

WITCH BORN

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The knocking came harder this time. Ellen could clearly hear two voices just outside the cottage's window, and behind them a low sea-swell of agitated muttering. It sounded like they had brought the whole village with them.

The house shuddered. She looked at the door, then down at the cooking pot slung over the fire in front of her, and then back to the door again. It wouldn't take much for them to break it down, but it might buy her a little time while they tried.

Hastily, Ellen gathered up the last remaining objects from around the hearth—dried herbs, stones, figures of straw and bone—and threw them all into the pot, poking each one under the surface of the broth with a wooden spoon as she went. Then she heaved the whole concoction out of the fire and left it steaming on the earthen floor.

“OPEN THE DOOR, CRONE!”

Again, the frame of the tiny cottage shook. Ellen sighed.

“Crone?” she murmured to herself, fishing a bonnet from the back of a chair and stuffing her masses of brown curls underneath. “I don't look *that* old . . .”



She stood up straight, smoothed out her smock, and roughly tightened the laces in her bodice. Her appearance probably wouldn't count for much once she had opened the door to her visitors, but she wasn't going to make their job easier for them. She glanced at the two beds in the corner of the room, one so small it could have been a crib, and a shadow passed over her face.

I hope she remembers what to do.

More pounding. The door seemed to be coming off its hinges.

I hope she'll be safe.

Ellen took a deep breath, and went to open it. Pale light and cold air, rich with the damp smells of late autumn, flooded the cottage.

The sight that greeted her on the other side gave her a thrill of surprise more than fear. The man in front of her had a quite impossibly handsome face. His high cheekbones, arched eyebrows, and pointed beard gave him a slightly devilish aspect that Ellen found rather appealing. Those features were framed by a vast ruff and tall black hat, its huge feathers nodding like the plume of some Greek warrior. And at the center of it all were his eyes—the kind of eyes that seemed to be all pupil, cold and black as forest pools. He smiled at her.

“Good day, sirs,” said Ellen calmly. At the shoulder of the handsome man stood a taller, thinner companion. In one hand he was clutching a Bible. In the other a noose. Behind them both were the dirty, ugly, absurd faces of the villagers, pressed in a ring around her cottage.

The handsome man cleared his throat and spoke. His voice sounded like a hammer striking an anvil.

“Ellen Greenlief. By the authority of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, you stand accused of the practice of witchcraft, denying Almighty God and His son Jesus Christ, of sealing a covenant with the Devil, and performing diverse crimes of sorcery and necromancy with which you have cursed and afflicted the good villagers of Fordham.”

There were subdued noises of agreement from the onlookers. Ellen did her best to look underwhelmed, and smiled back at the man.

“Forgive me, gentlemen, but I suspect you’ve had a wasted journey. I am a poor housewife, no more. I spin. I weave.” She gestured to a broken spinning wheel that was leaned against the outside wall of the cottage.

The handsome man laughed. “Ay, I can believe that. It is a web of *lies* and *deceit* that you have been weaving, and most subtly too.”

His smugness showed so plainly on his face, Ellen thought for a moment he might take a bow. A couple of villagers took heart from his reply and cried their approval.

“She ain’t never been to church!”

“She turned all our milk sour!”

Ellen sighed, and replied over the handsome man’s shoulder. “That’s a matter you should discuss with your cows, Master Garrard, not me.” There was a titter from one of the children in the crowd. “Come, sirs, it is a long journey back to London. Stay awhile and have something to eat, and I’ll see you on your way. I have just made a fresh stew.”

“She’s lying!” shouted another of the peasants. “It’s *poison!*”

“I’ll admit I’m not the most talented cook, but that’s a little unkind . . . At least come inside and rest your feet.”

The handsome man continued to smile, although one of his eyes twitched with impatience. He waited for the villagers’ baiting to die down.

“How very gracious of you,” he said quietly, his eyes now a pair of black storms. “We will be coming into your house, but that is not to say we will be accepting your hospitality.”

Ellen’s face hardened. “If it’s evidence of witchcraft you are looking for, I am afraid you will be disappointed.”

“Yes, of course,” said the man, drawing close to her. His eyes roamed greedily over her, as though searching for something on her person. “No doubt the Devil has taught you most cunning ways of concealing your art.”

Ellen let out a cold laugh. “So, if you find what you are looking for, I am damned. And if you don’t find it, I am damned for concealing it? How clever! And I thought I was meant to be the tricky one.”

The handsome man’s face split into a grin, revealing a set of perfectly white teeth. He was inches away now. He smelled of iron and wood smoke. “You may be able to conceal your apparatus, witch, but you cannot conceal your own body.” Suddenly he grabbed her wrist in a gloved hand, pulled her onto the doorstep, and tore a sleeve from her arm. Her skin prickled in the cold breeze. The crowd gasped.

“Look upon this, gentlefolk!” crowed the handsome man, dragging her from the doorway and thrusting her arm up into the air. “The witch’s poisonous teat, with which she has been feeding

her familiar! Who is to say how many more of these she has upon her vile body?"

Ellen looked at the two little pink lumps a few inches up from her wrist. They still hadn't healed after an accident with a toasting fork. Searching the faces of the villagers, she found nothing but hatred and ignorance, and she turned back to the man who held her.

"This is madness! That's a *burn*, you fool, can't you see? Show me a wife in this village who doesn't have any imperfections like this!"

"Still she denies it, when the evidence is clear as day! Lies, wicked lies!"

The villagers roared. Some began to pelt Ellen and her house with stones and mud and manure. The handsome man basked in their wild indignation, and spoke to the man at his shoulder.

"Master Caxton, bind her while I search her lodgings." Then he turned to address his frenzied audience. "There are yet more unholy discoveries within, too foul for your eyes to look upon."

"The girl!" a woman screeched. "She's hiding the girl!"

Ellen stared at the handsome man, whose back was to her now. The noise of the crowd had become overwhelming, and seemed to suck her underneath it like the waves of an incoming tide. Even while he faced away, she still heard his words. They seemed to blossom from inside her own head.

"Yes," he said. "The girl."

Then, without looking at her, he disappeared into the darkness of the cottage.

With practiced efficiency, the taller man yanked her arms behind her back and began tying them tightly together at the wrist. Ellen was thinking too hard to feel the rope bite into her flesh, to notice the hotness, the stickiness of her hands and fingers.

The taller man spun her around again, pulled her upright, and attempted to force the noose down over her head. Up close she saw his features were nothing like his superior's—they were blank and sallow, expressing precisely nothing. Behind him the villagers' howling faces rippled like a mirage, and beyond them she glimpsed the cool, inviting foliage of the beech woods.

I should have run away with her, she thought. As soon as I saw them I should have run.

The witchfinder's extravagant hat bobbed and emerged into daylight again. His smile still hadn't faded, although there was something more predatory about it now as he marched toward her. His tall, blank companion tightened the noose a little.

"Where is she?" the witchfinder said.

Ellen stared at him. He took another step forward, and nodded to the man holding the noose. It pressed against her windpipe.

"Speak," he said.

She cocked her head. Tighter still.

"Speak."

She could feel her pulse behind her eyes.

"Speak, witch."

After the third time, she turned her attention to the man holding the rope. She opened her mouth as if she were trying to form words, and he leaned in to listen. When he was close enough

for her to feel his sour breath on her face, she lurched forward and kissed him.

The handsome man roared with laughter. "I'm afraid your womanly charms, considerable as they are, will not distract us from our duty, Miss Greenlief. But I'm sure Master Caxton appreciates the gesture."

Ellen drew herself back, whispering softly as she did. Caxton struck her with the back of his hand, knocking her to the ground. The crowd whooped with delight.

Then, for the first time, an expression registered on his pale face. Something between fear and surprise. It looked like he was trying to spit on her, but couldn't. His lips purpled and blistered. In his panic he tried to speak, but something was obviously lodged in his throat. He gurgled, then heaved, then spat; and when he did, he saw his tongue, blackened and decayed, fall whole from his mouth and land in the dirt between his feet.

The handsome man looked at his whimpering companion for a moment, then at Ellen. He took a couple of steps forward, bent down, and plucked the tongue off the floor with his gloved thumb and forefinger. The villagers were silent now, save for a flutter of whispered prayers.

"This woman and her child," he announced, "are a plague. They will infect us all. And as any physician will tell you, gentlefolk, there is only one sure way to prevent the spread of contagion." He looked from one face to the next, his eyes sparkling. "Fire."

Fordham was all ash and smoke. It had started raining an hour ago, but the remains of the bonfire still smoldered and the cloying,

acrid smell of charred wood and flesh clung to the houses. It was the villagers' own fault—they'd gotten carried away, and the fire had been far too large. Most were returning, exhausted, to their homes, but some could still be heard tramping through the woods and hollering to each other in search of the girl. A wraithlike sun hovered on the horizon.

Two men remained at the edge of the ashes, staring at the spot where the stake had been. Despite the drizzle, John Hopkins stood with his tall, black hat in his hands and smoothed its feathers absentmindedly. His pearl-studded, velvet doublet was soaked through by now, as was his hair, but he didn't seem to have noticed. Just behind him was the village parson, an old man slow in mind and body, who kept coughing and spluttering as the wind blew gray flakes into his face.

"I thank God you came, sir," he said, bowing his head slightly.

"Hmmm?"

"I—I thank God. For sending you to us."

Hopkins didn't reply.

"And I shall pray for your companion," he continued. "That God may comfort him in his . . . affliction."

"As you wish."

The parson looked up, confused. He tried to blink the ash out of his watery eyes. Hopkins's eyes were still fixed on the smoldering stake.

"Stubborn old thing, wasn't she?" he said, drumming his jeweled fingers on the top of his hat.

"Beg pardon, sir?"

“The hag. Usually the flames haven’t even reached the soles of their feet before they’re confessing.” He was talking mostly to himself, and for once his lips weren’t curled into a smile. “But this one . . . Didn’t want to give us anything, did she?”

“No, sir. Must’ve been thick with the Devil for him to stick with her till the end.” He crossed himself.

Hopkins’s jaw twitched. He’d hoped that burning the woman would have brought the child out of hiding. Or that she would have revealed where the girl was, once she was tied to the stake. But neither of those things had happened. And now Ellen Greenlief was gone.

He suddenly whirled around, and the parson audibly cringed. “The girl. Did she have any friends in the village?”

“No, sir. Kept themselves to themselves, the pair of them. Never came to church. Not even after the fines. Never left that cursed house.”

Hopkins regarded the old man in silence for a moment, and then looked over the top of his bald head to Ellen Greenlief’s house, perched on a hill overlooking the rest of the village.

“Never left the house,” he muttered.

Without another word, he set his hat upon his head and marched away from the parson up the hillside. Rain was falling more heavily now, and the rutted pathway he was following quickly becoming a muddy torrent. The sky was bruise-black.

When he reached the cottage, the door was still wide open and inside it was as dark and empty as they had left it earlier. Tiny though the place was, the gloom gave it an unexpected air of

menace. He would have to tread carefully; he didn't want a repeat of the business in Norfolk. Thunder began to murmur overhead, and the beech trees sighed in the mustering storm.

Hopkins stepped inside and shook the rain from his cloak. In the dying light, he could just make out the beds in one corner of the room, and in the other the feebly glowing embers of the cook-fire. A pot of cold stew still rested on the floor.

He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness and moved over to the two beds. Something crunched underfoot, and he saw that the floor was scattered with little figures of animals and people, woven from straw and twigs. He placed one of them carefully in his palm and examined it in the dim firelight. Then he tucked it into the folds of his doublet and began to pace the room, scowling. The place was too small to have a false wall or a priest hole or any cavity for concealing a man. Or a child. But he must have missed something.

The thunder rumbled again, closer now, within the cottage walls, within his own ears, low like the growling of a cornered dog. It was suddenly much darker, too, a deep, oppressive darkness that seemed to creep into his nose and mouth when he tried to breathe.

Groping through the shadows, he stubbed his toe on something hard and immovable. When he'd finished cursing, he knelt down and brushed the dirt away from the offending object. It was an iron ring, cold and furred with rust. Strange that he hadn't seen it earlier.

Hopkins squatted and heaved twice at the handle. On the third attempt, he was able to straighten his legs, and the trapdoor

opened and fell heavily backward. A steady orange furnace-glow filled the cottage from beneath. He basked in the light, standing triumphantly over the entrance to the witch's cellar, hands on hips.

That was the moment she chose to stab him.

The knife she used was so sharp he didn't even realize what had happened until he looked down and saw its handle protruding from below his ribs. He staggered forward and fell halfway down the stairs, twisting awkwardly to catch a glimpse of his killer as she stepped over his body. He saw her face, surrounded by curls that seemed to burn with a fire of their own, and for once he stopped smiling.

It was true. All of it was true.

He never heard her leave. She was somewhere behind him, her breath slow and steady as his own grew shallower and more uneven. He felt a strange numbness creeping in from his fingers and toes.

The girl was still watching when the darkness finally claimed him.