba, who, flinching, sat up and flattened her back to the wall. She averted her eyes from his and turned

her head away. He seized her by the lower jaw and forced her to look at him.

He was tall, but seemed even more so now from the perspective Tituba had sitting on the floor of her cell. From there, he certainly was imposing, and the stern countenance he wore only accentuated the fact. He appeared to be no more than thirty-five or forty years of age, although his demeanor suggested one of more advanced years and experience. His brow was slightly furrowed; his hair, long and dark; his beard, full and streaked with several gray hairs. His face was austere and gaunt with deprivation giving it a rough, hewn appearance. It was evident that this was a man of some authority who was accustomed to a position of command from which to wield his well-seasoned powers.

“Leave me with her for a time. She will confess,” he declared knowingly as he jerked his hand away from her face.

“No!” Tituba screamed, unable to restrain herself any longer.

“Master Parris, I beg you not to go! Please! He will do me much harm! I do not wish to die!”

“Ah,” Blayne murmured. “The Devil has a powerful hold on this one, does he?” He wove his fingers into her frizzy black hair and pulled. “Let that be the contest then.” He turned to Hathorne.

“Leave me with her for a time. My soul to the Devil if she be not confessed by dusk,” he swore, then roughly released her again.

“Very well,” Hathorne said.

“No!” Tituba cried as Parris and the two judges disappeared down the hall.

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Blayne placed the tome on the floor and slipped out of his coat, the din of the dungeon door slamming shut and the bolt sliding back into place still hanging thinly in the air. He rolled his ruffled sleeves up and unbuckled his belt, pulling it through the loops of his breeches. There was no doubt as to how he intended to use it.

“You will confess. Oh, yes. You will indeed confess most profusely of your sins and the sins of your sister wenches. And lest you give thought to spending your tongue on such talk as that which you have seen, remember: It is I who chained you here with accusations and suspicion. Do not dare to bare your voice against me—a revered man of the cloth—for your testimony is but fodder for worms and shall not be believed.”

Tituba remained silent. She feared the man too much to do anything else. However, silence would do little, if anything, to lessen the torture and humiliation she was about to endure, and she knew it.

Blayne tossed off his skullcap and gripped her by the shoulders. He forced her to lie prone on the floor.

“No!” she cried, struggling. “Please...no, Master Reverend!”

Blayne responded to her pleas by smashing her in the face with his fist, stunning her into stupidity.

He tore her clothes open from neck to waist till her large brown breasts were exposed.

Tituba was still dazed, but she became aware of the reverend’s hands peeling away her undergarments from beneath her dress as she began to regain her wits. By that time, however, it was too late for any form of cunning to extricate herself from this situation. Blayne had her securely

pinned down with the whole of his body and had successfully completed the intended breach of his desire.

He thrust inside her methodically, every lunge accompanied by grunts of pleasure tinged with scorn. He whispered curses in her ears.

“Fuck...you, sow!” he hissed.

“Cunt! You cunting wench...Fuck!”

“I shall...tear...your cunt...piecemeal. Oh, you beast... your stench is strong. Oh, you savage...your cunt is wet...with blood.”

Tituba could smell him strongly, his breath and body poisoning her with his lustful scent as their skins rubbed together, making her feel nauseated. He pressed the side of her face into the cell floor with his palm as he changed his position, his member still sliding violently in and out of the thicket of coarse black hairs at the fork of her thighs, tearing her flesh.

She felt detached from herself, as an outsider, even though she could still feel the pain, could still feel the cold, dirty floor beneath her, could still feel him and his weight on her, oppressing her, making it difficult for her to breathe. How she so dearly wished she wasn't in this cold, heartless place. How she longed for the freedom and temperate climes of her peaceful homeland now so far away. Now, in the face of this wicked man, even death looked inviting.

Blayne released her face. She turned it back toward him speckled with grit. Her eye was cut and swelling shut from the blow he had delivered earlier. Tituba felt certain she would die here as a consequence of Blayne's rape of her. She was desperate, and certain she had nothing to lose, made a struggle to free herself.

“Oh, wench!” Blayne cursed. “You dare resist me!”

The Necromancer

Tituba, knowing deeply the failure of her effort to escape, said nothing.

“Then feel the lash of my belt!”

He reached for the belt, folded it in half, and whacked her in the side of the head with it, dazing her again, but slightly. She recovered quickly, but before she had time to initiate another escape attempt, Blayne’s hand found her throat and throttled it. Tituba choked and whimpered as tears rolled down her cheeks. She grabbed his arm with both hands in an effort to break his grip on her throat, but he was too strong. The hold subdued her effectively as the circulation of blood and oxygen was abruptly cut off from her brain.

This excited Blayne all the more and quickly brought the act to its conclusion with a series of moans and grunts at the same moment Tituba lost consciousness.

The coupling thus completed, Blayne stood up, pulled up his trousers, and brushed himself off with his hands.

A few minutes later, Tituba stirred and opened her eyes. Her body ached and was especially sore and stinging where she had been violated. She felt filthy and ashamed. His semen was all over her thighs and belly. It was still warm but cooling rapidly as it caked to her skin and pubic hair. The cell spun sickeningly. She found it difficult to maintain her balance as she attempted to sit up. She flopped over onto her side, and tasting the bile in the back of her throat, retched and vomited.

She looked up at Blayne, who was once again fully dressed, wearing his coat, and nestling the tome to his breast.

“Heed my words, wench,” he reminded her. “Lest you be hanged by your own hands.”

Then he left her cell, slamming the door shut behind him, and strode down the hall. He banged on the dungeon door for the guard to open it, and he was gone.

As the week wore on, more people fell ill. More livestock perished. More talk had spread of the witches held in the town's prison. Neighbors turned on each other. More people became afflicted, accusations were cast, and arrests were made.

Tituba had confessed as Blayne had insisted, naming herself and the two Sarahs as witches, and now the three of them were being sent to Boston to await trial. As Hathorne, Corwin, Blayne, and several guards escorted them from the prison, four men dragged two more women and one man down the street toward the prison in shackles.

The two parties met in the road and stopped briefly to exchange information.

"Witchcraft?" Hathorne asked expectantly.

The men nodded solemnly, then proceeded to the prison house.

One of the captive women held Blayne transfixed. He thought *she* was dead. No. He *knew* she was dead.

Upon closer scrutiny, however, he realized the woman in question—who could have been no more than twenty years old—wasn't the woman he thought it was, but someone who bore an overwhelming resemblance to her.

Still, he couldn't control the feelings that stirred within him when his gaze first fell upon her. It was at that moment that he resolved to see her again, and at any cost, make her his.

The Necromancer

CHAPTER FOUR

Susanna

The day following the departure of Tituba and the two Sarahs—March eighth—Blayne rode out to the prison on horseback from his cottage in Salem Village to visit the woman whose image had moved him so. When he arrived, the guard escorted him to her cell, and Blayne dismissed him.

The dungeon was more dank than usual and the stench of waste and body odor more prevalent. The cells were Spartan at best; each one equipped solely with one bucket for bowel and bladder movements. Prisoners, many of whom were infested with lice, were not allowed to bathe and were given only the minimum amounts of food and water necessary to sustain life. Roaches, rats, and other rodents and insects were given free reign to roam from one cell to another and forage for food...or possibly a little flesh from a slumbering inmate. The conditions were ideal for breeding disease.

But contracting disease was the least of Susanna Harrington's concerns. The penalty for being convicted of practicing witchcraft in Salem was death by hanging, and Susanna knew her situation didn't look promising. Why did the Bromidges accuse her of such a serious and detestable crime?

The Necromancer

She attended Meeting more regularly than most of the other villagers and was probably a more fervent believer in the divine grace and powers of the Almighty than many of the reverends. All she ever wanted was to lead a quiet, peaceful life, and tread the righteous path of the Lord. Now she was in danger of being branded a witch—a servant of Satan—and condemned to die.

She mulled the dilemma over continuously in her mind as she lay on the floor of her cell facing the wall opposite the cell door with her eyes closed. Even if she were acquitted, there would still be the scandal; she would still feel the shame; she would still be scorned as a pariah.

Nothing would ever be the same again.

She felt a strange tickle in her back, almost a twinge. She rolled over, opening her eyes. She was startled to find a reverend peering at her intently through the bars. To her surprise, she failed to recognize him. She thought she knew everyone in Salem, members of the clergy in particular.

“What is your name, child?”

“Susanna,” she replied meekly. “Susanna Harrington.”

“Well, Susanna Harrington, do you know the charges made against you?”

“I do, Reverend,” she said, lugging herself to a sitting position, “Witchcraft. But I know naught of such things. I am but falsely accused.”

He knew she spoke the truth. He knew, for the most part, that the accusations flying about were the results of the hysterical paranoia that swept through Salem; a consequence of the fear incited by the incident that took place at Reverend Parris’s home less than two months ago. Even if Susanna were a witch, it certainly wouldn’t have mattered. Though this was the first time they had ever encountered each other face

to face, Blayne loved her and her apparent vulnerability, and he would do whatever it took to protect her and see that she was safe. He wasn't going to allow the tragedies of the past to haunt him by repeating themselves.

"I believe you," he said, feeling responsible for her imprisonment, and feeling guilty for not telling her the truth.

"What shall happen to me?" she asked tremulously.

"Fret not, dear Susanna. No harm will befall you. I shall attend most firmly to the maintenance of your safety."

The dungeon door slammed. Blayne broke his gaze away from Susanna and looked down the hall at the man walking toward him.

"I am most grateful," Susanna said, compelling Blayne to turn to her with the familiar sound of her voice. "But why do you hold such conviction of my innocence?"

"I know you, though never have we two met prior to yesterday when I spied you, shackled and haggard, on the path to this wretched place. Take care in knowing I am with you, for I am your champion."

Susanna's cheeks flushed brightly with blood. His words and their underlying meanings were well perceived, although she doubted her comprehension of them. In fact, she doubted the whole conversation and even the fact that it had taken place. But it did take place, and the reverend was still standing in front of her cell as proof that it had.

The man was just a few cells away now as he continued to walk toward Blayne, peering with concern through the bars of each cell as he went along. He stopped a few feet away from Blayne, still beyond Susanna's limited view, and addressed the Reverend formally.

The Necromancer

“Pardon me, Reverend,” the man said. “But I am searching for my daughter.”

“Father,” Susanna called out.

She leapt to her feet and ran to the cell door, wrapping her fingers around the bars.

“It would seem you have found her,” Blayne said.

“Oh, Father,” Susanna said, taking his hands through the bars. “How I’ve missed you.”

“How are you, dear child?”

“Oh, I so wish to leave this place. I know not what I did to warrant this.”

Roger turned to Blayne.

“Surely, you know Susanna is not capable of such crimes as those for which she stands accused. In the name of God, why is she here?”

“Father,” Susanna interrupted. “The reverend has promised to help me.”

“Yes, Mr. Harrington. Susanna speaks the truth. It is quite plain that she belongs not in such piteous places as this, and I will employ the whole of my influence to see that the charges brought against her be dismissed.”

“Do that and you shall have my undying and most earnest gratitude. Our family has suffered much in the recent months with the illness of my youngest daughter and the frail condition of my wife. I could not bear to see any harm befall my dear Susanna too.”

Blayne placed his hand on Roger’s shoulder.

“All will be well,” he assured him. “I shall not rest until Susanna is liberated from her imprisonment.”

Blayne turned to Susanna.

“Blessed be, child, and farewell. I shall return tomorrow with good tidings.”

Blayne clasped Roger’s hand and shook it firmly.

“Farewell,” he said, then left before Roger or Susanna could say anything more to him.

Susanna heard the door slam and lock, then Roger turned to her.

“I do not think that I have ever seen that reverend before,” he mused aloud. “Hmm. Strange. Susanna, did he say what his name was?”

“No. I didn’t have the presence of mind to ask. It is strange, though. I do not remember ever seeing him, either. Father, do you suppose he is here for the witchcraft trials?”

Roger thought about this a minute, then said:

“Well, if that be his purpose, I am much comforted by the thought; for—if he be as good as his word—he would seem an ally in your case, and a valuable one at that.”

“He said he was my champion.”

Roger let out a light sigh and the corners of his mouth turned up slightly.

“Indeed. Then that is good news. Much-needed good news. That should do much to cheer your mother and sister. They have been grievously worried about your well-being.”

“How are Mother and Phoebe? Are they any better?”

“Dearest,” he replied, placing both his hands over Susanna’s again. “I wish to God I could reply in the affirmative, but I cannot. The fact of your imprisonment has weighed heavily on both their dear souls, and I fear they are both all the more fragile for their worry.”

The Necromancer

Susanna frowned. Tears welled up in her eyes. She was mortified.

“Now, dearest,” he said, wringing her hands gently in his. “Do not fret so. I think they should both improve greatly once I tell them of the promising words the reverend spoke to you and me.”

“It is my entire fault,” she wept, breaking down completely. “If I were not in prison, Mother and Phoebe would be better now. I am to blame for their suffering.”

“Not so, Susanna. I would not have told you of their conditions if I thought there was need for you to blame yourself for their ailings. It is no fault of yours that you were jailed. You committed no crime. They were both ill before your incarceration. They care about you, and so they have great concern for your well-being. Even if this were not so, only the Lord knows if their health would be restored by now. So, please dearest, take comfort in the knowledge that you shall be soon acquitted and released, and that your presence at home is much desired and will prove most beneficial to both your mother and sister.”

Susanna nodded, sniffing and wiping the tears away from her cheeks and eyes, but she still somehow sensed that she would never see her mother or sister well again.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Wood

Roger Harrington's Journal—

15 March—Today I mourn the loss of my poor Phoebe, who died yester-night after many a dreary day of suffering. We buried her frail body this morning, and now my concerns are for Martha, who has most assuredly taken ill with the smallpox, and was only able to attend the funeral with the greatest exertion; and Susanna, who has been falsely accused of bewitching the Bromidge boy into committing abhorrent sin. It is only with the most grievous strain that I now pen these words fully one week since Susanna was taken from me, for I did not have the strength to do so previously. I pleaded my case profusely to Judge Hathorne, yet it failed to move him. I know not what evil has come to Salem, but evil has come and stricken our home most severely. I pray God does not have it in His Grand Design to take Martha and Susanna from me. The loss of Phoebe has near killed me with mourning. I do not think I could survive more bereavement.

The Necromancer

Something had been gnawing at the back of Parris's mind ever since Tituba's interrogation. He was certain she hadn't told them everything, although she did confess, but he was also certain that there was something amiss with her confession. He didn't know what it was, but he was sure she had been holding something back. What he wasn't sure of now was her guilt. He didn't know why. Perhaps it was because she had lived in his home for the past few months and hadn't shown him anything that would lead him to believe she was the wicked sorceress she was purported to be. Perhaps he was feeling a little guilty himself for taking her from her homeland as a slave only to end up in some dark dungeon in New England awaiting a probable execution.

But there was something else that disturbed him.

She seemed to recognize Reverend Blayne when she saw him, and when she saw him she seemed genuinely terrified of him. She was probably afraid of what would happen to her when she had been tried and judged, but the fright he saw in her eyes when they fell upon Blayne was immediate fright, not the fear of one who knows execution is a somewhat distant, albeit very real, possibility.

Whatever it was that actually disturbed him, it was all the reason he needed to visit Tituba in Boston Prison. He was determined to unearth the whole truth. Both his conscience and God would accept nothing less.

Ambrose set out an hour before dusk for Judge Hathorne's home to seek an extension for Susanna to keep her from being sent to Boston, so that he may make further inquiries regarding the crimes for which she stood accused. At least that's what he intended to tell Hathorne. The fact that he felt so strongly about her and would do anything for her wouldn't do much to help her case, and would more likely

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jeopardize any chance of her acquittal. In his mind, he could hear Hathorne berating him for his poor judgment; or worse, dubbing him a victim of her enchantments. Ambrose Blayne, the great, but infamous, witch-hunter, bewitched.

Ambrose laughed lightly. It was amusing and ironic that he should be in such a position. A venerable man of the cloth, defender of God and king, in love with a witch. It would be a very laughable situation if it were not so serious. If his superiors and colleagues knew the truth—the real truth—they might possibly find it equally amusing as well, although Ambrose doubted any one of them possessed the degree of humor necessary to find it so.

He rode down Main Street, enjoying the break in the cold weather, which had been such a burden during the winter, reveling inwardly over the thought of being with Susanna. It had been an unseasonably warm day, but an appropriate one to herald the coming of the new season. Spring: a season renowned for birth, rebirth, and change. He felt optimistic about the future.

He rode on. People were outside enjoying the warmth of the ebbing sun. Gone were the heavy coats and layers of clothing and long faces of winter—at least for today. Children played with each other in the street; dogs barked; women nestled up to their men, grateful to have survived the hardships of winter, hopeful of a promising spring.

Ambrose came to Hathorne's home, stepped down from his horse, and tethered him to a hitch. As he approached the house, he heard voices coming from one of the open windows. It sounded like Hathorne and Parris were engaged in a mild discussion. Ambrose glanced inside and discovered he was right: Parris and Hathorne were talking, and the subject of their conversation was of such interest that Ambrose couldn't help but listen.

The Necromancer

“...but I don’t see what you can discover that has not already been learned. She is guilty, Sam. She confessed it herself.”

“Still, I feel it necessary to question her alone. There is much I sense she has not yet spoken of, and I am confident she will convey to me that which I seek to know.”

“Very well, Sam. I don’t like it, but do as you will, and report to me your findings—if there be any—upon your return.”

“I shall depart for Boston tomorrow.”

There was the sound of chair legs dragging across floorboards.

“Farewell,” Parris said.

Ambrose walked quickly to the door and knocked. Parris opened it, glared at him gravely, nodded, and then walked out. Hathorne, who had been sitting at the table, stood up.

“Reverend Blayne,” he said. “What brings you here?”

Hathorne’s eyes were red, his complexion pallid.

“That matter concerning Susanna Harrington. You know I believe—”

“Yes, yes,” Hathorne sighed. He looked more serious than Ambrose had ever seen him.

“You think she has been falsely accused. I don’t know what is worse: all this diabolism which is afoot or all you reverends who seem so thirsty for witches’ blood at the first, then wish they be dubbed saints.”

“It is most singular, I know. But my belief is firm. I do not wish to see innocent blood spilled, especially of one so young and pure of heart.”

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Hathorne looked away, shaking his head slightly.

“I can have her transport to Boston detained as a courtesy to you—there is word the prison there is overstocked, anyway—but do not ask it of me again. I trust you know this places me in a most awkward position, but you must have ample reason for your request.”

“I do.”

There was a long silence. Ambrose sensed tension coming from Hathorne. Hathorne turned away and walked to the window.

“Have you heard of the recent massacre just outside Albany?”

“Yes,” Ambrose replied. “Indians, were they not?”

Hathorne placed his hands on the window sill, as if to support himself.

“Bloodthirsty savages.” He took a deep breath. “Word has it; they came in the small hours of morning, fully two score of them, screaming like animals. They came and raped, pillaged, and murdered well near eighty colonists—men...and women...and children!”

Hathorne’s head drooped. From behind, it appeared to Ambrose as if he was sobbing. He was.

The magistrate continued. There was an uncomfortable tremor in his voice.

“When they had finished with their treachery, they razed the village and rode off with all the livestock, leaving barely a soul alive. Only by the following sunrise was their worst abomination discovered.”

Hathorne’s voice was so low now Ambrose had to strain to hear him.

The Necromancer

“The smoke was seen in Albany by a blacksmith and his son. They called together an assembly of townspeople and rode out to be of some assistance. When they arrived, they learned the insufferable truth. The mere thought of it makes me ill.”

More silence. Then:

“Those damned, heathen beasts had eaten of the flesh of those poor people.

“*MY BROTHER AND HIS FAMILY LIVED IN THAT VILLAGE!*” he screamed angrily, then broke down and sobbed more intensely.

Ambrose stood by silently, not knowing what he could say. He wondered why Hathorne had bothered to tell him about the massacre. What significance did this have to Susanna?

The judge managed to regain some of his composure once again.

“With all the recent barbarism perpetrated by these savages, many of our people are affrighted that they may be the next attacked and are seeking protection and retribution. There is an overwhelming sense of helplessness growing amongst us. The people feel they no longer have any control, and with the recent property disputes and this business of witchcraft, it is quite understandable.”

He turned and faced Ambrose.

“I need not tell you how this applies to your Miss Harrington’s case.”

Ambrose nodded.

“The people want more control over their lives. They want to feel safe. They are angered by the events which have transpired of late. *I am angered!*”

The Wood

Hathorne drew a deep breath then continued.

“Susanna Harrington may be innocent, but it will be very difficult to pose that case before the court. Witches are guileful creatures, are they not?”

“They are.”

“And is not that guile the most threatening of their powers?”

“It is.”

“Perchance there is a manner of course which can be taken with grace, though I have yet to discover it.” He turned back toward the window. “I have no more desire for spilt blood than you. It is regrettable we must deal in such disdainful matters, but the Lord has seen fit to hand us this lot, and we must employ the best of our wits to do right by Him.”

Hathorne turned back again to Ambrose.

“I shall consider the matter most profoundly,” he said. “Perhaps there are wiser ways of grappling with the Devil.”

Late the next morning, Reverend Parris visited Tituba in Boston Prison.

“Tituba,” he said.

She stirred.

“Tituba. It is I, Reverend Parris. Awaken, so that I may speak with you.”

Tituba opened her eyes and stared through the bars at her previous master. He was solemn but looked graciously upon her.

The Necromancer

“I have come to further discuss with you the crimes for which you stand accused. I do not believe you have spoken the whole of your testimony.”

“Oh, but Master Parris, I have.”

She looked nervous. Her eyes darted back and forth. He knew she was lying.

“Tituba,” he said insistently.

“Master Parris, please...”

“I need to know. What has you so fearful that you shall hold your tongue?”

“I beg you, Master Parris, do not make me say it.”

“You must. If you fail to make a full confession, you shall most certainly die and be damned.”

“Master Parris...”

“Say it!”

Tituba looked up at him meekly, then dropped her head like a scolded child.

“Say it!” he barked again.

Tituba relented.

“It was late in December,” she said. “I was in the wood, returning from Goody Hibbins’s cottage with the candles Mistress Parris sent me for, when I heard a scream. I stood still. It was a windy evening, so I thought mayhap it was the wind. I was not sure it was a scream, so I kept walking. Then I heard another scream. It was surely a woman’s scream I heard. I stopped again. I was affrighted, but I ran toward the woman’s voice. I thought mayhap I could be of some aid to her.

“‘Help,’ she screamed. ‘Mother of God! Help me!’”

The Wood

“I ran as fast as I was able, but I still had no sight of her. Then I saw a young maiden running and screaming between the trees. A man in black robes was after her. He was fast at her heels and he sprang on her. They fell behind some bushes, and she went quiet.”

Tituba’s head dropped. She sulked silently on the floor, her chest heaving in spasms.

“Go on,” Parris goaded.

“I gasped, then shut my mouth with my hand. I feared mayhap he heard me. I could see nothing now but the maiden’s hand. I stared at it. It was so white and smooth. I stood there for a spell. She did not move. I knew she was dead, but I was so affrighted I did nothing.”

Tituba remembered that moment vividly. It had seemed much quieter now that it was over and the woman was dead. The winds, so dry and cold, continued to whistle and howl as if Death were reveling in the claiming of one more soul.

“I raised my eyes from the floor of the wood and the maiden’s hand. Then I saw him, and he saw me. He had eyes like ice, but a strange fire burned in them also. I could feel them on me, and I thought I would surely die.

“He walked to me. For a long time I could not move. I tried to look away, but I could not. I do not remember what happened after that. My mind was touched. I only remember running back through the wood...running home.”

“Who was it?” Parris asked. “Who did you see?”

“Don’t make me say it. I wish not to say it.”

“You must.”

“He will hurt me. He is strong. He has powers.”

The Necromancer

“Powers? What kind of powers?”

“Wicked powers. Evil powers.”

“A warlock?”

She nodded.

“Who is he? Tell me his name.”

She remained silent.

“Tell me, damn you!”

“The Reverend...It was the Reverend Blayne.”

“Reverend Blayne?” Parris said. “Preposterous!”

Tituba sobbed.

“It was! I tell you it was. Never would I say such if it were not true. I remembered it was him by the eyes when you and he and the Judge and Sheriff came to me in prison. Never could I forget those eyes. Never will I forget them as long as I live. He is a terrible man. He made me promise not to tell, lest he should punish me again, but more severely.”

“When did he punish you?”

“When I was still in prison in Salem, he beat me and... and lay with me.”

Parris’s face flushed red. Tituba’s testimony was too debasing and horrid to be ignored. He believed her. He was too outraged to say anything, but his mind was filled with rage and indignation:

This man Ambrose Blayne, who calls himself a reverend and a witch-hunter, is nothing of the sort. He is an abomination to the cloth and humanity. He must be made to answer for his crimes.

Parris stormed out of the prison and headed back to Salem, knowing Tituba’s testimony to be true and being all the more enraged by the fact.

CHAPTER SIX

Odara

Fergus and Odara made love before a large crackling fire on the animal skin rugs they had acquired from Fergus's numerous hunts. His quarry's heads were mounted on every wall in the room: A lion from India; a gray wolf from Siberia; a tiger from the jungles of Indonesia; an elk from Scandinavia. They all looked on dispassionately as the two naked people wrestled on the furs in the flickering amber firelight, tending to each other's desires.

Tears fell from Odara's eyes. She whimpered sweetly, bringing her legs up to Fergus's waist and wrapping them around him, squeezing tightly. He groaned. She pulled him down to her and bit his shoulder as she clutched the flesh of his back, digging her nails in deeply. He groaned again. He relished the pain. It brought him closer to the brink. He could feel himself filling up, preparing to fill her. He seized her breast and kissed it, then took her hard brown nipple in his mouth.

She cried.

They held each other as if it were for the last time.

He rose up and thrust into her faster, then slow.

The Necromancer

They trembled together, and Odara felt his hot fluids squirt inside her. He fell on top of her, breathing heavily on her elegant white neck. They embraced, and she wept.

They lay together like that for a long time, a time that could never be time enough.

Fergus rolled onto his back and looked up at the lion's head. Odara rested her head on his chest, draping her long dark hair over his shoulder, her ample breasts pressed to his chest, her legs straddling one of his, pressing her wet plot of pubic hair against it. She dabbled in his chest hair with her fingers and looked up at him.

"You seem troubled, dearest," she said, raising her head.

"I do?"

She nodded.

"I am. I sense a terrible event will come to pass. I cannot see it, and that distresses me most of all. I have tried the shew-stone, but it avails me nothing."

"What of the spirits? Surely, they—"

"They are of no use."

He turned on his side, and she rolled onto her back again. He looked at her with concern.

"Make me a promise."

"Whatever you wish, love."

"Promise me you shall be on your guard while I'm away in the Orient. I could not imagine what I would do if I lost you."

"Can't I journey with you? It's painful to think you shall be gone from me again for so long a time."

He placed his hand gently on her stomach.

“Have you forgotten already?”

Her belly was flat and toned, and it wasn't yet time for her next menstruation, but they both knew.

“The journey is most arduous and long. I think it prudent that you stay here where the servants can comfort you and take care of you as your condition becomes more delicate.”

“Must you leave?” she asked, placing her hand on the one he placed on her abdomen.

“It cannot be averted. You know that, though I wish it were not true. The Magi have made demands of me and cannot be kept waiting. They will get their pound of flesh even if I should decline. Do you not remember Rome?”

Rome had been the place where the Magi first contacted him. They had been touring the city, studying the ruins, and were in the Flavian Amphitheater, in the hot summer sun when Fergus suddenly dropped down on one knee, clasping his hands to his temples.

A strangled scream escaped him. The whites of his eyes turned red. His nose bled. Every blood vessel in his eyes and sinuses had been ruptured from the pressure building up inside his head.

“Dearest,” Odara said, afraid to touch him. “What’s wrong?”

“My head...the pain...” he said, then collapsed unconscious on the amphitheater steps.

He had visions...not dreams. The Magi had made efforts to contact him before, but he wouldn't listen. Their signs had been too subtle, too easily dismissed as fancy and coincidence. But those signs had been too numerous to ignore.

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Spiritually, he was prepared to heed the signs and fulfill his obligation to those he had never met nor heard of before, but physically—mentally—he had trouble accepting those duties.

A voice clamored in his mind.

“We have watched you and your progress on the path of the righteous and the strong and the wise. Now the time is come. It is you who have been summoned by Us, the Magi of the Hidden Realm, to fulfill your magical endeavors. Are you prepared to receive the degree of Adeptus Minor, the first of three degrees before you must cross the Abyss or forever become a Brother of Darkness?”

“I am,” Fergus responded automatically, without thought.

“Then take up the Great Work and learn the Nature of your True Self and your Holy Guardian Angel. The ordeals will be many. You must consider every event as a direct dealing between yourself and God. Do you understand the nature of these ordeals as they have been conveyed to you?”

“I do.”

“Then let the ordeals of the Great Work commence at once.

Fergus opened his eyes. They were healed. He still lay limply on the steps, his head resting in Odara’s lap as she brushed the hair back from his forehead.”

“How do you feel?” she asked.

His skin was clammy and pale. He still looked a bit disoriented, but was able to respond.

“Well,” he said. “I feel well.”

“Can you walk?”

“Yes,” he replied heavily, rising to his feet. “Yes. And I have much work to do.”

That was almost a decade ago, and now, as he lay next to Odara, he contemplated the initiation that would ultimately decide his fate as a magician. It had taken nearly ten years to attain the degree of *Adeptus Exemptus*—the last of the three degrees he had accepted from the Magi—and now he pondered the Abyss. He would have to cross it to be initiated as a *Magister Templi*, or be cast out of the Hidden Realm and be forever committed to the Brotherhood of Darkness.

The ordeals had been severe. He had suffered the hells of starvation, fever, loneliness, desolation. The Magi had tempered him well with toil and pain. His will was strong. However, he had not yet attained the Knowledge and Conversation of his Holy Guardian Angel—his higher self; his true will. But now Fergus had powers even the scriptures hadn't intimated. All those years of solitary study and training, sometimes compelling him to be away from Odara for many months; all the abstinence and fasting; the hours of meditation; the long walks across deserts and countries had paid great dividends. But he regretted one thing: all the time he had to spend away from Odara, the woman he loved.

Odara had been a magician in her own right, but she was content with her magical development and didn't have the drive or the need that Fergus did. After all, Fergus was the man and could provide for both of them. After this last ordeal was performed, Fergus would never have to leave her again.

The next day, Odara followed Fergus to the door of their cottage and out back to Dreng, the black and white stallion which Fergus had already fed, watered, and saddled-up with all the supplies he would need to make the journey.

It was a chilly October morning. A thick, brooding fog had rolled in from the Firth of Forth so dense that one could see nothing beyond arms' length but an opaque white field.

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The weather wasn't promising, and he wasn't as well-equipped for the journey as he would have liked to be, but the Magi had always made his labors arduous and insisted he travel lightly in the most extreme conditions.

"It will be a difficult journey," Odara commented.

"I expect nothing less."

"Godspeed, love."

Their lips touched and they became immersed in a deep and longing kiss. Both of them trembled slightly. It may have been the cold, but both felt a gloomy sense that this would be the last time they would be together again. They had experienced such desperation on the other occasions Fergus had gone away, but somehow this seemed stronger, more final.

They broke apart, Fergus sliding his hands up her arms. He squeezed them firmly above the elbows as they stared into each other's eyes sadly. A moment later, he released her.

"I love you," he said, mounting his horse. "And I shall always be with you, even in my absence."

"And I with you," she replied.

"I shall return as soon as I am able."

Dreng pranced around in a circle then stopped as Fergus tugged on the reins.

"Be well, and take care. You are caring for two now."

Odara smiled weakly, and Fergus turned the horse around and rode away, vanishing into the fog like a ghost.

It had been three weeks, and still no word from Fergus. Usually, by now he would have visited her in his subtle body if for no other reason than to let her know that he was

alive. She had attempted to take to the astral plane in an effort to visit him and see if he was all right, but her pregnancy interfered with her ability to project. Now she was concerned. She knew how hard these retreats could be on her husband. The last one almost succeeded in killing him. He had come back from North Africa after well over six months of starving himself and baking in the Sahara Desert, and he looked as if he were only steps from the grave. He had aged. His gaunt, haggard appearance frightened her because, when he first appeared in the doorway, she hadn't recognized him. Only after the second week of the forty-day Ritual of Regeneration did he begin to resemble the man she had married.

Odara couldn't tolerate it anymore. She was desperate. Despite Fergus's warnings, she donned her robes and ventured into the woods behind their house with her sword and a censer. She cast a circle on the marshy floor of woods in a clearing where the moon and the stars were visible. Outside that she described a triangle and placed the censer within. After a time, she managed to get the incense smoking.

It was November now, and the night was cold and windy, but clear. Odara had decided a few days ago that she would perform the conjuration, but the weather hadn't been good. Thunderstorms and downpours had been continuous for almost a week, causing floods and confining her to the cottage. Only when it was absolutely necessary did she dare send one of her servants outside to collect water or journey into town for food and supplies.

She stepped inside the circle and commenced the conjuration. She would hail Aingealag, a spirit Fergus had summoned on many occasions and which had proved its loyalty and dependability with consistency.

After performing a brief incantation, she plunged the sword into the soil of the circle and raised her arms toward the

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sky. The wind whipped her hair behind her and billowed her robes.

“I summon you, O Aingealag, most righteous and benevolent spirit, to come hither with speed and grace and make appearance in the Triangle of Conjunction, that I may glean from thee all which I seek to know. I conjure thee in the sacred names of Adonai, Elohim, and Tetragrammaton. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, I conjure thee.”

The smoke eddied from the censer, and now, instead of dispersing, it collected itself together quickly and began to radiate with bright white light.

Iver and Annabel, a couple of young lovers from Haddington who had decided to take advantage of the clear night and rain-freshened air to ride out into the woods and gaze at the stars, saw the bright light reflecting off the trees and, consumed with curiosity, approached it.

The spirit took shape in the roiling smoke and achieved a size nearly half the height of the surrounding trees. It appeared to be composed almost entirely of pure white light, but it was a light that didn't blind or strain the eyes. The white vapors compressed until they achieved a density that resembled chiseled ice, but ice that was malleable.

Its eyes were black and beaming. Its face, delicate and pleasing, was framed with straight white hair flowing over its shoulders and above its head. Three pairs of large featherless wings branched out from its back and fluttered lightly behind it. With the exception of the smoke which clouded its legs, it was naked, allowing Odara to see its small but symmetrical breasts. But it was not female; it was decidedly androgynous, as a puff of smoke clearing away from its upper legs revealed.

“Are you the spirit, Aingealag?” Odara asked.

“Yes. It is I, Aingealag. How may I serve you, O Mistress?”

“My husband Fergus, who has often conjured you, is away on retreat, and I fear for him. Can you tell me if he is well?”

“Have you not attempted to visit him in the astral?”

“I cannot. I am with child.”

“Aye. Yet I see that you are not yet three fortnights in the way. You should still be fit to leave your body and visit your husband.”

“Do you speak the truth?”

“Aye. I am your most loyal servant. I can make naught of lies nor understand them.”

Odara was perplexed. If she was still able to leave her body and travel on the astral plane, then why had she had so much difficulty in merely passing the walls of her home?

“Am I ill?” she asked more to herself than to Aingealag.

“Nay,” the spirit answered. “But there is much to fear.”

“Fear? What am I to fear? I command you: Answer me.”

“There is a stronger magic at work in these matters. There is evil.”

“What evil do you speak of?”

“I know not, only the presence is certain.”

“Is Fergus in danger? Is he well?”

“I cannot see your husband. It is as a black veil that has been drawn about him.”

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“Can’t you tell me where he is?”

“Nay. The veil cannot be lifted.”

“What am I to do?”

Aingealag didn’t reply.

There was a long moment of silence, then the spirit addressed its summoner.

“Mistress—”

“I give you license to depart until next I summon you, and then you will come with haste and eagerness to tell me that which I desire to know and do that which I desire be done.”

“Aye, Mistress,” Aingealag said, then dispersed amongst the smoke until only the smoke remained.

Annabel, having witnessed the spectacle of the conjuration, fainted, collapsing into Iver’s arms.

Fergus was in a small town in Weimar, Germany, when that sense of foreboding he had experienced prior to his journey returned. This time, however, his intuition was more focused. A dull pain appeared at the center of his brow, forcing him to bring Dreng to a halt. A faint echo of voices rang in his head, but he couldn’t comprehend them. There were no visions, but the sense of danger he felt was definite. He knew he wasn’t in danger...It was Odara and his unborn child. He didn’t know what the precise nature of this danger was; all he knew was that if he didn’t get back to Scotland soon, Odara would die.

The cobblestone streets were empty and covered with several inches of fresh snow. It had been coming down steadily since Erfurt and showed no indication of letting up. It was near dusk, and Fergus and Dreng were exhausted. They

had been traveling all day in the cold, and Fergus's bones and muscles ached with stiffness.

He removed his gauntlets and rubbed his hands together briskly. They were red and numb. He had lost the feeling in them and his feet over an hour ago. As desperate as he was to return to Scotland, he knew he had no choice but to rest and start back first thing in the morning. Neither he nor Dreng would have a chance against the storm in the night.

He alighted from Dreng pale and weary, feeling faint. He leaned on the horse and rested his head on the saddle for a moment. "Oh, Odara," he moaned. "If only I were with you now. . ."

But he wasn't, and that wasn't going to change anytime soon; perhaps not soon enough.

Fergus rented a stable and a room for the night at the local Gasthof where he indulged in a hearty meal of roast pig, vegetables, ale, and cake. According to the Magi, the pork, ale, and cake were taboo for Fergus, but after experiencing the premonition about Odara, he decided to abandon the retreat. He had considered the possibility that the Magi were testing him by sending him the premonition or, more likely, actually jeopardizing Odara's life. In either case, he was turning back at dawn. Odara was far too important to him to allow even the Magi to take her from him, and if his disobedience to them meant his perdition, so be it.

That night, as Fergus readied himself for bed, the Magi contacted him again. There were no nose bleeds or red eyes; there was no pain. That had only occurred that first time they made contact in Rome. His body had acclimated itself to such invasions of power, especially now, since much of that power emanated from within himself. The Magi were strong, but Fergus was strong too, almost as strong as the

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Magi themselves. This time they appeared to him, visible to the naked eye: three hairless men in radiant, sky-blue robes, accompanied by an intoxicating musical undertone.

"Neglect not your duties, Fergus," They said. "To return to your homeland now would mean to forfeit all you have toiled for."

"I must return," Fergus replied. "The lives of my wife and child are in the gravest of danger. I have sensed it strongly."

"Do you know the risks of abandoning the Great Work?"

"Aye. I do. But I cannot allow any harm to befall Odara. She is my wife, my sister, and my closest friend. I love her, and I must do everything in my power to see that she is safe and well."

"If you turn back now, you shall forever be cast out from before Us. You shall become a Brother of Darkness and forever an enemy of the Hidden Realm."

"I do not wish to be Your enemy, nor a Brother of Darkness, but what choice have I? If I do not return to Scotland, I fear my wife and child shall surely die."

"Does not your oath to Us have weight enough for you to proceed with your undertakings in Our Order?"

"I cannot continue with the journey."

"That is your decision?"

"Aye. It is."

"That is unfortunate. You had such promise, now wasted."

"I shall remain righteous and faithful to the precepts of the Order."

"You have made your decision. Lest you continue on your journey to the Orient, you shall surely become a Brother of Darkness."

“I insist I will not.”

“Do what you will. You have chosen.”

The Magi faded away, leaving the room stark and silent. Fergus retired for the evening, too exhausted for even a visitation from the Magi to excite him enough to delay his slumber. He was troubled, but nodded off to sleep a few minutes later, hoping he would be able to return home in time.

Odara lay naked on a block of cold stone in the town dungeon. Her body was covered with welts and slimy with sweat, blood, and grime. A dark cap of stubble covered her scalp. (Her head and pubic hair had been shaved when she was first arrested so she could be closely inspected for hidden charms, amulets, and devil’s marks...but none were found.) She had been imprisoned down here, along with Colin—one of her servants—for almost three weeks now. During that time she and Colin had been tortured. She had been repeatedly raped and flogged, her arms crushed, her fingernails pulled out with red-hot pincers. But she had not confessed. She was too afraid of what would happen to her if she had. She had even told her captors of her pregnancy, but it didn’t seem to make any difference. A witch’s child would be a witch, and as far as the clergy and courts were concerned, all witches deserved death.

When Odara realized she was condemned, she decided to remain silent. She didn’t want to give her inquisitors the satisfaction of her confession, even though she was—to a greater or lesser degree—guilty. Odara knew it would be futile to confess. She was going to die, and nothing she said would be able to prevent that. Now, having been tried and convicted, she awaited her execution.

She sobbed.

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Fergus was three miles south of Lincoln, England, when Dreng stomped to an abrupt halt, raised his head up high, whinnied, staggered, rolled his eyes back in his head, and collapsed to the ground with a loud thud, throwing Fergus almost twenty feet off the road. Dreng breathed laboriously for a minute or two, then stopped.

Fergus knew he had been pushing the animal hard, but felt he had rested it sufficiently. But when they arrived back in England, Fergus sensed that time was dwindling away quickly, and he drove the horse harder with fewer rest stops. Now Dreng was dead, and he would have to get a fresh animal. He felt bad for Dreng. The horse had served him well. But time wouldn't allow for mourning.

Fergus gathered up the few items he hadn't left behind in Weimar to lighten Dreng's workload and proceeded to run north. He wasn't sure how long it would take him to reach the next town, but his intuition told him it wasn't very far. He only hoped this setback hadn't cost him his family.

The dungeon door opened, and the public executioner entered accompanied by two guards. Odara, who was sleeping, awoke.

The guards approached the stone block she lay on and proceeded to undo her chains.

"It is time," the executioner said contemptuously.

All color and expression abandoned her face.

"Dress yourself, wench," he said as she sat up. "The pyre awaits." He threw her clothes at her feet.

She was sore and stiff. Many of her wounds hadn't healed properly and were still open and suppurating. Dressing was a torture in itself. Her arms and hands were swollen and

mangled and didn't work properly. She fumbled with her buttons and laces. She was scrawny and malnourished now, and her clothes hung loosely on her body when she put them on.

"Move it, wench!" The executioner kicked her hard as she stooped over for her bodice, making her crash face first into the cold, hard floor.

She began to cry again.

Fergus rode up to the cottage on the black mare he had purchased in Lincoln. It was a cold, overcast November morning, a few minutes past ten o'clock. He'd been riding since dawn from Hadrian's Wall where he had spent the night, and now he was finally home. It had taken him less than a week to make the journey, and he felt terribly exhausted, but it wasn't over yet.

He dismounted the horse and ran inside.

"Odara! Odara!" he called.

But the house remained quiet.

He ran from room to room calling Odara's name, but found nothing.

Then he heard a voice call, "Master Crawford."

Fergus turned around. It was his servant Caillic.

"Oh, Master Crawford, something dreadful has happened."

"Where is Odara?"

"Prison. They came for her more than a fortnight ago. She has been accused of witchcraft and is to be burned at the stake this very morning."

"Dear God!"

The Necromancer

“They arrested Colin also, and they are in search of you. You mustn’t stay here. The King has seized the property and his soldiers are here—”

Fergus stormed back out of the house.

As he ran to his horse, two of the King’s soldiers turned the corner of the house and spotted him.

“Hey! You there!” one of them barked, breaking into a run. “Stop! In the name of the King, I command you to stop!”

Fergus ignored the man and leapt up into the saddle as the soldiers closed in on him.

“Stop!” the other soldier ordered, drawing his pistol.

Fergus responded by pulling his sword from its scabbard and slicing the gun-toting hand off its owner’s arm. The man cried out, dropped to his knees, and gripped his wrist as blood spouted from it in a thick red geyser. The other soldier, instead of pursuing Fergus, ran to his partner’s aid.

Fergus cracked the reins and rode off to town.

Onlookers pushed and spat upon Odara as the executioner and his guards shoved her through the throng of people who had gathered in the town square to watch the burnings. Her hands were bound behind her back. Her physical appearance was pathetic, but instead of inciting sympathy from the people, it seemed to fuel the mob’s already growing hatred of her.

The four of them made their way through the crowd to a scaffold that stood between two stakes centered on large piles of wood. A heavy plank of wood led from the scaffold to each of the stakes. Colin was already bound to one of the stakes and, having confessed under torture, would be granted a more merciful death. He had been arrested for no other reason

than the fact that he happened to be in the same room as Odara when they came for her, and now he would be executed for practicing an art he knew nothing about and had been too weak to deny.

The executioner climbed a ladder to the scaffold and hauled Odara up the steps while the two guards pushed her. She shivered.

The executioner shoved her onto the plank and walked her across to the stake where he bound her. He walked back across to the other stake where Colin was bound and awaited Reverend Marshall, the Privy Council, and their hired commission.

They were coming. As they proceeded toward the scaffold, the crowd parted and fell silent. To Odara, it almost seemed like Moses parting the Red Sea to lead the Israelites to freedom, but this Moses had malice in his eyes and hatred in his heart.

The men mounted another scaffold opposite the one between the two tinder-based stakes. Reverend Marshall opened a scroll of parchment and proceeded to read the charges and sentences.

“Colin MacGregor. You stand accused on this, the twenty-eighth day of November, in the year of our Lord, sixteen-hundred and seventy-two, of practicing the damnable art of witchcraft and its incumbent sorceries, and of aiding your mistress, Odara Crawford, in the practice of said sorceries wherewith she did conjure evil spirits and silence the tongue of one Annabel Lawson. Having confessed to these charges and been found guilty, you are sentenced here to death by strangulation, after which your remains shall be burnt to ashes. May God have mercy on your damned soul.”

Reverend Marshall nodded to the executioner solemnly. The executioner acknowledged him, positioned

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himself behind Colin and the stake he was fastened to, then brought a section of rope around the front of his body. Colin looked about himself nervously, but said nothing. The executioner coiled the rope around his neck and pulled. Colin's eyes bulged widely. His legs kicked. His body jerked. His face turned dark-red. One moment he thrashed violently; the next he stood still, every muscle in his body tense and straining. Thrashing, then still. Thrashing, then still.

His face changed from dark-red to a bluish-gray color. He bit his lip. Blood and mucous foamed from his mouth. He gurgled and choked and struggled.

Then, he died.

The executioner let go of one end of the rope, revealing the dark bruise it made, and the body slumped down limply against the stake.

Marshall redirected his attention to Odara, who looked like some child's mistreated doll, made to suffer at the whim of the child's tantrums. She couldn't cry anymore. Her eyes and mouth had dried up just before leaving the prison. In her present condition, she felt it would be a miracle if her baby had a chance of survival even if she somehow managed to avoid execution. She was simply too thin and ragged for her womb to be able to sustain life, and she knew that. At this point, death would almost be preferable to the alternative. Odara wanted it to be over.

"Odara Crawford," Marshall said, reading from a separate scroll. "You have been charged and found guilty of practicing damned witchcraft and its incumbent sorceries and black arts, and of trafficking with the Devil and his Infernal Spirits whereby you did steal away the power of speech from one Annabel Lawson. Do you now wish to confess these crimes as I have heretofore described them?"

Odara stared wearily and said nothing.

“Then it is the judgment of this tribunal on this, the twenty-eighth day of November, in the year of our Lord, sixteen-hundred and seventy-two, that you be burnt at the stake till you are dead, whereafter your soul shall be most surely conveyed straight away to Hell to burn in the Infernal Pit for time everlasting. Amen.”

He nodded to the executioner again, who then jumped down from the scaffold. One of his guards handed him a burning torch.

Someone in the crowd yelled, “Burn her! Burn the witch!” Someone else joined in, and soon the whole crowd was chanting, “Burn the witch! Burn the witch!”

The executioner set Colin’s pyre first. Then, after it caught, he started Odara’s. The wood was treated with pitch and caught fast with blue and yellow flames. Soon the fire was burning up to her feet. She screamed as the first flames scorched her flesh.

“Odara!” Fergus called out as he rode into the throng of spectators. He had first seen her when the executioner was setting Colin’s pyre, but he had failed to recognize her without her long dark hair and the weight she had lost since her imprisonment. Seeing her now, battered and starving, he charged toward her through the hostile crowd, regardless of those his horse was bound to tread over.

“Fergus!” she replied weakly, squirming away from the flames.

Marshall turned to see Fergus riding in fast through and over bodies.

“Seize him!” he yelled at no one in particular. “Seize him now!”

Men and women clawed at him from the ground and grabbed at his horse, almost knocking them both over. His

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path to Odara was blocked densely with people converging on him. He had no choice but to retreat, if retreat was possible.

He turned the horse about and galloped away, kicking off the hangers-on. The bodies scattered before him while the people behind continued their pursuit.

He looked back over his shoulder at Odara. The flames had engulfed her, and were at work on her, charring her body alive as she screamed and shrieked.

Fergus rode on, then stopped for a moment when his pursuers were a safer distance away from him.

He looked back at Odara's flaming body again, thrashing frantically in place. The ropes that bound her burned through, and she leapt down the pyre into the crowd, still flaming. A couple of men holding a horse blanket threw it around her and tossed her back into the fire. The wood collapsed around her as she fell into it, and she let out one last, terrible scream...then fell silent forever.

"NO!" Fergus cried.

More people rushed toward him. Fergus wasn't prepared for the anger that came over him upon witnessing Odara's execution. His blood filled with rage and mourning. A man ran up and grabbed for him. Fergus responded by booting the man hard in the face, bloodying his nose and driving its bone into his brain, killing him instantly.

"DAMN YOU!" Fergus growled. "DAMN YOU ALL!" he yelled, then reluctantly turned about and fled.

Fergus left the country, bitter and brokenhearted. He had nothing now, nothing but hatred.

Odara was dead, and with her death a part of him died too. In a very real sense, this was true. Odara and Fergus

had been more than friends, lovers, siblings. They were twins, and being such, were so much a part of each other that they experienced an intimacy beyond expression: Love beyond love. Pleasure beyond pleasure. Pain beyond pain.

Yes. Fergus lost a very real, very substantial part of himself when Odara's flaming body was hurled back into that pyre and her life extinguished. Now he was only half the man he once was, but that half was alive and strong and angry.

They had to be punished for what they did to Odara. They had to suffer. Retribution was in order, and Fergus was damned capable of administering that retribution.

"Mark well among you," a worked-up Reverend Marshall said in the middle of delivering a sermon to his congregation. "...you who are of wavering faith in the Lord. Mark well, for the Devil is among us, lying in wait for those souls whose belief in the power and purpose of the Almighty is shaken by these trying times. Let not Satan or his damned legions gain sway in your hearts lest you become his!"

He wiped the beads of sweat from his brow with the cuff of his frock.

"For behold!" he exclaimed, pointing at the young maiden sitting in the first pew. "Behold...a-hem!" He coughed. "If there be any amongst you who...a-hem...still does not believe that the Devil has come and...a-hem...and set forth his servants upon us to work his mischief, all you need do is look to this poor...a-hem...beset child before me."

Reverend Marshall coughed again. He began to feel strange. Everything seemed to take on a peculiar gloom although it was a sunny day and the shafts of light pouring in through the stained glass windows bathed the church in bright colors.

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“Not more than one month ago, Annabel Lawson was...was...” Marshall coughed, then gagged.

He couldn't speak. His throat felt as if it were clogged with dung. It was difficult to breathe. He felt his belly undulate beneath his frock. His skin was hot. He clutched his throat with both hands.

His face changed color quickly from sallow to red to purple, then he belched forth a host of black leeches, each at least half a foot in length. In their mouths they carried morsels of Marshall's innards. The parasites gushed out his mouth and nostrils in a manic procession and flopped and shivered across the floor beneath the altar.

A woman screamed.

Blood came up with them now, and they drew his intestines out through his mouth and dragged them across the floor.

Marshall's eyes inflated like over-ripe plumbs then burst open, spraying gouts of blood into the air.

People screamed and fled, climbing over the pews and each other to escape.

Marshall staggered back and forth as he felt his body get hotter. Blood seeped from his pores and oozed down his face and body. His skin exploded in flames. He ran around like a savage, a flaming savage with his guts dangling heavily out of his mouth.

He turned around to the altar and the crucifix mounted on the wall behind it. He lowered his hands from his throat and folded them together as they brushed against his soft, hanging innards. He fell to his knees to pray, but the flames overtook him. His body pitched forward and struck the floor with a thud, his burning corpse charring to black ash.

Escape

“**O**dara!” Ambrose screamed as he woke up and bolted to a sitting position, sweat pouring out of him.

It had been twenty years since Odara died at the stake and he had fled Scotland; twenty years since he had used the name Fergus Crawford; twenty years since he had killed Marshall and cursed the people of Haddington. The executioner and his two attendants were dead, killed in a similar fashion to that of Marshall. The townspeople were stricken with disease and misfortune. Ambrose had shown them as much mercy as they had shown to those they convicted and executed for witchcraft, but only to a degree commensurate with the hatred each harbored in their hearts. He felt it appropriate to merely redirect their own malevolence back at them and allow it to consume them.

Such was the scourge of Haddington during the fall of 1672.

“Ambrose,” Jessica said, sitting up and placing a hand on his shoulder. “Are you all right?”

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He nodded.

“Dreaming of your sister?”

He nodded again.

“You have not dreamt of her in a long time. Has she been heavy on your mind as of late?”

“Yes.” A tear streamed down his face. “Some days ago, I met a young maiden who was the very image of her. Since then, I have not been without her image penetrating my every thought.”

Jessica kissed his shoulder and pressed her cheek against it.

Ambrose had met her three years ago in a brothel in the East End section of London, where she worked as a prostitute. He had taken to finding solace in the arms of these knowledgeable women. It was all he could do to comfort himself during those years of prolonged grieving and lonely nights. He had been a reverend for several years then and could quite comfortably afford the hire of a mistress or two for the night.

By then, he had completely succumbed to his anger and had become a loyal Brother of Darkness. There was no sin to which he was not privy. No pleasure beyond his scope of experience. No pain he did not take ecstasy in. He savored his suffering, as he did all sensation, his loss of Odara the sweetest of his miseries. She had taught him love. Her death had taught him mourning and hatred, anger and vengeance. He turned his bereavement into an indulgence which opened the gateway to sin and further depravities. He mourned her loss, and he yearned for the days when they were together, but until they encountered each other again in the Hereafter, he would sin and revel in all the earthy pleasures of the flesh.

Then he met Jessica.

Escape

It was a cool and foggy evening early in June. Ambrose entered a brothel he hadn't frequented before, having heard of the exquisite breed of women employed there. He had grown bored with the prostitutes of his usual haunts and desired a change.

He rapped on the door and was greeted by a buxom beauty clad in a long red and black nightgown.

"Good evening, sir," the woman said. "I am Ella. May I take your cape?"

Ambrose removed it and handed it to the woman, who promptly hung it up.

The interior was much as he had expected: gaudy and red.

"Please have a seat," she said, directing him to a plush maroon sofa. "Would you care for a drink of wine? We have a fine sixty-seven claret."

"That will do nicely."

Ella walked over to a small table standing to the right of the fireplace. On it stood a large bottle of dark red wine and several wine glasses. She picked one up and wiped it thoroughly with a white handkerchief, then placed it back on the table and filled it.

"What manner of companion do you desire for this evening, sir? Have you any preference?" she asked, setting the wine bottle down.

"I think it best that I see for myself which lady will suit my taste for the night."

Ambrose's lips creased-up on the sides of his mouth. He nodded slightly. His choice of words begot more than one meaning, and he enjoyed the quip he had made.

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Ella turned around and faced him, holding the stem of the wine glass coyly with both hands. She walked toward him wearing a pleasant smile on her face.

“Of course,” she said, handing him the glass. “I shall be but a moment.”

She left the room, the train of her gown drifting quietly across the rug.

Ambrose sipped his wine. Much to his surprise and delight, it was good. He took notice of a soft breeze whisking the curtains in and sucking them out of the open window at the far corner of the room. The wine was working on him already. It flushed his cheeks as it warmed its way down to his stomach. It was soothing. All the tension in his muscles evaporated with every exhalation. It was obvious he had come to the right place tonight.

As he stared off into the distance enjoying the feeling of calm that came over him, Ella returned followed by no fewer than nine women, all of whom were very beautiful and scantily clad in lingerie.

The listless trance which held Ambrose in its thrall broke and he sat up, suddenly attentive.

“Choose as you wish,” Ella said. “I’m sure you will find any of my ladies quite suitable for companionship.”

He rose to his feet and approached the women, looking them over critically, but obviously very pleased. It was difficult to make a decision. They were all so enticing.

There’s time enough to have them all, he thought, then decided to pick any one for the night and move on to the others afterward.

He took one of them gently by the hand—a redhead—then froze when he looked at the doorway through

which they would pass. A large bald man stood there fixing his clothes. Behind him was a full-breasted blonde in a clinging white nightgown. She leaned against the doorjamb, her bosom heaving. Her face was flushed and beaded with perspiration, her long hair disheveled and falling in her eyes.

“That will be four pounds, Mr. Crowley,” Ella said.

“And worth every bloody bit of it,” he replied, digging into his pants pocket. He extracted the money and handed it to Ella, then turned back to the blonde girl. “And this is for you, my dear,” he said, kissing her on the cheek and pressing a large coin into her hand, folding her fingers over it.

The man left joyously, having obviously been well served and satisfied.

Ambrose continued to stare at her. She was young and very beautiful. He wanted her.

He unconsciously dropped the redhead’s hand and approached the blonde girl. He took her in his arms, kissed her, then picked her up and carried her upstairs to one of the bedrooms.

Jessica had been all of fourteen back then, and though she was still young and beautiful, if not more so now, Ambrose seemed to have lost a good deal of the passion which overcame him that first night he laid eyes on her. She, on the other hand, had fallen irrevocably in love with him and had since left the brothel, unable to tolerate so much as the slightest thought of being with another man.

There was never a wedding. There had only been one woman to whom Ambrose could ever make such a commitment, and she had died in 1672. Jessica wished things were different. She wished she could be sure he loved her as much as she loved him, but she couldn’t tolerate not being

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with him and was willing to stay with him under whatever conditions he demanded.

It was agreed upon that Jessica could do whatever she wished with whomever she wished; Ambrose, the same. There would be no reprimands so long as she remained loyal to him in her heart. It was the most he could give any woman at the time—perhaps forever. She would live with him as his concubine, but outwardly they would proclaim themselves husband and wife.

Now she feared she would lose him to this new interest of his. Of course, he had had other interests in the past: other lovers, other prostitutes, even other concubines with whom she was forced to live—but never did one of these interests resemble his dead wife, whom, he had told her on several occasions, he had loved more intensely than any other woman he had ever known. She hated it when he told her that. It hurt. It hurt dreadfully, and she was quite sure he knew it hurt, and just how much it hurt. But she couldn't leave him. She could never leave him. That would hurt more.

"It pains me to see you this way," she said. She raised her head and placed her hands on his bearded cheeks. She turned his face gently toward hers.

"It is better for you to forget her. Forget what happened. You cannot resurrect her as I have seen you do with others. She is gone. I know I cannot replace her, but I am with you now—alive." She paused for a moment, searching his eyes for recognition, but couldn't determine what lurked beyond them.

"I love you," she said, wiping the tears away with her thumb.

She kissed him, her open mouth inviting him in. He hesitated, then accepted the invitation. They kissed deeply, her warm tongue coaxing the longing from both of them.

Escape

She took his hand and placed it on her breast. He cupped it firmly, delighting in its soft, smooth texture. It reminded him of Odara, and for a moment, in the dark, it was Odara. This is how he used to cup her breast. This is what it used to be like between them. But it wasn't like that anymore. He fell to her breasts and sucked on her nipples. This wasn't Odara, and as Jessica opened herself to him, he realized this woman could never fill the emptiness that continued to eat at his heart all these years like so many worms.

But perhaps there was one who could.

Susanna didn't just merely resemble Odara physically. It wasn't as superficial as that. Ambrose had sensed she was Odara's spiritual equivalent as well. Perhaps Odara's spirit now inhabited this woman. He had to find out. He had to know if it was possible. He had to see if Odara's spirit was alive in Susanna. He could never forgive himself if he didn't at least make the effort.

The following morning, Ambrose rode to Salem Town to see Susanna. It was raining heavily, and the roads were treacherous with thick mud. Reverend Parris would be on his way to Boston to question Tituba further, and Ambrose knew what he would discover. His threats wouldn't be so feared if Tituba knew she would be put to death anyway. He had to get Susanna out of prison before Parris returned, or forever face life without her.

Ambrose was beginning to regret his role as the initiator of the witch-hunts. It would have been much more efficient if he had simply killed Tituba and been finished with the matter. But that would have been too simple. There wouldn't have been any sport in it and, more importantly, he wouldn't have been able to punish these prudish, sanctimonious eaters of dung for their hypocrisy. No. That

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wouldn't suffice in the least. There needed to be a huge letting of blood, and he wanted the satisfaction and credit for starting it. It was, after all, only just.

The mixed blessings which accompanied the inevitable hysteria of Salem's new awareness of diabolism were tainting his enjoyment. Proceedings had taken off slowly, but now that they were gaining some momentum and the executions would soon be under way there had been several developments, which Ambrose uncharacteristically did not foresee.

Tituba had confessed as he had instructed her to, but she had not yet been executed. With Tituba alive, he was still at risk of being found out for his initial crime if not also arrested for practicing witchcraft. He had since cursed her, but she remained alive. For the first time, his confidence wavered. Had she access to magic as well?

The witch-hunts were also responsible for Ambrose meeting Susanna, but she was imprisoned because of them, and he would probably have some difficulty in setting her free.

Then, he had himself to consider. He was a magician—a black magician—and if discovered as such would surely be put to death. Of course, being a reverend of some influence would help allay such suspicions, but there were no guarantees. He was having too much difficulty foreseeing the future to tell if there was any way he might possibly be captured and executed.

Nonetheless, he was forced to act now...and act fast.

When he reached the prison, he tethered his horse to a hitch and went inside. He proceeded downstairs to the dungeon.

At the bottom of the stairs, to the left of them, was an antechamber to another section of the dungeon. The door to the antechamber and the door beyond the antechamber were

Escape

both open. Men and women, tied to whipping-posts, endured endless floggings here; others hung upside-down by their ankles from shackles mounted on the cobblestone walls, their necks bound to the walls similarly, to keep them from sitting up. The guards were at them, insisting upon confessions. An imprisoned woman kept shaking her head, saliva running from her mouth down the side of her purple face into her eye. She coughed, then a gush of blood sprang up out of her nose and mouth.

Ambrose smiled, then turned to the guard who unlocked the door to the prison cells and let him in.

All the cells were occupied by men and women in various states of foulness. The dungeon stank strongly of excrement, urine, vomit, and body odor. The conditions had grown much worse since he'd been here last.

He walked to Susanna's cell, ignoring the desperate cries of the prisoners he passed on the way.

When he came to the cell, he stopped and peered in through the bars. Susanna sat sullenly in a corner of the cell, sulking and staring blankly at the floor near the cell door. Her face was oily and streaked with dust and tears.

It had been over a month since her sister died, but her father couldn't bring himself to tell her until last night when he visited her. The news seemed even more devastating to her than it had been to him, and he didn't tell her that her mother had contracted the disease as well. That, he thought—after just learning about Phoebe—would probably kill her, and she needed to be in the best of spirits now. She needed to be strong.

"Susanna, my dear child," Roger had said to her. "I must tell you of something most dire."

"Yes, father?"

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“It concerns your sister.” He stopped, looking into her eyes. They were troubled, as if she knew about Phoebe’s death already. She didn’t have to be psychically gifted to predict that. Phoebe had been very ill when Susanna was arrested, and considering the fact that her health had been steadily declining for some time now, the dire information which Roger was about to tell her concerning Phoebe could only be one thing.

Roger wasn’t sure he should go on, but he felt she had a right to know, and he had kept this news from her for much too long already.

“Your sister passed away from us last month. I am sorry I have not told you before now. I had not the courage or the strength to do so. I know you were most fond of her.”

“Phoebe...” Susanna said, “...dead.” That last word was barely audible, little more than a whisper. Susanna had suspected Phoebe had died, but hearing it and knowing it was true made it real for her.

“Oh, Father!” she cried, then broke down completely, clasping the bars with her hands and sliding her head and body along them until her knees hit the floor.

“Phoebe!” she sobbed.

Roger knelt down and placed his hands on hers as she wept. He felt terrible and guilty. I shouldn’t have told her, he thought. It didn’t help for her to know now. It simply could not help.

He hated to think about it, but it was a very real possibility that she would never have had to know. If the magistrate chose to see her executed, what good would it do to make the last days of her life more miserable than they already were. He resolved not to tell her of her mother’s failing health. It would be too much for her to deal with all at once.

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Roger stayed there, kneeling outside her cell, comforting her until she cried herself to sleep against the bars. He didn't want to wake her so he stuck his arms through the bars, laid her down on the floor, and wiped her tears away.

He stood up and wiped the tears from his own face, only just realizing that he had been crying at all. His family was being destroyed before his eyes, and all he had the power to do was watch. Had he done something to offend the Lord? He wondered again. He looked at Susanna and hoped the misfortune which had been smiting his family would come to an abrupt and utter halt, but hope was all he had.

Now Susanna sat almost catatonic in her cell, unbelieving of how much her life had changed in the past two months. If she ever survived this, her life would never be the same. It certainly wouldn't be better than it had been.

All she wanted was peace and happiness. If she survived this, she wouldn't take those treasures for granted again. She had become shy and introverted since the onset of adolescence, too shy to speak to boys, thus the fact of her ongoing maidenhood, despite her beauty. Now, she knew how silly she had been. She wanted a husband and a family. She wanted to be loved. If she survived this, she would cast away all those awkward feelings and find the happiness she desired.

"Susanna," a deep voice said.

She broke her gaze and became conscious of her surroundings once again. She raised her head slowly.

"Susanna," Ambrose said. "Are you well?"

It took her a moment to find voice enough to respond. She was still choking with bereavement.

"Yes," she said meekly. "Yes, Reverend. But I am very weary."

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“Well, perk up, child, for your time has come.”

Her face went from blank to horrified.

“Did you hear me well?” he said. “You are reprieved. You need not spend another dreaded hour in this damned place. I have come to take you away from here. You shall no longer suffer as you have.”

He plucked a set of keys from his coat pocket, rifled through them, found one, and inserted it in the lock.

“Come,” he said, turning the key and opening the door. “Let us leave this place immediately. You are liberated.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Fugitives

Reverend Parris arrived back in Salem early that evening and rode directly to Judge Hathorne's house to report his findings. The rain had stopped sometime earlier that afternoon, but the roads still remained slippery with inches of clumpy mud, which, in places, could swallow the whole of one's foot. Parris was glad to be back in Salem. His horse had been threatening to fall over throughout his journey and nearly threw him more than half a dozen times. The prospect of completing his trip in the now cold, damp weather, covered from crown to sole in mud was far from acceptable, but fortunately he was never forced to accept it.

When he reached the house he stepped down from his horse, stormed up to the door, and knocked rapidly.

"Reverend Parris," Hathorne said with mild surprise upon opening the door. "Back from Boston already? I had expected you would stay the night."

"There was no time. I have made a most monstrous discovery."

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Parris's voice was loud and urgent. Upon hearing it, Hathorne's wife Lydia, who had been in the kitchen preparing dinner, stopped everything and quickly appeared behind her husband, peering over his shoulder at the minister in the doorway.

"The Reverend Blayne is no such thing at all, but a warlock."

Lydia gasped.

"Tituba has informed me he murdered a maiden in the village this past winter."

"Mary Hobbs..." Hathorne said faintly.

"What was that?" Parris asked.

"Mary Hobbs has disappeared from Salem. Not a soul has seen her since late December."

"Tituba claims to have witnessed Reverend Blayne chasing the girl through the wood, whereafter he seized her and smote her dead. She says Blayne has the powers of a warlock, powers to kill and maim and bring forth great misfortunes and misery upon whomsoever he chooses by the employment of filters, potions, charms, and the like. He brings forth great suffering, says she, by trafficking with the Devil and his emissaries."

"Are you convinced the slave's testimony is genuine?"

"Yes. That I am."

"Then we must act with haste. Reverend Blayne must be interrogated at once. And if he truly proves to be one of Satan's own, he shall be made to answer for that crime." He stepped back from the door and grabbed his coat, then looked back at Lydia as he slipped into it.

"Sorry, dearest. But I must be off."

Fugitives

He grabbed his cane, stepped outside, and closed the door behind him.

“Ride out to the prison and notify Cranley that if Reverend Blayne comes for Susanna Harrington she is not to be released into his custody under any circumstances whatsoever. Blayne has been most anxious to see the Harrington girl exonerated, and if he should suspect we have any knowledge of his alleged involvement in the black arts, he may make attempts to remove her.”

“Where are you going?”

“To notify Sheriff Corwin and gather some men together, then we shall ride out to the Blayne cottage and have him arrested. Join us there when you have finished your errand. We may need a holy man to put the fear of God into this beast.

Judge Hathorne, Sheriff Corwin, and a group of four men rode out to the cottage where Ambrose and Jessica had spent the last seven months of their lives. It was located in an isolated area, nestled by trees, shrubs, and other greenery. They had torches, but if it wasn't for the clear night and waxing moon, they would have had much more difficulty than they did in locating the house.

The nearest neighbor was Isaac Goodale. His home was almost a full mile south. During the time the Blaynes lived in the village no one had heard or seen anything peculiar, least of all Isaac or his family. Moreover, Isaac was on amiable terms with the reverend and had on more than one occasion expressed great admiration for him.

Until now, there had been no reason to suspect any witchery among the Blaynes. The only accusations made against the reverend had come from a woman—a slave—who,

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herself, was an admitted witch. But the Devil and his disciples were clever, and it certainly wasn't beyond the scope of possibility that the reverend should prove to be a warlock. If he was innocent, the truth would surely reveal itself; if he wasn't, that too would be known, and the appropriate actions would be taken. Hathorne would see to it personally.

Such was the frame of mind he had when he and Corwin and his men rode up to the Blayne house. There was some doubt as to whether or not he should take such drastic action, but in these times of uncertainty it was much better to be cautious than to allow hidden enemies to gain the advantage.

Just as Corwin dismounted his horse, Parris rode up and stopped.

"He has taken her from the prison," he said to Hathorne. "Just as you have feared."

"Then he is the Devil's own!" Hathorne said, and nodded to Corwin.

Corwin advanced toward the door of the house, torch in hand, and hammered it with his fist.

"Reverend Blayne, this is Sheriff Corwin. In the King's name, I demand you to open this door at once! You have much to answer for!"

When there was no answer, he tried the handle. The door was locked.

"Break it open," he commanded the men.

John Hawks and his brother Phillip hopped down from the back of the wagon they rode in and walked up to the door as Corwin stepped back. John ran up and stomped on it right next to the handle, but the door was made of heavy

oak and showed no signs of weakening. Then Phillip made an attempt with similar results.

Robert Eames and Richard Carter stepped down and joined them. None of them had expected it would be the heavy task it was proving to be.

They took turns, two at a time, assaulting the door with pounding kicks. The wood began to splinter and give. Then, suddenly, as a couple of feet landed heavily against the door, it caved in and stinking blue smoke gushed out of the building as the Hawks brothers, who had kicked the door last, fell back on the ground.

The unmanned horses whinnied and bolted off blindly through the woods, taking the wagon with them while Hathorne and Parris struggled to still their horses and keep from being thrown.

The men choked and coughed. The smoke was not the smoke of fire, but of something foul and offensive which none of them had ever smelled before.

At first, the smoke obscured everything; then it blinded the men. And there were sounds. Something else was there with them, something alive in the house.

Its breathing sounded like a rusty saw cutting through bone. The breath was putrid and moist and enshrouded them, warming the surrounding air.

It growled.

“Dear God!” Parris exclaimed, rubbing his eyes in hope of regaining his sight.

Corwin had already done so, despite the fact that he had been closer to the house than either Parris or Hathorne, and he opened his eyes.

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A large creature lingered over the remains of Phillip and John Hawks, peeling the skin from their bodies with its talons and stuffing it in its maw. Its fiery breath had effectively scorched the clothes to ash to access the meat beneath, and it was hungry.

It stood inside the house by the doorway, a creature of no less than ten feet tall. Flaps of respiring flesh dangled loosely in slimy brown ribbons from its face and body. The head was a ragged boulder of festering gray meat with jaws large enough to encompass a man's head, unimpeded by its large teeth and fangs. Tentacles flowed from its scalp into a sinuous green mane dripping with venom. Its eyes writhed like crazed yellow serpents from their sockets, extending nearly half a foot from their origin, each one seemingly with volition of its own.

It roared.

Parris's eyes began to function again. Through the dispersing clouds of blue smoke his blurred vision could detect Corwin's figure moving toward the doorway in a vain attempt to save the Hawks brothers, although they had been killed the instant the door collapsed.

Eames and Carter were still dazed and blinded, reeling on their feet with their hands pressed against their eyes.

Parris's vision cleared. He saw the creature lurking just beyond the threshold, devouring its prey.

What in the name of the Lord is that thing? He wondered.

He thought about it for a moment, then concluded it could only have been some demon which Blayne had summoned from the rotten bowels of Hell. He had read about such a creature in a work on demonology. A Vortung, he thought it was called.

Fugitives

“George!” he called out as Corwin reached for Phillip Hawks’s half-stripped arm. Corwin looked back at him. Parris was still seated in his saddle, looking on impotently, afraid to move.

The Vortung, alerted by Parris’s call, raised its head from its meal and saw the edge of Corwin’s body crouched by the doorway. It roared again, and lunged toward him. Corwin dove out of the way as the Vortung’s bulk crashed through the doorway, sending shattered planks and splintered oak into the air. The front of the house collapsed in on itself and fell on the bodies of the Hawks brothers, crushing them.

The demon reached for the first man it encountered. That man was Robert Eames. He staggered back and forth, turning around in circles, sensing the danger he was in, but his eyes were still tearing and blind.

It seized him by the throat and hoisted him up. His hands dropped from his eyes to the arms of the creature which held him aloft while his legs kicked at nothing. The slime on the Vortung’s skin burned Eames’s hands and neck. Tears streamed down Eames’s reddened cheeks as he gagged and gasped for air.

He opened his eyes and stared blearily into the face of the demon which held him. He floundered in its grip. A shot was fired, and a chunk of the Vortung’s shoulder was blown off in a spray of black blood. Hathorne had fired his flintlock rifle and was clumsily reloading as quickly as he was able.

The Vortung howled, thrashing its head back and whipping its tentacles in every direction. Flecks of venom hit Corwin, Carter, Parris, and Parris’s horse. The horse cried out and threw the reverend into a bush before fleeing into the woods with the other animals.

Hathorne’s horse was sprayed on its hind quarters and the animal bolted into the woods, taking its rider with him.

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The venom burned and left cauterized pits in the flesh it struck. The men groaned as they wiped the scathing fluid from their skins.

The Vortung redirected its attention to Eames, still squirming lamely in its grip. It inhaled deeply. Eames felt the oxygen being sucked from the air and from his lungs. He fainted.

It hissed. Blue smoke gushed harshly from its mouth and the nostrils of its snout, baking Eames's clothes to his skin.

The pain shocked Eames back to awareness. He didn't scream, although he tried. His throat was too dry and choked. He had closed his eyes when he saw the smoke again, but it scalded his lids until they burned away like brittle leaves and boiled his eyeballs in their sockets. His skin blackened. He gagged and struggled and twitched.

The Vortung sliced open Eames's chest with one of its talons and began snapping his ribs apart. Corwin fired a shot which blew a crater in the demon's back. It howled again and dropped the corpse it held. Eames hit the ground hard with a thud. His entrails rolled out of his belly, foaming with blood and bile, splintered bones protruding jaggedly from his chest.

The Vortung turned and faced Corwin squarely. Corwin backed up, frantically attempting to reload. Another shot was fired, this one by Carter. He had been frozen by fright but now found the courage to act. The shot hit the creature in the head, blowing off one of its tentacles. It screamed, then stormed over to Carter and plunged its fist into his gut.

Carter grunted and grimaced. The Vortung uncoiled his intestines and dashed them to the ground as they spluttered and belched. Carter's mouth dropped open as his face ran white. He began to lose consciousness, but before that mercy could be bestowed upon him the Vortung opened its mouth

wide and engulfed Carter's head whole. Its teeth clamped down, biting into his spine. It shook its head from side to side. The spine snapped at the top of the neck with a loud "POP" and the Vortung pulled the head away from the body, allowing the mangled frame to fall to the ground like a large sack of potatoes. Blood spouted up from the veins and arteries of the neck, then subsided.

The Vortung crunched down on the skull, bunching up folds of scalp under its teeth before spitting the head out, smoldering, broken, and deprived of most of its flesh.

Corwin fired again; hitting it in the back of the head beside where Carter's shot had landed. Another tentacle fell off, bleeding blackly. The Vortung turned on him again. It was sluggish now, its wounds beginning to affect its equilibrium. It let out a tremendous cry, then charged at Corwin. Corwin dropped his gun and torch, and ran.

Parris crawled over toward Carter's body and picked up the dead man's pistol.

Corwin fled into the woods, the Vortung fast on his heels.

Parris loaded the pistol, then rose to his feet and ran after them.

The woods were strangely quiet. Parris couldn't hear Corwin or the demon that chased him. Although it was well past seven o'clock in the evening, the sounds of wildlife that would normally be heard were mysteriously absent.

Parris sweated. He could hear his heart thumping against the inside of his chest like a condemned prisoner behind the bars of his ribs, clamoring for release. He was afraid its release would come. For a moment, he pictured his heart bursting through his chest, still palpitating as it plopped on the ground.

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He shuddered.

The image was the product of a mind poisoned by the trauma of witnessing similar grotesqueries. It was the product of what that thing had done to those men.

Everything was calm now, and he prayed that it would remain so. But there was a nervous tension building up in the pit of his stomach, not unlike that which he sometimes felt just prior to a thunderstorm. He looked up at the sky. It was as clear as it was fifteen minutes ago when he first rode up to meet Hathorne and the others in front of Blayne's house. They had had all the rain they were going to get earlier that day. The rest of the night would probably be clear.

It had been a good five minutes now since Corwin disappeared into the woods with the Vortung chasing him. Had he been killed? What if he had been? What if that demon caught up to him, slew him like it did the others, and proceeded toward rest of the village? Of course it was hurt, but it was still incredibly strong despite its injuries and had still managed to kill a man since receiving them. If it reached the village... He couldn't allow that to happen. His family would be in jeopardy. It had been hard enough for him to see what was still happening to Elizabeth and Abigail, whose fits were less frequent and intense now, but still present. But he wouldn't be able to live with himself if he let that thing storm into the village and take their lives and the lives of the other villagers. He didn't know if he'd be able to kill the Vortung, but he had to try.

He started to run, looking everywhere for Corwin and the Vortung, thinking that if it could be injured; it could be killed.

He thought of Tituba. Was this the path she had fled down back in December when she witnessed Mary Hobbs's murder at the hands of Blayne? It didn't matter. He had to find

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the Vortung. He had to kill it and send it back to the murky depths from which it originated.

A stitch jabbed him sharply in the side. His lungs burned. The sound of the beating of his heart pounded in his head. It had been a long time since he had had a run like this.

Out of breath, he stopped and stooped over, resting the hand with the pistol on his knee while his free hand held his side where the stitch stabbed him.

Sweat poured from his brow now. A few droplets found their ways to his eyes, stinging them. He removed the hand from his knee and wiped one eye, then the other, with his back of his index finger, still holding the pistol.

He looked up as he continued to catch his breath.

It was there, standing no more than twenty feet before him. Parris stopped breathing. It remained silent and didn't move. Parris stared at it stupidly, not sure what he should do. It was almost surreal. There was no arguing against the irrationality of this thing's existence. But it was real. It had killed four men.

A sick, watery heat rolled up the back of Parris's neck into his head.

"Shoot it! Shoot it!"

The Vortung turned left toward Corwin and roared.

Parris raised the pistol and leveled it at the creature's head.

"Fire!" Corwin shouted. "Fire!"

Parris pulled the trigger.

The shot ripped through its face, turning it black with its blood, and it fell twitching to the ground.

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It stirred. Corwin ran over to the Vortung with his sword and hacked its skull several times with lust and fury until he had cleaved it open and the wormy innards of its brains bled onto the moist black soil.

Corwin stood there a moment holding his dirtied sword, then moved away from the body and sat down on the trunk of a fallen maple tree. He sat there a couple minutes breathing heavily with his elbows resting on his knees, staring at the mutilated thing. After a while he looked up at Parris, who hadn't moved.

"This is but the beginning," Corwin huffed. "Is it not, Sam?"

"That it is," Parris replied sadly. "Yes. That it is."

Walpurgisnacht

Roger Harrington's Journal—

9 April—It has been more than one fortnight since I have seen Susanna. Reverend Parris and Judge Corwin paid me a visit the eve Blayne spirited her away from Salem Prison and told me of Blayne's traffick with the Devil and his desire to see Susanna freed. This information is cause of a great distress unto me, more so now that Martha is ill. A gathering of men on horseback have been searching the wood for Blayne and Susanna, but as of yet have failed to discover their whereabouts. It was my wish to join in the search, but my immediate concern is for Martha, O Lord, please do not take her from me. It is with sincere endeavor and unwavering faith in the Lord that I continue to beseech Him through prayer and hardship to see my family through these most grievous events, that they may come to pass with mercy and love from He who is all powerful and all merciful, our beloved God Almighty. I pray, dear God, look after my sweet Phoebe's spirit and guide her in Your way, and have mercy on us of the living, Your faithful servants, that we may continue to pay You homage and worship.

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Ambrose rode north toward Portsmouth, Jessica riding on one horse, Susanna riding pillion on his. His dog, Anster—a gray husky—ambled beside them. They had been riding all day since late that morning when Ambrose and Susanna first left the prison, and now they were finally at the house Ambrose often retired to whenever he felt the need to be alone.

Susanna had been in no position to question him about her release from prison—she was just grateful to be free—but when he denied her request to stop home and see her parents, she grew suspicious.

“No,” he had said. “There is time enough for you to visit your mother and father. I would like for you to come with me. There is something wondrous I wish for you to see.”

Susanna consented silently, with some reluctance. She felt indebted to him for freeing her and thought it would be thankless for her to object.

They stopped before the large bramble-flanked house. Ambrose would often come up here to meditate or perform some ancient ritual the profane should not see. This place was much more isolated than the cottage he owned in Salem Village. It had to be. There were conjurations to be made, demons to be summoned, dead to be resurrected. These operations required solitude and communion with nature. They couldn’t be held indoors, although there were rituals that could—and some that must—be concealed from even the open air. But it was only in the bosom of nature that the majority of his powers could seek full reign and reach complete fruition.

Susanna knew nothing of these things, and she knew nothing of her reasons for being here. What was it that Reverend Blayne so much wanted her to see? Did he have

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some ulterior motive for bringing her here? She didn't think so. After all, he was a minister, and therefore beyond reproach.

Ambrose stepped down from the horse and looked the building over. Everything still seemed intact.

"We shall stay here for a time," he said, helping Susanna down. Her face was flushed as if she were overheated or embarrassed about something. It wasn't a very warm night, and she hadn't exerted herself, so Ambrose determined that it was the latter. But what did she have to be embarrassed about?

"Are you well, Susanna?" Jessica asked with a wicked smirk.

"I am," Susanna replied. She sensed that Jessica knew what had happened and was toying with her.

"Good," Jessica said. "It would be most distressing if you were to take ill." This, Susanna concluded, was said partly for Ambrose's benefit, but mostly meant as another jab of sarcasm. Jessica hadn't behaved warmly toward her since they first met, and it was obvious the reason was because she felt threatened.

Susanna did find herself attracted to Ambrose, but she knew he was married to Jessica, or at least she thought she knew. That subject was never broached, but the notion of the reverend maintaining a concubine was unthinkable. Jessica should have no reason to feel threatened. Susanna wasn't going to become involved with a married man no matter how desirable he was or how much she now ached to be with him.

But where her mind and morality succeeded in maintaining her confidence, her body had betrayed it. She was wet down there, in that forbidden place reserved only for the man she would someday wed. She had never held a man in her arms before other than her father; never felt a man's body close to hers. The long ride through the woods

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with her legs astride the trunk of the beast she rode and her breasts pressed against Ambrose's back had made her feel a way she wasn't accustomed to. The rhythmic bouncing up and down in the saddle as the horse's hooves pounded into the moistened earth had furthered her excitement. She knew what was happening but had no power to stop it, didn't know if she wanted it stopped, and was afraid to tell the reverend for fear of angering him, or worse...alienating him.

She had noticed Jessica glancing at them from time to time during the journey and hoped she hadn't witnessed those many times when the sensations aroused in her were so overwhelming she had to bite her own lip and cringe to keep from crying out in breathless whimpers of pleasure. What would Jessica do if she had? Say nothing and curse her silently? Tell Ambrose? Worse?

Finally, she allowed herself to relax somewhat. The flush in her cheeks faded. There was nothing she could do if Jessica knew about her naughty little secret, and she dismissed her fears of what Ambrose's reaction might be if Jessica told him. She would simply have to deal with that situation if and when it arose.

Ambrose secured the horses, and they entered the house with what few belongings they brought with them.

It was musty inside, but that was to be expected. It wasn't used very often, and when it was, it was usually just for a few days. After that, Ambrose would be rejuvenated in body, mind, and spirit, and he would ride back to Salem Village to continue his work.

"How long shall we stay here?" Susanna asked as Jessica lit one of the lamps.

There was a prolonged silence. Susanna, then Jessica, looked over at Ambrose. His gaze was fixed pensively at a far

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corner of the room, as if absorbed in the contemplation of some mammoth problem.

“Reverend?” Susanna pressed weakly.

He blinked and turned toward her.

“What?” he said half audibly.

“How long shall we stay here?”

“Till the celebration. Till Walpurgisnacht. Three fortnights.”

“Wal...?”

“Walpurgisnacht. I shall tell you all about it anon. For now, however, I think it best that we eat dinner and retire early. We have had a tiring day. We should rest now.”

Ambrose wasn't one to tire easily, Jessica knew; but she also knew magic was a taxing business, and the demon Ambrose had summoned to take care of the men who showed up to arrest him at his home in Salem Village was a particularly ruthless beast to control. She almost pitied the men who dared to breach the house's boundaries and unknowingly alert the thing awaiting them, but her loyalty as well as her heart belonged to Ambrose, and she saw any threat to him or their happiness together worthy of destruction. It would only be a matter of time before she could figure out a way to remove the threat she felt by Susanna's presence.

The days rolled into each other. The weather had warmed up rapidly, seemingly in conjunction with Susanna's feelings for Ambrose. It wasn't what she had wanted, but she had no choice. Every day she spent with him endeared him to her more until she came to the realization that she was in love.

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It was the most bitter-sweet experience she'd ever had. Even her sister's death seemed to pale in comparison to this anguish, and she felt all the more terrible for thinking that and knowing it to be true. How could she have allowed herself to fall in love with him—a married man?

After a while, it was so bad that she wept quietly in her bed at night, crying herself to sleep with the images of Ambrose and Jessica coupling in their bedroom upstairs battering her mind.

But the fact was, they weren't. Having his object of desire in such close proximity had thoroughly squashed all affection toward Jessica, inflaming Jessica's brooding animosity for Susanna and furthering Ambrose's urgency to be with her.

But now was not the time. Not yet...but soon.

But Ambrose had to let her know how he felt. That much he could do. He knew she was ready to hear the words. He knew, but for his relationship with Jessica, she would not object. He had seen her on more than one occasion stealing glances at him with a more than amiable glint in her eyes. He knew she was smitten with him. His pulse raced at the thought. Finally, his desires were coming to their fruition. He only had to be patient and wait. But for now he would tell her what she meant to him and assure her they would be together.

"Susanna," he called to her as he descended the stairs.

Susanna was in the kitchen helping Jessica prepare breakfast. They seemed to be getting along better now, but Susanna still suspected Jessica harbored feelings of ill will toward her. She was certain Jessica wasn't to be trusted.

"Yes, Reverend?" she answered.

"Ambrose," he said. "I told you to call me Ambrose. There is no need for formalities."

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"I'm sorry...Ambrose." She felt awkward saying it, but liked the way it rolled off her tongue with an air of intimacy. Ambrose liked it too, for the same reason; that's why he insisted she say it. It enhanced the images he had of her in bed beside him after a session of love-making, purring his name into his ears.

"Come," he said. "I wish to speak with you."

Susanna looked back at Jessica.

"She can finish preparing breakfast. Come. Let us walk."

Susanna wiped her hands off with a dishrag and accompanied Ambrose outside.

Jessica slammed the dough she was kneading on the table when she heard the outside door close. She ran to the window. Her mouth curled into a frown as she witnessed Susanna take Ambrose's arm. Jessica pouted, her chest heaving with sighs, her eyes watering with scorn.

"We have spent much time in each other's company these past weeks," Ambrose commented.

"Yes," Susanna said. "We have."

"In that time, I have grown ever fond of you."

"And I of you, Re...Ambrose."

"Walpurgisnacht is but a fortnight from now."

"What is this Walpurgisnacht? You never told me what it is."

"It is a great celebration: of life, and of spring. A wondrous event it is."

They stopped in the shade of a grove of elm trees and faced each other. They were still in view of the house, allowing Jessica to look on.

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Ambrose took Susanna's hands in his.

"I have never felt this way with any other woman but one, and she passed away from me many years ago."

He drew her hands together and raised them to his lips.

"I love you, Susanna," he said, and gazing into her eyes, kissed her hands. "I love you, and come this Walpurgis Night, I wish to take you as my bride."

Susanna's mouth fell open. She couldn't believe the words he had just spoken. Was it true? Was this man whom she had admired for the past several weeks as wholeheartedly in love with her as he had just said? It didn't seem possible that he could feel the same way about her as she did about him, but that's exactly what seemed to be happening.

She felt the blood rush into her face. She didn't know what to say. She had had fantasies of their being together, but she never expected them to come true. All she could think was that this couldn't be happening, as much as she wanted it to be. *But, what about Jessica? Wasn't he already married to her?*

She unlocked her eyes from his and glanced at the house. Jessica was still watching, but Susanna couldn't see her.

"Jessica..."

"She is not my wife," Ambrose said. "It is merely an arrangement for the benefit of others who would assume an unlawful congress taking place between us two. She was orphaned when she was but a child and took to a life of wickedness. I found her in the streets of London prostituting her body to the vile wretches of that city, so I took her in. She is as a daughter to me."

"But how is it that she appears to behave not as a daughter unto you, but as something more?"

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“It is true. Jessica does have somewhat of an infatuation with me, but I am fain to describe it not as love, but gratitude for saving her from her former life of depravity. There is a love between us, but it is a love becoming to a father and daughter.”

This explanation was readily accepted by Susanna, she having so wanted it to be true that further interrogation seemed unnecessary. She was so overwhelmed with joy, it never occurred to her that he might be lying, or that the circumstances of her release from prison and departure from Salem were, at the very least, suspicious.

Susanna was swept away; she was so happy. All reason and common sense had forsaken her. She couldn’t explain it. She was suddenly elated and filled with optimism and joy.

She slid her arms around his neck and searched his eyes with hers. They were beautiful eyes, she thought.

“I love you, also,” she said, then rose up on her toes to meet his lips with her own.

The kiss was intoxicating and blotted out the rest of the world. Her legs weakened and her knees buckled, but Ambrose held her up close to him and kept her from falling. A nervous tension built up in the pit of her stomach. Her body trembled. She was certain Ambrose would have to carry her back to the house because she wouldn’t have the energy to walk back herself.

The kiss broke. Susanna was out of breath but felt an urgency to say, “I will be a good wife to you, Ambrose. I only hope I am able to please you as much as you have just pleased me.”

“It is all I could ask of you, dearest,” he said, then pressed her head against his chest as they embraced again. “You have already made me a very happy man.”

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Jessica huffed, turned away from the window, and stormed back into the kitchen.

The eve of celebration was here—Walpurgisnacht.

The weeks leading up to this night passed quickly, but not without some difficulties, most of which were created by Jessica's jealousy and her inability to accept the fact that Ambrose was in love with Susanna and never with her.

He hadn't slept with her since the day they first arrived at the house—almost two fortnights. This was strange behavior for Ambrose, who had the desire for coitus daily and often more frequently than that. The longest Jessica ever had to wait between congresses was two days, and after that the sex would be exhausting and intense. Ambrose's desire to take her had lessened since he first met Susanna; now it seemed nonexistent.

He now spent his nights sleeping in a room down the hall from *her*—two doors closer to Susanna's chamber. Jessica had so desperately wanted to visit him in the night, but she knew better. She knew the outrage that would follow such presumptions. Ambrose could have a nasty temper when the mood took him. She had seen this temper before...and knew its consequences. She had seen him change drastically in seconds from an amiable gentleman to a brutal, callous, abusive tyrant, capable of dispatching his offender with speed and skill without once blinking; without remorse. Jessica had witnessed this first hand back in London when a man made a tasteless remark concerning her reputation. They had been walking pleasantly along arm in arm one minute; the next, Ambrose was throttling the man in the gutter until his thumbs had crushed the man's windpipe and burrowed into his blood-sputtering throat.

Of course, she didn't believe he would ever harm her, but neither did she wish to test his temper. She had had words

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with Susanna, and at one time those words had come to blows, but Ambrose was nearby and quickly intervened, displaying more than a little irritation toward her. She loved him, but what could she do? He was already angry with her and wouldn't stand for any more outbursts. All she could do was watch as he grew further away from her.

She lay curled up in bed, distraught and pondering her dilemma when she noticed him standing in the doorway looking at her. She sat up.

"Come," he said, swirling wine in the silver chalice he held. "The time has come. Summon Susanna and meet me downstairs."

He left without waiting for an acknowledgement of his commands.

Several minutes later, Jessica and Susanna arrived downstairs. Ambrose sat on a large brown divan at the far end of the room sipping his wine, half cloaked in shadows cast by the solitary light source of the room, a large black candle with a bluish flame. The candle was mounted in a tarnished silver candlestick standing on the mantelpiece off to Ambrose's left, and the light its sleepy flame cast gave the room a starkness and ambiance that made it seem vast and mysterious.

Ambrose wore a plain black robe, as did Jessica; Susanna wore a white one. A large white circle had been drawn outside a slightly smaller one on the floorboards. Cabalistic symbols were inscribed between them. The floor inside the circles was covered with a variety of colorful pillows and blankets. Susanna didn't know what to make of this, but her puzzlement was soon dismissed when her eyes locked with Ambrose's, as they always did now whenever she encountered him.

He rose to his feet, not breaking this gaze. He moved slowly, almost groggily, as if he were already heavily intoxicated

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by the wine. As he approached her, Susanna felt herself entering a listless state of wakeful dreaming although she still felt very much alert.

“Drink,” he said softly when he stopped before her and proffered the cup.

Susanna accepted the offering and sipped. It was a dark red wine with a bitter under taste. It went down warm. She could feel it acting on her rapidly. She swooned. Her eyes drooped. Her whole body felt limp and heavy, warm dullness blunting her senses. She fainted into his arms.

She awoke to the sensation of warm grease being rubbed into the skin of her legs, breasts, and belly. She opened her eyes. She and Ambrose and Jessica were lying naked in the midst of the circle. Jessica chronically dipped her hands into an earthen vessel filled with unguent and applied it to Susanna’s body and her own. Ambrose did the same. The grease made her feel strange, more intoxicated, yet more aware.

“What is happening?” she asked, bewildered.

“We are preparing for the Sabbat,” Jessica replied dreamily.

“What is this?” Susanna said, glancing at the bowl Jessica held.

“Ambrose...” She turned to him on her opposite side.

“All is well, Susanna,” he said, rubbing some ointment over one of her breasts. “Relax. Close your eyes. I love you, and all is well.”

Susanna did as he said, and upon doing so experienced intense vibrations in the back of her head. Suddenly, she became aware of the fact that her body had become rigid. She couldn’t move.

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Ambrose and Jessica also began to feel the effects of the ointment, and both lay down on either side of Susanna and soon became as rigid as she was.

The vibrations were stronger now and filled their heads and echoed in their ears.

Susanna was terrified, but couldn't speak. It was as if she were dead, but still conscious. Consciousness was not abandoning her, but this world was. She could feel it, or herself—she couldn't tell which—slipping away, drifting apart from each other. A sensation spread across her body, feeling like floating slowly to the top of a pond and breaking the mossy skin at the surface of the water. But she was in no pond. This was happening to her; to her body. It was separating from itself. She could feel it. She could feel her toes and fingers extending past themselves; a tickling in her chest; a light, floating sensation. Somehow, she knew her body was still perfectly intact as it had always been, but the sensation was unmistakable. She was being pulled out of her flesh. Her consciousness or spirit was leaving her body, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

She floated and separated, then all at once sprang out of herself. She rose up higher and higher until her breasts, nose, and knees bumped into something that prevented her from going any farther. She opened her eyes and found herself facing the ceiling. She pushed off it, her hands sinking slightly into the wood, and turned around. Beneath her, she saw her body, still as in death, flanked by Ambrose's and Jessica's bodies. Below, they were also separating from their bodies. They were transparent and radiant in the dark but otherwise every bit the image of their corporeal selves. As they rose up toward Susanna, she noticed a thin silver cord running from Ambrose and Jessica's material bodies to the bellies of their subtle ones; the same kind of cord running up to Susanna from her own body.

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She panicked and at once plunged headlong back toward her body. Ambrose was quick to react and seized her by the wrist before she could complete her descent.

“Fear not, Susanna,” he said. “All is well. We are away to the Sabbath.”

Susanna was too dumbfounded to reply. Ambrose held onto her wrist tightly, and the three of them soared through the roof and into the sky. The terrain rushed beneath them as they flew eastward. Trees, hills, and houses gave way to the ocean; the ocean soon gave way to beaches, trees, and mountains. The whole journey could have taken no longer than a few minutes, and now they were at the top of some mountain range somewhere in what Susanna supposed might be Europe. They were still in the material world, but now the mountains were changing. They looked different somehow. Vegetation, earth, and rock were subtly taking on other characteristics, becoming darker yet more radiant, more vibrant.

Susanna suddenly realized that, although the three of them didn’t appear to be, they were rising. She couldn’t see it, but she felt it. They were rising, but the mountains weren’t any farther below them than they had been when they arrived here just seconds ago. It wasn’t farther away, but they weren’t the same mountains anymore, either. Strange animals and vegetation replaced their counterparts; the mountains’ configurations were no longer the same.

They began to slow down. A lambent light began to flicker on the far side of one of the valleys. They floated toward it. The rising stopped. The light grew larger and brighter as they approached it. As they flew closer, they could hear the growing din of cacophonous music, revelry, and suffering. Trumpets blared; horns squealed; men, women, and children laughed, moaned, giggled, and cried. And there were beastly sounds: animals cavorting, squawking and howling in the wilderness.

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They set foot in the woods just outside the perimeter of the revelry and bore witness to all the wondrous horrors and hideous delights which awaited them within.

Witches and warlocks of all ages, races, and sizes—all naked—danced frenetically around a large, blazing pyre. Everywhere there was bare flesh. Those who weren't engaged in the dance were partaking of much less innocuous acts, acts of debauchery, perversion, and sin. All conceivable deeds of depravity took place amongst the frantic pushing throng of revelers. The fattest witches took to flight with several of the demons and created revelries of their own. The marriage of pain and delight was testified to by the groans, whimpers, and laughter of the celebrants. Men, beasts, and demons raped, sodomized, and punished women and each other. Women pleased themselves, their attackers, and each other with glee. Excrement was smeared over the buttocks and bodies of all and eaten as a foul and sensual sacrament.

Jessica couldn't contain herself. She had to join in. She looked up at Ambrose anxiously as if for permission. He nodded, a small smirk peering out from behind his beard, and she sprinted toward the midst of all those bodies. It wasn't long before she was pounced on and violated. First, by a swooping demon whose web-like body was devoid of all extremities except a large erect penis in its center; then, two women and an elderly man. The demon, seeking the vilest orifice, attacked her buttocks and impaled her with force enough to knock her down. As it undulated violently, wrapping the whole of its body around her ass like a suction-cup, the two women dove on her with probing tongues and groping hands. The old man found Jessica's head, knelt down above it, and emptied his bladder into her mouth as she swallowed willingly.

One of the demons—a foul-smelling creature with a conic mouth protruding from its ribbed throat—dismounted

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from a lascivious young slut, turned her over on her back, and inserted a claw in the folds of her cunt. In one fluid motion he unzipped her flesh to the sternum and spread back the skin of her belly as if ripping open a bodice. It seized a section of intestine and pulled it out of her.

“Oh,” she gasped, as if achieving orgasm.

The demon squeezed the intestine tightly above the writhing woman. She moaned again. It cut the organ open with a stroke of its claw and greedily stuffed one end of it in its maw and sucked and chewed the contents. The woman shuddered and groaned a masochist’s song. When the intestine was emptied, the demon stuck its huge thorny cock inside and masturbated into it.

Susanna gaped at this and the other scenes of wickedness her eyes drank up as they panned from body to body, appalled yet compelled to look on.

Then, those eyes fell on a couple familiar to them, and Susanna’s gaze intensified as she anticipated a chance to see their faces. After a few moments, that chance presented itself.

As the figures wrestled in the firelight, the woman, who was on top, raised her head from the person with whom she was copulating. She tossed her tresses back away from her face and moaned. It was Katherine Martin, a midwife she knew from Salem Town, and the person she was riding was no one other than Bernard, her son. Susanna once admired Bernard.

Susanna screamed as this vision roused her from her trance. Until now, it all seemed as a dream—a terrible nightmare which she had trouble waking from—but her scream and her consciousness of that scream and its loudness confirmed its reality. The realization stunned her back to open-mouthed stupidity and silence.

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Hearing the scream, mother and son turned to the source and laughed lustily, then Katherine rose her gyrating hips from Bernard's lap and turned around. She straddled his head and sat on his face, grinding her genitals into her son's eager mouth as she defecated on his face. She seized his member, wetting her lips, and went down on him.

"What is this place?" Susanna asked Ambrose timidly, finding her voice again. "Why have you brought me here?"

"For you, my dearest. So that we may wed."

Dread washed over her.

Wed? The thought was the furthest from her mind now. This was all some sort of trap, she thought. A ruse to trick her into sin, into perdition. There was no way she would marry Ambrose now. He only wanted to soil her, deflower her for his own perverted pleasures. He didn't love her. How could he? How could he possibly love her if he was capable of deceiving her into coming to this horrid place?

The betrayal was what stung the most, but there was also fear. She was surrounded by demons, witches, and sinners; she was surrounded by the damned. Was she in Hell? If she was, she would probably never be allowed to leave. But after thinking better of it, she decided that she probably wasn't in Hell. She had left her body back in New England, and the strange and comforting fact was that she could still feel it, everything down to her heartbeat. She was alive in New England, not dead and damned in Hell.

But she didn't know how to get away from here and back home, and she needed desperately to do so. All she had the wit to do was wait and hope they left soon and unscathed.

"Come," Ambrose said, taking her hand. "It is time for us to marry."

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Those words and their fullest implications now struck a profound terror into Susanna's heart. Her jaw slackened. Her mouth opened. Her eyes widened.

"No," she murmured, shaking her head and pulling away from him.

"No!" she screamed. "DEAR GOD! NO!"

But Ambrose dragged her along effortlessly through the crowd of unconcerned revelers as she struggled and screamed.

"Susanna," a raspy voice called out. She turned to see who it was and was confronted with the charred and mutilated corpse of Robert Eames imprisoned in heavy shackles, his eyes festering blackly in their orbits.

"Susanna," he croaked again, reaching for her blindly, but somehow knowing where she was.

His decaying hand found her free wrist and clasped it hard.

"Susanna. Stop. Do not go with him. Think profoundly of your material self. Will yourself back. You have the means."

Ambrose responded to this interruption of his plans by reaching across Susanna's body and jabbing the corpse in the face, sending it straight to the ground.

Susanna gasped. The body crumbled to the ground, releasing its hold on her.

Ambrose hauled her through the crowd of celebrants to an altar. It was little more than a huge block of granite that held goblets, victuals, and instruments of torture. Behind it was enthroned a burly he-goat with a third eye in the center of its forehead. It was crowned with a silver diadem and was

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fastened to a great throne, sitting in an upright position like a king. It wrestled feebly against its bindings.

Ambrose stepped over trembling arms, legs, heads, and torsos, Susanna stumbling unwillingly behind him, trying to pull away. Drum beats boomed through the valley. Demons sounded cornets. Lovers and tormented souls clamored and shrieked. A man stood on a ridge by the bonfire, the amber light flickering on him. He wore tattered rags from head to toe, loose strips of them flapping in the hot, arid wind. His face was wrapped in the strips, leaving only pits for eyes and a slit for a mouth. He thrust a long staff in the air and shrieked.

A large seething cauldron stood on the opposite side of the fire. A woman brought a squealing baby to it, holding the infant above her head with both hands. She stopped, then hurled it into the boiling liquid. The child let out one last cry, then cried no more. An obese bald man tended to the cauldron. He dipped a large pair of tongs into the liquid and hauled the baby out by an ankle. The tender flesh fell away from the bones as he shook it. The woman peeled some of the skin off and stuffed it in her mouth.

Susanna screamed. The whole episode seemed so surreal; she thought it had to be a nightmare. This couldn't be happening. This couldn't be happening to her.

But she knew it was.

The sea of bodies ended abruptly around the altar in a large circle, giving it a wide berth. In the center of that circle stood a three-breasted woman and her two hermaphroditic attendants. They were naked like everyone else, but the woman wore a red cape that fell just above her buttocks. She held a large wooden phallus in her hands. It had two heads, one of which she continued to prod herself with. Her attendants were similarly occupied.

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The woman scrutinized Susanna with an approving eye, then pursed her lips slightly and lidded her eyes as she rolled her head away and cried out in the throes of an orgasm.

Susanna shrank away but couldn't free herself from Ambrose's grip. It was all she could do to keep herself from going mad.

She remembered what Robert Eames had told her. "Think profoundly of your material self," he had said. "Will yourself back."

I must will myself back.

She turned her attention inward, first to her subtle self, then to her material self. *I must return, she willed. I must return.* She concentrated on her corporeal body, greased, naked, and sleeping back in the house in New England while she chanted her mantra inwardly. *I must. I must return. I have the means. I must return.*

It was beginning to work.

She could feel herself becoming more aware of her physical body. She could feel herself becoming denser. The mountain was changing again. She sensed she was descending.

She opened her eyes, and the interior of the drawing room where they had made their departure to the Sabbat appeared. She tried to move, but that was impossible. The ointment still had her. She was still paralyzed.

A smack assaulted her face, forcing her eyes shut, and when she opened them she was back in the Spirit World.

"No!" she yelled. "No!"

"It would be best that you not attempt that again, love," Ambrose threatened.

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Susanna's face palsied with sorrow as she broke down and wept.

"Continue," Ambrose commanded the caped woman.

She complied more than willingly.

She kneeled before Susanna, and her attendants took hold of her legs.

"Blessed be thy loins," she said. "They and their products shall belong to our Master."

She nuzzled her face into Susanna's bushy pubic hair and kissed her there, inserting her tongue between the folds of pink flesh that lay behind. Susanna writhed away.

The woman rose to her feet and said, "Blessed be thy breasts, that their beauty shall be celebrated throughout our Dark Prince's Kingdom in His name." She kissed each of Susanna's breasts, suckling each nipple tenderly with lip and tongue.

"And blessed be thy lips, that they may sing a song of homage to our Dark Lord."

She kissed Susanna deeply, forcefully. Susanna responded by clamping her teeth down on the tongue, severing it in two. The woman pulled away holding her mouth but not voicing her pain. Susanna, disgusted, spat out the hunk of meat she just bit off. The woman took her hand away from her mouth and smiled a grisly grin, then parted her lips and flicked her tongue out at Susanna. Not only was the tongue healed, but it was growing longer. It whipped Susanna's breasts, wetting them with saliva, then sought the more intimate parts of her body.

Susanna squirmed, but Ambrose had taken hold of her other arm now and the attendants continued to linger on her legs, holding them secure.

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The woman squatted down as her tongue snaked between her legs.

“Enough of this,” Ambrose said.

At once, the tongue retreated back to the bed of the woman’s mouth, and the attendants released Susanna’s legs.

“Proceed,” Ambrose said.

The woman continued with the rite.

Susanna looked at Ambrose, and his eyes riveted her to his will. Mere niceties would no longer be enough to compel her acquiescence. It was regrettable, but he had to bend her will with enchantments. In time she would love him again. In time, she might even overcome her newfound fear of him. Until then, however, enchantments would have to suffice.

“And do you, Susanna Harrington of Salem Village, take Ambrose Blayne to be thy husband; to honor and obey him for as long as thy spirit has radiance?”

Susanna. Stop. Do not go with him. You have the means.

The echo of Robert Eames’s words clamored in her head. She thought of her material body again, making a vivid picture of it in her mind. *I have the means*, she kept thinking, knowing from her previous success that she did.

But, try as she did, she could not go back. She strained her mind to its limit. She couldn’t move. She couldn’t even close her eyes to break Ambrose’s spell on her.

Then she felt her mouth open and her vocal cords vibrate. And in that instant, her ears picked up the sound among the cacophony of revelry of her own voice saying: “I do.”

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At that moment, the world was Hell. Susanna was damned. Chaos surrounded her. The celebrants' mingled torments and pleasures resounded louder than before, as if in acknowledgement of her new fallen status.

She hadn't willed those words. They weren't hers. Ambrose must have made her say them some way. But it didn't matter. They were married now; perhaps not in the eyes of God, but married nevertheless, albeit by a ceremony counter to God's design.

The implications and consequences of such a marriage weren't completely accessible to Susanna, but she knew that her soul was in jeopardy, if not already lost forever. What could she do now? Would she ever find grace with the Lord again?

She didn't know, but she was determined to try. At the first opportunity she would escape, and later repent for her poor judgment.

As Ambrose leaned in to give his new bride a kiss, she started her mantra again.

Her body accepted the kiss, though she was unwilling. Ambrose slid his hand down her back, tucking the tips of his fingers between the crevice of her buttocks before continuing down her leg. When it reached the back of her knee, he pulled her thigh up to his waist and plunged his member inside her.

Susanna wept.

The pain she experienced seemed limitless. Though this was her subtle body, she still felt the pain of a broken hymen acutely. But she imagined she would experience a great deal of pain even if she wasn't a virgin. He was big and hot inside her, stretching the limits of the sheath that she was to him.

He orchestrated her lithe body to sing a chorus of sin. A caress. A kiss. A bite. She performed the same acts Odara

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used to perform on him in the same manner she used to perform them. Ambrose remembered all the little sensualities of love which his sister had bestowed upon him. With a casual thought he made Susanna nibble on his earlobe or brush her fingers through his hair the way Odara once did. And for him, Odara was alive again, and he wasn't going to let her go.

He turned her around and fell on her. They hit the ground with a thud. He pushed his cock into her hard, sodomizing her violently in the intoxication of his lust. Susanna cried out. She tried to disconnect herself from the situation as much as possible and hopefully return to her body. She repeated her mantra desperately to herself as he rammed into her from behind: *I must return. I have the means. I must return.*

She could feel it starting to work again, but Ambrose commanded her to look back at him, and her body had to obey.

To her chagrin, she saw not Ambrose, but a thing...an animal. She would have surely thrashed herself to death if she hadn't lost control of her body.

The rapist had the head of a boar, its black snout dripping with snot, its black lips dripping with drool. She could smell its rank animal stench, its unclean body, mingling with the stench of her churning bowels. Its filthy hands kneaded the soft flesh of her hips and ass. She felt its stinking hot breath on the back of her neck. She wished she had never been born to suffer this.

She turned her head away and cringed, quivering with her eyes shut tight, tears streaming down her cheeks.

I must return. I have the means. I must return.

The creature shot its filthy spunk into her bowels, withdrew, smearing shit across her backside, and ejaculated its remaining fluids onto her ass and back.

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I must return. I must.

The creature backed off her and collapsed onto the ground, breathing laboriously, its eyeballs roving perversely, as if drugged.

Susanna was able to move again. She crawled away from the thing, sore and weeping, and wished herself back to her body. This time she returned, snapping back into herself in seconds.

She opened her eyes.

The ointment had worn off. She was no longer paralyzed.

She sat bolt upright and noticed a small amount of blood and excrement coming out from between her legs.

It was not a dream, she thought. It happened. It was real.

Ambrose and Jessica were still lying rigid on either side of her. They looked dead. She had to leave. She had to do it now, before they woke up.

She rose clumsily to her feet, pains in her bowels and loins reminding her it was not a dream, and left the circle.

She saw the robe she had worn when she first came downstairs draped over the back of a chair. There was no way she was going to put that on again. She ran upstairs to get her clothes.

She grabbed a dress and a pair of shoes and ran back down, but waiting at the bottom landing was Anster, and he wasn't going to allow her to leave.

She took another step, and the dog growled.

She stepped down again. This time, Anster barked.

Susanna feared the barking would wake her captors, so she retreated.

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She ran back to her room and closed the door behind her, not knowing what else to do. She walked to the window and peered out into the dark of the back yard and the woods beyond. She didn't want to jump, but she was desperate. Besides, it really wasn't that high up, and the soil below was soft. The consequences of the fall were less threatening than the alternative, so she opened the window and tossed her clothes through it. She stuck her legs out and sat on the sill for a moment, then turned over onto her stomach. The sharp edge of the windowsill hurt as she slid her belly and breasts over it and finally hung from her hands alone.

She took a deep breath and let go. She fell hard and fast, her naked body becoming imbedded with splinters as it brushed up against the clapboards. She hit the dirt heels first, then fell flat on her backside.

She was banged up, but otherwise she was fine; more than fine—she was free.

She sat up facing the house. She was a little stunned and shaken up by her fall, but she was beginning to feel better.

She turned around. Anster sat silently before her, staring. She gasped and flinched, backing into the wall. *How did he get out?* She wondered. All the doors and windows were closed and locked, except for the window she just jumped from, and she knew he couldn't have followed her from there.

She stood trembling, afraid that her slightest movement would set the dog off barking or worse. She stepped aside, and the dog mirrored her motion. He moved when she moved; he stopped when she stopped. She wished she was dressed. She felt all the more vulnerable for her nakedness, but she had no time to dress. She felt it absolutely imperative that she leave immediately, modesty be damned. She could put her clothes on later. Now she needed to act.

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One of her shoes lay less than a foot away from her. It wasn't much, but it might be enough. She crouched down on her haunches cautiously and reached for it, never once taking her eyes off Anster. The dog simply watched, apparently not sensing her intentions. She picked it up, then rose to her feet.

She had never liked the dog. For some reason, she always felt like it was too wild to live among people. There was something very brutal and primordial about it, something she found strongly offensive, and as a consequence she always kept a safe distance away from it. She couldn't bring herself to pet it, and it didn't seem to mind this. Unlike most other domesticated dogs, this one seemed content to be left alone even though it still remained loyal and obedient its master.

Now she was at Anster's mercy, and she was certain she could expect little of that. If the animal so chose, it could bark and alert its master of his bride's escape attempt or it could rend her to bloody chunks and suffer the repercussions of its master's wrath later. In any case, she had to do something.

She took a step toward him, holding out her left hand—the empty one—palm down, as if to stroke him.

He snarled and rose to a defensive posture.

She stopped for a second, then took another step forward.

He snarled again, not giving up any ground.

She took one more step toward him. He barked and snapped at her. She reacted quickly and bashed him in the side of the head with the heel of the shoe, putting out one of the dog's eyes. It howled and yelped for a moment, then delivered a series of furious barking chomps at the hand she extended toward him.

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She was baiting him, and he was falling for it. Every time he came close enough, she slammed him in the head with the shoe, bloodying the animal further.

Blood ran down the side of his face from his maimed eye and torn scalp. The fur around his head and neck grew red and tacky. His snout was gashed in several places, and small flaps of soggy hide dangled loosely as he continued to bark and snap and shake his head from side to side.

Susanna landed one last blow to Anster's skull and it split open. The dog's head unfolded in layers, revealing the dark red lining of its furry skin. The animal became infected with tearing. The rip in its scalp spread down his back and trunk, down his legs and tail. Blood-filled gashes branched out from the fresh wounds and created other avenues of suffering.

Beneath the blood and fur, the anatomy was mutating. Pulp pushed out through muscles; bones cracked and shattered, spewing out marrow; innards roiled and snaked and sputtered. The skull, half-split and fully exposed now but for some blood and slime, creaked, and then crumbled in on itself as the jaw opened wide and dislocated. It cried out miserably, as if begging for God's help, but this creature was a poor damned thing, and God would have none of it.

Susanna held her ears, dropped to her knees, and retched until the sour contents of her stomach roared past her ears and out of her mouth and nostrils in chunks and pale liquid. Her face was covered with cold, stale sweat. Her hands trembled over her ears as she heaved dryly and attempted to block out the beast's horrible cries.

She looked up. There was nothing to indicate that what stood here now was, at one time, a dog.

It stood bloody, contorting and twisting itself inside out, recreating itself. Somehow, it now looked several times larger than it had originally. It stood nearly erect now and

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smoldered with a foul-smelling gas which steamed from the pores of its exoskeleton in a phosphorescent mist that hung about it in an aura.

It wore its bones like armor, bones that breathed noxious gases, bones that suppurated, bones that were malleable. Its head looked like a clam set on its side with a green and lifeless eye on either shell. When it breathed the shells parted slightly, revealing rows upon rows of jagged teeth, then closed again.

It advanced upon her and shrieked, opening the clam widely, revealing the gummy dark meat and tendons inside. Susanna screamed and passed out.

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Roger Harrington's Journal—

3 June—I fear Susanna is gone forever. Sheriff Corwin has called off the search for her and that Reverend Blayne who stole her away. I am losing everyone dearest to my heart, and am helpless to do anything about it. Martha's condition continues to worsen, and if it weren't for that, I would surely be searching for Susanna myself. As it is, I have neglected my chores so that I may care for her. Martha's health is ever declining, and needs to be tended to vigorously, and I fear, even with the Bakers' assistance, that she is soon to follow the same course of degeneration as our beloved Phoebe. No medicine, tincture, or treatment of any brand we have given her seems to yield any positive effect. There is no relief of pain or abatement of symptoms. I don't leave her side for fear of her coming to crisis in my absence. Though there is little I can do for her, I may still be able to comfort her. I do not know how I shall confront her passing, for though it be unbearable to consider, I fear she has not much time left in this World, and I could not tolerate the thought of her dying alone and affrighted in her own bed—our

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bed. If she too leaves me, I think I shall never again sleep in that bed, if I am able to sleep at all. Dear Lord, please—I beg of You—do not take her from me, watch over Susanna, that she be well, and care for my poor Phoebe's spirit in Heaven.

Bridget Bishop, a sturdy and flamboyant woman in her early fifties, stood shackled in the back of a horse-drawn cart, forced to stand up by a guard on either side so the numerous people lining the streets could get a good look at her when the cart rolled by. People from Salem and neighboring towns and villages gathered to see the spectacle. They filtered in from every avenue to get a look: merchants came out of their shops; families, out of their homes; wanderers, from their roads. The spectators froze and fell silent as the horses clopped past, bringing the prisoner steadily to her doom.

The air was still and dead. The horizon, streaked with the sullen shades of a blood-red sunset, set an appropriate backdrop for the execution to come.

As the cart rolled past the great Meeting House, Bridget glared for more than a few seconds at the building and sounds of the structure's unknitting from the inside immediately followed. A few men and women, hearing the noise, ran inside to inspect. They found a plank from one of the walls lying on the opposite side of the room. A man picked it up and carried it outside.

"Goody Bishop did this!" he shouted. "Hurry off with her, and be done with it! Send her wretched soul back to Hell from whence it came!"

The crowd, prompted by the man's outburst, found its voice and clamored.

"Hang the witch!" one man yelled.

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“Bridget Bishop is the Devil’s consort!” another hollered. “She must be put to death!”

“I am no such thing!” Bridget shot back. “I am an innocent woman falsely accused! God Almighty knows the truth, and He shall surely see justice served! Only He can judge me!”

“And so He shall, Goody Bishop!” a bitter young woman proclaimed. “And so He shall, indeed!”

“The wench blinded my boy!” a stern-looking elderly woman cried out. “She must be punished for her sins!”

The crowd roared.

The driver of the wagon, realizing the furor of the crowd, cracked the reins harder and barked at the horses to move faster. As they did so, Bridget heaped curses upon her persecutors in defense. Tears started streaming from her eyes as she was carted away to the outskirts of Salem Town, several people running behind and along side the cart, cursing and spitting at her.

She was utterly alone now. All her friends and family had deserted her; some of them even cheered for her destruction. And there would be no reprieve. She knew that, and at this point that was fine with her. There could be no more forgiveness. There would be no forgetting. Her innocence meant nothing to them. Better that she be hanged and have it over with than to live amongst these people who so obviously hated her to the core of her being.

But she was afraid to die. What would happen to her when the noose choked the last breath from her twitching body? Would she cease to exist all together and be nothing more than rotting meat in the ground—food for worms and their like? If there was a God, would He take her into His arms openly with love and forgiveness? Or, would He turn her away

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from the Gates of Heaven, and cast her headlong into the depths of Hell to serve and be tormented by Satan for time eternal? She hadn't lived the cleanest of lives. Could it be that she very well may be damned? Her stomach did sickly flip-flops at the thought. She felt ill and nauseated.

The wagon made an abrupt turn from the main road and jolted up a narrow path to the rocky terrain of Gallows Hill. Bridget slipped and fell, her knees slamming into the hard wood floor of the cart, jabbing them with sharp daggers of white pain.

Her guards, Nyle Cranley and Wilfred Brown, hauled her up roughly to her feet. Though she chastised herself inwardly for making such a comparison, she couldn't help but be reminded of the Crucifixion and the procession to Golgotha during which Christ had suffered so many indignities. She had been taught about the Crucifixion when she was child and remembered the story now. She regretted comparing herself to God's Son and, being so close to death, she also began to regret the way she had lived her life.

She wept heavily now as they came to the hill's apex.

Gallows Hill, a rocky ridge which overlooked Salem and the sea beyond it, was barren but for a few oaks and locust trees that had managed to become implanted in its shallow soil. It was a place rooted in death, a place where the spirit of death and injustice lingered long. It was a place stained with the blood of unwilling martyrs.

Bridget's vision blurred at the sides then went altogether black, leaving her a narrow tunnel view of the driver and the horses and the scene they approached. Sheriff Corwin, Judge Hathorne, and the other magistrates stood gravely before the largest of the locust trees waiting for her arrival.

The tree was all but dead, only the merest trace of life to be found in its few flourishing limbs, branches sprinkled

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sparsely with tattered brown leaves. A temperate breeze blew in westward from the North River as Bridget surveyed the tree. A sickly heat rolled up the back of her neck into her head. A thick hemp noose had been secured from one of its higher boughs and swayed languidly in the diminishing sunlight as the wind tossed it casually to and fro. A ladder led up to a large bough about twenty-five or thirty feet above the ground and nine or ten feet above the bottom of the dangling noose. On this bough sat Morley Lawson, the hangman, nonchalantly smoking a pipe as he waited for the witch, Bridget Bishop.

The cart stopped suddenly and Nyle Cranley removed his hand from the crook of Bridget's arm and hopped down onto the ground. She turned toward Wilfred Brown and thought of Simon, the man who was forced to help Jesus carry His cross to Golgotha. She squeezed her eyes shut tight and shook her head thinking: *I surely must be damned. I have sinned, and now I must be punished.*

She opened her eyes and looked into his face. He looked kind. His face was gentle. Maybe he was a man she could look to for help.

"Please," she begged. "I am innocent. I know nothing of witchcraft or witches or their ilk. I have hurt no person, nor do I wish to see any soul in pain. Please. Let me go."

Brown's face and grip on her arm tightened.

"It is not my place to do so, Goody Bishop," he said sharply. "And if it were, I would not. You have been found guilty. You *are* guilty. You have lived most wickedly and have done so for many a year. If it were my doing, you would have been put to death long ago."

He paused, examining her face critically. Her mouth had dropped open to a mortified gape. No, this was no Simon of Cyrene. This was no Good Samaritan; no compassionate

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man. This was one of the Devil's henchmen making certain she kept her appointment with him.

"Come, Goody Bishop," he said. "The gallows await you."

Unable to articulate herself, she squirmed to get away from him, but his hold on her was strong and her struggle vain. He shoved her off the cart with rancor—her shackles clanging—into the arms of Cranley. Brown jumped down, then each man took an arm and forced her to accompany them to the ladder which was propped up against the large bough of the great locust tree.

Judge Hathorne cleared his throat as the trio came to a stop, then addressed Bridget directly but formally.

"Bridget Bishop," he said without needing to refer to the document he held in his hands. "You have been tried and found guilty of witchcraft whereby you did torment the said Abigail Williams, Ann Putnam, Mercy Lewis, Mary Walcott, and Elizabeth Hubbard of Salem Village."

As Hathorne said this, another horse-drawn cart rolled up to the top of the hill followed and preceded by the many people who wished to view the hanging. The five maidens whom Hathorne had just mentioned sat inside and were presently helped down by several of the men who had accompanied the wagon uphill. *This is no execution*, Bridget thought. *This is a carnival show, and I am the main attraction.*

Somehow, she was beginning to feel better physically, as if she had come to accept the immediacy of her death, but her legs still felt wobbly. Her whole body trembled, and her tunnel vision didn't abate, but closed in more. She couldn't see anything other than the faces of her persecutors now, and she could only see them one at a time when she looked directly at each one. Her ears buzzed.

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The sensation she had of feeling better fled away, a mere lull in her suffering. She reeled, straining to hear Hathorne over the speckled hissing buzz that razed her ears and brain. Hathorne's face was the only vista her eyes would allow now: a white ball of righteous indignation spewing forth contempt and lies.

Her eyeballs rolled under their lids as consciousness threatened to abandon her, but she wouldn't have it. There wasn't much in this world she could still control, but she was determined to control something. She could still preserve some modicum of dignity and self-respect. She swooned and swayed listlessly, her movements alerting her guards to the possibility of her breakdown, but she wouldn't give them the satisfaction any longer of seeing her harrowed. She clenched her fists into tight, white-knuckled balls and ground her fingernails into the palms of her hands. The pain was a bracing tonic for her. She was revived almost immediately, and once again became alert and animated. The buzzing in her ears faded. Her vision widened. She stood stolid but aware. Hathorne's voice became clear again, and she was almost glad to recognize the words he was speaking as the closing of his speech. She had no desire to have the agony prolonged by listening to the long-winded moral platitudes he was known for. Better to be done with it, she thought. Then rest would come. For better or worse. For salvation or damnation. Rest would come, and rest was bliss.

"It is customary," Hathorne continued, "to ask the accused once more before her sentence is carried out if she would confess her crimes to her community and to God. Do you wish to do so?"

Bridget had her wits about her again and would not relent in professing her guiltlessness.

"I have nothing to confess to you or to God," she said stridently.

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Hathorne balked at her defiance. Even in the face of certain death, she refused to atone for her wickedness.

“Am I to understand that you remain unrepentant?”

“I have nothing to repent,” she replied. “I have done nothing to cause any person harm through witchery or any other device. I am innocent.”

“Then to the gallows with you. And may the Lord Almighty have mercy on your damned soul.”

Corwin nodded to Cranley and he shoved her up the ladder. She complied reluctantly with his proddings, even though she had decided to be brave and die with dignity. There would be no crying, no screaming, no last minute confessions for crimes and sins she never committed.

Lawson reached out and grabbed the rope, pulling it up and coiling it in his hands. He waited.

Bridget climbed the ladder slowly and sullenly with deliberation, her shackled hands sharing one rung at a time, all too aware of what awaited her when she completed her ascent. From below she appeared like a huge inchworm crawling up a steep offshoot, taking its time but steadily covering the distance.

She reached the top of the ladder and looked down at Hathorne, Corwin, and the crowd still gathering at the bottom, looking up at her, gawking. It seemed that she was very high up, higher than she imagined it was when she looked up at Lawson from the ground below. Her stomach felt uneasy. Its sour taste filled her mouth. Though outwardly she appeared stoic, she was terrified. She felt her heart pounding quickly in her chest. Her breathing was rapid and shallow. The buzzing in her ears and the burning at the back of her head and neck returned again, this time with greater intensity. She tried digging her nails into her palms again, but it wouldn't work.

Gallows Hill

"May God have mercy on your souls," she declared drunkenly, her vision narrowing first on the appalled face of Corwin, then on Hathorne's.

Bridget may as well have said, "Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do." She didn't realize until the words had already left her mouth the blasphemy implied by such a proclamation. She huffed and turned up to Lawson, looking at him with bleary eyes.

"Well," she croaked with a dry tongue and a raspy voice. "Be done with it already."

He stuck his pipe between his teeth and took the rope in his hands, grabbing the noose, and allowing the slack to drop. He produced the black hood which he had tucked in the waist of his breeches and placed it over her head.

The black field she now saw only served to feed her sense of uneasiness and isolation. Everything was blotted out. Was this what death was like? It was far from comforting to know that the most dreadful, inevitable fate to ever strike man was so close, but, she realized, it was inevitable. It could be put off and delayed, but it would come, and it would come to everyone sooner or later regardless of sex, age, race, or character. Death, she figured, is natural. Whether she came to accept it in the few moments of life she had left or not, it would take her, and the inevitable would be over for good. But she wanted to accept it, embrace it like a long pined for lover. Then she would know peace. Then she would know contentment.

In an effort to speed the process of acceptance, she attempted to empty her mind of all thought and worry. *Let Death come*, she said inwardly. *Let him ravage me, body and soul, and I shall touch my lips to his and languish in his arms.*

But her thoughts betrayed her and the fear swept over her again with renewed vigor, sharp and cold and ruthless like

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the blade of a sword. She choked on her tears as they came afresh when she felt the hangman slide the noose over her head and under her chin, cinching it snugly around her neck, tightening the knot behind her left ear.

There was no added ceremony, only silence as she stood at the top of the ladder awaiting the final shove she would have to take. At first, after waiting what seemed like eternity, she thought she may be dreaming, dreaming a dream of darkness that never ended. When was the push going to come? Was this some kind of cruel joke? She began to think so, but when Cranley finally shoved her back and buttocks with both hands and turned her off the ladder, groping her in the process, not giving her a chance to ponder the moment, she felt herself plummeting through the naked air and knew for that second that this was the end.

Her body fell hard and fast, using up all the rope's slack in moments. The rope snapped taut in an instant, abruptly cutting short Bridget's descent as the knot cracked hard behind her ear, wrenching and breaking her neck.

The crowd gasped.

Her legs swung out in front of her. She thrashed violently, suspended in the air, jiggling the rope as her legs kicked wildly. The skirt of her dress grew wet as her bowels and bladder failed her. The stench of feces and urine drifted to meet Cranley's nostrils in the warm and still air as he looked at the twitching hanged woman. A light wheezing could be heard coming from her mouth and nose as her body convulsed once, twice, a third time, then suddenly went stiff, allowing the rope to become straight and taut. The wheezing stopped. No one spoke. The only sounds to be heard came from a few sparrows flying over the North River and the creaking of the rope against its bough, burdened by the weight of its victim swaying in a circular manner while the body spun slowly clockwise, then counterclockwise, then clockwise again.

Roger Harrington's Journal—23 July—I have neglected the journal of late. I have not the constitution to bear the events, which I know I must record for posterity's sake, that perhaps future generations who would read these words may somehow avert such barbarities from taking precedence again. This Tuesday past, poor Rebecca Nurse and four other women were brought to Gallows Hill, and hanged from the great locust tree as witches. And now, four days later, they hang there still, stinking of rot. Buzzards have gathered themselves in that damned tree and fly about it picking at the bodies at their leisure. This grieves me verily. I knew Rebecca. She was one of the most benevolent women I have ever been acquainted with. She has helped this family through many a time of hardship, offering nothing short of her own blood to see us fare well. I think it improbable that I should ever see her like again. I do not know the others hanged; only that Sarah Good was of poor disposition and poorer reputation. I cannot vouch for her, but if a woman, such as Rebecca Nurse, could be branded a witch and executed as such, then we may all be in most dire peril. I can only hope that God Almighty will see us through these desperate times anon, and return my Martha to her former state of health and good cheer and bring our daughter back home to us.

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The Summoning

Ambrose sat robed in black on an oriental rug in the center of the drawing room. He was in a lotus position: legs folded Indian style, the thumb and index finger of each hand touching, palms up. His eyes were closed, his posture perfect. His face was clammy with cold sweat. Before him, hovering about twelve inches above his lap, was a dark maroon gemstone about the size of a large apple—a shew stone, he had called it—which emitted a dim white-blue light from its center.

Ambrose had been seated in this posture in the dark for some hours now, meditating, seeing.

He shuddered.

He was surfacing from his trance.

Jessica appeared at the threshold of the room holding a candlestick, bathing Ambrose in the candle's flickering yellow flame, and remained standing there, watching him sadly.

He opened his eyes.

"It has begun," he sighed softly.

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The light in the stone went out and it fell from its suspended position in the air. Ambrose caught it in mid-plummet and drew a deep breath.

“The bloodletting has finally commenced,” he said, exhaling, shaking the shew stone in a fist of triumph.

“Ambrose.”

He turned toward the voice, to the door where Jessica stood.

“Susanna is having the dreams again.”

Ambrose rose from his posture and followed Jessica up to the bedroom he now shared with his bride. As they approached the room, they could hear Susanna crying. He flung the door open. She thrashed her head back and forth in bed, her hair pasted to her face with tears and sweat, saying, “No! No! Don’t...” Her arms flailed. Her legs pumped up and down, kicking the sheets onto the floor.

Ambrose sat down beside her on the bed and brushed the hair from her face.

“Susanna,” he said, grabbing her wrists and pinning her arms to the bed. “Susanna!”

“NO!” she screamed.

“Susanna!” He shook her violently. “SUSANNA!!”

She stopped thrashing, but didn’t open her eyes, didn’t awaken.

Her head lolled over to one side and she fell into a deep, silent sleep.

Ambrose turned away and looked up at Jessica staring down at Susanna’s limp body. Even he, with all his knowledge—arcane and worldly—didn’t know what to make of these nightmares. She shouldn’t be able to remember

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anything of what happened on Walpurgisnacht, consciously or subconsciously, but there could be no other explanation. She was remembering, despite his enchantments, and soon she would probably remember everything. Those memories would find their way into her conscious mind and she would know what he was.

Her subconscious mind was already becoming aware and her conscious behavior reflected that. Though they still made love every night since their wedding, a barrier had been erected between them. He saw a glazed, traumatized expression in her face on occasion, but mostly during, and especially after, they made love. Her lips, more than anything, betrayed the true feelings she was coming to realize she had about him. Her kisses lacked the honest, unbridled passion that had characterized them prior to the wedding, prior to her rape.

Ambrose had to do something. He couldn't—wouldn't—lose her again. He found himself thinking this, then corrected it. No. She wasn't Odara, but it was so often so easy to forget that. Susanna and Odara were so much alike, more so than mere superficial appearances betokened. They were kindred spirits, brought together by one link—him. The similarities extending to every aspect of their personalities, even down to their slightest mannerisms, was uncanny. Ambrose found himself on many occasions about to call Susanna by Odara's name before catching himself in mid-utterance, and he began to wonder if he was really in love with her or just with Odara's memory evoked by her. After pondering the matter for some time, he had concluded that his love for Susanna was genuine. Was it not, after all, the same qualities he loved about Odara that had caused him to fall in love with Susanna? Certainly, the initial physical resemblance had attracted him to her, but it wasn't until he began interacting with her as a person that he ultimately fell in love with her. He couldn't lose her now. He couldn't go through that pain again.

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Determined, he stood up and walked to the door, looking back at Susanna's slumbering body, then at Jessica.

"Stay with her, and watch over her," he said, picking up a candlestick from the table by the bed and inserting a fresh one.

"Where are you going?" she asked as he lit his candle from the flame of hers.

He looked at her gravely. An expression fell across his face which she had never seen before. It was worry.

"I have much work to do before sunrise. Stay with her. I know it is difficult for you, but you would be doing me a great service. Please. Take care of her. For me."

He left.

Jessica couldn't refuse such a request from him so tenderly put. She felt sympathy for him. She knew all too well the pain of losing someone close, the pain she felt everyday, knowing Ambrose no longer loved her, if he ever really did.

He loved *her*, the ungrateful wench on the bed. Jessica would kill her if she didn't think it would hurt him; if she wasn't so afraid of him, and what he would do and was capable of doing; if she wasn't so afraid of losing any chance to have him back in her arms and in her bed.

She would honor his request to the letter. Perhaps the time would come when he would realize that Susanna was really no good for him. Perhaps her loyalty would pay off and he would realize she was the best woman for him. Perhaps... Perhaps...Perhaps...

She placed the candlestick on the table, draped a blanket over the armchair standing against the wall by the door, and sat down for her vigil. She was tired and knew it would be

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difficult to keep her heavy eyelids from closing on her, but she would make the effort and hope Ambrose returned soon.

He certainly seemed concerned, she found herself thinking. But was this really necessary? Why should this be different than any other night? Susanna is sleeping soundly enough to be mistaken for dead, and the nightmares have passed already. Surely this is pointless.

And thinking so, Jessica fell asleep herself.

Susanna awoke with a start and sat up. She saw Jessica sleeping slouched in the armchair and wondered why she was there and why Ambrose wasn't in bed. Something must have happened, she thought, maybe something bad that he didn't want to worry her about.

She stepped out of bed and thought to wake Jessica and ask her what was going on, but decided not to disturb her. She looked too peaceful, and even though they weren't really getting along, Susanna harbored no resentment toward her. Jessica was just jealous, that was all. In time, that would pass. Perhaps they would even become friends.

Susanna looked at the candle. It still burned, but it was low. She replaced it with a new one and left the room, closing the door quietly behind her. She went looking for Ambrose. She still felt strangely, inexplicably detached from him—almost afraid of him—but he was her husband now, and to him her loyalty belonged.

She descended the stairs slowly, gradually becoming more alert as the lingering effects of sleep drifted away. But although her awareness was getting sharper, she was confused. It was difficult to think clearly. Too many thoughts bombarded her mind. Too many emotions flooded her head, changing the

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blood in her veins to ice. *I should not be here*, she thought. *I don't belong here, but with my family in Salem.*

Her inner eye flickered with a lewd montage: howling beasts; naked bodies; debauchery; murder; sin. They were fleeting images that made no sense to her but mindless horror. A shudder crept up her spine, and the images and her memory of them were gone. But the horror gripped her and refused to let her go.

She padded to the bottom of the stairs and made a cursory inspection of all the rooms, but found nothing but emptiness and silence, drear and profound silence. She could hear every movement she made, every rustling of her gown, every breath she took. It unnerved her to no end.

She found herself standing outside in front of the house. Though she wasn't aware of having done so, she had opened the door and stepped into the cool night breeze. The candle had guttered out some time ago, and now she stared at it dumbly as if some law of nature had been broken.

The moon was full and bright, thoroughly bathing everything in its pure light and washing most of the color from the trees and surrounding landscape.

Out here, things weren't quite as quiet as they had been indoors. Owls hooted. Crickets chirruped. Trees swayed in the wind, their leaves seeming to whisper dreadful secrets in the night. Flocks of bats fluttered overhead searching for food. And a peculiar murmuring droned on far away.

For some reason, Susanna's curiosity quelled her fear and she went in search of the murmuring's source.

At first, it was difficult to determine which direction the sound came from. The wind seemed to be carrying it to diverse places at the discretion of its whim, and like so many phantoms, it vanished just as she became confident; she was

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closing in on it. However, she was able to speculate fairly well as to the general vicinity of the sound's origin by noting the limited range of distance she had covered in pursuit of that sound.

Now, as she headed in that direction, she knew she had finally made the right choice, and was afraid. But her fear wasn't paralyzing and didn't hamper her quest. Her inquisitiveness was superior to her fears, and wouldn't be sated until a discovery had been made. Of course, she was anxious about what she might be likely to find, but, she reasoned, if she stayed a safe distance away and remained quiet, what harm would there be in that? Besides, Ambrose may be out here. Even though she was now sure that she did fear him, he was still her husband and deserved to be respected as such. If he was injured or needed her help, she would have to oblige him.

Her gait progressed from a walk to a stride—dropping the candlestick—to a sprint, and soon her chest was heaving and burning, her heart beating faster, her head pounding. The fresh sweat of physical activity mingled on her skin with the dry, stale perspiration of her nightmares.

Her run was producing results, though. She was covering ground, and not in vain. A strange murky glow loomed in the boughs of the trees ahead over the next hill, and there could be no doubt that the murmuring was coming from there. It was much louder now. The fluctuations in the glow's brightness coincided exactly with the tones of the sound.

Susanna stopped to catch her breath and get her bearings. She couldn't afford to be without her wits. She needed to be cautious. She needed to be alert. But more urgently, she needed to know what was happening and why. She had never seen nor heard of anything like this before, and if what lay in wait for her on the other side of that hill was anything the equal of this phenomenon, she may be in the direst of jeopardies.

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She knelt down and closed her eyes for a moment to compose herself. Her breathing was more laborious than she had first realized. She huffed slowly and deeply in an effort to regulate it, but it was difficult. Had she really run so far so fast that she should be exhausted already? She didn't think so. In fact, she knew that couldn't be the case since she was very fit and knew it. No. It was more than the running that had her breathing so heavily. It was her state of mind. Her anxiety was causing her body to rebel against her, and the more she tried to fight it and move on, the worse her condition became.

She began to hyperventilate, and her anxiety doubled as a result. She had seen this happen to someone before, to Peter Willard when they brought him to the dungeon where she had been imprisoned. Two guards dragged him kicking and wailing in shackles past her cell when his body suddenly fell limp. He began coughing violently and gasping faster and more desperately.

"Help him!" she had yelled. "In the name of God, will you help him!"

But the Cranley brothers didn't know what to do, and it wasn't long before Willard's face turned a bluish-gray color and his eyes bulged frog-like in their sockets.

"Help him!"

But Nyle and William simply stood by and watched the small frail body before them as it heaved, twitched, vomited, and died. That memory haunted her. She would never be able to forget that poor, wretched figure curled up like a dead rat on the dingy dungeon floor.

But was the same fate about to befall her? As she remembered Mr. Willard's death and its similarity to her present condition, she grew even more distressed. Her breathing continued to worsen. No matter how much air filled her lungs it didn't seem sufficient. She felt dizzy and nauseated.

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Calm, she thought—willed. I must be calm. I must be calm again.

But her efforts to sooth herself failed. Her eyes rolled back inside her head, and she collapsed onto the dewy grass.

When she awoke, it was still night. She couldn't have slept long, she knew, since she could hear the murmuring droning on as it had before. She raised her head and looked to the hill. The glow was still there in the trees, waiting for her to discover its source.

Susanna checked her breathing, and after a moment sighed with relief. She didn't know what had caused the attack which led to her unconsciousness, but she was glad it was over. Now she could concentrate on satisfying her curiosity.

She stood up and advanced toward the hill ahead. The murmuring grew much louder than she expected it would, although she did expect it to be loud since it had traveled such a considerable distance through the woods.

The base of the hill was before her now. It was steep and would be a tough climb for her, but she couldn't allow herself to be defeated, having come this far. Determined, she leaned forward and proceeded with her ascent.

The hill proved to be an admirable challenge for her, but she endeavored to be every bit the equal of it. She clambered up the hillside, seizing weeds, roots, shrubs, whatever she could find to lug her weary body upward as her feet probed for purchase on some rock in the earth.

Her breathing quickened, and for a moment she feared she would faint again and go tumbling down the hill. She looked down over her shoulder at the ground below. She had already climbed high enough for a fall to be crippling or fatal, and the thought further robbed her of breath. She turned back to the wall of dirt and rock, clung to it and closed her eyes.

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Calm, she thought, *Calm*.

This time she didn't faint. Her breathing slowed and she continued upward.

She was almost at the top now and received a whiff of gritty fetor which awakened a profound loathing in her. It smelled like earthy rot, a foul stench of decay which made the air thick and heavy. A lump swelled in her throat as if the rancid air were clotting in her windpipe, but it didn't hinder her breathing, and she was able to stave off the nausea the lump sought to provoke.

Her limbs were tired and wobbly, but she managed to inch her way to the top of the hill high enough to peer over the peak. At once, all her senses were assaulted. Stenches choked her, rupturing blood vessels, making her eyes burn and tear, causing ample amounts of mucous and blood to run from her nostrils. Her skin grew cold and clammy with a sickening grime.

The droning was deafening, reverberating throughout her trembling body, but the most abhorrent offense was to her eyes and what they now beheld. Susanna turned away, retching and heaving, covering her mouth with her hand.

The scene which caused her illness did so with revelation and horrid remembrance as well as the incomprehensible conglomeration of malformed anatomy to which she was now made witness.

Ambrose was in a firelight congress with a creature so vile and ugly that the very sight of it threatened to unhinge the doors of her mind and pitch her headlong into madness.

Somehow she held on. Even in the presence of that thing—with its writhing tendrils, multiple mouthed breasts, and exposed and translucent innards which displayed the course

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of its flowing parasite ridden excrement—she held on to her sanity.

It took all the strength she could summon to keep from crying out or losing consciousness.

The creature's ribs were cracked and broken and jutted out jaggedly from its back in a tangle of splintered bone and oozing marrow. Ragged flaps of colorless flesh cleaved to the luminous red eye which was its head and blazed brighter when it spoke. Broad plates of iron, which clanged together when it moved, festooned its densely muscled flanks, making up the whole of its exoskeleton.

It was obviously a creature of some intelligence, since Ambrose seemed to be conversing with it, but Susanna couldn't understand its or Ambrose's part of the dialogue. They appeared to be speaking in tongues or some foreign language she had never heard before.

She realized she never knew Ambrose, and never loved him. Seeing him interrogate the beast like this yanked her memories of Walpurgisnacht from the trauma and enchantment induced abyss which he had created, and panic swept through her. The horror of her brutal deflowering flooded her mind in a torrent, and before she could get her bearings and stop herself, she screamed.

She screamed like she never screamed before in her life.

Ambrose and the creature turned toward her. Her eyes widened. She knew her error in giving voice to her terror and felt exposed and naked. Her mouth fell open and she raised her hands to it briefly, forgetting her precarious position on the hill, and slipped.

She rolled down the slope in choppy thumps, bouncing and crashing into what felt like every rock and thorny

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shrub on the hillside. Her mind a blank, and her vision a blur of earth, stones, sky, and vegetation as she plummeted. As she tumbled, she caught a few glimpses of Ambrose's silhouette at the top of the hill, forecasting the muddy glow of the creature behind him.

"Susanna!" he cried out, but gravity was still taking her away from him.

But death didn't come. She hit the bottom with an uneventful thud and stopped. When she finally dared movement, pains jabbed at her from every side. She had taken quite a beating, but she had to move. She had to get away as fast as she could. She looked up the hill. It was dark there now.

She tried to rise to her feet, but a sharp pain notified her that she must have twisted her left ankle during the fall and another pain told her that her right shoulder was dislocated. She let out a small whimpering cry, more in fear of what her injuries meant in terms of her ability to escape than from the injuries themselves.

But injuries or no, she had to try. She stood up and began hobbling, holding her bad arm with her good one. Far away she could hear him calling her name: "Susanna!"

She figured he must be coming down the far side of the hill. That was good. That gave her a better chance of getting away. She continued deep into the woods, the deeper the better. If she couldn't get away, at least she could hide.

"Susanna!" he called again more urgently.

Susanna limped faster through the woods. The moon, the fullness and brightness of which she had been so glad to take advantage of earlier, now seemed like a curse and a traitor, allowing Ambrose easier access to her.

As she fled deeper into the woods, the trees appeared to grow larger and closer together, giving Susanna the added

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coverage she needed to elude her pursuer should he get this far.

It was strangely comforting to be this deep in the mysterious glory of the forest, amongst the pleasurable sounds and scents of nature, but Ambrose's voice was getting louder, and she didn't know how much longer she could keep up her present pace. She continued to run blindly away from his ever more urgent calls. Her lungs burned. Her body ached. A stitch stabbed her sharply on one side of her chest just beneath her ribcage.

Susanna stopped. She was exhausted and didn't want to risk fainting again. She took refuge in a small alcove of brambles and tangled weeds. It concealed her body quite well, she thought, despite the white nightgown which acted as a beacon in the moonlight.

She squatted there quietly, trying to regulate her breathing in short measured huffs so as not to alert Ambrose of her whereabouts. She could see him now through the twigs and prickly leaves. At that moment, the pounding in her head, which denoted the regularity of her pulse, stopped, snatched a breath, then continued. She was certain her heart had skipped a beat. She didn't know much about warlocks or magicians, but she had a terrible thought that maybe he had the power to find her through magical means. Her fear waxed. She cupped a hand over her mouth to stifle the scream hammering madly against the back of her throat for release.

Wide-eyed and blinkless, she glared at Ambrose standing in a clearing just yards away, turning to every quarter in search of her. His gaze fell in her direction. He seemed to be looking directly at her. She was paralyzed.

He took one step toward her, then another. As he advanced slowly, methodically, all she could do was hope he was merciful and killed her for discovering what she already

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knew. But she didn't believe he intended to kill her under any circumstances. His intentions were far more diabolical than that.

What if he takes my memory from me as he must have done before? She thought. What if he takes my memory from me with enchantments and makes me do things?

Susanna squeezed her eyes shut and prayed inwardly. She could hear Ambrose's footsteps getting louder and closer. But he walked and walked and kept walking. As the sound of his footsteps faded away, Susanna opened her eyes and looked around. She couldn't see him anywhere. It was as if one moment he was there and the next he simply vanished.

She stayed crouched there for a long time, almost comatose with terror. It was difficult to believe she had been fortunate enough to be overlooked. She was certain he would find her and do unmentionable things to her.

A vagrant wisp of wind howled and blew her hair across her face and forehead. It cooled her flesh and released her from her stupor. The stars and moon didn't look so sharp in the sky now. Dawn was coming, gray and sleepy.

She rose to her feet. Her injuries hurt even more now as she regained the circulation in her legs and they awakened with the painful tingling sensation of countless needles sticking all over.

She was still wary of moving from her sanctuary, but she couldn't stay there forever, so she left.

She hobbled through the woods, hoping to come to a familiar road once she was outside the perimeter of the forest. She knew from the direction of the lighter sky where the sun was rising, so she proceeded southward.

The first pangs of hunger crept inside her belly as she walked like a wounded soldier toward the babbling brook up

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ahead. It had been a long night, and she was hungry and thirsty and tired. She didn't want to think of the long journey home, a journey she was sure she would have to walk the full extent of on a bad foot and an empty stomach, but it was a journey that had to be made.

She didn't know when she would find the next body of fresh drinking water, so she would have to stop a while and slake her thirst, and perhaps drink a bit more than she needed in preparation for the long walk awaiting her. The lining of her mouth felt like cotton. Rest and refreshment were very welcoming.

She clambered down the bank to the water, crouched down on her haunches, and dipped her hands in. It was icy and bracing. She never thought anything so cold could feel so good against her skin. She cupped her hands together and greedily scooped the water into her mouth, slurping it savagely.

She drank for a long time until she was full and a little bloated. Twilight spread across the countryside, giving everything a bluish hue. She decided to drink a little more, just to be sure. As she bent over to bring her hands to her mouth again, she saw the faint image of a man rippling in the water and looked up.

She gasped.

It was the charred and partially skinned and eaten corpse of Phillip Hawks, staring at her with its scolded, black eyes.

"Susanna," it croaked with stiff, beckoning arms.

She made a panicked sound which was not quite a scream or a gasp this time, but something in between. Susanna fell back onto the bank and clawed her way to the top, in spite of her injuries. She started to run, glancing over her shoulder. Before she had time to turn back to the direction she was

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running in, she slammed into something rigid, but muddy. She backed away, pushing off it, and glared into the rotted black face of Phillip's brother, John, maggots wriggling in the fetid, spongy flesh of his cheeks.

Susanna looked down at her hands. They were buried in the decaying muscles of his chest and pressing against his cracked and slimy ribs. She could feel his soft cool lungs filling the spaces between them as he breathed.

She released a shrill scream and turned to run, but tripped and fell instead.

"Susanna," he groaned pathetically, creaking his head to one side as if begging for sympathy for his wretched state. "Help us. You must help us."

If she wasn't so utterly terrified of him, she might have felt pity for him at that moment, but she did not.

"Begone!" she yelled, holding her good arm up in front of her face defensively while her bad arm remained limply at her side, numb and dead. "Please...go. Leave me."

"You must help us," a raspy voice said to her from behind. Susanna turned around and saw a woman standing beside Phillip Hawks. She too was a cadaver, and the dark bruise around her throat and the way her head dangled from her broken neck onto her shoulder made it apparent how she died.

Susanna looked at the woman's puffy, blackened face and knew she was looking at Bridget Bishop. (Everyone knew Goody Bishop. There wasn't a soul in Salem Town or Salem Village that hadn't heard of her excesses.)

Susanna was surrounded by the three of them now, but they made no efforts to come near her.

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What is this? she thought. *Am I going mad? The dead can no more walk and speak than a tree or a rock. Is this a dream? Has this all simply been some terrible nightmare from which I may awaken?*

"This is no dream," Phillip said, answering her unspoken question. "And you are certainly not mad."

"How..." was all Susanna could say. Then she moved her shoulder. It was all she needed to do. The pain that came was immediate, excruciating, and very real.

"What are you?" she asked Bridget, knowing she had no choice but to speak with these dead, somehow feeling certain they needed her far too much to dare hurting her. "What happened to you?"

"We have been murdered unjustly," Phillip said. "And your husband is the cause."

"How did you know we were wedded?"

"The dead know many things," Bridget replied.

"Well," Susanna snapped back at her, irritated at the obscurity of Bridget's answer. "I do not know the how's and why's of these men's passings, but I have little doubt that yours was far from unjust."

"It is true, child," Bridget said. "I did not live the cleanest of lives. I am not exempt from the Lord's judgment, but I have been falsely branded a witch and put to death as such. If mayhap I had been allowed to live, I may have changed my ways and treaded the path of the righteous and the wise. But what am I now?—A dead soul damned to walk the earth."

"The Reverend Blayne—" John added. "Your husband is in league with the Devil and his infernal legions and practices the damned art of black magic, with which he has the whole province of Salem bewitched into hurling false accusations and

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slander at one another. Innocent people are being tried and executed as witches, and their spirits can find no peace in the earth.”

“We trod the earth undead,” Bridget continued.
“Dead, but living—tormented and aware.”

“Blayne keeps the souls of his victims captive,” Phillip said, “and they cannot rest until he is burned to death at the stake and the souls set free. Until then, we shall suffer miserably.”

“But I do not know what I can do,” Susanna said. “I am affrighted by him. I know not how I may help. Surely, there must be those better suited to the task.”

“Only you can stop him,” John said. “There is only you. There are no others.”

“But—”

“They come,” Bridget whispered to the others.

Everyone looked at her nervously.

“Who comes?” Susanna asked.

“Do you not hear them?” she hissed. “Do you not feel them? Do you not feel their grime poisoning the air?”

“Dear Lord. They come.”

“Who comes?” Susanna asked again.

“The demons,” Phillip answered. “Blayne’s demons have caught up with us.”

“We...m-must...g-go,” John stammered. “Now!”

But before they could, half a dozen cackling demons materialized in the air above them in all their ugliness, swooping at them with tarnished fangs and blood-stained talons.

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Susanna and her undead companions cried out as the creatures passed by and picked at their heads like hungry vultures circling a slaughter.

“No!” Bridget shrieked as a pair of demons dove at her: one, hooking her rotting crotch through her dress and an eye socket with its claws; the other, clamping its fangs down on her throat while tearing at her breasts and inserting its fingers between her ribs, hauling her squirming body up into the ashen sky.

“Bridget!” Phillip cried out as he lurched awkwardly to her assistance only to be seized by three other demons in a similarly brutal manner. He fought against them to the best of his degenerating ability, but they still dragged him skyward; and just as suddenly as the demons appeared from nothing, the seven flying figures dissolved to nothing.

“You must help me!” John begged Susanna as the last of the creatures made its final descent on him. “I do not wish to go back there!”

But Susanna didn’t know what to do, if she could do anything.

The demon attacked John Hawks from behind as he stooped over to avoid it and plunged its paws into his back and carried him away by the column of his spine.

Susanna stood in the clearing, dumbfounded, as she watched John Hawks watching her with an expression of loss and terror covering his mildewed face that she knew she would never forget.

And in that moment, he and the demon were gone.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Home

Roger Harrington's Journal—

22 August—Martha is dying. Doctor Griggs has, just now, confirmed this. He does not know how much longer she may live, but I fear it is a short time. She is sleeping peacefully now, and as I gaze upon her I find it most difficult and distressing to believe that she may have closed her eyes for the last time. O, how I have dreaded this. For the longest time I have prayed and tried to hope she would get well again, but now I sit here staring at my beloved, slumbering in what I know will be her death bed, helpless and soon to be alone. I, myself, am feeling weak of late, from illness or lack of food and sleep, I know not which. The strain of the events of this horrid year has most certainly drained me of all vitality. But, I have little concern for myself these days. If Martha passes on, I should not wish to go on without her. Salem is in an unbearable state of chaos. Several days ago, five more people were hanged as witches. Two of them were men I knew and respected. They were no more in league with Satan than I. I should not want to live alone in this house only to bear witness to more cruelty and suffering.

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Susanna stumbled down the narrow dirt road she had found after an hour's walk from the brook and the site where the demons had snatched Ambrose's undead victims. It was midmorning now, or so she figured. It was hard to tell since the sky remained uniformly ashen.

Nevertheless, it was a hot, muggy, August morning, for which she suffered more. Her ankle was no better; in fact, it was worse, and her greatly pronounced limp attested to that. The condition of her shoulder had also worsened, and not only couldn't she move that arm now, but she couldn't feel it at all. She felt faint and listless. Her mind had shut down some miles back, and the road was all she could see or remember. It was as if she had been on this road her whole life, and she yearned for a change of scenery almost as much as she did a drink of water. All she saw were endless stretches of dusty road surrounded by walls of trees. *When will it end?* She wondered. *When will it all end?*

I shall never be able to get back, she thought. I will die out here of thirst and starvation, and the buzzards will get to me before my body is found.

She resigned herself to the defeat of the grave. It made no sense to spend the last of her living hours trudging along this desolate road in hope of getting back to Salem or finding a town along the way. She was doomed. Her body and mind were telling her she was doomed. She could feel it in the marrow of her bones.

She sat down on the shoulder of the road and prepared to die. She fell back, exhausted. Before long, the dreary gray morning faded to black.

Ambrose was back in the drawing room using the shew stone again, but he was tense and knew it didn't work that well under such conditions. He had to be calm. He tried to

relax using techniques he learned in the East, but he couldn't, and the visions wouldn't come—only vague, incoherent images: a man driving a horse and wagon; an old crone; a small, unfamiliar village. Susanna was in none of these scenes, and it distressed him. It could simply be that he was having difficulty making the stone work, but it usually meant... It usually meant the person he was searching for was dead.

He had scoured the woods looking for her and found nothing. What did it mean? To where could she have disappeared?

Ambrose's eyes sprang open and the stone went dim and fell into his lap.

"DAMN!" he growled, grabbing the stone. He looked upward—heavenward. "DAMN YOU!" he screamed.

God was mocking him, he knew, and he was furious.

He almost hurled the stone through the window in his anger, but thought better of it.

He had to calm himself and try the stone later.

Edward Colton traveled south along Sutter's Road with the new shipment of tea, lumber, and other essential goods he had picked up in Portsmouth. He was returning home from his weekly journey when he saw something on the side of the road just ahead. He tugged the reins of the two horses drawing his wagon. The animals slowed down and stopped, bucking the wagon slightly forward. Edward dropped the reins and hopped down.

It was well past noon now, the sky retaining its bland, uniformly gray shroud. Edward's shirt was pasted to his back with sweat. It was hot and he was uncomfortable, almost as

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much emotionally as physically now that he realized the thing on the side of the road wasn't a thing at all, but a woman.

He ran over to her and knelt down at her side.

She was in bad shape. Her face was dirty and covered with cuts and bruises, and from what he could tell, so was the rest of her body. But he remained every bit the gentleman and didn't seek to find out.

She was clad in nothing but a simple nightgown, the hem of which rode up just beneath her slightly bent knees. Her legs were as badly banged up as her face, if not more so. He looked at that face now as a light summer breeze blew several strands of her hair gently across it. He brushed the strands away with the back of his hand and examined her face more critically.

Her lips were chapped and her eyes sunken with dark circles beneath them, but otherwise she was beautiful. Her skin was smooth and devoid of lines. She could be no older than twenty-four or twenty-five, but Edward figured she was much younger.

For a moment, all he could do was admire her beauty and wonder what events led to her lying battered on the side of this lonely stretch of road. Then he blinked and shook his head.

What am I doing? he thought, chastising himself. *The girl is most plainly hurt—quite possibly dead—and I am...*

Her chest seemed as motionless as the rest of her body. It would be too difficult to find out if she was breathing by holding the palm of his hand up to her mouth and nose; the breeze was too strong.

He removed his spectacles and pressed his ear against her chest and listened.

For a moment...nothing. Then...a heartbeat. It was faint, but it was a heartbeat all the same. With his head pressed to her chest, he could feel it rising and falling ever so softly. Edward closed his eyes and let out a sigh of relief. He lay like that for several seconds, finding pleasure in resting his head between her breasts. *She is beautiful*, he heard himself thinking. *She is so beautiful*.

He opened his eyes and sat up, sliding his spectacles back in place.

He knelt down on his knees and was about to lift her when he realized there was something peculiar about the way her right arm looked. It seemed askew. He reached over and felt it, then withdrew as if he had touched something slimy and repulsive.

“Well,” he said, standing up. “I don’t know how it happened, but if I were in your present condition, young lady, I would not wish to be awake when that arm is popped back in place.”

He stepped across her and sat down, kicking off his shoes.

“Please forgive me, young Miss,” he said, sticking one of his feet under her armpit and taking hold of her arm, “but it has to be done.”

He drew a deep breath and pulled. At first, it didn’t seem to budge, so he pulled harder, and that was all it took. The arm shifted up slightly, then slid quickly back into place.

“See, Miss. All better.”

And with that bit of work done, Edward picked the young woman up and laid her down in the back of his wagon, fastening her snugly to some lumber with a rope so she wouldn’t be tossed around in transit.

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“Not to worry, Miss,” Edward said to his new passenger in the back as he picked up the reins. “You’re in capable hands. I shall see that you get well and are well taken care of.”

Edward cracked the reins. The horses kicked and clopped their hooves into the dirt, and the wagon rolled down the road.

“Where am I?” were the first words out of Susanna’s mouth when she opened her eyes and found herself in the strange bed of an unfamiliar room.

“Why, you are in Angelwood, of course,” a gaunt, old woman replied.

Susanna looked up into her kind, wrinkled face.

“Who are you?” Susanna asked.

“I am Elethea. I am Edward’s mother.”

“Edward?”

“Yes, my son. He found you lying along Sutter’s Road. You were really in such a state. You could have died out there. Not many people travel that road anymore, just Edward as far as I know. You are quite fortunate. He only uses that road once every week when he rides up to Portsmouth for supplies.”

At first, it took Susanna a while to realize what had happened, but then she remembered. She had been sure she was destined to die on that road, but fate obviously had another destiny for her to fulfill. What it was she wasn’t yet certain of, but having been snatched from the grip of Death, she knew it was important.

“Tell me, child,” Elethea said. “What is your name?”

“Susanna...Susanna Harrington.”

“Well, Susanna, can you tell me what happened to you that you were found in such a wretched state?”

Susanna parted her lips as she was about to speak, but hesitated. She hesitated, not because she failed to trust this woman -- she did. She trusted Elethea more than people she had known during the entire course of her life. There was something about this woman that compelled a person to trust her. Something about the eyes. They were kind hazel eyes that beamed with goodness. There was nothing particularly striking about them, but they drew you in and filled you with warmth. No. Susanna didn't hesitate for lack of trust. Not even for fear that the woman wouldn't believe her. Susanna hesitated because, for a moment, she had actually forgotten. She didn't want to remember, but she knew she had to, and this time there were none of Ambrose's enchantments to prevent her from recalling the events of the past six months.

She hesitated an additional moment simply because she had difficulty believing what had happened to her herself. It all seemed like a nightmare, and it seemed like forever since it had all happened.

Susanna squeezed her eyes shut tight, wrinkling the flesh of her lids as she choked back her tears. Remembering was painful. She shook her head slightly from side to side, wishing this was a nightmare and that she would awaken soon and everything would be all right again. But when she opened her eyes and saw Elethea looking down at her with concern, she had to face the realization that she hadn't been dreaming, and she wept.

Her sister was still dead; she was still a refugee; and Ambrose was still her husband and the warlock who had raped her at the Witches' Sabbat. Nothing would ever be the same again.

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“My husband...” she sobbed. “My husband...is a warlock... He bewitched me...into marrying him...and I...I ran away.” Then she broke down completely.

“There there, child,” Elethea said, pulling Susanna up to her bosom and cradling her there as she swayed with her back and forth. “All will be well again, child. All will be well again. I promise.”

They stayed like that for several minutes, then Susanna’s tears finally began to abate.

Elethea drew back a little so she could look into Susanna’s face.

“Where are you from, Susanna? Where does your family live?”

“Salem,” Susanna replied, sniffing. “Salem Village.”

“Well, not to worry, dear. You shall be home soon enough. Edward will take you home when you are well to travel, and then you will be with your family again.”

Susanna nodded. Her eyelids looked heavy, so Elethea laid her down, and Susanna fell asleep.

Elethea came downstairs with a troubled expression on her face.

“How is she?” Edward asked, waiting impatiently at the bottom of the stairs.

“She has been through a terrible ordeal, but I think she will be well in a few days.”

“Has she said anything?”

“Well,” Elethea sighed. “She says her name is Susanna Harrington of Salem Village...”

“What is it, mother? You look disturbed.”

“The girl told me she was bewitched into marrying a warlock. She told me it was he she fled from.”

“A...warlock?”

“Yes.”

“Do you believe her?”

“I am afraid I do. She is weak, but not delirious. And it is not my inclination to think she is mad.”

Edward’s mouth fell open a little. This was more than he had been prepared for.

“I had better inform the magistrate. If this be true, then the warlock may come here to look for her.”

“Yes. That is a most prudent idea. Inform Judge Townsend. I cannot send the poor child away in her present condition. I should think she will need several days to recover from her injuries, then we can send her back to her family. Let us hope this warlock does not come here to look for her.”

“I shall not be long,” Edward said, then left to see the judge.

It was midmorning and Ambrose was agitated. No matter how hard he tried he couldn’t conjure Susanna’s image in his mind’s eye. He knew he would have to resort to artificial means in order to achieve the proper state of mind necessary to perform the operation.

He put the stone down and unfolded his legs from the position he had been seated in for the better part of three days since Susanna’s disappearance, getting up only when the discomfort of thirst or excretory movements necessitated. He was adept at ignoring hunger pangs and therefore didn’t eat.

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He didn't have time to eat. He had to concentrate on finding Susanna, whether she was dead or alive.

He stood up and went upstairs. He went to the bedroom, passing Jessica's room on the way, but he ignored her.

Jessica was inside, lying on her bed awake, miserable as always since Ambrose first met Susanna. Her eye was black and swollen. Ambrose had hit her when he returned to the house without Susanna, and he hadn't talked to her since. She knew better. She had been weak and let Susanna get away when he expressly requested her to watch her while he was out. She had failed him, and now he was punishing her by shunning her. Jessica realized this was a light punishment considering his substantial powers and capabilities, but she was sure she would rather be flogged or killed than endure this kind of suffering. After thinking about it for a moment, she knew if Susanna was never found or found dead, she may very well receive such punishments.

Jessica cried quietly into her pillow.

Ambrose walked over to the dresser and opened the cedar wood box seated on top. Inside lay his pipe and an ample supply of opium, enough to kill three or four men. He removed the pipe and tore off a small hunk of the sticky, black drug and stuffed it into the bowl of the pipe.

He didn't want to try the stone this way—the visions came more readily but were less reliable because of the intoxication and the effects of the drug on his perception—but he felt he had no choice. If he didn't find her soon—if he didn't act soon—it could be too late. For all he knew, it was already too late. He had every reason to suspect she was dead.

Ambrose stuck the mouthpiece between his teeth and lit a match. He brought the flame to the bowl and sucked then released. He did this several times until the opium was ignited

and smoldering sweetly. He inhaled deeply as he looked at the glowing red-black ball of opium burning in the bowl, holding the smoke in his lungs for as long as a minute each time.

As he puffed away, he thought of Susanna. If anything ever happened to her, he would never be able to forgive himself...or Jessica. He loved Jessica too, but she would most definitely have to be punished if Susanna came to harm. There was no excuse for allowing Susanna to get out. Mere reprimands would simply not suffice.

The drug was taking effect. A perverted, uncontrollable smile rose behind his beard. He staggered for a moment in the middle of the room before backing up and plopping down on the bed. He laughed lightly, then berated himself for doing so. This was the first time in months he had decided to smoke opium, and he had underestimated its potency and overestimated his dosage. He was far more inebriated than he had intended to get, but there was nothing that could be done about it now.

He leaned over and dropped the pipe on the night table, ejecting the dark clump onto the tabletop. It smoked for a few minutes, and then went out.

Ambrose swooned, his eyes half lidded. He knew he was far too intoxicated to even walk. He had left the shew stone downstairs. There was no way he would be able to use it anyway. He needed to maintain the right posture and that was impossible at the moment.

He lay down on the bed and closed his eyes. He hadn't slept for four days now, and it took a Herculean effort to stay awake. He couldn't use the shew stone, but perhaps he could travel in his subtle body to find her.

Normally, Ambrose would describe a circle of protection around the place he planned to project from to keep the demons away should he be seen, but he was so intoxicated

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he neglected this precaution. He was aware of the possible consequences of leaving himself so vulnerable, but he could already feel his body separating as a result of his drugged state, and he was anxious to see Susanna again and know she was well. It wasn't long before his subtle body parted from his corporeal one and floated to the ceiling and beyond.

All he ever had to do to find someone when he was in his subtle body was think of that person and in an instant he was there. This time, however, he was having difficulty. He just drifted above the treetops aimlessly, like a lost pigeon. Perhaps it was the drug; perhaps it was the fact that he was never all that much of a seer; perhaps Susanna was dead; or maybe...perhaps...she was unconscious. He hadn't thought about that possibility before. If she was so unconscious that she wasn't even dreaming, it would be almost impossible to find her. After all, it was the mind he homed in on, and if that wasn't producing thoughts, he had nothing to guide him. She could simply be sleeping. He knew from the arcane teachings of his previous masters that a large part of the sleep cycle was spent without any thought whatsoever and that dreams only comprised a few minutes, at the most, of that cycle. It wasn't unlikely for Susanna to have been unconscious during those times he tried to find her, those times when he wasn't too tense and was actually capable of finding her.

But it was the middle of the morning. She shouldn't be sleeping now, should she? He didn't think so, but he had no way of knowing for certain.

He fought against his desire to sleep and concentrated on finding her. He had to remain relaxed but focused. It was difficult, but his efforts were rewarded.

Susanna dreamed. Terrible dreams. Dreams of Ambrose and what he had done to her; what he had done

to Bridget Bishop and the Hawks brothers; and what he was doing to Salem.

She dreamt he was there with her now, at her bedside, watching her, touching her face.

She awoke feeling a pain spread down the side of her cheek. Her eyes sprang open. She screamed.

Ambrose hovered over her at the side of her bed, caressing her cheek with his hand. He was transparent: she could see through his body to the painting mounted on the wall above the dresser behind him. It was a painting of a bleeding, thorn-crowned Christ exposing His glowing, bleeding, thorn-crowned heart. The effect of seeing that painting through Ambrose's body was horrid. She cried out, holding her face, and pulled away, falling out of the bed and crashing to the floor.

"Stay away!" she screamed. "Go away from me!" she shrieked.

Ambrose frowned gravely and turned toward the window. Then he looked back at Susanna and vanished, leaving her to think it was a dream or a hallucination.

Edward threw the door open and stormed into the room followed by Elethea.

"What happened?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

Susanna didn't say anything. She just sat curled up against the wall under the east windows, trembling with her head buried between her knees.

Edward looked at his mother, urging her with his eyes to do something.

She walked over to Susanna and knelt in front of her.

"Susanna," she said. "Susanna, child, are you all right?"

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Susanna shook her head.

“Are you hurt?”

Susanna raised her head. Her hair was covering her face.

Elethea reached out and brushed the hair out of the way. She pulled back immediately with a horrified expression on her face.

“What...” she stammered. “What happened...to your face?”

A puffy, black bruise ran down the side of Susanna’s face from temple to chin.

“Ambrose...” she said. “His specter visited me...and touched...me.” She wept.

“Come, child. He knows where you are now, and he will come looking for you. It would be best if you weren’t here when he arrived. Edward,” she said, turning to her son. “Get the horses ready. It is well time we saw Susanna back to her family in Salem.”

Ambrose found himself at once in the room where Susanna was staying, hovering at the side of her bed, watching her sleep restlessly. *She’s alive*, he thought, relieved. *She’s alive*.

He reached out to her and touched her face, but instead of having the soothing effect it was supposed to, the caress seemed to hurt her. She flinched and jerked and woke up and screamed when she opened her eyes and saw him, but the scream sounded muffled, probably because of the opium.

She scrambled away from him, crying and holding her cheek where he had just touched it, and fell out of the bed.

She was yelling at him, backing away from him on the floor.

Ambrose frowned. A profound sadness came over him seeing Susanna so repulsed and terrified by his presence.

Then he could hear them.

The demons had found him and were squawking hungrily like the war cries of countless battalions.

He could see them now through the windows, and they weren't alone. The rotting undead were with them, the ghosts of his victims unchained from the purgatorial prison he had set them in.

For the first time he could remember, fear counseled him. Unreason reigned. Those people were his slaves. The demons weren't his, but those people were. How did they get free? How could they get free? This was no time to ponder those questions. They weren't looking to have a nice little chat with him over a cup of tea; they wanted to rend him apart limb by limb, body and soul, however black that soul may be. He briefly mourned the loss of favor in Susanna's eyes and fled. Knowing where she was would have to be enough for today. He would have to think about getting her back later. Now he had to save himself.

He willed himself back to his body as his assailants passed through the walls and windows unhindered, and he was gone. He snapped back into his body at once and opened his eyes and gasped like a drowning man who had just been yanked out of the water.

The clamoring of the demons and the dead stopped. Ambrose tried to sit up but could not. He was too exhausted and inebriated. He closed his eyes again, feeling the acute sting of Susanna's rejection, and drifted into sleep.

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That evening, as the sun began to set, Edward Colton drove his horse and wagon down Topsfield Road into Salem Village. Elethea was in the back with Susanna, whose condition was vastly improved. Being out in the fresh air had done much to revitalize her.

On the journey down, she told the Coltons everything. She told them of her arrest, how she met Ambrose, and how he took her out of prison. She even told them of Walpurgisnacht, with more than a few accompanying sobs.

Edward and Elethea were horrified, but they believed her and wanted to help her, and that's what mattered. For the longest time Susanna felt so alone and shunned—even with Ambrose during the time she thought she was in love with him—but now she had friends who believed her and who actually cared about her even though they only knew her a few short days. It was comforting to know she was no longer so alone in all this chaos.

Within the hour, the wagon rode up to the Harrington house and stopped.

Roger heard the wagon coming up the road and came out to see who would be visiting him at this time.

"Father!" Susanna called out after climbing out the back of the wagon and seeing Roger standing in the doorway. He just stood there, dumbfounded with shock.

"Father!" she cried, running into his arms and burying her face in his chest. "I missed you so much."

"Susanna?" he said with disbelief. "Could it truly be you?"

She pulled back so he could see her face.

"Yes, Father. It's me. I'm so glad to be home."

"My God. What happened to your face?"

Home

“It matters not. I’m just happy to be home again.”

She nestled her head against his chest again and they stayed that way for a long time, embracing each other snugly, not wanting to let go.

“Father,” Susanna said finally.

“Yes, dearest?”

“Where is Mother?”

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Martha's Eyes

Susanna didn't take the news of her mother's illness very well. In fact, she broke down and sobbed uncontrollably in her father's arms when he told her, and she couldn't enter the house until the tears had completely abated. That took a long time. Hearing that her mother had contracted smallpox was almost as good as telling her she was dead. Susanna knew the virulence of the disease only too well, having seen Phoebe succumb to it a little bit every day before she died without giving Susanna a chance to say goodbye.

Roger didn't euphemize Martha's illness by telling Susanna it wasn't as bad as it looked. It was bad, and he knew telling Susanna otherwise would only prolong her grief and ultimately be more devastating. It was better to be honest as he had needed to be with himself. Martha was dying, and there was nothing that could be done to prevent that. Optimism had no place in the face of imminent tragedy.

Susanna stood in the doorway of her mother's bedroom and peered in at her. Martha slept soundly. The room was illuminated by one solitary candle burning steadily on the night table. The way the light hit Martha's face accentuated her

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gaunt and partially lined features, making her look older and sicklier than she may have in a brighter room. Susanna knew this, but that didn't change the impact the image had on her, nor the fact that her mother was dying and probably didn't have much time left. She looked back at her father.

"I'm all right," she said. "May I sit with her for a time?"

Roger nodded, knowing she meant she wanted to be alone, and closed the door quietly behind her as she stepped inside.

"I would like to thank you again," Roger said, turning around to face Edward and Elethea. "I did not know if Susanna was alive or dead. With all that has happened to our family this past year, I was certain she would be lost to me forever. At least now she may be with her mother in her final hours. I do not know if Susanna told you, but she was deprived of that privilege when her sister Phoebe passed on last spring."

"Yes," Elethea said, nodding gravely. "We feel for your loss."

"Indeed," Edward added, adjusting his spectacles. "You have our most sincere condolences." He shook his head. "Poor girl."

Roger sighed.

"We have suffered most grievously this year," he said sullenly. "I, for one, will be glad when it is over."

"You will still have Susanna," Edward said in hope of consoling him.

"Will I? I am no longer that certain." He looked back at the bedroom door as if he could see through it to Susanna sitting at Martha's bedside.

Martha's Eyes

"Surely you don't think that she will still stand trial as a witch after all that has happened," Edward said.

"Only the Lord knows what will happen in times such as these," Roger replied.

"Well," Elethea said. "Let us not allow for that possibility. I think it prudent that Susanna remain hidden until this madness is resolved. Edward and I shall stay and yield what assistance we can."

"I—"

"Now, Mr. Harrington, I insist," she said, pressing his hand between both of hers. "This is no time to be proud. You cannot bare the burden by yourself for long. You are plainly exhausted. It would make no sense to continue as you have. Your wife and daughter need you strong and well rested. What good would come of you wearing yourself ragged?"

Roger broke away and stepped back from the old woman.

"I cannot ask you to do this for me. You have your own problems, I'm sure. I would not feel right—"

"To the Devil with feeling right!" Elethea barked. "This *is* right. When Edward found that child in there lying near death at the side of the road and brought her into my home to heal, she became my responsibility because that was right. And with the Lord's help, she became well again, and I intend to see that she stays well."

Roger looked at her with some surprise. The woman obviously felt strongly about the issue. He thought about what she had said for a moment, then decided she was right. He needed all the help he could get. A few extra bodies around the house to help share the labors of putting food on the table and taking care of Martha would be a great relief, and he welcomed

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the thought of having someone to talk to and confide in since Martha slept most of the time now.

“You are right. I do not know how much longer I will be able to continue by myself. And I suppose even with Susanna home now the burden will still be great.”

“Indeed it will,” Edward agreed.

“Well...” Roger sighed. “We have the room.”

“Then it is settled,” Elethea said. “We shall stay and help you in your time of need.”

“I know not how I shall repay you for your kindness.”

“Fret not, Mr. Harrington,” Edward said, placing a hand on Roger’s shoulder. “Any righteous person treading the path of the Lord would do the same. It is only just. Would you not do likewise if me and mine were in a similar predicament?”

Roger nodded.

“I would.”

“Good,” Elethea said. “Now I will hear no more of this. I am most tired from the journey. So, Mr. Harrington, if you would be so kind as to show us where we will be bedding down for the night—”

Roger cut in.

“Please. Call me Roger.”

“Very well, Roger,” Elethea said. “You may call me Thea, and you know Edward.” Edward smiled gently and nodded once.

“The rooms are up the stairs,” Roger said. “Come. I will show you.”

And the Coltons followed Roger upstairs to their rooms.

Susanna wept, holding her mother's hand against her cheek, wetting it with her tears. The sense that some great evil had stricken their home was overwhelming. No matter what any of the Harringtons did to counter this evil it remained brooding and inescapable, like a shark that sensed a man's blood in the sea and circled and picked at him, ignoring his kicks and butts, until nothing was left. Was there anything more unjust than losing someone you loved?

The hand trembled.

Susanna raised her head, her hair shrouding her tear-streaked face. She looked at her mother's face. It was troubled and covered with pockmarks left by her disease. The heavy shadows made it impossible for Susanna to see if her mother had opened her eyes or not. They were just large black pits in her face.

"Mother?"

A wan smile creased Martha's mouth.

"Susanna? Susanna, is it truly you, my daughter?"

"Yes, Mother," she said, parting the hair from her face with one hand, gently squeezing Martha's hand with the other. "Yes, it is me."

Martha seemed to be only half awake.

"How are you, dear?" she asked listlessly.

"I'm well," Susanna replied. "How are you? Are you in much pain?"

"Oh," Martha uttered faintly. "At times I can barely endure it, it hurts so..." Her words were choked off as her expression bunched up into a cringe.

"Mother?"

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Martha gasped and swallowed aridly.

“Susanna,” she said with a raspy voice. “Would you pour me some water please? My throat is most dry.”

Susanna reached to the jug on the night table, poured the water into a cup, and thought: *She looks so old and tired. This may be the last time I ever speak with her.*

Susanna slid her hand under Martha’s head and raised it to the cup. Her head was hot, much hotter than Susanna knew it should be. Fresh tears spilled from her eyes as she watched her mother sip feebly. Water flowed over the rim and trickled onto Martha’s chin, neck, and nightgown. She nodded stiffly, pulling away from the cup, and Susanna placed it back on the night table.

“Thank you, dear.”

She coughed a wet cough and a stringy whip of clear saliva lashed out between her lips and slapped against the side of her mouth.

Susanna didn’t wipe it off. She found herself too disgusted to think of that, and she couldn’t believe she felt that way.

And she was terribly ill.

And she was dying.

How could she feel disgusted by something her mother could not control? At that moment, she felt contempt for her, and a greater contempt for herself for feeling that way. *I am an awful person, she thought. I deserve to be dying in bed, not her.*

“When did Judge Hathorne let you out of prison?” Martha asked.

She knows nothing of what happened. Father did not tell her.

Martha's Eyes

Susanna looked into her mother's eyes. They were hollow, black, empty. She still couldn't see her eyes; she wasn't even sure her mother had eyes anymore. Maybe she only had dark, vacant craters now, like the ones that were sprinkled all over her face and body. *MY GOD! she thought. WHERE ARE HER EYES! SHE HAS NO EYES! THE SMALLPOX ATE AWAY HER EYES!*

But, when Martha turned her head and the light struck her face, her eyes were there, sunken, glassy and dark, but still there. That was some comfort, but not much. Those eyes heralded the coming of death. Those were Death's eyes. It would only be short time now, Susanna knew, and her mother would be gone. She would never come back. There was no coming back from death. Death was forever, and that's how long she would be gone. Forever.

But was that really true? What about Goody Bishop and the Hawks brothers? Death might be forever, but only in this world. In the other world there would be life eternal; Goody Bishop and the Hawks brothers were proof of that. And if that wasn't enough to convince her, surely all the bizarre events that happened to her in the past few months could. Susanna knew there was more to the world than her eyes could discern.

"Susanna?"

"Yes, Mother."

"When did Judge Hathorne let you out of prison?"

She debated with herself whether she should tell her mother the truth, then decided it would be better if she didn't know. As much as she hated to admit it, her mother was dying and there was nothing that could be done about it. It would serve no useful purpose to tell her the truth. That would only distress her, and in her fragile condition that news could very well kill her.

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“Early this evening,” Susanna replied.

Martha smiled.

“That is good,” she said. “That is a great relief. The state Salem is in at present is most distressing. Your father has tried to protect me from knowing what has been going on because he wanted me not to worry about you, but I know. I hear things, you know. He prefers I didn’t, but I do; and I do not want you telling him I know. He has enough to concern himself with without worrying about me worrying.”

“I will not tell him, Mother.”

“It is so good to have you home safe, Susanna.”

Susanna’s eyes returned to the offending strip of saliva and she took a handkerchief from a pocket in her dress, wiped it off, and placed the handkerchief on the night table.

“Now listen to me, dear. I want you to be a good daughter to your father. He needs you. When I am gone, you will need each other.”

Hearing her mother speak of her coming death with such certainty caught Susanna off guard, and her mouth dropped open.

“I know...Susanna. I know I’m dying. When I have passed on, you and your father will be the only kin you have left. You must be strong for him, for me, and most importantly for yourself. I want you to be happy, dear. Life is far too short and fragile to mourn for the dead.”

She clasped Susanna’s hand tightly. She had amazing strength for a woman in her state of ill health.

“You have been such a lonesome, young woman. You should find yourself a good husband and learn the joys of being a wife and a mother.”

Martha's Eyes

I am married, but my husband is a monster.

“Susanna, you must always remem...” Martha’s lids struggled to stay open. “...remember I will always be with you... always love you...al...”

Martha’s eyes closed. At first, Susanna thought she had died, but her mother’s chest still rose and fell, and a moment later she could hear her drawing the long, slow breaths of sleep.

A few days later, Roger awoke before sunrise and went in to check on Martha. Her eyes and mouth were open, but she was dead.

The Necromancer

Resurrection

Reverend Parris held a small ceremony behind the Harrington house. Martha lay in a pine box beside the open grave which Roger had dug for her earlier that morning. Edward had offered to do it, but Roger insisted on digging the grave himself. It was something he felt he had to do, something he was sure Martha would have wanted.

Edward and Thea stood by Roger to comfort him. He hadn't been very talkative since he discovered the body, hadn't even shed a tear. But Thea knew he was devastated. She had seen a good number of men mourning the loss of a wife or child at a good many funerals in her 76 years, and this one was no different. From her experience, she realized there were three kinds of widowers: the ones who sobbed; the ones who stood stoic and numb; and the ones who just didn't give a damn and might even allow a faint, serene smile to crease their lips. Most men fell in the middle category, and that was where Roger fell. She knew he was hurting and would need all the support they could give him.

Susanna looked on from her bedroom window on the second floor, crying. She wanted so much to be down there

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at her father's side, paying her last respects to her mother, but she had to stay hidden. She couldn't risk anyone seeing her. Sheriff Corwin was probably still looking for her, and she didn't want to think of what could happen if she was arrested again. She was free and with her father, and that was all that mattered. But this was her fourth day back at home and she hadn't left the house once. It was making her restless. Every time she broached the subject of venturing outdoors Edward, Thea, and Roger became alarmed, and she knew there was no convincing them she would be safe. They were adamant. She was imprisoned in her own home.

Outside, Reverend Parris had finished reading from the Bible, and Edward and three of the reverend's attendants walked over to the coffin and stood on either side. Two ropes lay underneath it crosswise and each man picked up an end. The coffin rocked slightly from side to side as it was hauled up. They positioned it over the grave and proceeded to lower it into the earth.

Susanna turned away from the window and threw herself on the bed, burying her face in the pillow to stifle her weeping.

On September 17th, Giles Corey, a stubborn old man of eighty-one, was taken out to an open field behind Salem Prison naked and forced to lie flat on the ground when he failed to enter a plea of guilty or not guilty for practicing witchcraft. He knew he and the others accused were innocent, and he had no intention of validating these trials by pleading not guilty or otherwise. He remained silent.

But Judge Hathorne was determined to get a plea out of him. On this point the law was clear. The penalty for remaining silent was *peine forte et dure*.

Ressurrection

Corey's arms were outstretched, his wrists and ankles bound to stakes which had been hammered into the ground. Several men placed a thick wooden board across his chest, covering his old body from his neck to his shins, and began gradually piling heavy stones on his chest.

After a while, Hathorne asked Corey if he had changed his mind and decided to enter a plea.

For some time there was silence as Hathorne impatiently tapped his cane against the ground.

"You had best put more stones on and get this madness over with," Corey said laboriously. "You shall not be hearing any such words uttered from my mouth."

Infuriated, Hathorne said: "Let us see how you feel after some days under the stones." Hathorne and his men walked away.

When they returned, two days had passed. Corey was pale and weak. A cloud of flies buzzed around his body. The stench of his rancid excrement was overpowering.

"Giles Corey," Hathorne said smugly. "How do you plead?"

Corey looked at the judge sternly, grimacing, but he said nothing.

The judge nodded to his men and they proceeded piling more stones on top of Corey.

Corey grunted and winced, groaned and cringed.

"I am not asking for a confession," Hathorne said as the men continued. "All I require is a plea. Enter a plea and I will have the stones removed."

Corey shook his head, then the judge shook his as if to say, *What a foolish old man you are, Giles Corey.*

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Hathorne and his men heard a crunching sound and the board shifted slightly. Corey wheezed. His eyes widened. A tremor shook through his body. He exhaled one last, dry breath. His head jerked up and flopped on its side. His tongue lolled out of his mouth followed by a small amount of blood, then his body went completely limp and still.

Hathorne scrunched up his face in disgust, and he pushed the tongue back in with the butt of his cane.

Ambrose sat on the divan sipping his wine, preparing himself for the ritual. He thought about the last time he saw Susanna and what had gone wrong since then. He had slept too long after fleeing from the demons and the dead, and when he finally did awaken two days later, Susanna was gone from Angelwood and he was having difficulties finding her again.

His proficiency with the shew stone was far from adequate, but he had to make the best of it. Traveling in his subtle body was very draining and he had to save up his energy for his next journey—the journey he was going to take tonight, to the Salem churchyard.

After some time spent in meditation with the stone, he had achieved success. Susanna was back home in Salem with her father, and Ambrose knew she wasn't going anywhere.

He sat down in the magic circle wearing a black robe embroidered with red symbols around the neck and cuffs. He would much rather have gone in his corporeal body, but he knew they would be looking for him and he couldn't risk it, even in the small hours of the morning when the ceremony had to be held.

Ambrose anointed his forehead with some ointment, perched a crown of vervain on his head, and grabbed his sword. He lay back and closed his eyes.

Ressurrection

The vibrations came quickly. It wasn't long before he was rising to the ceiling, leaving his material self behind. Unlike his opium-induced projection, he was in more control and better protected by the sanctity of the circle. There would be no mistakes tonight.

In another few seconds he was at the churchyard, standing before the grave of Robert Eames. Eames had tried to warn Susanna at the Walpurgisnacht celebration, but Ambrose still held his soul captive in that tormented limbo, and that meant he was still Ambrose's slave and would have to obey him.

Ambrose outlined the gravesite, slicing into the earth with his sword, not actually plowing through it but leaving a silk-thin border of flames. He stood back and described a circle around himself in the same manner.

Next came the incantations.

The words droned on and vibrated in the cool air. Soon the whole graveyard resonated in an array of spectral colors and unearthly sounds. All the trees and grave markers threatened to splinter and unknit themselves. The clouds rushed in and blotted out the moon, but the churchyard was ablaze with light and marvelous colors and there was no need for further illumination.

Ambrose struck the gravesite with his sword, allowing it to slide effortlessly into the earth up to the hilt, then he raised his outstretched arms, palms upturned and fingers splayed and curled like claws, toward the sky, knotting his hands into fists at the top of the movement.

"In the names of Beelzebub, Lucifer, and Mephistopheles, I command you to rise and obey.

"Rise!" he cried, bringing his arms down and raising them slowly again as if he were lifting some enormous weight.

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“Rise!” he screamed, performing the same gesticulation.

“In the name of Satan, I COMMAND YOU TO RISE!”

Everything fell still and silent. Then a smile of satisfaction graced Ambrose’s face as he heard a muffled pounding sound come from beneath the ground: Thump... Thump... Thump... Then a dull crack. The earth shifted with a low rumbling sound, pulling down a small amount of topsoil and withered grass.

“RISE!” Ambrose roared.

The grave began to open up. Sod and soil sifted down into it, widening the crevice. The rank odor of musty decay wafted upward from the hole. The sound of soggy pine wood snapping apart became louder as pebbles and moist and dry dirt continued to filter downward into the coffin with a hollow raindrop sound, exposing it to the damp, naked air.

Scrambling to the surface like a wounded rat, the dead man wrested himself from his dark bed of wood and earth and plunged his flesh-stripped arm up awkwardly out of the grave.

Susanna slept soundly and dreamlessly. Mourning the loss of her mother had drained her. She wept into her pillow for many hours after the funeral, refusing to eat or leave her room. She knew to expect her mother’s passing, but she wasn’t prepared to deal with it. Susanna had cried, and had kept crying, until she had cried herself to sleep early that afternoon.

A noise jarred her from sleep and she opened her eyes. One of the shutters to her window had broken away from its latch and the wind was banging it against the wall outside. She pulled back the covers, stepped out of bed, and went to the

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window. She still wore the dress she wore when she watched the men lower her mother into the ground, but she didn't remember covering herself up. Her father must have done so earlier. Well, she still had him. That was some comfort.

When I have passed on, you and your father will be the only kin you have left.

She opened the window and a gust of cool night air rushed in and blew her hair and her dress back. She reached outside and refastened the shutter, then drew back and slammed the window shut. She looked down at the new grave marker and the fresh rectangular mound of black earth before it. A pang of sorrow assaulted her chest and she sighed, afraid she would start sobbing again. She didn't. She felt choked up, but the tears wouldn't come. That was good because she didn't know if she could endure that kind of mourning any longer.

A noisome odor gagged her and she pinched her nose between her thumb and index finger as she turned around. The door to her room was open. It hadn't been when she awoke, she was sure of that. Her stomach filled with a nervous, watery feeling.

"What..." she said, confused, then saw a figure to the right of the door move. Its motion in the dark shadows was enough to enable her eyes to lock onto it and determine what it was, and then she knew that the foul odor she detected was the fetor of skin turned sour.

The figure was that of a skeleton, robbed of all its flesh but a few flaps of rotting meat here and there and some ragged tufts of filthy hair sticking out of its head in patches. It was dressed in the rags of a man she may have known once, but in its present state of decrepitude she couldn't determine who that man might have been.

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It lurched toward her. She stepped back, no longer holding her nose even though the stench was great, but bringing her hand down to her mouth to mask her horror.

It continued its advance, its limbs creaking like twisted leather.

She backed into the wall by the window.

It came closer, reaching for her.

A shaft of haunting moonlight fell on its face, revealing its loose, brown teeth showcased in a perpetually ghoulish smile. A slender strip of shriveled skin and muscle dangled from its chin. Inside one of its orbits writhed one budding, glistening maggot.

Susanna slid along the wall, away from the animated skeleton, but her progress was impeded by the adjoining wall. Cornered, she made a desperate attempt to bolt past the skeleton man, but it was fast and seized her by the wrist with a tough, icy grip. She looked down at her wrist, raising it to her face, attempting to yank it free from the hard, ivory hand, but could not. She tried to scream for help, but all that would come was an utterance of stifled terror.

In her panic, she swung at its head with her free hand and hit it hard, making it jerk to the side. Some of its sparse, rotten flesh came off its face, clogging her nails and fingers with carrion. It recovered quickly and grabbed her other hand as she stared into her palm and all its grizzly contents.

She became unhinged, and this time she screamed.

“Help! Father...Someone...Please help me!”

She struggled and fought, but Eames wouldn’t release her. Instead, he dragged her past the bed and toward the door. She lost her footing and fell on her back, her legs kicking

Ressurrection

behind her. It let go of one of her wrists but still continued to haul her out of the room by the other.

“Help! Please...Let...me...go!”

Eames dragged her into the hallway. Edward bolted out of his room at the far end of the hallway. He was half-dressed, still buttoning his breeches under his nightshirt, hair disheveled, eyes bleary behind his spectacles as he ran after them.

“Susanna!” he yelled.

She looked at him helplessly as the corpse pulled her along, ignoring their pursuer. He caught up with them and leaped. Eames’s grip broke as he and Edward crashed to the floor sounding like a man who had been carrying an armful of wooden canes and fell on the deck of a ship.

Eames rose quickly, faster than Edward. Edward was still on his hands and knees, shaking his head, dazed and blind without his glasses, which had flown off in the fall. He looked up at the skeleton man in astonishment, then a white blur of naked digits and cartilage swiped past his face and turned everything black.

“Edward!” Susanna cried, seeing him slump back to the floor with a fresh flowing gash on his temple.

She crawled toward him, but Eames reached her before she reached Edward, and she was once again in his grip. Susanna managed to stand up. She tried to pull free, squatting down low, but the skeleton man was too strong, his grip too tight.

They started down the stairs, Susanna pulling in a tug-of-war she couldn’t win as Eames towed her down one step at a time.

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Roger stood at the bottom landing in his nightshirt, staring blankly with open mouth and widened eyes, his arms down impotently at his sides.

Susanna grunted and strained, tears rolling freely down her cheeks now.

“Father! Help me! Please! IT WILL NOT LET GO!”

Hearing his daughter’s panic-stricken voice shook him out of his stupor, and he looked around frantically for a weapon.

He looked at the fireplace and spotted a poker propped up against the hearth. He ran over, picked it up, and cocked it over his shoulder.

“Release my daughter!” he yelled, running back to the foot of the stairs.

They still descended, the skeleton man not heeding Roger’s words. When they reached the bottom, Roger swung the poker at its head with fury and indignation, releasing a growling scream. The poker came down in a wide arc and smashed through Eames’s skull, creating a large crater in the side of his cranium.

Eames, who had so far remained silent, let out an ungodly and agonizing howl from what was left of his vocal cords as the barb of the poker caught inside his head and hooked his brainpan. Roger tugged at it, wrenching Eames’s head sideways.

“Let her go, I said!” Roger demanded, but Eames would not release her.

Roger yanked the poker again with all his weight. A piece of the skull chipped off and Roger went sprawling to the floor, banging his head against the wall.

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Eames opened the door and picked Susanna up. She fought and screamed and struggled against him, but couldn't get free.

"Father!" she cried. But Roger was dazed and in no condition to do anything.

"Father! Father!! Fa...!!!"

Eames carried her outside into the blackness of the early morning.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Vision

On the twenty-second of September, eight more people were sent to their deaths on Gallows Hill, Susanna was gone, and Roger and Edward were still recovering from the injuries they sustained during her abduction two days before.

Roger had what amounted to a slight concussion, but Edward was in worse condition. He had lost a good deal of blood and hadn't yet awakened since the incident. If Thea hadn't hastened her old, brittle body when she heard the commotion in the hall, Edward would have surely bled to death. But he was fortunate. Thea had found him and knew what to do.

Roger was distraught. He had wanted to go after Eames that same night, but his body had other plans. He couldn't seem to gain balance enough to stand up.

Eventually, Thea had come downstairs after bandaging Edward's head and helped Roger to his feet, but by that time Roger knew it was too late to do anything that night. He resigned himself to bed and stayed there for almost a week

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under Thea's orders. She could be a mean old crone when she had to be, and she knew how to stand up to stubborn, bedridden men who insisted on getting up and going about their business. Roger proved to be a particularly hard case, however, which was perfectly understandable, considering the circumstances. Thea almost felt guilty keeping him confined to his bed for so long, but there was nothing he could do now anyway. His condition warranted rest. What good would it serve Susanna if he became worse?

Edward had awakened briefly on the twenty-third. He was getting better, but it would take time, and time was something Roger felt there was little of, but he waited nevertheless. Edward was the only one who might know where the skeleton man had taken Susanna, and Roger had to wait until Edward regained consciousness and wit enough to tell him.

Roger waited anxiously for more than a month for Edward to recover fully enough to tell him where Susanna could be, and now it was late October. Roger was out back, kneeling on one knee amongst the fallen brown and orange leaves before Martha's grave, praying silently to her spirit for guidance, as he did everyday now. It was a gloomy morning, but there were some golden clouds in the distance just beyond the dark gray ones. Maybe the day would turn out to be nicer than it looked.

He felt a hand fall on his shoulder and looked up. His mouth fell open slightly and the skin between his eyebrows bunched together. It was Edward. The gash on his temple was healed, but scarred. He still looked pale and weak.

"Should you be out of bed?" Roger asked.

"I'm well," Edward said, raising a hand to his scar and running his fingers across its ridge.

"You seem weak."

The Vision

"I am...somewhat. But I'm well enough. Now, let us get you your daughter back."

"Susanna told me during her convalescence where she had stayed when she was with Blayne," Edward said to Roger and Thea as they sat at the kitchen table, discussing the matter over tea and rye cakes which Thea had made. "I know not the exact location, but I have a fair idea of where it is. I estimate it should not take long to find it."

"Well, let us be off then," Roger said, standing up.

Edward grabbed his arm.

"Not so hasty, my friend," Edward said, shaking his head. "This is a warlock we are planning to do battle with, and we have seen evidence of his abilities at first hand. Do you really think it wise to storm in on him unaided?"

"What, then, do you suggest we do?" Roger asked. "I have no desire to seek assistance from Judge Hathorne or Sheriff Corwin. Susanna is still a fugitive wanted for witchcraft. I should not like to see her jailed again. A score of innocent people have already been executed for that damnable crime!"

"But if we could prove that this Blayne is the cause of all this witchery," Thea reasoned, "would they not be amenable to admitting their error?"

Roger laughed sarcastically.

"I could never be so sure of that."

"But we must try," Edward said. "If we confront Blayne by ourselves, we will most surely die. He near killed us before. And you can be certain we have seen but a fraction of his powers."

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Roger saw the logic behind what Edward was saying and was forced to concede. They would have to present their case to the authorities in order to better their odds in successfully defeating Blayne, but they would do so on Roger's terms. He wasn't going to take any more unnecessary chances with Susanna's life.

He was a very good personal friend of Sheriff Corwin's, and while Corwin couldn't get Susanna out of jail because everyone knew about their friendship and would be watching him closely, he still might help them in light of this new information.

"They will be coming soon," Ambrose said, unknitting his legs from his lotus position. "How is Susanna?"

Jessica had just entered the room. She had done so quietly and didn't think he would be able to hear her, but apparently he did.

"She is sleeping."

"You used the unguent?"

"Yes."

"Good. She should sleep for some time."

He rose to his feet and walked over to her, stopping uncomfortably close. Jessica could feel his hot breath on her face. She sensed that he was going to lean in and kiss her, as he had done so many times before. She felt the urge to throw her arms around his neck, but resisted. If she presumed anything, it could prove to be fatal. After all, the wench was sleeping naked on rugs and pillows and beneath quilts in the next room, her skin shiny with slimy unguent. And Jessica knew all too well how he felt about her.

Ambrose leaned in.

The Vision

He is going to kiss me.

She tilted her head up toward his and started to close her eyes, and Ambrose said in a low, indignant voice:

“Get back in there and watch her, like I instructed you.” Jessica’s eyes popped wide open. “And do not make me have to tell you again.”

A dull ache swelled up in her chest and radiated to her throat as she turned away from him and did as he demanded. By the time she sat down to watch Susanna she was weeping terribly, but quietly.

A posse of ten men including Roger, Edward, Sheriff Corwin, and Reverend Parris rode out of Salem on the morning of October 30th, fully armed with swords, daggers, and flintlock rifles and pistols.

Sheriff Corwin needed little argument to convince him that what Roger and Edward told him was the truth. He had known Susanna since she was a little girl and knew she wasn’t capable of the diabolism which had taken place during the year. After his encounter with Blayne’s demon, not to mention Tituba’s damning testimony, there could be no doubt that he was the warlock they sought. Certainly, there could be others, but Blayne’s case was the most concrete. There was more than the mere “spectral evidence” that the trials depended on for their convictions. Corwin, himself, had witnessed the results of the supernatural powers which Blayne had harnessed. They had the body of that thing, which attacked them, buried in a deep grave in the field behind the prison with a marker that read simply:

BEWARE:

WITCH’S FAMILIAR

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Below that was inscribed a hexmark whose sole purpose was to keep the evil from getting out. That was all the evidence Corwin needed to assure him it was just and good to hunt Blayne down, and see him hanged on the Old Locust Tree on Gallows Hill.

Early that morning, he had summoned Reverend Parris, and asked the Reverend to accompany him and his men on the journey. Parris, too, needed little convincing and readily agreed.

All Hallow's Eve

It was All Hallow's Eve. Ambrose stood at the window, looking at the vista of the sunset streaking shades of red, yellow, and violet through the clouds and across the sky. The trees below the horizon were barren, sharp, and gray, all their leaves having dried up and fallen into a rust-colored carpet for the earth. Cool breezes played with them and whisked them up into the air, reminding Ambrose of the flight of the witches and demons during the Walpurgisnacht celebration.

They're coming, he thought. They haven't yet found the house, but they will. They will come...and they are close. He didn't need the shew stone to know that. He could feel it.

The thought made him feel slightly nauseated. He had hoped he would have more time, a day at least. It was as if they sensed what he intended to do, like worms sense dead bodies rotting in the ground. They were determined to stop him, and no amount of time spent with the shew stone would yield an answer as to the result of the coming confrontation. Ambrose was never very good with that wretched stone, but usually he could see something, even if it was the merest glimmer of

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a misguided vision. The not-seeing was the worst of it. The impenetrable blackness, the absolute void, the abyss. Did that mean he wouldn't survive? He didn't know, but he didn't like the implication...or the uncertainty. Time was growing short, and now he had to act. Before they reached him. Before they had the chance to stop him. Before they killed him.

Corwin rode his horse along a narrow, dusty road accompanied by Roger, Edward, Reverend Parris, and four other men on horseback; the Cranley brothers rode in a wagon drawn by two horses. The back was empty save for several pairs of shackles.

After a day and a half of travel, Edward was baffled. From what Susanna had told him, they should have come across the house by now, but there was no sign of any houses out here. Every time one of the men thought they spotted a house the others would look and find nothing but hills and trees. Corwin and Parris and the others were beginning to wonder if that head injury Edward had sustained was distorting his judgment, and as they continued their search and continued to be misled by their own eyes, they began to wonder about their own judgment as well.

"It must be somewhere around here," Edward insisted. "I know this area well, and while I do not remember there ever being any houses out in these woods, I know we should be close. Susanna could not have walked much farther in the condition she was in when I discovered her lying on the side of Sutter's Road."

"True," Corwin agreed. "From what you told us of the girl's condition, I find it remarkable she walked that far." He shook his head. "But we have been searching the area for the better part of the day, and still we have found nothing."

All Hallow's Eve

Hearing this, Roger rode up along side Corwin and placed his hand on his shoulder.

"Please, George," he said. "We must find her. She is all the family I have now."

Corwin looked at him grimly.

"We must ride onward," Edward added emphatically. "If not for Susanna's sake, then surely for Salem's, for there can be little doubt that Blayne is the cause for all this witchery. If we find them not, he will most assuredly destroy us all."

Corwin nodded slightly, sullenly, sighing through his nostrils.

"Very well, we shall continue. But, we return to Salem in the morning, with or without them. I cannot allow myself to be further diverted from my duties in town in search of a man who may or may not be a servant of the Devil; who may not even be out in these woods."

Roger's face relaxed a little, but he was continuing to grow uncertain. What if they never found her?

The sun had set. Candlelight now illuminated the room. Ambrose still stood at the window wondering how it could be that they would be coming tonight, the most crucial and efficacious time to perform the ritual. Surely this was no coincidence. There had to be some other power or intelligence governing these men. There had to be some—dare he think it—divine intervention.

Well, there was no point in dwelling on the situation. He had done everything he could to prevent being disturbed during the time of the ceremony. He had created diversions for the men who sought him. The house was cloaked in a camouflage shield with a demon keeping watch at every

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quarter. None of them had reported to him yet, and that was good. Perhaps the diversions would keep them occupied chasing shadows until they gave up the search and went back home, but an indescribable feeling of dread, which he had never before experienced, told him otherwise. Perhaps they wouldn't come for Susanna and him, but he knew they would.

He couldn't wait any longer. Ideally, the ritual should commence at the strike of midnight, but he knew there wouldn't be time enough to simply sit around waiting impotently for midnight to come. The ceremony itself would be long and exhausting in order to build up sufficient energy for the desired result. He had to begin now.

"Damn them," he muttered, and then he drained his cup and slammed it down on the windowsill. He turned around. Susanna was still sleeping, covered with quilts in the circle. Jessica sat on the armchair beside the circle, looking up at him meekly. Anster lay curled sullenly at her feet with his head on his paws, his tail beating the floor sporadically.

"Get out," Ambrose said lowly.

Jessica's eyes widened, but she didn't move.

"Begone!" he yelled, storming across the room and hauling her out of the chair by her upper arm. "OUT! OUT! GET OUT, YOU CUNTING WENCH!" he growled.

"Ambrose!" she cried, confused and upset.

He kicked Anster, making the dog whimper and run from the room, then shoved Jessica through the doorway, and slammed the door behind her. His palms remained pressed to the heavy oaken door. He leaned forward, resting his forehead against the wood, and sighed.

He stood like that for several minutes, breathing slowly and deeply to regain some control. When he did, he turned to

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Susanna. His outburst hadn't disturbed her from her slumber. The unguent had been most effective.

He gazed at her sentimentally. Nothing she could do would ever make him love her any less than he did now. Even though she had fled from him, and now regarded him as some kind of monster, he couldn't help but love her. It made him sad. All his life, happiness seemed fleeting. The brief love and contentment he had taken for granted when he was so young and Odara was still alive were elements that continued to elude him since her death. He fed his emptiness with anger, but now—even now—that anger ate at his heart and turned it black with rage. He didn't like using Susanna this way, but he had no other options. This was his last resort.

All he wanted was to love her and be with her. But they weren't going to allow that. They were coming for him, and when they arrived, they wouldn't be merciful, nor did he expect them to be. He was never able to let go of the anger, and it was that anger that made him evil. He knew that. He knew that very well, and he exercised that evil on Salem. They could never forgive him for that.

Now there was regret. Now there was sorrow. No amount of penance could undo the harm he had caused.

If only Odara had never been murdered...all this misery could have been avoided. But those ignorant people in Scotland were too afraid of powers they didn't understand and couldn't control. Those damned, ignorant people.

The anger returned.

There was no way to turn back time, and remove the evil that haunted the past, present, and future. He had forged his fate of vengeance many years ago, and he was still bent on avenging the injustice of Odara's death. He knew who and what he was...and he was proud of it. He would not run. He would not take Susanna and flee like some love-struck

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adolescents whose parents didn't approve of their joining. There was a higher purpose to his vengeance than the wrath incurred by the loss of a spouse—there was *true* justice.

He would stay and fight, but he would make certain he would be with Susanna in the end, even in defeat.

He kindled the incense.

Susanna dreamt an escapist's dreams. No nightmares this evening; only dreams of love. Dreams of love with Edward. Hugging. Kissing. Making love in a garden of fragrant flowers and perfumed dews. Naked. Free.

Gone were troubled thoughts that plagued her throughout the year, and even the thought that the man she was dreaming of had been killed by the skeleton man who had taken her from her home. There was only bliss, and bliss was all.

She played with Edward's thick, blond hair as he kissed her deeply and fell to her breasts, devouring her nipples hungrily. He rose up from them and groaned familiarly. She brought her knees up to his waist and wrapped her legs around his hips. He bucked into her rhythmically like waves crashing against a wall of rock. She cooed and moaned, holding onto his strong arms for support.

He slammed inside her, and it hurt. It hurt enough to wake her.

She opened her eyes, then she screamed.

It wasn't Edward she was making love to, but Ambrose, and he looked deranged, like a madman. In the dark room, illuminated solely by smoldering embers of incense, his head appeared to be disembodied, but it was only an illusion

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caused by the darkness and the robe he wore hiked up around his waist.

She screamed again and tried to claw at his face with her nails and break free, but he had them pinned to the floor at the wrists under the bulk of his weight.

He groaned again, and for an instant, she caught a glimpse of that thing that was him beneath the skin, the same thing which had raped her on Walpurgisnacht.

She squirmed, and cried, and thrashed, but she could not move. That dirty thing was inside her like vermin, a poisonous leech that sought to rob her of all her self-respect and sanity. Its filth was building up, preparing to explode inside her and pollute her body forever.

All she could do was scream those horrible, gibbering words that had no rational meanings, but which could only be interpreted by the most visceral, instinctual perceptions of man and beast alike.

Edward was the first to hear those faint, but existent screams. He tugged on the reigns of his horse and listened as the animal stopped.

"What is it?" Roger asked, riding up along side him.

"I thought I—"

He was cut off by another scream, this one louder than the first, and more urgent.

"Dear God!" Parris exclaimed, hearing the tormented cry.

"It came from over that ridge," Corwin announced, pointing north toward a small hill.

"Susanna!" Roger gasped.

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“Follow me!” Corwin called behind him as he took the lead and the screaming continued.

“No!... No!” Susanna shrieked, weeping. “NO!”

But Ambrose ignored her. Instead, he continued his violation of her, his moans mutating into grunts, his grunts into swine-like snorts and dog-like growls. His face flickered back and forth from human to inhuman to human again; man to beast, beast to man.

Susanna was petrified. She dared not to move or utter another sound; her fear would allow it no longer. Something in her mind snapped. She simply lay there now, a sack of heavy, limp flesh, her mouth and eyes wide open like a dying fish out of water; her breathing: slow, deep, labored.

Jessica pounded on the door, calling to Ambrose to let her in, but he could no longer hear her. He was all beast now, and the beast’s eyes were closed, the furrowed, leathery lids trembling as the eyeballs beneath darted wildly from side to side in their sockets. Its stubby black snout twitched and bristled with short, coarse fur as snot and drool oozed and dripped onto Susanna’s breasts.

It roared out in tongues and began to shudder savagely.

“There!” Roger cried, and pointed at the top of the hill ahead.

All the men stopped and looked up in the direction in which Roger pointed.

“I see nothing,” Corwin snapped as he peered with strain into the leave-blown night.

"Nor do I," Parris added.

"But I tell you I saw it," Roger said.

The screaming had stopped and they could no longer determine which direction those screams had come from.

For a moment everything remained silent; only the low howling of the wind could be heard. Then Edward spoke up.

"Wait," he said. Just now he thought he saw something too, but it vanished almost as soon as it appeared. He removed his spectacles, huffed on them, clouding them with his breath, then wiped them with a handkerchief and slid them back on. He looked back in the direction he thought he saw it, but nothing was there.

He rode up to the front and passed Corwin, Parris, and the others. He rode up the hill, to where he thought he saw the house, and about half way up he disappeared.

Corwin's mouth fell open. The men looked at each other with puzzled expressions.

"Roger!" he called from the nowhere behind the invisible shroud. "Sheriff! I see it! I see—!"

His voice broke off suddenly with a squeak, and a couple seconds later a heavy thud was heard.

"Oh God!" he yelled in a garbled, watery voice. "OH GOD! SOMEBODY...! SOMEBODY HELP...! SOMEBODY HELP ME...! GET IT OFF ME! GET IT OFF...! SOMEBODY HELP GET IT OFF ME GET IT OFF GET IT OFF!!!"

Roger kicked his horse and cracked the reigns, and the horse bolted up the hill. Corwin followed, then Parris and the rest of the men.

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Roger dismounted as soon as he passed through the cloak and saw Edward thrashing on the ground being mauled by a winged creature, which looked like a cross between a baboon and a huge bat.

He rushed over to the two struggling figures, and pulled his dagger from its scabbard.

“Edward!” he yelled. Edward looked up, his face covered with blood, his eyes wide with terror. He pushed the demon to arm’s length above himself as it lashed at him with its claws, barking furiously. It sliced into him repeatedly, shredding his clothes and turning them dark with blood.

Roger had his chance and took it. He cocked the dagger high over his shoulder and swung down with it in a bold arc, putting the whole of his weight behind the blow. The blade plunged into the center of the thing’s back and it howled and howled as a gush of scolding green muck spouted from the wound and cooked Roger’s arm up to the elbow. Roger fell back groaning as the demon released Edward and started to fly away, but it fell to the ground as soon as it was airborne and flopped away from the two injured men.

Corwin and his men rode up.

“Kill it,” Roger huffed, holding his bad arm to his chest and pointing at the demon with the other. “Kill it before it gets away. Beware...of its blood... It burns.”

Nyle Cranley aimed a rifle at the demon from his seat in the wagon and fired with a resounding BOOM, blowing a hole in its head and sending flaps of scalp, chunks of skull and brains across the dead leaves. It choked. It twitched. It flopped over. And it died.

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The beast quivered and bucked into her with ferocity as she stared vacantly into the dark. Jessica continued to beat her fist against the door.

Tears flowed down Susanna's expressionless cheeks.

There was no more forgiveness, not now—not ever. No redemption. No love. No God. Only emptiness and loss, sorrow and despair. Only corruption reigned now. Utter and relentless corruption. Death was preferable to living.

Ambrose continued to change: Beast to man; man to beast. Chanting in guttural tongues.

He roared and dragged his claws down Susanna's shoulders and across her breasts, digging deep canals of blood in her flesh.

She cried out from the pain, but her eyes remained distant, her mind empty. Her body felt the injuries; she felt nothing.

There was a crash in the other room, and a scream, and Jessica's calls and her banging on the door stopped. A scuffle ensued. Then gunfire.

Ambrose glanced at the door and briefly focused on what was taking place behind it. There was a lull in the gunfire.

One last shot.

Then everything fell silent again and Ambrose threw his head back and roared—half man, half beast—as a final tremor rumbled through his body.

A moment later, the door burst open.

Corwin and Parris rode up toward the house. A few windows in one section of the building shed light. From outside, the house appeared placid, almost inviting.

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Doubt assailed Corwin's determination. The house seemed harmless enough; innocent enough. But he cast his doubts aside. They had left Roger and Edward lying back there, halfway down the hill, injured by some thing which could not have been wrought by God's hands, but by Blayne's...or the Devil's.

Corwin dismounted some distance from the house and tethered his horse to a tree. He signaled the men to do likewise and to remain quiet as he led them up to the building.

When they reached the door, Parris peered into one of the windows. Jessica pounded on a door to an adjoining room, crying to be let in. Parris recognized her from Salem Village, but did not remember once seeing her at one of his services.

He nodded to Corwin, and Corwin nodded to Wilfred Brown and Morley Lawson. They pulled back from the door with their pistols drawn and charged, each assaulting the door with one hard and effective stomp, tearing it off its hinges and causing it fall in flat on the floor with a loud slap.

Jessica screamed with a start and turned to them in mid-pounding, simply staring at them with her bloodshot and tearing eyes as they entered the house. First Corwin, then Parris followed Wilfred and Morley inside, each the living symbol of authority and piety.

"We have come for Reverend Blayne, if reverend such he be," Corwin said. "Where is he?" he demanded. He nodded at the door she had been pounding on. "In there?"

But Jessica said nothing.

Without prompting, Wilfred stormed up to the door and reached for the handle, but he didn't live to grasp it.

Anster leaped at him from nowhere and fixed his teeth in Wilfred's throat. In seconds the dog was ripping threads of

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vein and rags of tissue from his neck as blood spouted across Corwin's coat.

Corwin, Parris, and Morley stood stupefied as the dog rent their compatriot's twitching body apart between a series of barks and growls.

Morley shrugged off his shock and started to Wilfred's aid, but Corwin caught his arm and pulled him back.

"It's too late," he said. "We can do nothing for him now."

Corwin aimed his pistol at Anster and fired, blowing a crater in the side of the dog's head, splitting it open like a melon and spraying the wall with blood. Anster keeled over and his brains plopped out of his skull and slid across the wet floor.

Morley doubled over and vomited.

All Corwin could think was, *That shot should not have been able to cause that much damage. Never have I seen...* Then, thought abandoned him.

The dog howled terribly. It shouldn't have been able to, but it did. Corwin at once felt pity and horror at the sound as a sickly heat rolled up the back of his head and neck.

After a moment's hesitation, Corwin reloaded, barely taking his eyes off the wounded animal.

Anster's furry hide tore open in ragged slits from his head to his belly and branched outward, folding back in scarlet slabs of meat. His entrails spilled out onto the floor in thick, noodle-like clumps with a moist, muddy sound and writhed and heaved as if they were sentient beings in their own right.

This wasn't the result of a mere shot fired in fear. This thing was changing. But was that possible? Corwin had seen many a strange happening in his lifetime, especially in the

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past six months, but it still unnerved him to be witness to such an abomination. Corwin fancied himself a reasonable man, and reason dictated that such metamorphoses simply weren't possible, weren't...natural. Were his eyes deceiving him? If they were, he certainly wasn't going to stand there and close them in hope of restoring them to reasonable vision. The damned thing howled a howl such as he had never heard from any beast before.

Anster's anatomy was taking some kind of perverted shape; that much was apparent. It was giving birth to itself. A sopping-wet embryo was growing like fungus in the mess on the floor, and it made the air rife with an earthy fetor and decay.

As he finished reloading, Corwin looked at Parris and Morley. They stood still, mortified and afraid, with their mouths gaping open.

"Fire!" Corwin yelled. "Fire! Both of you! Fire now!"

Morley blinked twice, then aimed his pistol and pulled the trigger. The shot plunked into the heart of the mass, and it let out a shrill, sad cry as black blood poured copiously from the wound.

Parris fired, striking the creature in its nascent head, and the poor, wretched thing cried again.

It was rising from its womb, still changing, still growing. It lurched forward, its limbs raised toward Corwin, seeming to beckon or plead, but, Corwin thought, more likely to attack. It lunged at him clumsily and he fired, almost feeling sorry for the creature, but far too frightened to allow his sympathy to slow him from his duty and knowing when he pulled the trigger that it was the right thing to do.

It pitched forward at his feet and hit the floor with a thumping wet slap, wheezing chronically, laboriously, as one of

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its eyelids opened for the first time and peered at him through a stringy film of its own blood and amniotic fluid.

It reached for him again, but it was slow and Corwin merely stepped back to avoid a grasp he was certain would be caustic.

Morley had reloaded and decided to send the miserable creature to the hellfires from which it had spawned. He advanced slowly, cautiously, until he stood less than a foot from Anster's head, and shot the beast in the part of its anatomy he supposed was its face. It sighed and belched up an odor fouler than the stench already permeating the air, and then it sank into a smoldering stew of putrescence.

When Corwin heard the roar from that other room, he acted immediately, without forethought, and reached for the door, but finding it locked, kicked it in himself.

The door flew wide open, casting light directly on Susanna and her molester. It looked humanoid, but its shape was somewhere in that lonely, ungodly abyss between the distinction of man from beast. It wore a black robe which was hiked up over its tail, revealing its furry legs and cloven hooves. Its body trembled. It roared—in triumph or ecstasy or anger, Corwin could not tell.

The girl beneath it was limp, her mouth and eyes wide open. Corwin could only conclude that she was dead, for her eyes didn't move, didn't blink. The fixed expression on her face made it evident that the terror she experienced during her rape would have been sufficient to incite her death.

He raised his pistol unconsciously and leveled it at the murderer, but when he pulled the trigger nothing happened. His face fell. He had forgotten to reload and now the creature was dismounting its victim and rising to its feet, shuddering all

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over in a way that brought chills to the sheriff's bones. It had its back to him. There may still be time.

Corwin turned to Morley and Parris hopefully.

"Your pistols," he said to them lowly. "Are either of them loaded?" But they just stood there dumbly.

Corwin turned back to the other room. The creature was standing fully erect now, the robe having fallen to full length, allowing Corwin to view only the back of its head.

He didn't know what to do. There was no time to reload. He looked around desperately for a weapon, but there was none.

Then it turned and faced him.

Parris and Morley gasped.

It was Reverend Blayne. Corwin knew he should have expected as much, but he didn't expect this.

"Sheriff Corwin," Blayne said casually with an air of superiority. "How pleased I am to see you." He looked over Corwin's shoulder at Morley and Parris. "Reverend Parris. Mr. Lawson. I am so glad you could come."

Blayne's manner was disarming. Indeed, Corwin hadn't expected anything that happened up till now, but he also couldn't allow these events to divert him from his purpose. He spoke:

"We are not here on a friendly visit, Blayne," he said. "We have come to arrest you on charges of practicing the damned art of witchcraft, and with us—whether peaceably or by force—you will return to Salem to stand trial."

"That is Reverend Blayne," Blayne said sternly.

"You may be a reverend of the Devil, but not of the Lord, our God," Parris said.

Blayne laughed.

"Maybe so," he said. "However, I am returning not to Salem with you, but am staying here...with my wife." He glanced back at Susanna's still and naked body.

"You are mad!" Morley cried out. "She is dead. Any man with an ounce of reason can see that."

"I am the mad one?" Blayne said, smiling and nodding smugly. He looked directly at Corwin. "Tell me, Sheriff: Am I mad? Am I truly the mad one when you and a mere handful of men ride up here virtually defenseless against forces you have yet to fathom?" He looked at Wilfred's mutilated body and the molten remains of Anster beside him. "You have killed my pet and companion..." He tilted his head upward at an angle and gazed searchingly at a distant corner of the room. "...and also one of my demons. But at what cost? Two of your men are quite injured. A third is dead," he said, nodding at Wilfred's corpse. "You and Reverend Parris and Mr. Lawson are here."

Corwin's brow bunched up. Something was wrong. What was it? What was it that Blayne was getting at?

"Tell me, Sheriff: Where are the rest of your men?"

At once, Corwin's heart seemed to leap up into his throat. Beads of sweat collected on his forehead. Where *were* his men? Cedric Aldrich was with Roger and Edward, looking after them. But the rest should have been right behind him. Where were Milton Ramsey and the Cranley brothers? Why weren't they here?

"Should I tell you, Corwin?" Blayne said in a slow, deep, haunting voice, answering his unspoken question as if he had read his mind.

Corwin did and said nothing.

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Milton Ramsey and William and Nyle Cranley stood by the door as Sheriff Corwin nodded to Lawson and Brown to kick it in. Milton wasn't a guard or hangman like the rest of the men, and this witch-hunting was new to him. He was a little scared, but his boy was suffering the same kind of torments that the afflicted girls were, and it had to be stopped. He had heard the rumors about Blayne and the Harrington girl, that they were responsible for everything that was going on in Salem, and he volunteered to help. To help his boy. To serve justice. To kill the warlock Blayne and his damned witchwife Susanna.

They shall suffer for what they are doing to my boy. I will make it a certainty. They will suffer miserably. Then, they will die.

Lawson and Brown stomped on the door and it caved in. At once, they rushed inside and Corwin and Parris followed. But as Milton's foot crossed the threshold, the house vanished and a huge, yawning pit gaped up at them blackly. Milton's foot plunged into nothingness and he lost his balance and fell forward.

Nyle Cranley dove to the edge of the pit and reached for Milton as his scream echoed off the walls of the hole. Nyle seized an ankle as he belly-flopped hardy on the ground. The whole of Milton's body smashed into the rough hewn wall of the pit, breaking his nose and ribs and decorating his face with blood. Nyle spread his legs and free arm away from the pit's mouth to keep himself from being dragged in with Milton. Nevertheless, he began to slide.

"William!" he cried out to his brother. "Take my feet... fast!"

William dropped his rifle and did as Nyle said.

"Pull, William! Pull!"

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William pulled, and pulled hard, but his laziness over the years had made him weak. Nyle was always the strong one, the hard-working one.

“Pull harder!”

He strained and grunted and gained ground slowly.

Milton had blacked out for a moment, but was fully conscious again and opened his eyes, blinking to clear the blood out of them. He could hear something down below in the blackness as Nyle and William pulled him up, a whooshing sound, and it was getting louder.

His vision cleared.

“Help me!” he cried. “Help me up! Help me up now!”

Something was rushing up at him with incredible speed, a hot, moist gust of foulness preceding it.

The Cranley boys pulled harder.

Nyle grabbed Milton's other foot.

A grating hiss from below.

A tentacle, enormous, winding, and gray, whipped out of the darkness into the moonlight.

A rasping growl.

“PULL ME UP! DEAR GOD, PULL ME UP!”

Milton pressed his hands into the crannies of the wall and pushed off, walking his way back up to the lip of the hole and out, every movement reminding him painfully of his broken ribs.

The earth rumbled and shook, and the three men ran in staggers and falls down the hill away from the pit.

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“Holy Mother of God!” Lawson gasped, looking through the doorway.

“What is it?” Corwin asked, looking back into the other room.

But Lawson didn’t reply. He just stood there, gawking.

Parris turned toward the door and gaped.

Corwin backed away from Blayne, stepping over Anster’s remains, and saw what had stricken Lawson and Parris with such awe. The colors had changed. Greens were white. Browns were blue. The sky and everything else that was black was now the brightest blood-red. And the shape of the landscape had changed completely. The house was no longer in the same place it was when they broke in. It was unnatural; ungodly. Blayne had perverted the pure and incorruptible. He had perverted nature itself.

“What have you done?” Corwin accused, turning back to Blayne. “What in God’s name have you done?” he hissed, trembling.

The rumbling was deafening now. Neither Milton nor the Cranleys wished to turn and face the source of the noise, but they knew something had to be done. They couldn’t simply cower idly by and watch as some unmentionable monstrosity was given birth in the world. They had to stand fast and fight.

Nyle grabbed Milton and William’s arms and stopped.

“You go down to see if Cedric can give us aid,” he said to Milton. “William and I will hold ground here until you return. Now go!”

Nyle gave Milton’s shoulder a shove and Milton was gone. He turned to his brother.

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"William, I know you do not like this—nor do I—but this is what we must do."

He slapped William on the shoulder and raised his rifle.

"Nyle, I...I do not know that I can—"

"You must. You must help me. I need you. We must stay our ground. For our family...and friends."

William swallowed dryly, his Adam's apple bobbing visibly up and down, and raised his rifle with a weak smile.

"Good man," Nyle said, and tapped William's arm lightly. "Good man," he repeated lower as he turned back to the top of the hill and raised his rifle again, and waited.

"Now, have you any conception of the breadth of the power you face in me?" Blayne admonished. "Have you?"

Corwin could think of no way to respond to that question. He was still too befuddled to think at all. But he reminded himself why he was here and what his purpose was, and responded in the only way a sheriff could:

"We have come to bring you back to Salem where you shall be tried for treason, for trafficking with the Devil and his hordes, and for practicing his damnable witchcraft. Come with us peaceably, or you shall be taken by force."

Parris and Lawson looked at the sheriff with astonishment, then at Blayne, but the warlock's face could not be read. They stood there in silence for tense, interminable moments. Then Blayne burst out, not in tirades or violence... but in laughter: haughty, hideous, demonic laughter.

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“How is your arm?” Edward asked Roger, sitting up holding his bare and bloody chest as Cedric wrapped it with strips torn from Edward’s shredded shirt. Roger was likewise wrapping his acid-eaten arm, little more than bones, ligaments, and tendons now.

“It pains me grievously, and I do not think that I should be capable of working it again, but otherwise I am none the worse for it. But mind not my arm. How are you? It would seem the beast has had more than its measure of your flesh.”

Edward held his head up and winced as Cedric secured a shirt strip snugly around his chest.

“Forgive me, Edward. But it must be tight.”

Edward nodded.

“My wounds burn hotly, but the blood makes it appear much worse than it is. I feel fit enough to see our purpose carried out to its conclusion.”

“As do I,” Roger added.

“Let us go then,” Edward said, rising to his feet.

“Are you sure you are able?” Cedric asked the two of them.

“As long as my body draws breath I shall be able,” Roger proclaimed. “Nothing shall keep me from saving my daughter. Nothing.”

“Come,” Edward said. “We mustn’t tarry. Our—”

The ground rumbled and trembled beneath their feet, and they held onto each other to keep from falling down.

“What—” Edward began.

“Earthquake!” Cedric yelled.

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"Earthquake?" Roger said. This could not be mere coincidence, he thought. No. Not at all.

"The earth quakes," he said loudly. "But this is no earthquake. This is the Devil's work. You can be certain of that."

They stood there speechless and frightened for a long time, pondering Roger's statement as the ground jostled them around like dolls in a box. Then an urgent voice threaded its way to them from up the hill through the noise of churning earth.

"Cedric! Roger! Dear God!"

Ramsey scrambled down at them from up the hill on wobbly legs holding his chest with one arm and flailing the other about madly. His face was red with blood.

He reached them in moments, gibbering, and grabbed Cedric's shoulder.

"We are doomed!" he cried. "We are doomed! Oh God...Oh God..." He held his chest with one arm as he rocked back and forth, looking around himself and especially back to the place on the hill he had just come from. His face was scrawled with fright.

Then Edward noticed something was wrong, and it made his face run instantly white.

"What happened to the house?" he asked.

Milton shook his head.

Edward seized his arms and shook him, breaking Milton's grip on Cedric's shoulder and making both arms fall helplessly to his sides.

"What happened to the house? WHAT HAPPENED TO THE HOUSE!"

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“Gone.”

“What do you mean?” Roger asked. “What happened to it?”

Milton shrugged, still shaking his head.

“It comes,” Milton said.

“What comes?” Cedric asked.

“It. That thing. We are doomed.” He began rocking back and forth again, holding his chest.

“Where are the others?” Cedric asked.

“William and Nyle are up there.” Milton jerked his head toward the top of the hill. A thick white fog billowed up from the ground where the house used to be at the pit.

“What about the rest of the men?” Roger asked.

Milton shrugged and shook his head.

The rumbling stopped.

“Come,” Edward said, picking up his rifle.

Edward, Roger, and Cedric gathered up their weapons and trudged up the hill toward the pit. Milton followed them reluctantly, holding his chest and rocking back and forth as he whispered prayers to himself.

Nothingness dissipated and was replaced by a black field through which remote yet clearly audible voices filtered through.

Susanna’s eye fluttered in its socket. The initial trauma was abating, and she was resurfacing to consciousness. But something held her back. She still couldn’t move.

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She felt strange. That feeling of breaching the skin of a mossy pond returned again, but this time it was different. This time it was reversed. She wasn't leaving her body, and she didn't feel lighter. She felt heavier, denser, fulsome.

She tried to move her hand, but to her surprise her foot moved instead, and complete consciousness—no matter how close she came to it—eluded her.

Her other foot shifted, and her hand moved. Her eyes closed then sprang open.

Roger led the way up the hill. The fog had grown so great and dense that nothing could be seen more than a couple yards away in any direction since they had entered its perimeter.

"S-slow down, Roger," Milton said. "The pit is just ahead of us."

"How can you tell?" Edward asked. "I can see nothing through this fog."

"The slope is not so steep now," Milton replied. "We... we must be at the top now. Take care and watch the ground. And st-stay on your guards. That thing is here. I smell it."

"Is that the rotten stench which assails me?" Cedric said.

"Yes."

Cedric grunted and fell silent, searching, staying alert.

"William!" Roger called. "Nyle!" But the only responses were the echoes of his own voice resounding in the foothills and valleys surrounding them.

Heavy footfalls came toward them louder and louder until William Cranley appeared in the whiteness, covered from crown to sole in blood. He lunged at Cedric, falling into his

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arms. He slumped down along Cedric's body, trying to hold on, and collapsed at his feet, breathing laboriously.

"Wi-William," Milton said.

"What happened?" Roger asked.

William moaned, sobbing, and said, "Nyle...Nyle's dead. It caught Nyle. It...ate Nyle."

Edward knelt down and opened William's coat. His shirt was soaked and shredded. He peeled it off one bit at a time and tried to sop up the blood to get a better look at his injuries.

It was bad. One group of pectoral muscles was sliced away from the sternum and ribcage and was now nothing more than a flap of meat hanging on by a sliver of skin at the shoulder. Deep gashes covered the remainder of his torso. The worst of William's injuries had to be the deep laceration running vertically from his naval and disappearing beneath his breeches, his entrails threatening to spill out over his belt.

Edward looked up at the others gravely, silently announcing William's chance of survival.

"What happened?" Roger asked again.

But it was useless. William gurgled. He made an attempt to respond to Roger's question, but belched up thick gobs and bubbles of mucous and blood instead. He choked, vomited more blood, and gasped, his eyes half-lidded. He sighed. His chest dropped suddenly ...and never rose again.

The four men stared at each other. Not far off, a sawing growl cut sharply through the stinking, white air.

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Screams—the screams of men—and gunfire came from outside some distance away. Parris, Lawson, and Corwin turned back toward the door. Corwin and Lawson bolted outside.

Parris stood still, unsure what to do. He recognized one of the screams as that of Cedric Aldrich, one of his most loyal parishioners. He had volunteered to journey with the reverend and sheriff on the witch-hunt upon seeing the men riding toward the village limits on horseback, and now he suffered for his loyalty and good will. Parris turned back to Blayne with open mouth and trembling lips, a reverend of God confronting a priest of the Devil.

“Stop this!” he hollered. “You’re killing them!”

Blayne just stared at him heartlessly, with a sternness and severity that chilled the blood.

Parris glanced down at the pistol he was holding. (He had reloaded after shooting the dog, and it was ready.) He leveled it at Blayne and fired.

The growl grew louder, closer. The stench grew stronger, and it bespoke of rot and death. Something stirred in the murk.

“What was that?” Cedric asked to no one or anyone.

“What?” Edward asked.

“I thought I saw something move there.” He pointed up and to his right.

The growling was thunderous. It was all around them now. They couldn’t tell where it came from.

“Stand back to back,” Roger said. “Everyone. And bear watch.”

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The four of them turned around and stood close, shoulders touching, creating a human circle. They held their weapons out in front of them as they rotated slowly, each of them looking anxiously in every direction, blind as moles in an open field on a hot, sunny day.

“Oh God,” Milton mumbled, holding his pistol with one shaky hand and his chest with the other as his legs grew warm and wet with urine. “It...It’s going to get us and...and...eat us.”

“Quiet,” Cedric whispered to him sharply.

“We...We’re going to die.”

Cedric turned to him and grabbed the lapels of his coat. “Your mindless babbling will make that a certainty,” he barked lowly. “Is that what you want? Is it? Whatever it is that stalks us may be able to see no more than we. All your gibbering will make it—”

Milton’s mouth fell open as he saw it appear over Cedric’s shoulder in the mist and lash out at him with one of its tendrils and skewer him in the back. Cedric screamed as the tendril burst through his stomach, its crab-like pincers snipping open the intestines it was snagged on, emptying their contents onto the ground as it hauled him up into the oblivion of whiteness that lingered on the hill.

Milton screamed and fired as Cedric vanished amongst a flurry of whipping tentacles, writhing tendrils, and flapping wings. Roger and Edward turned and fired as well, but the creature and Cedric were gone. The whole incident had taken but a few seconds, and now they were three.

They could still hear Cedric’s screams, but they were much farther away now, miles perhaps. Whatever it was that took him was fast and ruthless...and it would be back.

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"We must go away from here," Milton said. "It will be back for the rest of us. And then—"

"And then," Edward said, "we will kill it."

"No," Milton said. "It cannot be killed. You saw what it did to Cedric...to William. We're doomed if we stay."

"Maybe so," Roger said. "But if we do not kill it and it reaches Salem or some other town or village..."

"That shan't happen," Edward said. "We will not allow it to happen. It must be killed."

Corwin and Lawson ran across the strangely colored landscape toward the screams and found an enormous wall of dazzling silver that went on north and south and to the stars in the red sky as far as they could see. This was where the screams came from.

Corwin reached out to touch it but his hand passed through it and was surrounded by a tingling, vibrating sensation. He yanked it out as if he had touched something which he found repulsive, then stuck his hand through the wall again. He looked at Lawson and noticed that Reverend Parris wasn't with them. He must have stayed at the house. Well, there was no time to think about it. The reverend would have to take care of himself until they could come back for him.

"Take my hand," he said to Lawson. "And hold fast."

"You're not..."

"I am."

Corwin reached to Lawson and Lawson gripped the sheriff's hand and wrist tightly with both hands.

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Holding his breath as if he were about to be submerged in water, Corwin pushed his face through the wall with his eyes closed, then opened them.

The world he saw was the same he had always known, but it was colorless and sparkles of silver dust glittered everywhere. Senseless noise and magnified sounds echoed throughout. There was energy here. He could feel it pulsing through his face, his teeth, and the bones of his skull. His hair stood on end, rising in perfectly vertical lines from his scalp. He inhaled. His nostrils drew in the sparkling silver air. It tingled, but didn't harm him. He removed his head from the wall and turned to Lawson again.

"It is safe," he said, exhaling the bright sparkles which fell away and were sucked back into the wall. Lawson's head jerked back slightly in surprise. His hands fell away from Corwin's arm.

"Load up," Corwin said, pouring gunpowder into his pistol. "We must be prepared for whatever we may encounter in there."

When they were finished and their guns were loaded and cocked, Corwin said, "Let us make haste."

They stepped into the wall together with their hands extended before themselves as the crazed din of Cedric's screams gave way to the deafening crunching of their own footsteps on brittle leaves. Their hair shot out from their heads. Their bodies tingled. When they breathed, they drew in the particles of silver dust which then puffed out of their mouths and noses like the steamy breath of wintertime.

They moved slowly through the silver mist, their weapons poised and ready in their hands.

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A flock of ravens flittered across their path in mocking swoops. Startled, the two men locked onto them and tracked the birds until they were gone.

They walked on. Corwin had almost hoped the screaming would last long enough to lead them through, and even though it had stopped, he had a fairly good idea of its direction from the moment he stuck his head through the wall—straight ahead. That was where they headed.

The confines of the wall grew narrower, nothing but black emptiness beyond its shimmering fabric. It was little more than a tunnel now, the mouth of which was just up ahead of them: an opaque door of whiteness.

Lawson's curiosity was piqued by pondering the walls of the tunnel they traveled through. He reached through one of them as he walked on. As soon as he had passed his hand through the silver veil to the blackness beyond, he jerked it back and groaned, falling to the ground. That blackness harbored the coldest of cold. Frostbite chewed hotly into his hand.

"What happened?" Corwin asked, crouching down beside the burly hangman.

Lawson held the iced hand up close to his chest for display, frozen and gray, and covered with crisp white frost.

"I passed it through the wall," he said.

Corwin shook his head and helped him up.

"Can you continue?"

Lawson nodded, and they proceeded.

When they reached the tunnel's mouth, Lawson hesitated.

"What if it's cold...like the wall?" he said.

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Corwin thought about this a moment, then removed his coat and swung it into the mouth's whiteness. It returned unscathed.

He slipped back into his coat, and they stepped through the doorway.

It was coming. They could hear it: the flapping of its wings, its grinding breath. The stench had returned; its stench. It was the ripe smell of spilt blood; of death.

"We must go," Milton said. "If we do not leave, we will die."

"We are not moving from here," Roger said, "until we destroy that thing."

"Roger's right," Edward said. "If we flee, we will most certainly be responsible for the deaths of many an innocent soul. We have a responsibility. We cannot go."

"Oh God," Milton said, rocking back and forth holding his ribs. "We are going to die, we are going to die, we are going—"

"Shut your mouth," Roger snapped, raising his gun over his shoulder, "or by God I'll thrash you."

Milton's babbling decayed to grumbling, then subsided completely to bitter, white-lipped speechlessness.

The creature hovered about them now, circling them in the mist. Its growling was everywhere.

The three of them stood back to back as before, anxiously anticipating the impending attack. Every second was an endless cruelty. When would it spring on them? And whom would it claim as its next victim? Those were questions all of them were asking themselves now, but Milton felt the horror

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of his pessimistic answers deeper than the others. He wasn't prepared for anything like this—none of them was. He wasn't prepared to die.

He had thought it would be a simple matter of arresting Blayne and his witch-bitch Susanna and carting them off to Salem Prison to await a brief trial and a speedy hanging. He hadn't expected to have to do anything. If they encountered any problems, the others would take care of it as he watched. He simply wanted to be there to see justice prevail. He wanted to see someone—it really didn't matter who—held accountable for what his son was going through.

Now he thought about his son, his wife, his life in Salem. What if he never saw them again? What if—

Through the chronic, omnipresent growling, he thought he heard something snap—a twig, perhaps—just up ahead of him to his left.

CRACK!

Roger and Edward turned to the noise as Milton aimed in the direction of the sound. Something dark was moving toward them through the cloud. Edward swung his arm under Milton's and knocked the gun up as Milton pulled the trigger, making the shot go wide and up into the air.

"Wha..." Milton gasped, turning to Edward.

Edward nodded and Milton followed his gaze back to Sheriff Corwin and Morley Lawson coming out of the mist.

"I..." Milton said. "...could have..."

Edward looked at him critically. Milton felt ashamed by what he might have done.

"Where are William and Nyle Cranley?" Corwin asked. "What happened to Cedric? We heard him—"

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“Dead,” Edward said. “They are dead.”

“What happened? What is that noise?”

“It...” Milton stammered. “It...ate them.”

“What?” Lawson asked.

“It’s true,” Edward said. Then after a moment, “Where are Reverend Parris and Wilfred?”

“Wilfred is dead. The reverend must still be at the house.”

“Have you found Susanna?” Roger asked.

“Yes,” Corwin replied. “But...” He huffed. “But she was not conscious.” He placed his hand on Roger’s shoulder. “Roger, I am not sure she was alive.”

“Not...No,” Roger said, shaking his head. “I do not believe that.”

A roar resounded in the mist and they all turned to it, being able to discern the creature’s location for the first time. A moment later curls of white fog eddied away from it, revealing sections of the creature’s body while others remained obscured in the bulk of the cloud.

A shudder crept up Corwin’s spine as he realized the hideous enormity of it and fired into its midst. The others followed suit, but it still rushed at them with furious speed. Before Morley Lawson could reload his weapon, before he could scream, the creature swooped down and ripped into his throat with its taloned paws. Blood spouted from his neck in a long dark gush. He opened his mouth, gurgling, and staggered back, dropping his gun and groping for his throat with both hands. The creature swiped at his head, knocking him to his knees. He reached up with one of his hands and it slid under something warm and soggy like a cap, but it was his scalp.

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The creature gored him with its tendrils and thrashed him against the ground with a series of dull, wet thuds. His body twitched miserably. His eyes were wide open. The expression his face retained in its death rictus was one which allowed the living to know he was aware—if only briefly—of the horror of his demise.

Edward dropped his rifle and removed a pistol from his breeches. He had a clear shot at the thing's head as it fell to eating Lawson's remains. Edward fired and managed to put out one of its eyes.

It roared again, but in pain.

If it can be wounded, Edward thought, it can be killed.

But it was hurt and angry and would surely attack them in moments. It whipped to its left and to its right, every appendage lashing out in the madness of an infuriated fit.

It let out a tremendous cry, and they fled.

Blayne glanced down at his chest where Parris had shot him, then looked back at the reverend.

"You foolish, foolish man," he said. "It shall take quite a bit more than that to kill me. I would have thought a man of your learning and intelligence would know better. Well, I suppose I shall have to educate you."

Blayne strode up to Parris and smashed him in the face with the back of his hand, sending him sprawling to the sticky, bloody floor.

"Fergus," a preternatural voice called from behind.

Ambrose straightened up. His face went blank. He turned around slowly.

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Susanna stood in the darkness wearing a white robe with intricate gold symbols embroidered around the collar, cuffs, and hem. But it was not Susanna. An aura of blue flame hung about her, illuminating her in the darkness. And the features of her face and the texture of her hair were somehow different.

Ambrose stood silent, unsure of himself and what to do. Parris looked on from the floor, holding the side of his face.

“Fergus,” she said, frowning. “What has happened to you?” He could almost hear tears in her voice. “Why have you become so wicked?”

“Odara?” he whispered lowly.

She stepped toward him, and he backed away.

“Why do you fear me?”

“I know not fear. I do not fear you or any other being.”

She stepped toward him again, and again he stepped back. He couldn’t understand it. All these years he had yearned for her, and now he recoiled from her.

“You do not speak the truth. You are affrighted by my presence.”

“I insist I am not.” But as hard as he tried, he could not bring himself to make one step toward her.

Outside, gunfire and screams continued to echo in the hills.

“You must stop this, Fergus. You must send the demon back to the pit. There is yet redemption for you. Please. Repent. For me.”

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But he could not repent. Time had hardened him. Whatever good that had resided in him when Odara was still alive was long dead.

"I love you," he said. "But I cannot repent."

"Then you cannot love me. The man I knew...The man I loved, Fergus, my brother and husband, is dead. You are but a hollow shell of that man. You no longer know what love is."

"I love you!" he shouted. "Everything I did was for you!"

She covered her face with her hands and shook her head.

"Do not say that! You have done many terrible deeds. I do not wish to be their cause."

He wanted to reach to her, touch her, comfort her, but he could not. His feet would not move.

"If you ever loved me, you will send back the demon."

His face grew impassive.

"I will not." And after uttering those three words, he felt a black wave of perdition flush over him, and he knew that all he ever did he did for Ambrose. All he ever loved was Ambrose. Fergus was dead, and never a part of him. They were two separate entities who had shared the same body and struggled for control of it. Vengeance was merely an excuse Ambrose used to sate the guilt Fergus felt by all the treachery they incurred together. Now that Ambrose had won and Fergus was dead, there was no guilt—only hate.

A light breeze blew in from outside and swept through the house, building up quickly to a cold, powerful wind. The windows shattered, glass fragments blowing inward. Odara's hair streamed back over her shoulders as her robe billowed,

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defining her breasts and the lines of her body beneath the white linen.

She stepped forward and proceeded toward Ambrose, to the doorway behind him. As she approached him they stared at each other longingly, like strangers whose eyes become riveted upon each other with an awful feeling of familiarity or déjà vu.

He let her pass, the cool blue fire of her aura brushing by him, sending a shiver into his heart and bones. In death, she had reached the attainment he had spent his life toiling to develop, but never quite achieved. He had taken a darker, easier path, a path whose fruits were more sour than sweet. She had power, a power he had never sensed in her before. She walked listlessly past the remains of Wilfred Brown and Anster, and left the house, stepping onto the white grass outside as Ambrose and Parris looked on in rapt bewilderment.

Parris, still holding the side of his face, turned up to Blayne, but Ambrose didn't look at him. Instead, he followed Odara outside, walking as slowly and listlessly as she did.

Odara walked in the direction of the screams and gunfire, to the silver wall. When she came to it, she stopped, outstretched her arms, and raised them heavenward, pitching her head back.

"I summon you," she called, "O, Aingealag, most righteous and benevolent spirit, to come hither with speed and grace, for thy service is needed, and I am thy master."

"What are you doing?" Ambrose barked at her.

"I asked you to banish the demon to the pit from whence you summoned it. You refused, so I must do it."

"NO!" he yelled, and pounced on her.

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They crashed to the ground, rolling and grappling in the grass like they did when they were adolescents, but this was no mock wrestling match between frolicking teenage lovers—this was mortal combat.

Ambrose pummeled her face with blows that would have crushed a mortal's skull, but she tolerated the punishment and retaliated, clawing his cheeks with her nails and driving blue flames of icy energy into the gouges and under his skin. She tore into his back, his arms, his legs, and each time she did so he recoiled.

He bled. He was hurt and angry and frustrated. He pounded down on her chest with all the force he could conjure, sending searing-hot bolts of his own into her. Her ribs cracked audibly beneath her breasts as he spilled his fire into her wounds. One of those breasts was ruptured. Blood seeped through her robe.

She gasped in wheezing hiccups, her eyes wide and rolling, silently imploring her assailant for mercy.

There was none.

Ambrose hammered away at her chest and face, knocking her breath out of her before she could draw it, not caring that he was killing the only two women who ever meant anything to him.

The wall behind him rippled and began to roil. Flecks of silver dust sprang from it and danced above the ground, collecting themselves together into a massive silver cloud.

Odara jabbed her fingers in Ambrose's eyes, filling one of them with blue fire, blinding it.

He threw his hands up to his face and groaned.

She kned him in the testicles, and he fell off her, coughing, one hand nursing his eyes, the other his groin.

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“Damn you, cuntin g wench! Damn you!” he growled.

Odara rolled onto her side and started crawling away.

Ambrose seized her ankle. She kicked at him but couldn’t hit him and couldn’t kick free of his grasp. She saw the cloud floating behind him. Flashes of light were bursting within it and branching out through its structure as it molded and congealed. She reached out to it with an open hand.

Ambrose regained sight in one of his eyes and sprang on her again, one tightly balled-up fist extended high over his head, prepared to dash her brains out of her skull. He cried out as he drove the fist down at her head with all his strength, but was halted in mid-arc and thrown off her.

He tumbled to the ground and looked up, dazed. Aingealag hovered above him, bright and silver with the dust of the world of the wall, its black eyes beaming down at him.

Ambrose scrambled back from it and whispered:

“Sinnis. Rotazater. Manatas.”

The distant sounds of gunfire and panicked men on the other side of the wall were drowned-out by the noise of Ambrose’s demons rushing forth from the nowhere in which they dwelled. A slight, satisfied smirk crossed their summoner’s face. Then they appeared, soaring down from the roiling crimson sky, one by one in the order Ambrose had called them.

“Attack!” Ambrose barked, pointing an accusing finger at the silver spirit.

They dove at Aingealag, shrieking morbidly for its destruction, their dark distorted ugliness contrasting sharply with Aingealag’s luminous elegance.

Aingealag extended one of its arms out in front of its chest and passed it from left to right as if bestowing a blessing upon them. At once, Sinnis and Rotazater stopped

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dead in mid-flight, choking in high-pitched squawks, fangs and teeth gnashing together over their ulcerated black lips. They plummeted from the sky like lead bricks, hitting the ground with heavy thumps as they thrashed in fits and clawed at their faces and raked the rotten flesh from their skulls.

But Manatas kept coming. Aingealag passed its arm at him again and he flinched, but he kept coming.

Aingealag raised both arms out in front of its face when the demon crashed into it and drove it back toward the wall. They struggled in the air, a mass of fluttering black and silver wings holding them aloft as they tore into each other.

Ambrose rose to his feet as they fought. His wounds were sore and throbbing, but he was well; certainly better off than Odara, who still floundered in the grass wheezing and coughing up small amounts of mucous and blood.

He approached her slowly, confident she could neither flee nor attack him. She was at his mercy, and he wasn't feeling very merciful. Her fate would soon be realized, and it would be a fate of suffering. He stood above her and kicked her in the ribs hard, snapping two more. She rolled a few times and stopped.

She wept. Her hands trembled. Blood oozed from her mouth in strings and gobs. She looked up at him, her eyes wide and sad. Susanna and Odara both stared out those eyes now, both acutely conscious of their plight.

Ambrose kicked her across the face. Her head jerked to one side and everything went gray. Susanna had served his purpose as his concubine, as a substitute for Odara, and now she had to die. He never wanted it to end like this, but he had no choice. Odara possessed her body and had betrayed him. As long as she remained inside that body and controlled its thoughts and actions, she would continue to betray him. That could not be tolerated.

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He crouched down beside her and slid his hand under her neck, raising her throat up to him, baring it as her head stirred slackly then flopped over. He placed his other hand over her windpipe and began to squeeze. Her hands flew up to her throat and clutched Ambrose's wrists, then groped upward toward his face.

Her wheezing narrowed to a thin, clotted hiss. Then it stopped.

Her body bucked and stiffened, bucked and stiffened. He bore down on her slowly, grinding his thumbs into her windpipe. He could feel it beginning to collapse under the pressure of his grip.

Her face was red, almost purple. Her eyes sprang open and bulged like eggs from her sockets. Odara's aura grew dim. She bucked and stiffened...and stiffened...and stiffened. The world was fading from gray to black, slipping away from her. She sensed that death was no more than a heartbeat away.

Suddenly, Ambrose's grip slackened, and he released her. She gasped and relaxed a little. Her complexion began to fade from dark purple to red as she heaved and breathed deeply. She opened her eyes. The world began to come into focus again. Ambrose still straddled her, but his face was knotted up in a grimace and he was arching back and holding his chest.

She was too weak to throw him off her. All she could do was lie there helplessly, breathing in and out in slow, methodical breaths.

Behind him hovered Aingealag, an arm extended at him; the demon, Manatas, lying dead and mangled on the ground before it. Ambrose turned to face it, rising to his feet. It raised its other arm, extended it at him palm down, then rotated the palm upward in a deliberate wrenching action as its fingers folded one at a time from pinkie to thumb into a

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fist. A new paroxysm smote his chest, harder than the first. He flinched and his knees buckled, but he fought the pain, endured the pain, made it his, and stood up.

"I will not be defeated by you," Ambrose shouted insolently. "...by your God, or by any other of your God's servants!"

He removed the clutching hand from his chest and raised his chin up proudly.

"I am your master. Kneel before me or suffer my wrath."

"Nay. I know you not as my master, but as my master's foe. I shall not kneel nor yield to you."

"Then die!"

Ambrose leapt at Aingealag, gripping the sides of its head and vomiting gouts of liquid red fire from his mouth, eyes, and nostrils into the spirit's face. They wheeled around in the air, whipping around in half circles.

Susanna sat up, Odara's aura flickering back to its former brightness.

Ambrose tore into the spirit's head, ripping one of its ears and several locks of its long hair from its scalp, turning them back to silver flecks of dust which fell and were sucked back into the wall from which they came. Aingealag voiced its pain in a long, agonizing, high-pitched shriek through the fire as Ambrose spewed into its face. The spirit sank to the ground as Ambrose proceeded to strangle the life from its body, the flapping of its wings slowing considerably.

Odara's aura, once again full and blue, receded up her legs and torso and down her head and neck into her arms and open hands where it grew into two spheres of blinding light.

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She held them up at Ambrose's back like cannons as the light pulsed with increasing speed.

Ambrose, seeing the brightness all around, stopped pouring his poison into the spirit and released it. He turned just in time to see the sharp beams of light issue from Odara's fingers, but by then it was too late.

The beams locked onto him and wouldn't let go. He writhed in their light as it penetrated his flesh and muscles and organs, and seeped into his joints and bones like arthritis.

"O-dara!" he groaned, his countenance palsied, his arms crossed defensively over his chest. "No! Stop! STOP!"

But she couldn't stop, although she wanted to. He had no right to the sympathy for which he was pleaded.

Ambrose shut his eyes tight and braced himself up harder against the searing beams as he summoned every last particle of energy he had to direct his will to the clothed bones lying between the house and the foliage of the bramble bushes beside it.

Robert Eames woke from a rest once thought eternal, but which was for him fleeting and substituted with torment. He rose and obeyed his master's will.

The men split up. Corwin and Milton went one way; Roger and Edward went the other. It was still almost impossible to navigate through the fog, so they had to be slow and careful or risk falling into the pit.

The demon was loud and angry, and Milton was certain it was after him and the sheriff.

"George, what will we do? What will we do?" he kept asking in an annoying, whining voice as he continued to sway back and forth.

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"We must fight," Corwin responded, trying to ignore Milton's worried gibbering.

That was not the answer Milton wanted to hear, but he felt safer being with the sheriff, and he had to live with his decision.

"Have you loaded yet?" Corwin asked.

Milton nodded nervously, the mask of dried blood on his face making him look like a savage or a jester, Corwin couldn't determine which.

The sheriff checked his pistol, then looked up into the fog toward the direction he thought the roaring was loudest.

"Come," he said as he strode ahead. But Milton didn't move.

Corwin stopped and turned around.

"Come, I said."

Milton shook his head.

"Fine," Corwin huffed. "Stay and wait for it to come for you."

Corwin disappeared into the whiteness, leaving Milton to ponder the situation alone. Alone, he thought. Alone.

He ran after the sheriff.

When he caught up with him, Corwin was crouched behind a tree with his pistol held up by his chest.

"George," Milton said.

"Quiet," Corwin whispered sharply. "I think I see it."

"You...You see it? W-where?"

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“Look.” Corwin pointed his gun at a grove of trees about twenty yards ahead. Something large and dark and distorted moved there.

“We...” Milton stammered. “We must go. We shall never be able to kill it. It...is too large.”

“We must. There are no other options.”

“I should not be here,” Milton muttered. “I cannot be here. I cannot...” He ran away.

“Milton!” Corwin called, unconsciously raising his voice and alerting the creature to their whereabouts.

It took to the air and in seconds was lashing out at Milton as he ran with one arm folded over his head and the one with the pistol holding his ribs. It clawed at him and slashed his head and raked through the back of his coat, shredding it and the flesh underneath. Milton tripped and fell. His head throbbed. His back burned. His ribs and nose ached. He was one big ball of pain lying there open and vulnerable in a fetal position.

He looked up.

It hovered directly over him now, its wings flapping heavily, its belly an obscene wound of pillowy black flaps of moist skin, which parted chronically to reveal a maw of jagged teeth and wart-like lesions. Its heat radiated down at him as its tentacles draped over him like a prison tent.

He lifted the gun off his chest and fired into the thick black maw. The creature shuddered and screeched. Black muck gushed from the wound and tarred him to the ground. He couldn't move. The tendrils snaked down at him, their pincers snapping mindlessly, and snipped into his chest and arms through the muck. Several of them bit into him and retreated, plowing, drilling.

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“OH GOD! GEORGE! OH GOD! NO!
NO! OH GOD NO NONONONOOOOO!
GOHAAAARRRGGGGHH!”

The screams faded into a garbled mess of grunts.

Corwin had started toward him as soon as he knew the beast was attacking, and he was almost there now. He stopped and fired, breaking one of its wings. The demon whirled around in the air and crashed beside Milton.

It scurried after Corwin. He ran, the creature's pincers clicking at his heels.

Reverend Parris was still nursing his jaw and shaking off the daze Blayne had put him in when he heard something bang against the side of the house.

He stood up, holding the back of a chair for support. He still felt dizzy.

He looked out the window and saw the skeleton man walking away from the house. *What's this?* he wondered. *Has the Lord's Day come? Have the dead begun to rise from their graves? Is this the work of God or the Devil?* He would follow the skeleton man and find out.

Odara grew weaker, and Ambrose was still alive. But he, too, was weak and unsure. It had taken much of his strength to fight the spirit, and he had not succeeded in destroying it. He had sent the strongest of his demons to do battle with it, and it had killed them. Odara's strength and resilience had surprised him. All his power seemed to be leaking away from him. He couldn't retaliate or move. He wasn't even sure he was able to reanimate Eames to come to his aid.

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But then he saw Eames coming and knew his summons was answered. *Attack her*, he willed. *Kill her*.

Robert Eames walked toward Odara. She rested on her side now, straining to keep her arms up.

Parris saw the skeleton man change direction, saw Odara's rays locked on to Ambrose, and knew the skeleton man's intent. He raised his gun slowly, took careful aim, and fired.

The shot struck Eames in the back of the head on the same side Roger had caved in with the poker. The whole right side of the skull exploded into bits, sending white dust and sharp fragments of bone everywhere like shattered pottery.

No agonized howl issued forth this time. His vocal cords had long since rotted away. He was all bone and cartilage now.

The skeleton turned around and faced its assailant. Parris stood there, mortified and all too conscious that he was alone. He reached for his gunpowder but the skeleton man was fast and stormed over toward him. Parris stood still, petrified.

No, Blayne willed. *Forget the reverend. The girl. Kill the girl.*

Eames turned and continued toward Odara. There was no time to reload. Parris ran after the skeleton man and tackled him, pistol-whipping the yellowed skull, knocking off hunks of bone and teeth with every blow.

Eames rolled over, half his skull mutilated and missing, and clasped Parris's wrist before he could strike again. Parris tried to pull free, but Eames was strong. The reverend grabbed the gun with his left hand and swung it at the skeleton man's face. Eames blocked the blow and gripped Parris's other wrist. The reverend rocked back and forth and side to side but couldn't shake loose.

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Eames sat up, the decrepit grin of death smiling coldly from his broken face. Parris stood up, hunched over the skeleton man almost as he would an elderly man who had fallen and couldn't get up. But instead of helping Eames rise, he kicked him in the ribs, cracking and breaking several of them. He stomped on the skeleton's knees and pelvis, crunching the dead, brittle bones. He booted Eames in the gut, but there was no gut and his foot shot through the moldy, tattered shirt which hung loosely on his frame and crashed into his spine, popping disks out of place and clicking vertebral bones together as the back locked. Parris kept kicking, but Eames still wouldn't release him.

The girl, Ambrose willed again more urgently. Kill the girl! Do it now!

Eames let go and Parris fell back and thumped to the ground.

Odara was almost drained, but it was working. Ambrose had weakened greatly. He dropped to one knee, then the other. His complexion was pallid, his expression weary and blank. He glowed like white-hot steel. His shoulders slumped forward. He sank back on his haunches then pitched forward and hit the ground with a heavy thud.

The beams cut off and the spheres of light evaporated from Odara's hands. Eames collapsed into a pile of bones and rags as he crawled up beside her and reached for her throat. She sighed, then went limp and lost consciousness.

Parris ran over to her. She was still breathing, but barely. He approached Blayne and knelt down beside him. He too was alive. Parris didn't know if either of them would live, but precautions had to be taken. Blayne had to be shackled, and perhaps the Harrington girl as well. In matters of witchcraft one had to exercise great care. No undue chances

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could be taken lest the evil once captured be given reign to perpetuate itself and wreak its mischief.

But the world he was in remained the same. The wagon with the shackles in it was not here; it was probably on the other side of that silver wall, and he wasn't certain he wanted to go through it. There were still sounds of shouts and gunfire coming from beyond that wall. For all he knew, Hell was on the other side of that wall.

No. He couldn't chance venturing through. He had to find something here, in this world, to restrain them with.

He looked about him. The aftermath of what had occurred here was in great evidence. Malformed demons lay dead and decaying on white grass. Black clouds scudded across a red sky that ended at the edge of a wall of silver. A witch and a warlock lay unconscious and near death. Shifting a little, still alive between the warlock and the wall, the silver spirit roused and rose up.

Parris approached it slowly.

"What are you?" he asked.

"I am Aingealag. I was summoned by my master to banish the demon of the pit."

"What master? What demon?"

Aingealag gestured toward Susanna.

"I am afraid she may not live," Parris said calmly. A roar echoed through the wall. "Is that the demon?"

"Yes."

"Well then, I think you best banish it, and make haste about it. Men may be dying."

The spirit fluttered up into the air, then turned and plunged into the wall.

Roger and Edward ran back toward the screams and gunfire. They had all hoped to elude the creature long enough to figure out a way to kill it, but Milton's screams testified to their failure to do so. Hopefully, they would be able to reach Corwin and Milton in time, but it didn't sound promising.

A figure came toward them in the mist. They could not see it clearly, so they stopped.

"Go back!" Corwin hollered. "Go! Now!" he yelled waving his arms wildly at them. But they just stood there.

Then they saw it. It was right behind the sheriff, mammoth and hobbling after him with hungry speed. It clamored, making a sound none of them had ever heard before. It was a harsh, repulsive, regurgitating sound, as if it were hacking to cough up enormous balls of phlegm which had become lodged in its throat.

"Run!" Corwin cried.

But neither of them ran. The creature was too close for them to simply run; they probably wouldn't be able to get this close again. They raised their guns and leveled them at the demon. Edward fired, then Roger. Edward's shot pelted it in the head but went too high and ricocheted off the slope of its brow. A few gray scales chipped off in a spray of muck, only wounding it mildly, not enough to stop it. Roger had more luck, blowing a hole in the yellow underbelly of its throat, creating a more serious wound. But it still rushed at them, its tendrils lashing out ahead of it. They turned and ran as Corwin caught up with them.

They all ran as fast as they were able, unsure where they were heading in the fog. Then the tall, thin silhouettes of trees came into focus just ahead of them. The trees were

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cluttered close together. Corwin was exhausted, but glad they had come this way.

“Through the wood,” Corwin said raggedly. “We must run into the wood. It’s too big to follow us in there.”

They ran into the woods. Corwin felt some relief after having entered them, and slowed down. Roger and Edward slowed also and looked back. For a second they heard and saw nothing. Then loud creaking and cracking sounds as the leafless trees at the entrance to the woods swayed and then fell and crashed to one side and the other. Then more creaking and cracking; more falling trees.

They turned and bolted again, faster than before. The crisp sounds of breaking tree trunks and swooshing trees as they fell and crashed through the woods followed the men. Those sounds grew louder and closer, as did the sawing breaths and growls of the beast that pursued them.

“What can we do?” Roger asked, panting heavily as he forced his leaden legs to work their hardest.

“Keep going,” Edward replied. “Don’t stop. Whatever you do, do not stop!”

Then Corwin noticed something, something familiar. He realized he had been in these woods before. He and Lawson had come through them after passing out of the wall.

“Faster...” he yelled. “Run faster.”

The fog dissipated a little. They could see a clearing up ahead. It was the same clearing Corwin and Lawson had encountered upon exiting the mouth of the tunnel in the wall, and beyond that stood the silver wall itself.

They ran into the clearing and stopped.

“What...?” Edward asked Corwin, leaving his mouth open and his bottom lip quivering as he glared at the sheriff.

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Corwin ran over to the wall and pressed his hands against it. It was solid. He felt along the wall, groping desperately for the doorway as the growls and crashing trees grew louder.

"It was here," he said emphatically, pounding his fists against the cold metal surface. "I know it was."

The demon roared. They all turned and looked back at the woods. The trees parted as the creature made its path through them, and now they could see its horned back bobbing up and down over the treetops.

"George...", Roger stammered.

But Corwin could only turn back to the wall and pound it so hard and so many times that his fists bled and the bones broke. He broke down and cried, slumping against the wall and crumbling into a helpless ball at its base.

"Stand up, Sheriff," Edward said, grabbing Corwin by the shoulders and hauling him to his feet. "We must run."

But Corwin only shook his head and babbled, his eyes half-lidded.

The demon parted the last of the trees that came between it and its prey. Its mass was immense, its ugliness nothing short of revolting. It was apparent from its posture and the manner in which it moved that its injuries were minimal. They had barely affected it. Edward had put out one of its eyes and Corwin had broken one of its wings, but now a new eye had grown beneath the missing one and its wings didn't appear to be damaged to any degree.

It lurched toward them slowly.

The three men huddled close together. Corwin was useless, a gibbering mess. Edward was out of ammunition. Roger fumbled with his pistol in an attempt to reload but it

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was too difficult. He had been able to reload several times since losing the use of his right arm by pressing the gun in his armpit as he filled it with gunpowder and loaded the metal ball and packed it all down, but it was a difficult process and he was tired. He was too tired now to do it again. He handed the pistol to Edward, but he wouldn't take it. There was no time. It would be futile to attempt to defend themselves by firing one solitary round at a beast that would recover so quickly and regenerate itself.

"Take it, damn you!" Roger hissed in a whisper.

"It would be of little use. We haven't time. We must separate, each man in his own direction. It is the only way. It cannot catch all of us if we are in different places." He turned to Corwin. "You hear me, Sheriff? When I say run, you run." Corwin nodded, regaining his bearings once again.

The creature stepped toward them, the whole of its body trembling fiercely, its breath sawing out in low grunts and growls. It was uncomfortably close now.

"Run!" Edward hollered. "Run now!"

They ran. The creature seemed confused for a moment, then attacked. A large, slimy tentacle whipped out and caught Edward, coiling itself around his torso and hoisting him into the air. He struggled in its grip but couldn't free himself. Its grip was so powerful he couldn't breathe. His ribs were cracking slowly and the blood rushed into his head, arms, and legs with such speed and under such pressure that he was sure his head and feet would explode. A terrible ache swelled up in his ears and behind his eyes. The demon's hot, foul breath gusted in his face as it brought him up to its open mouth, its sharp teeth and fangs dripping with saliva. A sour, metallic taste rose up Edward's throat into the back of his mouth. All he could see was the demon's maw. He went limp

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and began to lose consciousness, vaguely aware that if he did, he would not wake up again.

Everything was graying out on him when a bright flash of light lit up the demon's face...and then another...and another. And then Edward fell.

The fall knocked the wind out of him, leaving him breathless and coughing and gasping for air. He looked up. The demon hovered above him, its wings flapping. A section of the wall was glowing bright white. It rippled and poured out of itself, gushing out in a liquid stream of white-silver light which plowed into the demon and drove it back through the woods, setting the fringes of the fallen trees on fire. It was Aingealag attacking the demon, forcing it back to the abyss from which it had come. The demon and the spirit vanished into the fog; the demon's clamoring filling the air.

Edward's ragged breathing slowed. Roger and Corwin stood at opposite ends of the clearing, both staring open-mouthed at the fiery path left in the woods. Roger turned to Edward and ran to him. Corwin followed.

"Are you all right?" Roger asked.

Edward nodded. "I am well," he replied, then after a pause: "What was that?"

"I know not," Roger said.

Edward looked at up Corwin.

"Nor do I," the sheriff added, looking back at the woods.

Edward sat up.

"Come," he said. "We must find Susanna and the others."

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Roger extended his good hand. Edward took it and Roger pulled him up. His whole body ached and stung and throbbed.

The fog was thicker now and continuing to grow denser.

Far off, the creature's howls and screeches faded into nothingness.

Parris had just finished tying Blayne to a tree with some rope he found in a closet of the house when he noticed the white vapor seeping out of the silver wall and rolling up its surface. The vapor grew opaque, obscuring the wall, and rolled out rapidly, hugging the ground. It flowed over Susanna's prone body and across the field. Soon, the red sky was blotted out and everything was white.

"What the devil is this?" Parris whispered to himself.

He made his way over to where he had seen Susanna last and knelt down and groped for her. He crawled around for a minute, then his hand fell on her delicate, thin wrist. It was warm. He proceeded to tie her up.

When he was finished, he sat down on the ground beside her and waited.

He sat there a long time with his arms wrapped around his knees, one hand clasping his wrist, the other holding his pistol, now loaded. An odd silence prevailed. No crickets chirruped in the grass, no owls hooted in the trees, no bats fluttered overhead. Nothing. The roars and screams and gunfire had stopped some time ago. Parris never felt so alone.

He bowed his head and thought of Naomi and Elizabeth in New York and wished he could be with them now. Elizabeth had been feeling much better before he sent her and

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her mother away. He wished he didn't have to do it, but they would be much safer in New York than in the midst of chaos and mayhem in Salem. Yes, it was most prudent and wise to send them away when he did. It was very wise indeed.

He looked up. Voices came from the direction of the wall, and they were getting louder.

"Susanna," Roger called.

"Sam," Corwin called.

"Here!" Parris replied and stood up. "I am here."

Now he could see the light of their torches coming toward him. He rose to his feet and ran up to meet them.

"Where are the others?" he asked. "Where are the Cranleys? Where are Morley Lawson, Milton Ramsey, and Cedric Aldrich?"

"Dead," Corwin said flatly. He had recovered his wits and courage, but didn't look well. His hands were wrapped in bloody rags.

"All of them?"

There was a tense pause.

"Milton...may yet be living," Corwin said. "I am not certain. But if he be alive, he is surely not well."

"Lord," Parris whispered, shaking his head.

"What happened here?" Roger asked.

"Blayne has been defeated. I bound him to a tree," Parris said, nodding over his shoulder. "He is alive, but unconscious."

"Where is Susanna?" Edward asked.

"Over here." He strode back to her body and the others followed.

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“Susanna!” Edward and Roger exclaimed, almost in unison. They knelt down beside her. Roger cradled her head in his lap as Edward hastily proceeded to undo the rope.

“What happened to her?” Roger asked, looking up at Parris sadly.

“She fought Blayne. It was she who defeated him.”

“Then why is she tied up?” Edward said indignantly.

“During the battle she plainly exhibited symptoms of witchcraft, by which means she fought and ultimately defeated the warlock. I do not deem it wise to free her. A most powerful sorceress is she.”

“Are you touched in the head, man?” Roger said. “She is barely living. Only the slightest breath does she draw.”

Parris looked at Corwin.

“Why do you let them loosen her bindings? Surely you can see the danger of that.”

“You said she defeated Blayne with the magic of witchcraft and that is how she came to be thus injured?”

“I do.”

“Then she has proved herself to be our ally in this matter.”

“Well...,” Parris said hesitantly. “Yes. I suppose she has.”

“Then I see no reason why she should be restrained at this time. In any case, she appears to be in no state to cause mischief through either magical or physical means. In fact, it would seem she may not survive her injuries. Therefore, let her be.”

“But...” Parris started to object, then stopped himself, seeing Corwin cast him a baleful glare.

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"Susanna," Roger said softly, brushing the hair back from her forehead. Tears rose to his eyes. "Susanna."

The fog began to thin again.

Susanna's complexion took on a blue hue which flickered brightly, becoming radiant and full and steady, the light reflecting off the faces of Roger and Edward. Her shallow breathing deepened. Her cool fingers closed briefly on the hand which Edward held hers with. She opened her eyes and looked at him.

"Her eyes," he said. "There is something. . ."

Slowly, she sat up. She turned to Roger, then rose to her feet, allowing Edward's hand to slip away.

"See," Parris whispered to Corwin. "She is not as impaired as we first supposed. She must be restrained." He stepped toward her, and Corwin blocked him across the chest with his arm. "We..."

She turned and walked listlessly to the tree where Ambrose sat bound with his arms behind his back and his head lolling onto one side of his chest. She touched her palm to the side of his face. His head rose as his eyes opened blearily and peered into hers. A tear rolled down his cheek.

They remained still for a long time, like ancient statues. Then the blue aura flickered again until it stopped altogether, and Susanna went limp and collapsed to the ground.

Roger and Edward ran to her. She was weak, but stirring and conscious.

"How do you feel, dearest?" Roger asked.

She looked at him groggily.

"Tired," she said lowly. "My bones hurt. My throat hurts."

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She looked at his maimed arm. Her face scrunched into a frown.

“Father! Your arm. What happened?”

“Never you mind, dearest. I am only grateful you are alive. Now it is most important that we see you are well again.”

The fog was largely dissipated now. The silver wall was gone. The sky was black and festooned with stars. The grass was dark again. Everything was the same as when they arrived. But men had died.

“Help me! Somebody help me!” The cry was hoarse and frustrated.

“It came from that direction,” Corwin said, pointing to a grove of elm trees halfway up the hill.

Corwin and Parris followed the voice. Edward looked at Roger.

“Go,” Roger said. “I will stay with her.”

And Edward ran after the reverend and the sheriff.

The three of them came to the grove and followed the raspy voice through the trees. It wasn’t long before they came to the clearing and saw the man squirming in the black muck.

“Milton,” Corwin said, almost to himself. “I was certain you were dead.”

“Well, I most assuredly am not. Help me. I am wounded and cannot free myself from this...this...” He raised his arm a little and it snapped back to sticky black ground.

It would have been almost comical if Milton weren’t so severely injured. A pleased look crossed Corwin’s face, not because Milton looked ridiculous, but because he was alive.

He grabbed his dagger with his swollen and broken hands and knelt down and started cutting the tar-like substance

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away while Edward and Parris watched. Corwin stopped and looked over his shoulder at them.

"I could use some assistance here," he said.

"Oh," Parris said. "Of course." He and Edward produced their daggers and knelt to the task of freeing Milton.

An hour later, the sun was rising and they were on their way back to Salem: Milton, Susanna, and Roger riding in the back of the wagon with Ambrose; Edward and Sheriff Corwin riding up front, Edward taking the reins. As they rode on, Parris realized something was wrong and rode up to the front of the wagon to tell Corwin.

"George," he said. "What about the girl?"

"I think she will be fine," the sheriff replied. "I have known her and her father for many years. She is no more a witch than you or I."

"No. Not the Harrington girl, the other one. Jessica Blayne. What happened to her? Where is she?"

An uneasy, sickening feeling filled Corwin's stomach. He had forgotten about Blayne's wench. He sighed deeply. He couldn't concern himself with her now. His main priority was to bring his prisoner and these injured people back to Salem with haste so they could begin recuperating and trial proceedings could commence.

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November Coming Fire

Roger Harrington's Journal (entered by Susanna Harrington)—

11 November—At father's request, I am continuing his journal as my own since he is unable to do so. He tells me it is important for posterity's sake that an accurate record of all events such as we have seen and partaken of be kept. Poor father, Dr. Griggs had to saw off his arm above the elbow, such was its condition. He insists he is well, but his skin retains a sickly pallor, and I know he is in much pain. The kind doctor said he will regain his strength with speed, and that is some comfort. The doctor visited us this morning and assured me of this, but still, he cannot stop boasting of my recuperation, so certain was he that I was destined to die. Indeed, we are fortunate. Father is already much the better, as am I, though still I am very much weaker than usual. If it were not for Edward and Thea, I am certain, Father and I would be much the worse for our injuries. I am most glad Edward is with us still. It comforts me much that he is here. The hanging is to be tomorrow, and though father is very set against my attending, I know

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I must attend to ease my mind, and Edward has agreed to take me. I must see the end of all this.

12 November—The hanging failed. I stood with Edward and Father amongst the people of Salem on Gallows Hill this noontime, amongst the shouts for justice, while they wheeled him up to the locust tree in the executioner's wagon in shackles. Upon seeing me, he cast me such a look that my flesh ran cold. I turned away quickly for fear that to endure that look a moment longer I should surely die. I looked back when I felt his eyes pass away from me. He was mounting the ladder, hissing at the crowd as they shouted at him and cursed him for his crimes. Then he reached the top of the ladder and considered us. He seemed to have neither remorse nor regret—no emotion at all—and that chilled me to shivers. Judge Hathorne read the charges against him, but did not ask if he was repentant. He simply nodded to Jeremiah Brown, who placed the hood over his head, and then the rope. Mr. Townsend pushed him off the ladder. He fell and the rope snapped tight and his body jerked. He swayed back and forth for a minute or more, then his knees rose up. He swung his hands under his feet and reached up for the rope and began to climb up. O, I am more affrighted than ever I have been before. The guards stopped him before he escaped, but I am no longer certain he can be killed. I know I shall not be able to sleep restfully till he is dead. That sounds terrible, and I wish it were not I who penned those words, but it is the truth. God forgive and protect me.

The day after the failed execution, Judge Hathorne, Sheriff Corwin, and Reverend Parris sat at a table in Beadle's Tavern drinking tankards of ale as they discussed the situation. It was a cold night, but the large cobblestone fireplace threw enough heat to keep the tavern comfortably warm throughout. It was well past eleven o'clock. Most of the patrons had gone home long ago, having had an

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evening of stealing glances at the trio and whispering to one another. Now the three men could speak more freely.

"I think it most prudent," Parris said, "to strike all reference to Blayne from the records. Should there be inquiries later on, we claim ignorance at ever having heard the name. There most assuredly will be inquiries if we let it be known that we sent two reverends to their deaths under charges of witchcraft."

"I see," Hathorne said. He turned to Corwin. "Do you concur with Sam's proposition, George?"

"I do. I deem it most prudent indeed. I should think we shall suffer enough admonishment for the deaths of one reverend and nineteen others—all innocents." He leaned over the table to the judge. "But two reverends..." he whispered, shaking his head. "And the second without a trial..." He huffed, sitting back in his chair and throwing one bandaged hand up while raising his tankard to his mouth with the other and gulping his ale.

Hathorne nodded solemnly.

"Very well then," he said. "I shall see that it is done in the morning. Now, Sam," he said, looking at Parris. "You are certain Blayne will not survive tomorrow's execution."

"Most certain. There has yet to be a witch or a warlock able to tolerate the pyre."

"Good," Hathorne said. "You and George see to it that Blayne is not the exception. There is much distress amongst the townspeople due to Saturday's folly. I should be placed in a most awkward position should we fail to succeed this time."

Corwin brought his hand to his mouth as he gazed at the floor pensively.

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“What is it, George?” Hathorne asked.

“Well...,” he said hesitantly, looking up. “Are you sure you want to hold the burning in the Town Common?”

“Most sure. The wind blows too fiercely on Gallows Hill to hold it there. We would never be able to ignite the pyre. I think it would be far more to our advantage to hold it in the Common, in any case. More people shall be able to witness the execution. A much wiser choice by far, I’m certain.”

Corwin nodded and sipped his ale. He had a dark, gloomy feeling about tomorrow’s execution. He felt uneasy about everything since Blayne’s failed hanging. He knew something wasn’t right.

The bolt slid back and clicked into place, and the dungeon door swung open. Corwin and Parris walked sullenly down to Ambrose’s cell, and Corwin opened the door. Ambrose sat in the corner of the cell, shackled, shrouded in shadow, still wearing the black robe he wore when he was captured.

“Come, Blayne,” Corwin said. “The time is come to send your damned soul to Hell.”

Ambrose didn’t move. Corwin stormed over to him and hauled him to his feet by the shackles which bound his wrists behind his back, making Ambrose grunt. He glared at Corwin, then smirked knowingly.

Ambrose still looked somewhat drained from Odara’s attack, and also from his imprisonment. His hair was disheveled, his eyes sunken and dark, his face gaunt. But he still had power. He could tell Corwin sensed it, too. Even if he couldn’t sense it, he surely knew, now that he had foiled their attempts to hang him.

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“There are worse fates than mine, George,” Corwin’s face slackened slightly, and Ambrose’s smirk curled into a smile. “Let us make haste to the pyre,” Ambrose said lowly, nodding slightly. “There are sufferings to delight in. I would not wish to deprive you by time spent in idle discussion when you could be learning of pain.”

“You are mad,” Parris whispered.

Ambrose laughed heartily. Corwin shoved him out of his cell, and they proceeded to the Town Common.

It was a cold but calm November morning, the sky overcast in a uniform field of dark gray. Corwin and Parris, accompanied by two guards, walked Blayne through the tight mob of spectators lining the streets. The people parted in front of them, creating a path to the Common. Some of them shrank away upon seeing Ambrose; some cried and shrieked when he looked at them; but most clamored for his death, and a few even mustered up enough courage to spit in his face and curse him.

Up ahead, in the center of the Common, stood the scaffold and pyre. Before it stood the grave figure of Judge Hathorne; behind it the stocks and their prisoners: the perpetually intoxicated Nathan Prynne and a lesser known personality, a young strumpet named Rachel Moore, who had attempted to seduce the wrong man and was now being punished for her sins.

Susanna, Roger, Edward, and Thea stood amongst the throng and watched as Ambrose was led to the pyre.

“Are you certain you feel well enough, child,” Thea said, reaching across Roger and lightly touching Susanna’s wrist.

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“Yes,” Susanna replied. “I am feeling quite fit, only a bit tired.”

“Roger,” Thea said, looking up at him. “The poor child seems weak. Perhaps we should see her home.”

Roger turned to Susanna. She did look pale.

“Susanna—”

“No,” she said, cutting him off. “I am well. I must stay. Please. I need to see it ended.” She clasped his arm urgently, clinging to his sleeve. Her eyes pleaded for his approval. “When the whole event has passed, I will return home and rest.”

Roger studied her for a few moments and realized it would be fruitless to attempt to persuade her otherwise.

“Not one minute later,” he consented reluctantly.

“Thank you,” she said, embracing his arm and cuddling her head against it. She gazed across Thea to Edward and smiled. He smiled back, then returned his attention to the men approaching the pyre.

Milton Ramsey’s black eyes peered wildly over the bandage strip which was wrapped around his head to mend his broken nose. His ribs were sore, and he still ached all over where the creature had attacked him, but he felt well enough to avenge his boy.

He slowly threaded his way through the crowd, searching for the witch-bitch Susanna Harrington. He hadn’t been well enough to attend the hanging, but he had heard about its failure. He had also heard about the Harrington girl’s acquittal of all charges of malefic magic and traffic with the Devil. What outrage! Timothy still suffered in the grip of demonomania, and now one of those damned servants of

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Satan had been allowed freedom. Well, he was still weak, but not so weak he could not see true justice prevail. He was here today, and he wasn't going to allow anything to go wrong this time. No. In fact, everything was going to be perfect. He would make it so.

He picked Susanna out of the crowd and began to ease his way up behind her. He drew his dagger from its scabbard.

Corwin shoved Ambrose through the mob toward the pile of branches, twigs, and junk lumber that was heaped up against the stake to a height of seven or eight feet. A plank was propped against it, leading from the ground to the stake. Ambrose felt a churning in his stomach. He hadn't been able to experience this in visions. In fact, he hadn't had any visions. Much of his power had abandoned him, and with it the ability to foresee. Nevertheless, nothing—he knew—could prepare him for this. Noth...

A face in the crowd hooked his gaze. Jessica, cloaked and peering at him furtively from under a large black hood, advanced toward him. Ambrose smiled.

Corwin shoved him again. Ambrose stood firm and turned. Corwin gave him another shove, forcing him to look ahead. He glanced to his right. Jessica was closer now and moving more swiftly toward him.

As they emerged from the crowd, Corwin pushed him into the clearing surrounding the pyre. Jessica ran up to him, threw her hands up to his face, holding it with splayed fingers, and kissed him savagely, passing something large from her mouth to his. Ambrose knew the taste well. It was opium, and judging by the size of it, it was all that had remained in the box he kept on the dresser in his room. It would be more than enough. When the fire roasted his flesh he would feel nothing.

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“Seize her!” Hathorne barked, extending his arm and pointing accusingly at Jessica.

The hangman, Jeremiah Brown, lunged at her from the mob. She responded by plunging a dagger in his throat. He recoiled as she yanked it out of him, his mouth falling open in shock and horror, his hands gripping his neck, blood running between his fingers. He slumped back into the crowd and to the ground. Gasps and screams from the rabble polluted the air.

Jessica ran, but there was nowhere to go. People were everywhere, people she knew—not one of them her ally. A man leapt in front of her, blocking her way. She turned, but another man stepped forward, and another. She was surrounded, and they were converging on her. She turned around and around and around. A gust of wind blew her hood off and messed up her hair, whisking it across her face like limp straw.

She searched for a way out of this predicament, but all her exits were clotted with people, and those exits were growing denser. In moments, any hope of her escape would be thwarted. She knew that very well. She scanned about for the sparsest collection of people and ran toward them, swiping the dagger in broad strokes before herself.

Isaac Goodale, Ambrose’s closest neighbor, who at one time held only the highest praise for the Reverend Blayne, reached out at her in an attempt to snatch the knife away from her, but he was too old and slow. The bloody blade swept down at him in a swift, crisp arc and diced off the first two digits of his index and middle fingers, and sliced into the others. Isaac cried out and shrank away from her, nursing his hand.

Two more men charged at her from behind. She swung around as if she had seen them coming and threw her

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armed hand up at the first man's face. A spray of blood shot out and was taken by the wind as a chunk of his nose soared into the crowd behind him and thumped lightly as it struck a young girl's chest and fell to the ground. He doubled over holding his face and groaning as the girl screamed and clawed at the people surrounding her.

Jessica turned to the other man, but he was already upon her. He tackled her, and they crashed to the ground. She swung her arm over his shoulder and stabbed him in the back. He arched up, his face fixed in a rictus of pain, and fastened his fingers to her throat and squeezed. She stabbed him again, harder this time. The blade disappeared into his back up to the hilt. A hollow groan exited the man's mouth. His body convulsed and became rigid, then fell limp and heavy on his murderer.

She squirmed out from beneath him and rolled onto her belly. As she pushed herself up to her hands and knees a man jabbed a musket in her back.

"You best stay down, Miss," the man said. "I do not believe it is my place to take a life, even one as wretched as yours be, but if you move, I will kill you."

Jessica peered through her dangling hair at the dagger still sticking out of the dead man's back. No doubt she knew she would be executed for her crimes. It was inevitable. However, whether she was executed at the hands of this man or the flames of the pyre was her choice.

She rolled onto her back and knocked the musket barrel off her. It discharged into the ground. She grabbed her dagger and wrenched it free. As she rose to her feet, a shot blared out followed by two more. All three rounds hit her square in the chest, but she remained standing as if she hadn't been hit at all. She glanced at her chest. Blood was there, blood of her victims' and hers.

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She turned to the first musketeer, raised the knife high above her head and screaming furiously, attacked him. A volley of shots was fired from behind her by half a dozen men holding muskets and pistols. Two hit her high in the back, making little impression on her. The third blew out her left knee, causing it to buckle and sending her down. The fourth struck her in the center of the small of the back and shattered her spine. The fifth went wide and knocked out the two front teeth of old Mr. Hanford's open mouth before cracking the back of his skull and killing him. The sixth ripped through Jessica's ear, taking half of it off before slamming into Katherine Martin's forehead and sending her back wide-eyed and open-mouthed into the arms of her loving son Bernard.

Jessica collapsed into the musketeer's arms, but he didn't catch her. He stepped aside and allowed her fall dead at his feet.

"Glory be," Thea said.

"There be no glory in murder, Mother."

"Certainly not."

Several men carried the corpses of the innocent away. Two others picked up Jessica and brought her to the pyre and bound her to the stake. When they were finished, Corwin shoved Ambrose forward and guided him up the plank to where the two men waited. They fastened him to the stake next to Jessica's body, walked back down the plank, and carried it away as Hathorne once again read the charges against him.

"Ambrose Blayne, you have been found guilty of witchcraft, conjuring, trafficking with the Devil and his infernal legions, and murder. Of this there can be no doubt. You have mocked God and the faith of our people by adorning yourself in the robes of a reverend. There could be no fouler creature

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on all the earth than you. Therefore, having shunned death on Gallows Hill—thus further yielding evidence of your guilt—you shall be burned at the stake till you are dead and the ashes of your body are blown to the four winds. It is my sincerest hope never again to lay mine eyes on such a dirty beast as you. Amen.”

Hathorne nodded solemnly to two men holding blazing torches. They stuck the torches in the pile of wood and ignited the pyre, the fire catching rapidly in the light breeze.

Milton held the dagger close to his chest as he stepped forward, not once taking his eyes off Susanna. Only two people stood between her and him now. He raised the dagger over his right shoulder and pushed them away with his left arm as he brought the knife down hard and fast, screaming, “Witch!”

Susanna turned around and fell back when she saw the blade rushing to meet her face. It nicked her shoulder as she crashed into a few men, knocking a couple of them down with her.

Milton raised the dagger again and dove at her, but Roger caught him and blocked the blow with his good arm.

“Witch!” Milton cried. “Damned witch! You’re killing my boy! You’re killing my boy!”

He struck out wildly with the knife and was kicking himself free of Roger’s grip. Edward seized him, but he had the strength of a madman and would not be stopped.

“How are you, child?” Thea asked as she helped Susanna to her feet. Susanna trembled, but she nodded.

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“Witch! You’re killing my boy! You’re killing my boy! Kill you! I shall kill you for hurting my Timothy! I will kill you! Kill you!”

“This is not over, Hathorne,” Ambrose yelled drunkenly. “This is not the end. This is but the beginning!”

Hathorne turned away from the commotion in the crowd and stared at Ambrose as the burning wood crackled and popped and smoked.

“May your soul—have you a soul—be sent straight away to Hell,” he said.

Ambrose laughed, his head lolling from one side to the other, his eyes half-lidded with intoxication.

“Only the beginning,” he murmured.

“Behold!” he announced, raising his gaze heavenward. “They come.”

The dark clouds hung lower now, as if they would sink down at any time and smother Salem in their moist shrouds. Everything took on an ochre tint.

Ambrose raised all the power he could employ and whispered:

Mezinthan. Choronzon. Baaliffer. Anavrin.

Thunder rumbled in the sky. At once hail plummeted and pummeled the Common. Men, women, and children fled screaming, stampeding over each other to get to safety. Hailstones the size of plums pelted the fleeing people. Several of them fell with bloodied heads and were crushed underfoot by their friends and neighbors.

Mercy Williams—the grandmother of Abigail, Elizabeth Parris’s cousin—plodded her way fearfully through

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the spooked crowd when a ball of ice slammed into the side of her head, tearing through her bonnet and ripping a large gash in her scalp, sending her toppling to the ground. She attempted to stand up, but her hands and back kept getting stomped on, and her face continually suffered batterings and kicks. Her ribs and spine snapped as the townspeople ran over her and stamped her into the earth. Her breath was stolen from her as her broken ribs punctured her lungs, her neck broken, her windpipe crushed.

And then the demons came.

They swooped down at the Common with fury, squawking and cackling, and picked at the hooded, hatted, and bonneted heads, cutting into their victims with their blood-stained talons.

Mezinthan was the first of the four to take a life.

Peter Hubbard sensed the demon's attack only too late when he whipped around with his upturned face and stared into the two faces of his murderer: the first, a corrupt, black maw beneath a pair of blazing red eyes and seething nostrils, a pair of tarnished horns adorning its brow; the second, an alligator's head protruding from its groin.

In the moment it took him to recognize his doom and voice his terror, the alligator head had engulfed his and stifled the scream that never came. A moment later, Mr. Hubbard was a blood-spouting headless corpse staggering from side to side in his last death throes and Mezinthan was aloft again and searching for new prey, the alligator head at its crotch still crunching down on its victim's skull.

The demons reveled and feasted, tearing flesh, spilling blood, devouring prey amongst the chaos of the hailstorm and the screams and shrieks and the gunfire the musketeers now directed at them.

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The flames of the pyre guttered but continued to grow. They licked at Ambrose's legs. He laughed, barely coherent now, as he looked on bleakly at the mayhem he had incited.

"Have you not one repentant bone in your wretched body?" Hathorne shouted, turning back to him. "Have you no remorse?"

Ambrose's face fell sullen and contemptuous for a moment, then he spat at the judge and laughed again.

"The fires may consume me, but I shall never die," he hollered raggedly. "You may crush my bones to dust, yet I shall never yield. In death, as in life, I will always be your master."

"Never." Hathorne said. "Never!"

Ambrose closed his eyes and whispered incantations.

"Susanna!" Roger yelled, still helping Edward restrain Milton, who wouldn't stop screaming for Susanna's blood to be shed. "Go home! And take Thea with you! Go now!"

"Father!" she cried with her arms over her head to block the hailstones, not knowing what to do, not wanting to leave him and Edward, not wanting to leave without seeing Ambrose consumed and knowing he was truly gone.

The demons continued their attack, diving at their victims, digging their claws into them and carrying them up into the sky as they fed on them, only to drop their limp corpses callously into the rushing mass below.

"Listen to your father, Susanna," Edward said. "Please. Take yourself and Mother away from here."

She looked at him for a long, sad moment, then turned and placed her arm around Thea, and the two women trudged

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away with their heads hung low to shield their faces as the hail beat down on their backs, shoulders, and heads.

“I will kill you, witch!” Milton continued, never letting up, having seemingly inexhaustible reserves of energy.

He still held the dagger. Edward had sustained several small stabs in the shoulder as he reached for the knife and attempted to pry it away from the madman, but Milton was too strong and wouldn’t let go.

Edward held the knife-wielding arm by the wrist at arm’s length and punched Milton in the stomach, further damaging his broken and healing ribs. Milton was hurt, but refused to give up.

Edward slugged him again. This time the ribs gave way all together and Edward’s tightly clenched fist sank into Milton’s chest. Milton let out a gurgling groan as the blow stole away his breath. He slumped over, dropped the dagger, and belched up gouts of blood, splattering Roger’s coat dark red.

Edward drew back his fist quickly, revulsion adorning his face. He never wanted to harm the man, but he had no choice. Milton wouldn’t let up. Now, he very well could die. Edward never wanted that. He never wanted to be responsible for taking another man’s life.

For all Edward knew, Milton might have survived the blows he had given him, but that was one possibility forever relegated to the realm of speculation. Fate had decided to take charge and leave Edward in doubt. In the next moment Anavrin had come from nowhere and snatched Milton up from Roger and Edward with a speed and ease that left them both startled and astonished. Milton howled one last, garbled gasp, then the demon ripped out his throat with its fangs and silenced him permanently, showering the unwilling spectators below with muddy red liquid.

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Anavrin fed itself well on Milton, then discarded him like the others. The body fell on the head of a small blond boy who became separated from his parents in all the chaos and was crying as he sought them out. His neck snapped when Milton landed on him. The boy was dead before he hit the ground.

Anavrin cackled at the boy's misfortune, but it was the last cackle the demon would ever voice. Half a dozen shots pealed out one after the other from the direction of the pyre where the musketeers stood, and most of them found their mark. In seconds, the demon's belly split open and its innards spilled out and dangled down to its feet. A chunk of meat was blown off one of its arms. Its face exploded into a thousand bits and pieces. Holes appeared in the webbing of its wings. It spiraled downward, twitching and rasping to its death.

More shots rang out from other men armed with pistols and muskets. Demon blood was spilled, and the creatures began to fall.

The flames were higher now, the acrid smoke stinging Ambrose's nostrils, eyes, and throat. He continued chanting lowly as his robes caught fire, the fabric baking into his burning flesh. The drug was strong, and for a long time he felt no pain. Indeed, he felt certain he would die the painless death of an opium overdose before the fire overtook him. But the flames were stronger, and his constitution was too strong to allow a fatal poisoning. The pain reached him, beginning to disturb his incantations and corrupt his concentration.

He opened his eyes and screamed.

The dead were in the flames with him. The dead *were* the flames. They were the dead of Gallows Hill, his victims, moaning in torment, clamoring for justice, howling for his

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death. They were searing tongues of vengeance tearing at his blackened soul.

Their faces glared at him from the guttering yellow fringes of fire. Here was Bridget Bishop and Rebecca Nurse, Giles Corey and the Reverend George Burroughs. And here were the Cranley brothers and George Eames. All his victims—even to the Scotland days—were here in the end to aid in his destruction, broiling his skin till it bubbled and blackened, biting into his throat, his eyes, his testicles. No part of him would be denied. He was food for the dead, compensation for the innumerable sufferings and infamies he perpetrated. This was his lot.

He squeezed his eyes shut tight and wished away his tormentors, trying to dismiss them as opiate hallucinations, but knowing they were not. He resumed the incantations, the pain driving him to shout them out in suffered ramblings. Certainly now, more than ever before, he needed to pray.

The flames gushed up over him, and the dead consumed him.

At that moment, the blaze caught Susanna's eye and she turned to get one last look at Ambrose. All she saw was a faint figure in the flames sagging down against the stake. Her arm fell away from Thea, and she doubled over in pain, collapsing at the old woman's feet, hail raining all about her.

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Susanna's Condition

Roger, Edward, and Thea stood in the dark, candlelit hallway outside Susanna's room waiting for Dr. Griggs to emerge and inform them of her condition.

"I cannot understand it," Roger muttered, shaking his head. "She had recuperated from her injuries so quickly. She had since seemed so well."

Edward placed a hand on Roger's shoulder.

"I am sure she is well, Roger," he said. "What happened at the Common was madness. I find it remarkable that we are not equally as strained."

"Yes," Thea added. "The poor child has had more than her lot of anguish. When she is well-rested she will be fit again. I am most certain of that."

Of course, Roger thought, the insanity that took place at the Common would be enough to induce strain, but what if she didn't suffer from strain? What if it was something more insidious and hurtful? What if it was the first symptoms of the smallpox that had claimed the lives of Martha and Phoebe? It still lingered in New England, that much he knew. What if she

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had contracted the disease? Life would be unbearable with her gone. He would be utterly, dreadfully alone.

The door opened and the doctor appeared. Everyone looked at him expectantly, waiting for him to speak.

Griggs reached into his physician's bag and pulled out a small leather satchel. He handed it to Roger.

"Brew this slowly for no less than half of an hour and give her the tea to drink: once upon rising, once during the day, and once again before bedtime."

"What is it?" Roger asked, opening the satchel and sniffing at its earthy-smelling contents.

"An herb from the Orient. It has proved to be quite efficacious in matters of exhaustion such as these."

"So she has not been stricken with the smallpox?" Roger asked anxiously.

"Lord no," Griggs replied confidently. "You needn't fret about that. Sufficient food and rest, and the tea, will be all that is required to bring her to full health again. She has been suffering from much anxiety of late. I am surprised this hasn't happened earlier. In any case, she should be well in a few days."

"Well, that is a great relief," Thea said.

"Certainly," Roger added.

"I must be away now," Griggs said. "There are still more severe cases I must tend to since this morning's calamity."

"You have my eternal gratitude," Roger said, shaking the doctor's hand. "I could not bear to see any further harm befall my dear daughter."

"I should think there will be little chance of that now that that beast, Blayne, has been justly dealt with."

"Indeed," Thea said. "He was a most wretched man."

Susanna's Condition

Several days later, Susanna was up and about and feeling well again, as the doctor had predicted. But she had an uneasy feeling that something was wrong. The sense of completeness she had expected, which would come with Ambrose's death, never did. It was as if he had never died. Every time there was a knock at the front door, she expected to see him: dark, lean, and bearded, those ice-blue eyes staring intently at her from their pits, freezing the blood in her veins.

But it was never him.

Of course it wasn't. He was dead. She had seen him consumed in the fire herself.

Maybe so, she thought. But he was with her still. She didn't know how or where, but he was. She knew he was. Watching her. Whispering to her. Caressing her in the night... and in her dreams.

Was she going mad? She wondered. She hoped not. But she would still much rather be mad than have him haunting her from the hell he no doubt resided in now. Anything but that.

Susanna Harrington's Journal—14 December—More than one month now has passed since the day when he was executed, and I feel him with me still. It is most straining upon me, and the strain has made me weak. Often times I cannot leave the comfort of my bed in the morning to perform my daily chores, such is my condition. Kind Doctor Griggs has said it is but the lingering on of that exhaustion I suffered following the execution and the chaos that accompanied it, but I am not so certain as he. I do not feel well at all. I awake many times each night from dreams I cannot remember yet which disturb me so profoundly I cannot fall back to sleep. O,

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how I wish Mother and Phoebe were here. It would be such a comfort to see them again, living and well. Often I think of them, and I weep, and I cannot stop the weeping. Father and Edward and Thea have tried to comfort me in such times—God bless them—but the tears will not be stopped. I cannot find the comfort I need in any face or fancy. I want to die.

Susanna's condition worsened as the days passed, and Roger and Edward were frantic. But Thea suspected the reason of the girl's apparent illness and was less distraught than the men, although, perhaps more disturbed by the implications should her suspicions be confirmed. All her years as a midwife had given her experience enough to know what symptoms to look for. There was little doubt in her mind, but she had to be sure. She had to interview Susanna to confirm or disprove her prognosis.

She knocked on the door to Susanna's bedroom. When she didn't get an answer, she opened it quietly and stepped inside, closing it behind her. It was mid-morning. The sun streamed through the windows, falling on the floor and across the foot of the bed, casting a shadow-cross which melted over the bedspread and onto the floorboards. Particles of dust floated about in the bright light.

Susanna was asleep. The old woman sat on the edge of the bed and squeezed the girl's arm, shaking it gently.

"Susanna," she said in the softest voice her aged vocal cords could manage. "I must speak with you."

Susanna opened her eyes.

"What..."

"How are you feeling?"

"Not well. Not well at all."

Susanna's Condition

Susanna's skin was pasty, her eyes puffy.

"Thea?"

"Yes, child."

"I'm most hungry."

Thea nodded and folded one of Susanna's hands between both of hers.

"I shall cook you breakfast soon, child, but I must ask you something now."

Susanna nodded.

"Have you been visited by the menses since Blayne's execution?"

Susanna's eyes widened, and at once Thea knew that not only hadn't Susanna given thought to her menstrual cycle since the burning, she hadn't experienced menstruation since then, either.

"No," Susanna said, suddenly alarmed.

Thea patted her hand.

"And you have been ill; vomiting and such."

"Yes. That I have been. Very ill."

Thea shook her head.

"Susanna, I have been midwife to many a young woman such as yourself, and I know that of which I speak. What I must tell you should be a moment every woman cherishes, but alas, I think this is not to be so with you. But first, tell me: Have you lain with any other man than Blayne?"

Susanna sat up, her breathing ragged.

"I have not," she responded, alarmed.

"Susanna. Dear girl. I am afraid you are with child."

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Susanna frowned and shook her head.

“No,” she muttered.

Thea squeezed her hand, and Susanna squeezed back, tightly.

“I shall help you.”

“No.”

“Edward and your father are here for you. All will be well, child. All will be well.”

“NO!” Susanna screamed, then broke down to sobbing in Thea’s arms. “No. Oh God no.”

A New Beginning

In January, Tituba and over 100 other innocents were still in prison for witchcraft, awaiting their release. Hathorne, Parris, and Corwin, embarrassed by the folly, conceived of an elaborate scheme to cover up the fact that they had executed Ambrose Blayne, the second reverend executed for witchcraft. They also conspired to cover up any evidence that they were in any way responsible for the murder and mayhem of the witch-hunts by having the afflicted girls “admit” to having made false accusations against those accused. Hathorne reasoned that it was better to look half the fool with a scapegoat upon which to place the blame than to admit to the execution of not one, but two men of the cloth. Such admission would surely raise questions none of them would care to answer. The Salem witch-hunts were over. That, they reasoned, was what mattered most.

But it wasn't over for Susanna. She was carrying Ambrose's child in her womb. Only time would reveal the repercussions of that. Her pregnancy ensured her expulsion from the only home she had ever known; even if it hadn't—even if she weren't soiled by Ambrose's seed—too much had

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happened to her to allow her to remain in Salem. The people would never forget.

Susanna's reputation had been destroyed. Even with her acquittal she would never be looked upon in the same way again. And the situation would only get worse if she stayed, especially now that she would be showing soon.

Edward left his store in the hands of his brother Zachariah after taking what resources he would need for him and his mother to start over in New York. He and Thea had grown very fond of the Harringtons in the months they had spent with them, and it hadn't taken long for him to realize he was in love with Susanna.

Susanna Harrington's Journal—20 January 1693—
With all that has happened of late I have been neglectful in penning my thoughts and keeping this journal current, thus this is the first entry of the year. Father sold the house and we—I mean Father, Edward, Thea, and myself—have left Salem, and come to New York, where we have been settling in for the past week in a beautiful home overlooking the Hudson River. Edward had suggested Angelwood, but rumours of all that has happened has spread throughout New England, and I would still be branded a witch if we had moved there. Father had heard that those accused who fled Salem journeyed to New York, which has become something of a sanctuary for refugees of the trials in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, so he felt it would be safer here. He and I told Edward and Thea that they needn't come with us if they did not want to, but they were both quite adamant about traveling with us to make certain we arrived safely and without incident to our destination, and Thea insisted on attending the birth of my baby herself. They have really been so good to Father and me. I do not know how we shall ever be able to fully express the depth of our gratitude. Edward is such a kind, giving man. I

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cannot help but have the feelings for him that I do. But my belly grows fat with another man's seed and though that man be dead, I cannot imagine Edward feeling the same way about me as I do him, even if he had such feelings once. Nor do I wish him to, even though I yearn to be with him. He deserves better. He and Thea have done more for Father and me than could have been expected of any person. God bless them and keep them.

Thea knelt at the foot of Susanna's bed, glancing up at her through her raised knees, then back down between her legs. The old woman's face was strained, and shiny with sweat. A shudder shook through Susanna's body, paroxysms shooting into her belly and groin. She could feel the baby sliding slowly out of her, its limbs writhing and groping at the inside of her thighs and the naked air between them.

"A beast," a man whispered into her ear.

She turned to the voice and tried to squirm away, but could not.

"Our beast," he said.

The baby cried the tormented, phlegm-clearing cry of birth.

She looked between her legs at Thea. The old woman backed away, her bloody hands outstretched and empty before her, her eyes wide, her mouth gaping.

Susanna turned to Ambrose, who scowled at her. She looked away, back between her legs, down at the fork of her thighs. A small hand pawed at her lower belly, making an impression in the soft flesh. It was wet and furry, each little finger tipped with a claw. Susanna tried to scream, but could not. Tried to push away, but could not. It raised its head, the boar's head of its father, wet with blood. It stared into

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its mother's eyes and bared its sharp teeth, its short tusks protruding over its black lips. For a moment, it did nothing. Then it opened its mouth wide and chomped down on air. It just chomped and chomped and chomped, its white teeth clicking mindlessly with maddening speed.

Susanna woke up gasping and looked around for Ambrose and Thea and the beast-baby, but they weren't there. The room was dark with gloom. Someone was rapping on the door, but she was too scared to answer it. It opened slowly, and Edward peered in at her. She sat up a little, still shaken by her nightmare.

"Forgive me for waking you, Susanna, but you have been sleeping all morning. I know you do not feel well, but you must keep up your strength." He stepped back into the hallway and out of her view. A moment later, when he returned, he held a tray of food. "I brought you breakfast," he said, carrying it in to her.

"No," she said, shaking her head.

Edward placed the tray on the night table and sat down beside her on the edge of the bed, lightly touching her hand.

"Had another bad dream?"

She nodded, her face knotted up with grief, and broke down. Edward took her in his arms and held her closely as she sobbed.

"Shh...Shh... It will be all right," he said. "Once you have the baby, all will return to normal again: no more nightmares."

She drew back and looked at him queerly as if she were looking at a stranger.

A New Beginning

“How do you know?” she asked. “How do you know all will be well? How do you know my baby will be normal?”

“Susanna,” he said weakly. “They are but dreams. They mean nothing.”

“Nothing? They mean nothing?” she said, weeping more intensely now. “He was standing...beside my bed... whispering...to me...and that...that thing.. It was his!”

“It was a dream, Susanna,” he said, grabbing her shoulders. “It was only a dream.”

He pulled her close and hugged her, her head dropping to his chest.

“I won’t let anything happen to you, Susanna. You must know that.”

She nodded her head, the tears on her cheeks seeping into his shirt.

“I do,” she said, sniffing.

They sat like that for a long time. Then Susanna said:

“Edward.”

“Yes.”

“Why must there be suffering? Why must so many good people suffer?”

“I know not, Susanna. I know only that each man, woman, and child must bear up with what the Good Lord has deemed appropriate, and that perhaps it is the Lord’s intention to teach some lesson when good people suffer.”

“There has been much suffering this year past,” she said somberly. “And I see no design behind it, no lesson to be learned. Only senseless pain...and death. Many people died, and I see no good in it, or reason.”

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Edward remained silent. Perhaps Susanna was right. What lesson could be learned from such fruitless tragedy?

He held her a little while longer, then realizing she had fallen asleep, he laid her head down and let her rest. She didn't look at all well. Her face was ashen, her eyes dark and hollow. She looked...dead. He chastised himself for thinking so, then cleared the thought from his head and left the room thinking: She only looks ill because she is with child. She will be well again after the baby is born.

But as he walked down the hallway, he knew it was more than that. He didn't know what it was, but he knew something was wrong. Very wrong. He could feel it.

Susanna Harrington's Journal—27 January—Edward has asked me to marry him, and I told him I would only after much thought and debate. He has done so much for Father and me. I wished not to make him feel obliged to marry me unless it was what he truly wished to do. As I had feared he is fast in his belief that the baby should have a father and not be born out of wedlock. It is Edward's wish—as it is mine—that the child not know who its real father is, at least not until the child is old enough to cope with such revelation. But I did not wish Edward to marry me for the child's sake, or mine or my reputation's. I wanted it to be because he loved me, and it was what he really wanted to do, and after he professed such feelings for me in the most eloquent language I have heard from any man's lips, so moved was I that I could not turn down his proposal. Lo these many months I have wondered what his kisses would feel like upon my lips, and now I can hardly see through the joyful tears, which fill my eyes even at this moment, such was the lasting impression he made upon my heart. O, Edward, I shall be a most loving and devoted wife to you. I love you, my Edward. I love you.

A New Beginning

After the wedding, the dreams lessened in frequency and intensity, and that was a great relief. Perhaps everything would be well, as Edward had said. But the memories of those nightmares haunted Susanna. What if... What if she gave birth to the beast of her dream? As unfathomable as that was, she couldn't let go of that question. She could only block it out and forget it, if even only for a little while. Though, she continued to find herself posing that question from time to time, those times were growing fewer and further between each other. Her life was regaining some sense of normalcy.

But as her pregnancy progressed, so did her sickness. As her baby grew stronger and bigger in her womb, she grew weaker, and her body—with the exception of her belly and breasts—grew leaner, almost emaciated. It was as if the baby were a parasite draining the life and blood from her body to feed itself. By the eighth month of her term, Susanna looked like a big-bellied skeleton with a thin sheet of skin pulled tautly over its bones. Her cheekbones jutted out sharply on her wan and withered face and seemed as if at any moment they would break through her skin and reveal themselves to the world. Her hair had grown dry and brittle; her eyes, darker and more sunken by the day.

One morning, Edward noticed her from behind as she was dressing and became alarmed by what he saw. Her ribs stood out sharply on her naked white back on either side of the knobs of her spine. The joints of her knees were larger than the muscles of her thighs. Her shoulders seemed much broader than her shrunken torso should allow, though they were thin and bony. The veins of her arms were greatly pronounced.

“Susanna! What has happened to you?”

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She turned to him, covering herself with her gangly arms, crossing them over her breasts as if ashamed.

He sat beside her on the bed and placed an arm around her shoulders, feeling at once how frail and insubstantial she had become.

“Have you been starving yourself?”

“You know I have not,” she said, on the verge of tears. She lowered her arms and placed her hands on her belly. Her breasts looked fuller and more round than he remembered them, and her belly was tremendous.

“I...I know not what to think,” he said.

“The baby,” she said. “It uses all I eat, Edward. I am so tired. I haven’t strength enough to do anything.”

She began to cry.

A hot, humid morning near the end of July, Susanna awoke with pains in her belly. Immediately, she called for Thea.

By the time the old woman appeared at the door of Edward’s and Susanna’s bedroom, Susanna’s water had broken and she was in full labor. Susanna lay on the bed, rocking back and forth.

“Fret not, child. All shall be well. I am here now.” Thea entered the room and walked toward the bed.

“It pains me!” Susanna grunted, grimacing through her bared teeth.

“I know. I know, dear. Giving birth is never without the pains.”

Thea pulled the sheets back over Susanna’s knees toward her head, instructed her to bend her legs, and raised

A New Beginning

Susanna's nightgown. She removed some fresh sheets from the dresser drawer behind her and placed them on the floor beside her as she knelt at the foot of the bed.

"Edward... Father!"

"They are not here, child."

"Wh...Where are they?"

"They rode into town early this morning. They should be back by early this evening."

Another contraction rippled through Susanna's belly. She let out a long, strained groan, her teeth clenching, the muscles of her face bunching up.

Images of the nightmares flashed vividly before her eyes: Ambrose. The boar's head. The small, furry hand pawing at her from between her legs. Thea backing away in horror with blood on her outstretched hands and splayed fingers.

Now, more than ever, Susanna was terrified.

Roger and Edward rode up the lane to the house in Edward's wagon and brought the horses to the stables for the evening. The sun hung low in the sky, spreading long shadows everywhere its warm amber light didn't fall. Twilight crept up and deepening to dusk.

After the horses were tended to, the two men walked to the house discussing the day's events. They had decided to go into business together, importing various goods from England and parts of Europe, and though they had only started a few months ago, they had already made a substantial sum of money. Edward taught Roger a good deal of the business, and Roger learned quickly. This was a good business, he thought. Certainly more lucrative than blacksmithing. Certainly not as laborious. Maybe his and Edward's success was

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a sign of better things to come, a break with all the horrors and misfortunes of the past.

They entered the house. It was quiet. Edward went to the kitchen to see if his mother was preparing supper as she usually did at this time. But when he didn't find her there and no evidence that she had even begun preparations to cook, he knew something wasn't right.

"Mother's not in there," he said to Roger.

"She must be—"

A shriek came from upstairs and Roger and Edward dashed up the steps two and three at a time.

It was Susanna's shriek they heard. A shriek of labor... and perhaps fear.

"Bear down, child," Thea said, her face smudged with blood, her clothes covered with it. "Bear down. Its time has come. I see the head."

Susanna gulped down a mouthful of air and pushed hard, her face turning red as she cried out again.

Roger and Edward appeared in the doorway, their mouths dropping open.

"When...," Edward said.

"More than six hours ago," Thea broke in, glancing up at them, then returning her attention to the task of delivering the baby.

"Does it...Does it seem...normal?" Susanna asked, raising her head and peering at Thea over the bloody sheets which were draped over her knees and clung snugly to her thighs.

A New Beginning

“Normal?” Thea said. “So far as I am able to tell. There is much blood.”

Roger and Edward drifted into the room: Roger to Susanna’s side; Edward behind his mother. Roger sat on the edge of the bed and took his daughter’s hand. She reciprocated by gripping it hard as she felt the next contraction.

“Push hard, child! Susanna, push!”

Susanna did as Thea demanded and the baby poured out of her body in a red stream into Thea’s waiting arms. She held the newborn upside-down by the ankles and struck its buttocks a couple times. The baby wailed, blood and mucous falling from its mouth in stringy gouts. Thea briskly wiped the muck off the infant’s body with a clean rag and cut and tied the umbilical cord.

“A boy,” she said, wrapping it in a thick white cloth. “A beautiful boy.” She handed the child up to Edward and he received it awkwardly.

“A handsome child,” he said, smiling and looking up at Susanna and Roger. He was in awe of it.

But Susanna didn’t look right. Her face was still flushed, and she was still panting. “Susanna?”

She shrieked again, her head rising from the pillow as she cringed and pushed.

“Is it...” Roger said.

“Another child,” Thea said.

“God,” Roger whispered.

“Another?” Edward asked.

Thea made no reply. She was already too involved with bringing the second baby into the world.

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Susanna pushed, her low, strained groans giving evidence of her agony. Roger felt his daughter's grip on his hand tighten again. She looked up at him. He saw fear in her eyes and gaunt features.

"Be strong, Susanna," he said. "Be strong, dearest."

"Father," she rasped between her clenched teeth. "It hurts! It pains me verily!"

Roger looked up at Thea for reassurance, but if she felt his gaze upon her, she refused to acknowledge it. Her attention was consumed by the event taking place before her. The old woman's eyes were bleary, her skin clammy. Even in this dwindling light Roger could tell she was exhausted, probably as exhausted as Susanna, if not more so.

Edward cradled the crying baby in his left arm as he wiped remnants of tacky blood off its face with his right arm using the rag Thea had employed for the same purpose. The baby seemed extraordinarily heavy and big, especially for a twin. He didn't know much about babies, but it seemed abnormal. And if the child's twin was anything like its older brother, could it be any wonder the rest of Susanna's body was so emaciated in comparison to her breasts and belly? He estimated the boy he held weighed better than ten pounds. An abhorrent word entered his mind which he tried to rid himself of but could not: parasites.

"Push, child! Susanna, push harder!"

Susanna pushed, and for that moment all she could think of was the dream again...or worse. *What if it was something worse?*

She felt it alive in her, shifting inside her, slowly wiggling its way out. It wasn't a part of her. It had never been a part of her. It was foreign and it would be a great relief to have the wretched thing out of her body forever.

A New Beginning

“No!” she screamed. “No!”

“It’s all right, dearest,” Roger said. “I am here. Edward is here. You’re fine.”

“No!”

She began to weep as she felt the baby struggling to free itself from the confines of her womb—a foul and loathsome creature which fed off her flesh for the past nine months, making her sick with its shit and piss and vomit, and every movement it made turned her stomach and pummeled her back and kidneys and bladder.

All at once it slid out of her into Thea’s arms, producing a sickening wet sound like a dog moistening its mouth with saliva.

For a moment there was silence. Then Thea spanked the infant with a hard wet slap, and it wailed.

“This one is a girl,” she said, cleaning it up. “Two beautiful babies.”

Thea wrapped the girl in a sheet and carried her to her mother. Susanna’s panting slowed, the flush fading from her cheeks.

“A girl?” Susanna repeated in a nervous laugh of relief. “A girl.”

Edward followed his mother to Susanna’s bedside and passed the boy to Roger as Thea sat down on the bed and showed the girl to her mother.

“My grandchildren,” Roger said aloud to himself proudly as the babes cried on. “My beautiful grandchildren.”

Susanna was equally impressed. The nightmares and torments of imagination that had assailed her were obliterated by these cherubic visions. Now that she beheld them, marveled

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at them, how could she feel anything but love for these children of hers?

A few minutes later, having thus bestowed her babies with her love, feeling everything was finally right with the world, Susanna drifted off into a long, deep sleep.

Daniel And Molly

Susanna Colton's Journal—

9 June 1698—I had another nightmare last night, though I remember not—as with the others—what it was. Apparently I screamed because Father and the children came running into our bedroom to see what the matter was. Thea has not been feeling well of late and was not fit to leave her bed. Edward told them I was all right, that I merely had a bad dream. After Father left and put the twins to bed, Edward tried to comfort me, but I was much affrighted. I could not remember the dream, but the fear of it remained with me, and remains with me still. I had thought the past was gone from me. I fear I was wrong.

The Necromancer

Molly and Daniel ran around the kitchen chasing each other, giggling. Though they were precocious children, each exhibiting an intelligence and depth of understanding superior to those several years their senior, they were still only children, complete with limitless amounts of energy to expend, energy that yearned to be released.

Susanna busied herself at the stove preparing some vegetable soup for Thea, but the twins kept bumping into her legs as they continued to chase each other around, screaming.

“Daniel!” Susanna hollered, dropping the knife she used to chop the vegetables and turning toward him. The twins stopped their cavorting and looked up at their mother.

“Take your sister outside. The two of you can play in the back yard.”

“Yes, Mother,” Daniel said in a low, monotone voice, then turned to his sister with a smile and chased her out of the room, both laughing.

Susanna watched them fondly as they ran. Despite the past, and the nightmares, and her difficulty in dealing with both, her life was good. Since the twins’ birth she had gained back the weight she’d lost, and a few pounds more. She was voluptuous now, and she knew that pleased Edward. She and her marriage were strong, and even though she hadn’t had any children by him, Edward seemed to love her even more now than when he first married her. The business he and Roger had started five years ago was thriving, and the family wanted for nothing. The only thing that wasn’t right was the fact that Thea was ill—that...and the nightmares. But Thea was old, older than anyone Susanna had ever known. It made her sad to think that Thea would die, that she may never recover from her convalescence. But nothing—and no one—goes on forever. Thea had lived a long life, and from the stories she had told

Daniel And Molly

Susanna, a fairly happy one. That is all anyone could ask for, she mused.

She turned from the doorway which the twins exited through and continued chopping carrots.

Outside, Daniel and Molly clambered over the white picket fence in the back yard and ran down to the rocky embankment of the Hudson. Every so often they would see a small blonde girl about their age playing in the mud of the shore a little upstream from their home. They had played with her on several occasions, but she usually preferred to keep to herself, planting daisies down close to the water and playing with the frogs. More than once, her mother or father or both had yelled at her from the top of the slope to get back up to the house, and more than once a spanking would be awaiting her when she got there. Today, like so many other summer days, she was there by the water, kneeling in the mud, dirty from head to foot, playing with dolls she made from the mud of the shore.

“Rachel,” Molly called.

The girl looked up at them as they approached her, but she didn’t say anything.

“Making mud dolls again, Rachel?” Molly said.

Rachel returned her attention to the mud she shaped in her hands and nodded slightly, her head drooping a little.

Waves lapped against the shore, kissing the earth with soft, wet smacks. Daniel picked up a few flat rocks and skipped them across the water.

“Is there something wrong, Rachel?” Molly asked.

“N...No. Not really.”

The Necromancer

“Are you sad?”

“Well...Maybe a little.”

“Why?”

“Because,” Rachel said, making eyes in the mud doll’s head with her pinky.

“Because why?” Molly persisted.

“Just because.”

“‘Just because’ is not a reason,” Daniel said, launching the last of the rocks he was holding across the water’s surface, then turning to Rachel.

Rachel finished making the doll and stood up, displaying it to the twins.

“I can make him,” she said. “But he never comes out like I want.”

“How do you want to make him?” Daniel asked.

“More real.”

“Let me try,” he said, taking the doll.

Almost immediately the rough, raw bulk of the doll began to take on a more definitive shape in Daniel’s adroit hands. The limbs grew lean and sculpted; muscle bellies became curvaceous; even little toes and fingers were revealed as he sloughed off the excess muck. He reworked the head, etching in ears, nostrils, and lips, smoothing a jaw-line, developing the cheekbones. In mere moments he had given the doll a realism which Rachel never could have achieved in hours. The two girls stood by and stared in wonder of the work Daniel had wrought.

“Here,” he said, handing the doll to Rachel.

Daniel And Molly

It felt warmer than it had when she had handed it to him; heavier too, though he had not added to it, but trimmed away its clumsy excess. And something else: Was it also harder?

“Is something wrong?” Molly asked Rachel the second time that afternoon.

“It...It...”

“Oh,” Daniel said. “I almost forgot.”

He stepped toward Rachel, who still held the doll in the bed she made with her hands, and bent over it and put his lips to the mud doll’s and blew. Then he stood up straight and stepped back.

“There,” he said. “Finished.”

They all stared at the doll, the girls looking more intently to see what it was that Daniel did when he stooped over the doll.

Then, suddenly, the doll blinked and opened its mouth, releasing a low, tormented screech.

Rachel gasped and recoiled, dropping the doll. It fell quickly, as if it were composed of lead, and hit the shore with a small thud. It stood up and raised its fist at her.

“Daniel!” Molly exclaimed. “What did you do?”

“I made the doll better. More real. Like she wanted.”

“It...It...” was all Rachel had wit to say as she stumbled back from the doll which was now walking toward her. Finally, she looked up at Daniel and said:

“You...You are a warlock. A warlock. A...”

Now Daniel approached her, his gait calculating, his eyes ice. Rachel’s legs trembled beneath her, her feet wading in the dark muddy water as she backed up along the shore. She raised her hands to cover her mouth and stared at him wildly,

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like a convicted man staring at his executioner just before he places the hood over his head.

“Daniel,” Molly said. But he was either too focused on Rachel or simply chose not to answer.

Rachel turned to run, her long blonde hair whipping out at him as she did. He lunged forward and seized her by the nape of her dress. The motion stopped her abruptly as if she had run into an invisible wall. A choked whimper escaped her mouth as he yanked her back toward him and slapped the muddy palm of his free hand to her forehead. At once, her knees buckled and she went completely limp, fainting into his arms as if he had drained every ounce of vitality from her frail little body. He examined her face in the manner of an artist scrutinizing a piece of sculpture he had just completed. Her mouth gaped open. Her eyes were still wide, fixed...lifeless.

He let go of her and she spattered onto her back in the mud and water, the small waves tugging her golden tresses to and fro as the current carried her out.

Molly stood watching blankly, her jaw slack, her lips parted. Daniel turned to her.

“Say nothing,” he told her in an emotionless voice. She didn’t.

The doll he had infused with life still stood on the shore screaming and shaking its fists. Daniel stormed over to it and stamped it to death with his foot. He then crouched down on his haunches and washed the mud off his hands in the water.

“Come,” he said, standing up and taking Molly firmly by the crook of the arm.

As they climbed up the slope to their home, she glanced back over her shoulder to the river. She caught only a glimpse of Rachel’s body floating downstream before it was

Daniel And Molly

obscured by the dark green canopy provided by the trees which lined the greater parts of the riverbank.

Susanna knocked lightly on the door, then entered the room. Thea was just waking up.

“Forgive me,” Susanna said. “Did I wake you? I know you are weak and need your rest.”

“I am more than certain I have had my fill of sleep, dear.” She sat up. “Come, Susanna. Sit with me a while.” She patted the bed feebly with her gnarled fingers.

Susanna stepped toward her slowly, not wanting to make any unnecessary noise. It wouldn’t be good for Thea’s condition.

She sat herself down on the bed beside the old woman.

“But you are right,” Thea said. “I am weak. I should think God will have me soon.”

“No.”

“Let us not allow false hope to fool us, dear. I am old. I have lived long and seen much. I know when one’s time has come. My time in this world is nigh finished.”

“It is the illness that is making you say that.”

“No, child. I am quite in my wits.”

“Is there much...pain?”

Thea touched Susanna’s hand and clasped it lightly.

“No...not much. Weakness mostly. I am most tired. I feel I could sleep a thousand years.”

Susanna frowned.

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“Be not sad, child, for each of us will have our day. Death should not be looked upon with dread. It is but a part of living. I imagine it is quite beautiful to die. Like drifting away into a long, calm sleep.” Thea’s lids drooped heavily and her grasp on Susanna’s hand loosened to non-existence. Susanna let the old woman’s cool hand drop to the bed, figuring she had fallen asleep. Perhaps she had. Or maybe she had just died, slipped away right before her. But then the eyes widened again, declaring her consciousness.

“You have so much been a mother to me these years past...since my own mother passed on. It would be painful if you should leave me also. I love you, Thea.”

A faint smile crossed the old woman’s pale, lined face.

“And I love you, sweet child. I could love you no more than if you were of my own flesh and blood.”

Susanna’s eyes grew glassy with tears, but somehow she managed to keep them from flowing.

“I made soup,” she said. “Would you like me to fetch you a bowl?”

Thea yawned, showing her crooked yellow teeth.

“No, child. I shall have some later. I am more tired than I first thought. I shall rest a while. Perhaps I need to sleep a bit more.”

Thea’s eyes closed. Susanna rose from the bed and left the room. Her body felt suddenly heavy. She went to her room and lay down. She too was tired. It wasn’t long before she slept.

That evening, as Susanna served dinner to Roger, Edward, and the twins, Edward expressed his concern for his mother.

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"I fear it unlikely that she shall ever recover from this illness," he said as Susanna rolled an ear of steaming-hot corn onto his plate.

"She is very old," Roger said.

"Yes," Edward agreed. "I suppose it is foolish to hope she will live on indefinitely. But it makes me so sad to see her in such an enfeebled condition."

"I understand that well. When my dear Martha and Phoebe were convalescent with the smallpox, it required the greater part of my will and strength to see them decline so from one day to the next, such was my grief."

"And mine also," Susanna added, placing a hand on her father's shoulder, the one with the stump. Roger placed his hand on hers and looked up at her.

Edward turned to the twins.

"The both of you have been very quiet this evening," he said. "Is there a reason for this uncommon event?"

"We are only tired," Daniel said.

"Yes," said Molly. "We have been out playing most of the day."

"You have, have you?"

"Yes."

"Did either of you happen to see the Addams girl while you were out and about playing?"

Molly looked at Daniel for a heartbeat as he responded to the question.

"Rachel?" he said. Edward nodded. "No. Why? Should we have, Father?"

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“Not necessarily. I merely ask because Mrs. Addams called to me and your grandfather as we were riding home and wished to know if we had seen her. She told us Rachel wandered away from the house this noontime and has not been seen since. She was very concerned.”

“We have not seen her in almost a fortnight ourselves,” Daniel lied again.

“Really?”

“Really,” Molly testified.

“Neither of you would lie, would you?” Susanna asked.

The twins shook their heads.

“I know how fond you are of playing down by the river,” Roger said. “You would not tell lies because you were there when you know you should not have been, would you?”

“No, Grandfather,” Daniel said.

“No, Grandfather,” Molly repeated.

“If you did see her down by the river,” Edward said, “you would not be scolded if you told us. It is most important we know for certain.”

“We have not seen her,” Daniel emphasized.

“Very well,” Edward said. “I am sorry I was so insistent, but I find it most distressing to think of what may have happened to the poor girl.”

“I am sure if the children see her they will make haste to mention it,” Roger said.

“Of course,” said Daniel.

“Yes,” Molly added. “Certainly we will.”

Daniel And Molly

That night, after Edward made love to her, Susanna had the dream again.

She was back in Salem, being hauled up into a horse-drawn cart in shackles after having been dragged from her house, which was being set on fire by several men with torches.

As the cart moved quickly along the road, people came out of their houses and trailed behind and along side, cursing and spitting at her. It wasn't long before they were riding up a rocky slope to the top of Gallows Hill, engulfed in a mob of angry villagers and townspeople. Thick dark smoke hung heavily in the air. As the cart drew closer, Susanna saw that its source was a smoldering heap of dead bodies, which even now was being added to as two men carried the rotting corpse of a woman over to the pile and swung its limp bulk back and forth by its arms and legs. The men flung the body on the heap. The body rolled once, the arms flailing, then came to a halt on its back with its legs elevated at the top of the pile and its head on a decline toward the bottom, the arms outstretched. Susanna gazed at the dark, maggot-eaten face with the gaping mouth and upturned eyes, and recognized it was Thea just before the low flames caught her dress and the smoke blotted her out of view.

The cart stopped.

Susanna looked up at the great locust tree. It was adorned with decomposing bodies hanging from its boughs, swaying and turning slightly in the hot, smoky summer air which choked the hill and added to the stench of death and decay. Buzzards picked at the soft, larvae-ridden meat of the victims, their ragged feathers rustling as the occasional gust of wind threatened to blow them off their food. The hanged men and women hung there, suspended, their loose flesh baking in the reddish light of the setting sun. They were unhooded, their flat eyes dangling slightly from their sockets, their mangled black tongues lolling from their mouths. Among them was

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Bridget Bishop. Hanging beside her, turning into view, was Edward. Beside him...her father.

The guards lead her up to the tree now, her eyes fixed on her dead husband and her dead father, her voice stifled as if something huge were lodged in her throat.

The guard forced Susanna up the ladder, her legs shaky, her footing uncertain.

“Susanna,” a voice croaked.

It was the voice of Bridget Bishop. Her dark, dead face turned toward Susanna as she said her name again:

“Susanna. It is not finished. It is not finished, Susanna. The evil is still with you.”

The hangman slipped the rope over her head and cinched the noose snugly around her neck. She looked up at him, but it wasn't a him at all. It was Molly, a grim smirk creeping across her face.

“Let not the evil flourish, Susanna. It is near. It is upon you. Wake, Susanna! Wake!”

Molly looked away. Susanna followed her gaze to Daniel, dressed in the robes of a magistrate. The corners of his mouth curled up, forming a perverted smile, then he nodded.

Molly turned her off the ladder, and she plummeted and plummeted and...

Woke.

She sat bolt upright in bed, drenched with sweat. The room was pitch-black. She groped around next to her for Edward. Her hands found his chest and slid up to his shoulders. She shook him hard.

“Edward! Edward!”

“What?” he groaned.

Daniel And Molly

“There is something wrong. Something bad has happened.”

“The nightmares,” he said. “You had another dream again, haven’t you?”

“Yes. But this was different. I know something has happened. There is evil in the house with us. Do not ask me how I know. I just do. We must do something.”

Edward groaned again and sat up. He lit the lantern on the end table beside the bed, put on his spectacles, and looked at her.

“It was only a nightmare,” he said, taking her face in his hands and kissing her. “Only a dream.”

“I know,” Susanna replied. “I know. But the feeling is strong.”

“Susanna...”

“It would ease my mind...” She glanced at the door. “It would be a comfort to know everyone was well.”

He sighed, nodded, and removed his hands from her face. When he reached the door, Susanna was by his side holding a lit candle.

“Check on Father and Thea,” she said. “I will look in on the children.”

Edward opened the door and went left down the hall toward Roger and Thea’s rooms; Susanna went the other way toward the twins’ rooms.

Susanna’s heart thundered in her chest, the sound of it rising up and filling her head until it throbbed like an enormous swollen sore. Everything was calm and quiet like death. That made each unnerving step she took, every strangled breath she drew, rattle her all the more.

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She padded down the long, narrow hall as if the floor were covered with broken glass. As with the other nightmares, she remembered nothing of this last one. But unlike the others, her terror didn't wane after waking up; if anything, it was worse now. All she could think was: *The children. Something dreadful has happened to them. I know it has.*

She reached the door to Molly's bedroom. It was open a crack, which was odd since Molly was always too afraid to leave it open at night while she slept.

Susanna eased the door open, holding the candle before her. As the light from the flame illuminated the room, her gaze automatically shot over to the bed. It was empty, the sheets bundled into a heap at the foot of it.

Susanna's tongue felt like it was made of cotton. She tried to swallow, but could not; tried to move, but could not. *What happened to Molly? Where is she? What is happening?*

She tried to call Molly's name. Her mouth opened, but no sound came out. Her mouth and throat were too dry, her tongue too swollen, her mind too crippled.

Finally, she regained her ability to move and stepped back into the hallway.

Instinct alone brought her to Daniel's room. His door was wide open. So was his window. White curtains billowed up into the room and were sucked out again by the wind like tormented ghosts forever enslaved to the window. Daniel was not in his room either.

Susanna could hear the sounds of her own labored breathing. Her skin was clammy. Her brain felt like it was swimming around in the hot furnace of her head.

Then Edward cried out.

Daniel And Molly

Her head whipped around in the direction of the cry. Down the hall, Edward backed out of Thea's room. He held the lantern extended before him with one hand and covered his mouth with the other, shaking his head and saying: "No... No...Mother...No..."

"Edward," Susanna managed hoarsely.

He turned to her, still shaking his head. She moved toward him, walking faster as she went. He walked to her also, but stopped in front of Roger's room. His face was all knotted up. As Susanna walked closer and the light of her candle added to the light of the lantern, she saw that he was weeping, his cheeks glistening with tears.

"Edward," she said again, tremulously, wondering what it meant—his cry, his tears—but knowing it was something wrong and terrible; feeling that something bad did happen.

He stopped her when she reached him and prevented her from entering the room.

"Susanna. No."

But she had to see, had to know what had happened, regardless of how terrible it was. She pushed past him and plunged into her father's room.

Her body trembled as she stared, a strangled scream lurching from her lungs to her throat but unable to escape.

Blood was everywhere.

Roger's throat had been cut in his sleep, his head almost completely severed from the rest of his body. His chest had been butchered savagely into a dark, bloody pulp. Several of his ribs had been broken, a couple of them jutting outward. Whoever had killed him intended desecration.

The Necromancer

“Father?” Susanna whispered weakly, her high-pitched words almost seeming to ring out in the incredible night quiet that had fallen on the house like a shroud.

“Susanna,” Edward said behind her.

“Father,” she said again, beginning to whimper softly.

She placed the candlestick on the dresser beside the door and ran to the bed, falling on her knees and pressing her forehead against his hand.

“Father!” she cried, her body heaving with heavy sobs now. “Oh, Father!”

“Susanna,” Edward said again, touching her shoulder. Then she remembered why she and Edward were there, and she realized this wasn’t the end.

“Thea?” she said, looking up into her husband’s face with tears on her cheeks and her father’s blood on her brow.

Edward shook his head with an anguished frown.

“The children,” she said. “Dear God! The children!” She sprang to her feet, grabbing Edward’s arm for support.

The two of them rushed into the hallway and began checking all the rooms, even checking the closets and under the beds and rechecking Roger’s and Thea’s rooms. But the twins weren’t there.

Susanna and Edward ran downstairs together and searched for the twins, but they were nowhere to be found.

“Where could they be?” Susanna kept saying. “What could have happened to them?”

“Shh,” Edward said, touching her arm.

“What—”

“Quiet, Susanna.”

Daniel And Molly

Susanna stopped talking.

“Listen,” he whispered.

Then she heard it. It was faint and far off, but there could be no doubt it was a child crying—Molly crying.

“Outside,” Edward said.

He opened the front door and grabbed a rifle. They left the house, following Molly’s sobbing out to the backyard and the woods beyond overlooking the river. The crying grew louder as they followed it through the trees and dew-laden shrubs.

They came upon a clearing, in the center of which stood Molly, weeping with blood around her mouth and nightshirt. At her feet lay a dark lump in the grass.

“Molly?” Edward said.

“Daddy!” She ran to him and threw her arms around his waist. “He made me...” she said. “He made me eat. It was... horrible, Daddy.”

Edward looked back at the dark lump in the grass where Molly had stood. A burning heat rolled up the back of his neck. He pulled Molly off him and Susanna knelt down and hugged her as he stepped toward the lump. He crouched down, shined the light on it, and gasped. It was a partially eaten human heart.

“Oh...no...” he uttered. “Oh God!”

He turned aside and set the lantern down. He felt dizzy.

“Edward? Are you all right?”

“Stay where you are, Susanna. Please stay where you are.”

He rose slowly to his feet and turned to Molly.

The Necromancer

“Who...Who made you...eat?”

Molly let go of her mother and turned to Edward.

“Daniel,” she said, still weeping heavily. “He...He had one also. He said...He said we both had to eat. I did not want to, but he had a knife. He said he would cut me if I did not eat. It...tasted bad. It was terrible, Father.”

“Where is Daniel now?” Susanna asked.

“I know not. He told me he would be back, but that was a long time ago.”

“We must get back to the house,” Edward said.

“Edward, what is happening?”

“I know not. But I feel we all would be safer inside.”

“But Father and Thea—”

“They were sleeping, Susanna. They had no opportunity to defend themselves.”

The front door was open wide, as they had left it, but it was uncomfortable to look at—the darkened house in the night with that door open to anyone or any thing which might be inclined to cross its threshold and ferret around within. It looked abandoned, like something so terrible had happened there that the owners couldn’t risk a moment more behind its walls. Despite this foreboding feeling, which all three of them felt, they mounted the porch stairs.

They stopped at the doorway.

“You two wait here. I shall go in and look around first. When I know it is safe, I will come back for you.”

Susanna nodded, holding Molly close, and Edward went inside.

Daniel And Molly

The crickets and other night sounds gave way to the uneasy quiet of the house as he stepped inside and proceeded to look around. He walked silently through the rooms of the first floor, not wishing to draw Daniel's attention if, in fact, the boy had become deranged. He didn't find him, so he walked up the stairs to the second floor, the lantern held out before him, the rifle propped up against his shoulder.

It was almost inconceivable to Edward that the child should have gone berserk and killed Roger and Thea as Molly's testimony indicated. But she didn't seem to be lying; she was too upset. Why would she lie, anyway? She and Daniel had always been so close. Of course they had their occasional squabbles and disagreements but never had either of them laid false blame on the other. No, Molly wasn't lying. There could be no other explanation. For whatever reason, Daniel had decided to get out of his bed in the middle of the night, while everyone in the house was asleep and vulnerable, and slaughter them.

Edward shuddered.

His own son... But Daniel wasn't his son. The twins weren't his children. It all seemed so long ago he had almost forgotten. It was easy to forget. Aside from the fact that they were more intelligent and mature than other children their age, the twins appeared to be perfectly normal, and very lovable, very charming. It was easy to forget they weren't his, easy to forget that their father—their natural father—was...

If Daniel did kill Roger and Thea, what made him do it? And if it had something to do with his father, what about Molly? Would she become homicidal as well?

As he reached the top of the stairs, he thought he caught a glimpse of something moving down at the end of the hall near his mother's room, but the light thrown by the lantern played with the shadows and he couldn't be certain.

The Necromancer

He walked down the hall toward Thea's room, his breathing shallow. He passed the twins' rooms, briefly shining the lantern in at them and giving a cursory examination to each. Each appeared to be empty. He would look through them further if his suspicions turned out to be nothing more than suspicions.

Edward slowed down when he came to Roger's room. Remembrance of the horror of Roger's mutilated remains had taken him aback, even more so now that he knew the poor man's heart had been robbed from his body. That remembrance, in turn, reminded him that the same fate had befallen his mother.

He felt his head run cold and light as the blood in his veins fled down his body. He stopped, his arms drooping down to his sides, leaned back against the hallway wall, and drew a deep breath. He closed his eyes, trying to push away the pain and not quite succeeding, and took another breath. He opened his eyes.

He pushed off the wall and looked into the room. Flies buzzed around the dead man's body now, but otherwise nothing had changed. Daniel wasn't here.

Edward tried not to stare at the body, but he couldn't help himself. It was hard to imagine that it had been mere hours since he last spoke with Roger, and now he could hardly recognize him. He retched once, feeling nauseated, and turned out of the room.

Now the task set before him was no easy one. He loved his mother very much. It was unbearable to think she had been so brutally murdered, yet he had seen her himself not long ago: the blood dripping down her knotted fingers from her hand, which hung limply over the side of the bed. The open mouth and blank expression. The mutilation. The blood. Her throat had been cut in exactly the same manner as Roger's.

Daniel And Molly

Her chest displayed the same flaps and chunks up uprooted flesh as his. Edward knew if he had courage enough to look closely, he would find that her heart too had been taken from her.

He eased up to the doorway hesitantly. He didn't want to go in. He didn't want to have to see her like that again. He wished he had never seen her like that, like he knew he would see her in his memories and nightmares for the rest of his life. He wished he could remember her only as she was when she was alive, without this desecration: Kind. Gentle. Smiling. Happy. Those memories were ruined for him now, forever tainted by the eternal vision of her murdered body lying bloody and mutilated in her own bed.

He forced himself to raise the lantern and peer into the room with the rifle poised and ready, but the only person in the room was Thea.

"Oh, Mother," he said morosely, choking on his tears.

He backed out of the room, lowering the lantern and gun, shaking his head, unable to withstand it anymore.

"Mother," he sobbed.

He turned and saw Daniel standing before him with a bloody knife in his hand and a twisted smile on his face. Edward's mouth fell open. Daniel leaped up and plunged the knife high into his stepfather's chest, and yanked it out. Edward fell back groaning and fell sprawling to the floor, the gun and lantern flying from his hands. The gun skittered across the hallway floor and stopped; the lantern crashed into the wall by the window at the far end of the hall and exploded, painting the wall with flames.

The Necromancer

Susanna heard Edward cry out as she stood at the threshold of the front door. Molly clung to her side, tugging on her nightgown.

“Edward!” she called anxiously into the house.

His answer never came. In its stead, she saw the lambent yellow glow of the spreading fire reflecting off the dark woodwork of the banister and the hall at the top of the stairs.

“Edward!”

Again, no answer.

She pried Molly’s fingers from her nightgown and crouched down beside her.

“Go stand over by those trees, darling,” Susanna told Molly, pointing to a small grove of elms some distance from the house. “And stay there till I come for you. Do you understand?”

Molly nodded.

“Go, Molly. Go now!”

Molly ran to the trees and Susanna watched to make sure the child was safe. When Molly reached the trees she stopped, turned around, and simply stood there with her arms by her sides staring vacantly back at her mother. Susanna turned, ran into the house, and stormed up the stairs.

The knife wound knocked the wind out of Edward, but it was too high to be fatal, having entered just under his left shoulder. Daniel was upon him a moment after he hit the floor, exhorting a screaming growl as he dove at him with the knife, putting all his weight behind the coming blow. The knife rushed toward his face. Edward jerked away and the blow went

Daniel And Molly

wide, striking him in the shoulder. Daniel yanked it out, cocked it over his shoulder, and plunged it down again. Edward caught the boy's wrist, despite the pain of his injuries, and seized his other wrist before he could use it against him.

The boy had enormous strength. Edward didn't know if it only seemed so because of his weakened condition or if he genuinely possessed such power, but it didn't matter. The boy was strong and seemed to be getting stronger as he grew weaker. If that didn't change soon, Edward knew he wouldn't survive the battle.

Susanna reached the top landing and saw their silhouettes struggling before the wall of fire.

"Edward!" She ran to them. She threw her arms around Daniel's chest and tried to pull him off, but she could not. He was too strong and heavy.

"Daniel!" she begged. "Let go!"

He released a harsh, cranky grunt, jerking the knife up and down at Edward, coming close enough to nick his face and neck with the tip of the blade.

Susanna swung her arm around Daniel's neck and leaned back, hoping to choke him enough to make him stop his attack. She pulled and strained as hard as she could, using all her weight, but Daniel was implacable and wouldn't be appeased until his intended victim was dead.

Susanna looked up and saw the gun lying on the floor ahead. The fire was rapidly closing in on it. There was no time to think about what to do, only time enough to do it. If she didn't stop Daniel, he would kill Edward or they would both die in the fire. She let go of him, staggered over to the gun, and picked it up. It felt heavy and powerful in her hands. She pointed it at her son.

The Necromancer

“Daniel!” she screamed, moving away from the intense heat at her back. “Release your father!”

“He is not my father!” It was not Daniel’s voice she heard, not a child’s voice that said those words. It was Ambrose. An instant after she made that realization, the orange-yellow light that played on his face revealed a glimpse of the boar’s head of the beast that raped her.

Susanna screamed and pulled the trigger. The gun kicked hard against her shoulder with a loud cracking BANG and flash. The ball ripped into Daniel’s face. His head jerked back followed by the rest of his body. The knife left his hand, hit the wall, and clattered to the floor.

Daniel threw his hands up to his face and squealed, squirming and thrashing his legs against the wall and the floor.

Susanna dropped the gun as if it were something she found disgusting like vermin, and ran to Edward’s side, dropping to her knees.

“Edward, are you all right? Are you all right?”

He raised his head, holding his chest with his hand, and then fell back, his head lolling wearily from one side to the other. Daniel’s thrashing was already subsiding to shivers.

“Edward!” She shook him. “Edward!” But his eyes rolled under his half-closed lids. He had lost a good measure of blood.

Daniel rolled over onto his belly, his hands still plastered to his face with a thick, oozing sheet of blood.

“Edward,” Susanna said. “Edward!” But there was no response.

Daniel pushed himself up to his knees and elbows, whimpering.

Daniel And Molly

She caught him rising in the corner of her eye and turned his way. Halfway between them lay the knife.

Edward was completely unconscious.

The enormous heat at her back was almost unbearable. Behind her, the fire ate the hallway, crackling as it chewed up the walls and the floor and the ceiling, belching out dark clouds of acrid smoke between the jaws of the flames. It was hungry, and it was coming for them.

Daniel brought his knees up to his chest and started to rise to his feet.

Susanna looked at the fire, at Edward, then back to Daniel. He was standing now, one bloody hand still covering his face. He removed it. His nose had been blown apart and was now dangling by a thick but narrow layer of skin just under one of his eyes. The dark chambers of his nose were exposed and bleeding into his mouth and down his chin. He didn't seem to care. Somehow, he was able to detach himself from the pain. If she had needed any more evidence that he wasn't normal, this was it. He was his father's son, a fact she had tried to deny, but which was as inevitable as sunrise.

His head stirred, like a dog trying to shake a wet leaf from its snout. He put his hand to his nasal cavities and blocked one side. Then he inhaled deeply through his mouth and blew through the open side. The ball Susanna had fired at him popped out in a spray of blood and snot and bounced on the floor a few times before rolling into the wall and stopping. Susanna's face bunched up in revulsion. Daniel smiled a perverted jack-o-lantern rictus, then tore off the loose appendage and tossed it at her. She flinched, then scrambled over to the knife and grabbed it. He made no effort to stop her or get the knife himself. She rose to her feet slowly, not taking her eyes off him.

The Necromancer

“There is no need, Susanna,” he said. “I will not harm you. I love you.”

“No. You do not.”

“We must go,” he said. “The fire is close.”

She glanced back. In another minute or so it would be upon Edward. At the far end of the hall, fiery beams crashed to the floor.

She turned back to Daniel. He hadn’t moved, but something about him was different, yet familiar and compelling. She couldn’t take her eyes off him.

“You shall always be mine,” he said. “In the blackness of night or the brightness of day, in dreams or in waking you shall always bequeath your love to me, for I am your husband, and you are my bride. Neither the tenuous web of Time nor the moldy bones and dust of Death shall come between us. I shall teach you enchantment and revelation and the art of regenerating yourself. You shall be forever young, forever fertile. You shall bear me many children and want for nothing. And you shall always give of yourself freely to me.”

Susanna stood stupefied, her glazed-over eyes focusing somewhere beyond Daniel. It was as if she were outside of herself, apathetically watching it all happen as in a dream. All the anger and fear and loathing she felt for him drained away. Her mind was empty.

Daniel stepped toward her and took her hand.

“Susanna.” It was Edward calling to her, floundering on the floor. The flames were creeping up on him.

“Susanna.” His voice sounded like a faint echo in a mountainous valley far away.

“Hand me the knife,” Daniel demanded.

Daniel And Molly

Her fingers loosened a little, but she didn't let go.

"The knife. Hand it to me."

"No. Susanna."

"Mother!"

A tremor shook through Susanna's body upon hearing the small, distant voice calling her urgently again and again.

"Mother!"

It was Molly's voice. A sweet, tender little voice laced with panic and fear.

Susanna came back to herself. Molly stood at the other end of the hall, crying. Daniel still held her hand, the jack-o-lantern face turned up to her expectantly, his free hand held out to her palm up. She looked down at her other hand, at the knife. Her fingers tightened around it until her knuckles went white.

"The knife," Daniel said in Ambrose's deep voice. "Hand me the knife."

She shook the last remnants of his influence over her off.

"Here!" she yelled and slammed the blade into his chest up to the handle, making a dull thumping sound. He fell back gasping, his mouth and eyes wide with surprise. He hit the floor with the knife sticking out of his chest and flopped around grabbing at it with both hands, but he couldn't remove it. He thrashed and twitched.

Edward's hair was on fire. Susanna rushed to his side, beat down the flames, and dragged him away from the fire, coughing.

"Go, Susanna," he said. "Save yourself and Molly. Leave me here."

The Necromancer

“No. I will not let you die.”

“Nothing can prevent that now,” he said.

“I am not leaving without you.”

The look on his face acknowledged he knew she meant it, and she helped him sit up.

“Mother!”

“Go back, Molly! Go back outside to where I told you to stay!”

“But I am affrighted.”

“Go!” Susanna yelled. “Go now. Your father and I will be behind you. Go!”

Molly turned and ran back down the stairs. The fire and smoke were everywhere now. Daniel rolled around on the floor, still unable to remove the knife from his chest. Susanna and Edward coughed and cried as the smoke burned their lungs and stung their eyes. She helped him to his feet and they hobbled past Daniel to the stairs under a ceiling of fire and creaking beams.

Susanna hesitated. She turned her head and looked back one final time before descending the stairs. Daniel continued to struggle on the floor. Beyond him, people appeared out of the fire, their silhouettes deepening, becoming more substantial. And they moaned. They moaned like only the dead could moan if they were able. But these people were dead. They were able. And they had come for Daniel.

Susanna turned and helped Edward down the stairs. Halfway down they heard Daniel scream—part his voice, part his father’s, part something else. They stopped for a moment, startled, then continued onward.

Daniel And Molly

The fresh air felt cool on their faces when they left the house and trudged over to where Molly stood waiting for them under the elms.

Susanna helped Edward sit down on the grass. The fire multiplied on itself now, throughout the remainder of the second floor, cremating the remains of Roger, Thea, and Daniel. Flames burst out the windows and worked their way up the clapboards of the outer walls up to the gables as the lambent amber light began to brighten in the windows of the ground floor.

Molly put her arms around her mother as they stared silently at their home and watched it burn.

After the funeral, Edward hugged his brother with his good arm—his other in a sling—and said farewell. Zachariah and his family hopped up in their carriage and headed back to Angelwood in the hot, gray morning.

Edward, Susanna, and Molly rode back to the inn where they were staying until Edward could find another home. The inn was located about a mile upstream from where their house had been. The cemetery was only about two miles farther than that. They arrived back in time for lunch, but none of them felt very hungry, not even Molly, who always had an appetite.

“Are you sure?” Susanna asked, removing Molly’s bonnet and placing it down on the seat of a chair.

“Yes,” Molly replied. “I think I shall just go to my room.”

“As you please, dearest.”

Molly turned and walked down the narrow hallway to her room.

The Necromancer

“She seems to be coping well,” Edward remarked.

“As well as a girl her age could, I imagine. Should I brew a pot of tea?”

Edward nodded.

“I am concerned though,” he said.

“What about?”

“Well... To be blunt: Who is to say Molly will not attempt to murder us in our sleep as Daniel did?”

“No.” Susanna shook her head. “It was different. Daniel was Ambrose.”

“For God’s sake, Susanna. They were twins. They were both his.”

“Molly is not that way. She could never be that way.”

“Ambrose was her father.”

“And she is my daughter.”

“Daniel was your son, but he still killed our parents. He would have killed me if you had not stopped him.”

“He was...different. Molly is nothing like him. You saw how she behaved. If she were like him, she would have helped him. She would have...”

She turned away from him suddenly. Tears flowed from her eyes. He walked over to her and put his arm around her shoulder.

“I did not mean to upset you. I simply feel uneasy about what has happened. You understand?”

She looked at him and nodded, sniffing.

“I love her, Edward. I do not want to lose her. Not like Daniel. Not again.”

Daniel And Molly

“I know, Susanna. I know. I love her also.”

He held her close while she wept against his chest.
They stayed like that for a long time.

Molly sat in a chair by the window overlooking the river. A warm, light breeze caressed her face and blew strands of her dark hair from her forehead and back over her shoulders. The high sun was burning away the overcast.

“I think it will be a beautiful day today, do you not think so too, Elizabeth?” Molly asked, turning to the doll in the white dress sitting in a far corner of the room.

The doll blinked and nodded.

Molly turned back and looked out over the river again. She smiled.

“Yes,” she said. “A most beautiful day.”

THE END

The Necromancer

Author Bio



Kevin Dunn was born and raised in New York City and attended Queens College, where he graduated with a BA in English. During that time, he wrote music reviews for the *QC Quad* and a number of short stories, plays, and poems, some of which were later published in small literary magazines.

After graduation, he worked as a personal fitness trainer, census taker, computer consultant, and freelance writer.

He currently lives in New York City and works as a Computer Analyst for a financial software company. *The Necromancer* is his first novel.

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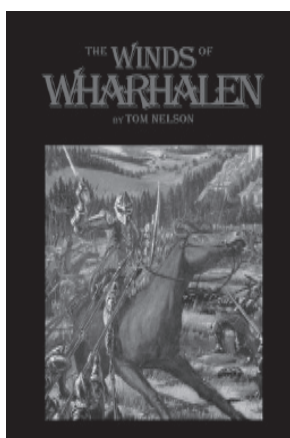
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By Tom Nelson

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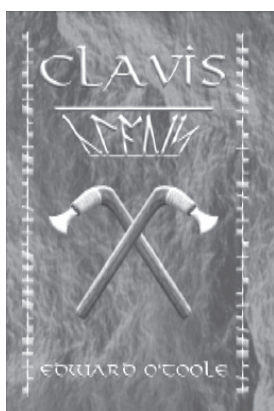
gold and has him sold into slavery. Fueled by anger and sustained by his hatred of this man, Locke survives a virtual death sentence in the stone quarries. He then begins an odyssey that will take him through two campaigns with the Queen's army, and see him rise through the ranks to become a knight. Against a backdrop of medieval warfare, *The Winds of Warhalen* is a tale of adventure, romance, treachery, and revenge.

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Clavis

By Edward O'Toole

“I have watched you for several summers now, little Clavis; I have watched you more closely than you can imagine. You carry a secret that I had believed was mine alone. Many nights have I spent trying to decide your fate, and am glad I waited

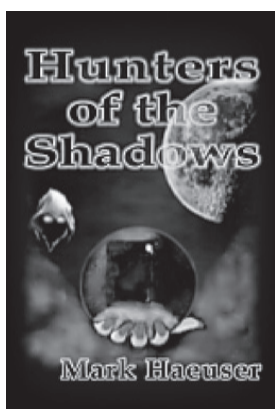
because I know you can hold your tongue, I have brought you here. As of yesterday, you are a non-person as are the rest in that blasted list you heard cried. You have lost the right to a home and land; you have lost the right to work and to marry. I'm trying to save your life. Here is my deal: I will save your life and you will save my family, my reputation, my Province, and the Kte, I want you to travel to Oksat.”

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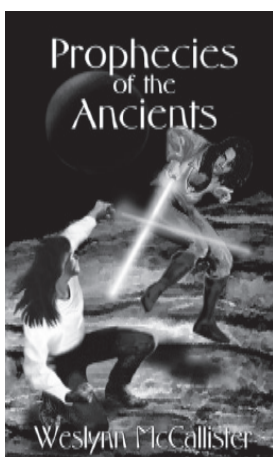
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