

WINTEKOWA

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ON BLACK SCREEN:

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock.

If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come
in to them and eat with them, and they with me."

(Apocalypse, 3,20)

Text fades out.

FADE IN

EXT. VILLAGE - ALLEY - DAY

A festive red ribbon flutters in the wind.

Children's eerie LAUGHTER echoes in the distance.

SUPER: NEW ENGLAND, 1650

ABIGAIL (6), tiny and pale, in coif and apron, darts into
the alley, giggling.

Two chickens scatter, flapping their wings in surprise.

ELIZABETH (12), her braids bouncing, follows quickly.

ELIZABETH

Abigail! Come here!

She catches Abigail and tickles her. Their laughter rings
out...

A *thick red drop* lands on Abigail's hand.

The girls freeze. They stare at the drop.

Slowly look up at the clear sky...

SOUNDS OF BONES CRACKING, FLESH TEARING, MANDIBLES
CHEWING.

A red glow flickers in the girls' eyes.

Their fingertips twitch.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MERYL (O.S.)

What are you doing still here?
Your father is about to start his
speech.

The glow vanishes from the girls' eyes.

The twitching stops.

Silence.

MERYL (40), stern eyes, strides in.

The girls stare at her, puzzled.

EXT. VILLAGE - SQUARE - DAY

The main square of a small, wooden village.

Ribbons flutter in the breeze.

Food stands line the edges.

A FEW DOZENS VILLAGERS— women, men, elderly, children—in
their best clothes.

In the background, a modest church.

At the square's center, a handwritten sign hangs between
two poles:

CITY OF BETHLEHEM - HARVEST 1650

GOD IS WITH US

THE REVEREND (50) stands beneath it, a sense of
uneasiness behind his charismatic smile.

He shakes hands, exchanges words with VILLAGERS.

Meryl, with Elizabeth and Abigail, weaves through the
crowd toward the Reverend.

They pass a MOTHER (30), chatting with her FRIEND (40).
Her CHILD (3) sits on the ground, playing with rocks.

Abigail glances back, distracted.

She hears— *something*.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JEANNE (20), trustful as only youth can be, noticeably pregnant, approaches Meryl.

JEANNE
Have you seen Isaac?

MERYL
He's late, as usual.

The Reverend raises his hands, commanding attention.

The crowd falls silent.

REVEREND
Cherished friends and neighbors, I
extend my heartfelt gratitude to
each of you for coming.

Polite applause.

ISAAC (20), young and slightly scruffy but with a protective demeanor, appears behind Jeanne, gently grasping her hand. He has a visible, old scar on his neck.

She smiles.

JEANNE
(whispers)
Where were you?

ISAAC
(whispers)
I think I got lost --

Meryl shushes him with a stern glance.

REVEREND
As the Almighty is our witness,
the past winter has tested us like
never before.

The mood shifts, growing somber.

Meryl's face hardens. Isaac notices, uneasy.

Behind them, unnoticed, *Elizabeth and Abigail* murmur softly.

In the audience, three WOMEN weep softly.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

REVEREND

Yet, amid the profound darkness of
our souls, the Lord has
illuminated our path with His
divine light.

Capillaries burst in Elizabeth and Abigail's eyes,
turning them blood-red!

No one notices.

REVEREND

The Lord has bestowed upon us the
gift of life!

Applause mingles with weeping and cheers.

Meryl doesn't clap. Isaac sneaks a glance at her, wary.

The Reverend looks toward Jeanne and Isaac.

REVEREND

At the beginning of the year, we
witnessed the union of my
cherished son, Isaac, in marriage
to the gracious Jeanne, our
esteemed neighbor from the village
of Stillwater.

Isaac and Jeanne look at each other.
Love *shines* between them.

REVEREND

Life wins. God, wins.
(a beat)
And now, beloved friends, let us
commence our--

A SHARP FEMALE SCREAM slices through the air. The crowd
turns.

The MOTHER from before clutches her hair, frantic.

MOTHER

My child! My child is gone! Help!

REVEREND

Please, calm yourself, where was
the child?

MOTHER

Here! He was right here beside me!

The crowd murmurs, voices rising in confusion and fear.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

The mother continues to scream, searching the faces around her.

MOTHER

Thomas! Thomas!

Meryl scans the crowd, eyes wide...

Her gaze meets Isaac's.

MERYL

...Where are Elizabeth and Abigail?

FEW MINS LATER

People rush through houses and alleys around the main square, shouting for the missing child.

MOTHER

THOMAS! THOMAS!

Jeanne moves with the crowd, but...

SOMETHING IS OFF.

She stops.

A cold gust of wind tousles her hair.

A *faint sound* catches her ear.

It comes from the *village barn*, looming nearby.

Jeanne hesitates.

Breaks away from the group, heading toward the barn.

EXT. BARN - DAY

Jeanne reaches the door.

It stands ajar.

The noise *grows louder*.

She hesitates.

A shiver runs down her spine.

But she has to see.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

She steps inside.

INT. BARN - DAY

Jeanne walks in slowly.

Piles of hay loom in the dim light.

Beams of sunlight through the wooden planks.

Jeanne looks around.

In the far corner, *two figures-*

Elizabeth and Abigail. Kneeling. Backs to us.

They are bent.

Over

something.

Jeanne steps closer.

JEANNE

...Elizabeth? Abigail? What are
you --

Noises of BONES BREAKING, FLESH TEARING, MANDIBLES
MASTICING.

The same horrific sounds of the first scene.

Jeanne freezes.

But she can't look away.

She takes another step closer.

EXT. VILLAGE - BARN - DAY

Jeanne's horrified SCREAMS echoes from inside the barn.

Villagers rush to the entrance. Meryl, Isaac, the
Reverend, William, and the child's mother.

The barn door swings open. Jeanne staggers out,
distraught.

She collapses against the wall, sobbing.

She retches, vomiting.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Isaac dashes to her.

ISAAC

Jeanne!

All eyes on her, shocked and fearful.

The child's mother catches on -- *something is terribly wrong.*

She bolts to the barn door.

Peers inside...

And...

Her face twists into *sheer horror.*

She screams, piercing and primal.

Her scream continues on...

BLACK SCREEN

The scream ends.

Silence.

After a beat-

EXT. LAKE - NIGHT

Dense fog. Black, still water.

Nothing visible.

SUPER: TWO WEEKS LATER

SPLASHING sounds.

A small wooden boat emerges from the mist like a ghost,
lit by two oil lamps.

Onboard, two men paddle frantically:

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JOSEPH (40), rough but loyal boatman,

Doctor **JAMES WILBUR** (40), man of science, yet haunted by memories that science can't cure.

Wrapped in a blanket behind them sits **HOPE** (16), wounded like James, yet courage and kindness bloom within her.

JAMES

How much longer?

(a beat)

We must hurry.

Joseph glances around. Fog as thick as molasses.

JOSEPH

I believe we are nearly there.

(a beat)

I cautioned you -- crossing the lake at this time of year poses a great risk. The water's freezing.

JAMES

I would not have imposed such a demand upon you, were it not a matter of life and death.

Hope shivers from the cold.

JOSEPH

Doesn't your sister reside in Bethlehem? What is happening? You won't even confide in me--

JAMES

Believe me, the less you know, the safer you will be.

Joseph eyes him, concerned.

In the distance, the fog parts, revealing *caves on a hill*.

They all stare.

Something *eerie* about that place.

JOSEPH

Have you heard the legend of the *cursed caves of Bethlehem*?

(pause)

It is said that an evil spirit resides within them.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Hope turns to him. Fear in her eyes.

CRAAAAAACK!

The boat grinds to a halt, stuck in the ice, a couple of meters from shore.

EXT. LAKE SHORE - NIGHT

A dark lakeside.

The boat rests on the shore, tied to a tree.

James and Joseph unload the bags.

Hope holds the lamp, her eyes scanning the surroundings.

A few steps away, a path leads into the forest.

From behind a nearby tree, shrouded in darkness...

SOMETHING WATCHES THEM.

Hope turns, raising the lamp, but sees nothing.

JOSEPH

I shall camp here for the night
and set out at dawn.

(a beat)

Should anything arise -- and you
require a ride back, I will be
here.

JAMES

Thank you Joseph. I don't think it
will be necessary.

They shake hands.

James and Hope move toward the path.

JOSEPH

James!

James and Hope turn back.

JOSEPH

(hesitant)

Good luck. To both of you.

James nods.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SUPER: 4 HOURS TO DAWN

James and Hope head into the forest.

EXT. PATH - NIGHT

A narrow path in the forest.

Dark. Gloomy.

James and Hope move quickly.

HOPE

Father, do you think we'll need
the ride back?

James stops. He gently places a hand on her shoulder.

JAMES

Hope, *this time*- it is different.
(a beat)
I promise.

Hope looks down.

HOPE

I'm afraid.

JAMES

It is natural to be afraid. But
remember, you are so brave.
(a beat)
Just like *her*.

Hope meets his eyes.

JAMES

And if anything happens, there is
still the boat. Understood?

HOPE

Understood.

A sudden HISS in the air.

The lamp flame flickers, nearly extinguishing.

They watch it, tense.

The flame steadies, returning to life.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOPE

What was that?

They scan the darkness around them.

In the distance, a glimpse of the cursed caves.

A RUSTLE from behind a bush!

James steps in front of Hope, grabbing a fallen branch.

JAMES

(whispers)

Quiet.

He edges toward the bush...

Behind it, a fox.

It stares at them, almost expectant.

The fox moves aside, revealing her cub -- *lifeless*. She licks its fur, a silent farewell.

James and Hope gaze at the scene, sorrow in their eyes.

JAMES

Come on, we must hurry.

They continue, quickening their pace.

EXT. VILLAGE - STREET - NIGHT

James and Hope rush into Bethlehem.

Silent.

A ghost town.

They move toward a house next to the church.

EXT. THOMPSON HOUSE - NIGHT

James and Hope reach the front door, breathless.

James knocks.

No answer.

James knocks again.

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CONTINUED:

JAMES

It's James! Please open the door!

Rushed FOOTSTEPS from behind the door.

It creaks open.

Meryl stands there, disheveled, dark circles under her eyes. She stares at James in disbelief.

MERYL

You've come -- praise the Lord!

JAMES

I departed immediately upon receiving your letter. Where are the children?

Meryl notices Hope.

MERYL

(worried)
Why is she here?

JAMES

You know I always bring her with me.

(a beat)
Where are the children?

Meryl looks at him. Hesitates.

Steps outside of the door.

MERYL

(to James)
Follow me.

She glances at Hope.

MERYL

Hope, please wait inside.

JAMES

She can come, she assisted me many times --

Meryl grips James' arm.

MERYL

She should wait *inside*.

James gets it.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

JAMES

Hope, would you wait for us
inside?

Hope nods, enters the house, gives them a final look, and
closes the door.

Meryl walks off.

James hurries after her.

JAMES

Do you not keep them at home?

Meryl's face tightens with shame.

MERYL

The Reverend ordered they be kept-
(a beat)
in the barn.

JAMES

In the *barn*? They're children,
Meryl!

Meryl stops. Looks at him, her eyes filled with terror.

INT. THOMPSON HOUSE - NIGHT

Hope enters.

The house is dark and silent.

ISAAC (O.S.)

Hope!

Hope turns.

HOPE

Isaac!

Isaac appears with an oil lamp, pulling her into a tight
embrace.

ISAAC

Last time I saw you, you were but
a child -- look at you now!

HOPE

I remember, cousin! You would
carry me on your back like a fine
steed.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Hope smiles at him, but her happiness quickly fades.

HOPE

What is happening with Elizabeth
and Abigail? Father said they are
ill --

JEANNE (O.S.)

They are not ill.

Hope turns to see Jeanne, distress etched on her face.

HOPE

Jeanne!

Jeanne hugs her tightly.

ISAAC

(to Jeanne)

See? I told you they would come to
our aid --

JEANNE

(a Isaac)

Can we leave this place and return
to my village?

ISAAC

I cannot abandon my sisters--

JEANNE

Those -- those **creatures**

(a beat)

They are not your sisters.

Hope watches them, confused.

EXT. BARN - NIGHT

Meryl leads James toward the barn.

JAMES

Where is your husband?

MERYL

Since the incident, he has
confined himself to the church, in
prayer. He cannot bring himself to
face the girls.

(hesitant)

He- he sent word to...

James feels a chill run down his spine.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JAMES

To whom?

Meryl forces herself to say it.

MERYL

...to *Judge Von Kramer*.

James freezes.

MERYL

I- I am sorry. I did not tell you-

James raises a hand to stop her.

JAMES

Did you doubt that I would come?
That I would abandon my sister and
my nieces?

He grips her hands firmly.

JAMES

Elizabeth and Abigail are merely
afflicted, and we shall heal them.
(a beat)

They are the Reverend's daughters.
Not even Von Kramer would dare to
bring them harm.

Meryl nods, her eyes glistening.

They arrive at the barn.

INT. BARN - NIGHT

In the darkness, we see the shaky POV of *something*
lurking inside, watching James and Meryl.

Heavy BREATHING fills the air.

EXT. BARN - NIGHT

James approaches the entrance.
Meryl stands close beside him.

The door is marked with eerie painted crosses.

James raises his hand toward the door...

But-

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The CHURCH BELLS toll loudly, shattering the silence!

They stop and glance toward the church.

MERYL

Why the bells at this hour? The
Reverend is inside—

JAMES

Let's go!

Meryl and James sprint toward the church.

The barn door is left behind.

We catch a glimpse of the LOCK, *hanging loose as the door slowly creaks open.*

INT. THOMPSON HOUSE - NIGHT

Hope stares at Jeanne.

HOPE

Elizabeth and Abigail --
(a beat)
Are not ill?

JEANNE

No. It is much worse than that.

ISAAC

Jeanne, please --

JEANNE

No, she must know!

Jeanne fixes her gaze on Hope.

JEANNE

It began during the Harvest
Celebration --

The CHURCH BELLS ring out suddenly!

They exchange shocked glances.

ISAAC

Father-- why is my father ringing
the bells at this hour?

Isaac heads for the door. Jeanne catches up to him.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JEANNE

I'll come with you.

Isaac nods, shaken. Jeanne turns to Hope.

JEANNE

(to Hope)

Lock the door.

(a beat)

And don't open to *anyone*.

Jeanne and Isaac rush out.

Hope bolts the door.

In the back of the house, **an OPEN WINDOW gapes...**

EXT. CHURCH - NIGHT

The church bell tolls, relentless.

Meryl and James reach the door, pounding on it.

JAMES

It's barred from within! Is there any other way on?

Meryl shakes her head. She bangs on the door.

MERYL

Jeremiah! What is happening? Open the door!

Isaac arrives, Jeanne at his side.

MERYL

The door is locked!

Isaac sprints to the side, where a small window sits high up.

He jumps, pulling himself up, peering into the church.

His eyes widen.

James, Meryl, and Jeanne gather around.

MERYL

What do you see?

ISAAC'S POV: Inside the church, the Reverend stands half-naked, his body marred with scratches and blood.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He mutters to himself hysterically, violently pulling the bell rope.

ISAAC
Father! What are you doing?

INT. CHURCH - NIGHT

Continuous. The Reverend halts the ringing of the bells and turns.

He looks toward Isaac but doesn't truly see him.

His eyes are wild with delirium.

He grasps a jar of oil, a crazed smile creeping across his face.

Raises it high above his head.

EXT. CHURCH - NIGHT

Continuous.

ISAAC
NO! FATHER!

INT. CHURCH - NIGHT

Continuous. The reverend slowly pours the oil over his head.

It drips down his face, over his closed eyes, soaking his torn clothes.

EXT. CHURCH - NIGHT

Continuous.

ISAAC
(to the others)
We must break down the door! NOW!

Isaac and James rush to the door, battering against it.

Nearby, a villagers couple rushes by, BENJAMIN (40) and his WIFE (40).

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CONTINUED:

ISAAC
(to the man)
Benjamin, please help us! My
father --

The couple quickens their pace, moving away.

ISAAC
Where are you going? Help us!

BENJAMIN
Because of your sisters, the whole
village is cursed, Judge Von
Kramer will have us all killed for
witchcraft! We won't wait for him
here!

James notices a hatchet by a nearby woodpile, seizes it,
and swings at the church door.

The Benjamin family disappears into the night.

With a final blow, James breaks through the door!

They can see inside but cannot yet enter.

INT. CHURCH - NIGHT

Inside, the Reverend is drenched in oil.

He stands, staring down at his feet. Defeated.

ISAAC
(from outside)
Father!

JAMES
(from outside)
Jeremiah!

The Reverend moves toward a lamp on the wall.

ISAAC
(from outside)
No! Father!

MERYL
(from outside)
Jeremiah! What are you doing?

The Reverend grasps the lamp.

EXT. CHURCH - NIGHT

Meryl screams.

James and Isaac try to fully open the door.

INT. CHURCH - NIGHT

The Reverend stares at them with hollow eyes.

REVEREND

It is too late. *He is here.*

He drops the lamp at his feet.

Flames quickly coil around him!

Isaac frantically hacks at the door with the hatchet.

EST. CHURCH - NIGHT

James and Isaac finally break down the door!

They burst into the church, Jeanne and Meryl close behind.

INT. CHURCH - NIGHT

James and Isaac, with Jeanne and Meryl, rush to the Reverend.

It's too late.

He lies on the church floor, *a charred, lifeless body.*

Meryl's screams pierce the silence.

INT. THOMPSON HOUSE - NIGHT

Hope paces the room, nervous.

On the table, a book rests beside a flickering candle.

Its cover is missing, and the pages are yellowed and worn.

Hope's eyes fall on it.

The first page reads:

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

"Holy Living and Holy Dying"

by

Jeremy Taylor

She feels an unexplainable pull toward it.

Her fingers brush the pages.

She hesitates, then flips it open.

She starts reading.

In the back of the house, *the open window stands ominous.*

HOPE

(reading)

*"The most terrible of punishments
is reserved for those who in this
life have despised the mercy of
God, refused His grace--"*

Focused on reading, she doesn't notice...

...something CRAWLING IN THE DARKNESS BEHIND HER.

HOPE

(reading)

*"-and by their willful neglect of
holy living, have provoked His
divine justice."*

Hope's nose **bleeds**. Surprised, she reaches for an hand-
chief, to clean herself --

From the open window, a gust of wind blows THE CANDLE
OUT!

DARKNESS.

Hope snaps out of her trance and glances around.

Nothing.

But... *something* lightly brushes against her face.

It's **human hair**.

Hope freezes.

Trembling, she slowly looks up.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Hanging from the ceiling is Elizabeth, possessed and horrifying, her face deformed in a silent scream!

Her dead eyes bore into Hope's.

Elizabeth lunges, throwing Hope to the floor!

Hope struggles, trying to push her away, but Elizabeth looms closer.

HOPE

Elizabeth! Stop-please! It's me,
Hope!

Elizabeth pins Hope down and pulls out a grotesquely long black tongue.

She drags it across Hope's face.

Hope is paralyzed with terror and disgust.

HOPE

Please! Please stop-

Elizabeth snaps like a rabid beast, attempts to bite Hope!

Hope turns her head, her eyes landing on a fire poker nearby on the floor.

Desperately, Hope stretches her arm, reaching for the poker, as Elizabeth's gaping mouth inches closer to her face!

Hope's fingers brush the poker... *but she can't grasp it!*

Elizabeth's mouth is just a breath away!

Hope finally grips the poker and strikes Elizabeth, who recoils, shrieking in pain.

Hope scrambles to her feet and dashes for the door.

EXT. THOMPSON HOUSE - NIGHT

Hope bursts out of the house, sprinting to the neighbors.

She pounds on the door.

HOPE

Help! Please, open the door!

No response.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Hope moves toward the church, but --

Elizabeth leaps out of the shadows, blocking her path!

Hope spins around, forced to run in the opposite direction.

Toward the forest.

EXT. CHURCH - NIGHT

Meryl sobs into James' arms.

The burnt remains of the Reverend lie in the center of the church.

Isaac stands in shock, Jeanne holding him close.

JAMES

We must leave -- if Von Kramer arrives he'll find a way to blame Elizabeth and Abigail for this.

MERYL

(delirious)
We must bury my husband -- my husband -- Oh God...

James grips her shoulders, shaking her firmly.

JAMES

Sister, if we don't leave now, we will bury your children as well! Do you understand?
(a beat)
Von Kramer must not find them!

Meryl sobs, her composure crumbling.

ISAAC

How-
(a beat)
Where can we take them?

JEANNE

Let's bring them to my village. It's only a few hours from here --

ISAAC

We don't have enough horses.

JAMES

Walking?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ISAAC

Too long. At least a full day.

Suddenly, James brightens.

JAMES

The boat!

They turn to him, hopeful.

JAMES

The boat we came with is still at the lake. The boatman will depart at dawn.

ISAAC

Are there enough places?

JAMES

Yes, I believe so.
(a beat)
It's our only option.

Jeanne, exhausted, clutches Isaac.

ISAAC

(to Jeanne)

We'll take them to the boat, then you and I will ride straight to your village, to your family.

Jeanne nods, a flicker of hope in her eyes.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Hope sprints into the forest, alone.

She pauses, glancing back: Elizabeth screams are getting *closer!*

Hope pushes herself, weaving through the trees.

Through the dense foliage, a small wooden house emerges!

EXT. METOAK HOUSE - NIGHT

Hope rushes to the door, banging desperately.

HOPE

Help! Help! Please, open the door!

No response.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOPE

Please!!

Elizabeth's screams draw nearer, echoing through the forest.

Hope keeps pounding on the door.

Suddenly, the door *flies open!*

METOAK (40'), a Native American woman, armed with a knife, dressed in Puritan attire, grabs Hope and pulls her inside.

INT. METOAK HOUSE - NIGHT

Metoak points the knife at Hope, who raises her hands in surrender.

HOPE

Please... Please help me-

METOAK

Shhhhh.

Metoak places an oil lamp in front of Hope's face, scrutinizing her eyes as if *searching for something*.

Metoak's expression softens.
She lowers the knife and releases Hope.

A monstrous SCREAM from outside. *Elizabeth!*

Hope sobs, Metoak clamps her hand over Hope's mouth, silencing her.

They sit on the floor, their backs against the door.

Metoak shuts off the lamp.

In the darkness, *a shadow crawls outside, beneath the door.*

A *HEAVY BREATHING SOUND.*

Hope looks at Metoak in terror, who listens intently.

SOUNDS of something CLIMBING UP the outside wall.

Hope and Metoak freeze, their eyes fixed on the ceiling as the creature ascends to the roof.

Some *old dust* falls down from above.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The thing moves toward the chimney!

Metoak leaps toward the fireplace, smashing the lamp. Oil spills into the chimney.

She strikes flint, trying to spark a flame.
It doesn't catch!

The monster descends the chimney;
hair tips begin to appear...

In one fleeting spark, like a subliminal frame, a DARK SHADOW WITH RED EYES crawls on the wall behind Hope, unnoticed.

Finally, *the spark catches!* Fire erupts in the chimney.

The monster SHRIEKS and retreats up the chimney.

Its screams fade into the night.

Hope and Metoak collapse against the door.

EXT. BARN - NIGHT

James, followed by Meryl, Isaac and Jeanne approach the entrance.

James glances at the others: *they're frozen in fear.*

He pushes the door...

It opens with a CREAK.

JAMES

It was already open-

James turns to see Meryl Jeanne and Isaac, still frozen.

JAMES

We must get the children! There's
no time to lose!

James hurries inside the barn.

INT. BARN - NIGHT

James enters carrying the oil lamp.

The silence is broken by a faint *sobbing*.

James' steps crack on the bare earth.

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CONTINUED:

He moves towards the sound. Step by step.

The sobbing *intensifies*.

The light reveals *Abigail in the corner*.

Curled up against the wall, rocking back and forth.

Weeping like a wounded animal.

James steps closer.

Step.

By.

Step.

He reaches out, hand trembling, and gently touches her shoulder.

JAMES

Abigail, it's me, Uncle James.
It's all over-

Suddenly, Abigail TURNS!

She's just a normal child, crying, her hair dirty and disheveled.

James hugs her tightly.

He notices her wrists are tied with rope. He quickly unties her, scoops her into his arms and heads out.

He notices a post in the ground. Broken chains hanging from it.

EXT. BARN - NIGHT

James emerges from the barn with Abigail in his arms.

Meryl, Jeanne, and Isaac watch, eyes wide. Meryl rushes forward.

MERYL

Abigail! My child!

James steps back, pulling Abigail away from Meryl.

JAMES

What have you done? How could you
do this to them?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Meryl breaks down.

MERYL

I'm- I'm so sorry...

Jeanne steps in.

JEANNE

(to James)

Doctor Wilbur, you weren't there
that day -- you did not pull up
the remains of that poor child
from the dirt --

JAMES

What are you talking about --

Isaac scans the area.

ISAAC

Where's Elizabeth?

JEANNE

Wasn't she inside?

James shakes his head. He hands Abigail to Meryl.

JAMES

Let's search for her. She can't be
very far.

They head towards Meryl's house.

EXT. THOMPSON HOUSE - NIGHT

Isaac spots Elizabeth collapsed by the door. He rushes to
her, lifting her into his arms.

ISAAC

She's here!

James, Meryl, and Jeanne run to them.

ISAAC

She's hurt- burned.

Meryl hugs the girl in despair.

MERYL

My poor child-

James touches Elizabeth's forehead and wrists.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JAMES

She's in shock, but not in danger.

(a beat)

Now let's get Hope and leave.

Isaac takes Elizabeth into his arms, and they all dash towards the house.

INT. THOMPSON HOUSE - NIGHT

Continuous. The group burst into the house.

JAMES

Just grab the essentials!

He searches for Hope.

JAMES

Hope? Hope!

Frantically, he looks around and notices a large word scrawled on the wall in ash from the fireplace:

BOAT

James understands.

JAMES

We must get to the lake! Hope will be there!

They rush out of the house.

INT. METOAK HOUSE - NIGHT

Metoak and Hope sit before the glowing fireplace.

HOPE

Thank you. You saved me.

Metoak stares into the flames. Lost in thought.

METOAK

(to herself)

No- it cannot be.

The fire flickers, reflecting in Metoak's dark eyes.

Memories resurface. Ones she wishes to forget.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

METOAK
(whispers)
Wintekowa.

Her gaze turns to Hope, filled with dread.

METOAK
You must leave this place
immediately.

HOPE
My father is back at the village-
I must return-

METOAK
Listen to me. By now, they will
all know. The only chance is to
escape.

HOPE
Escape?

METOAK
Whatever chased you before- it is
but a shadow of what is coming.
(a beat)
I know. I have seen it before.
(grabs her hand)
You must flee.

Outside, a haunting bird sings.

Hope glances at the window—a faint blue light seeps in.

It's almost dawn!

HOPE
The boat! I need to reach the lake
before dawn!

She jumps to her feet.

EXT. METOAK HOUSE - NIGHT

Fog. A surreal grey - blue light.

Metoak and Hope stand at the open door.

Metoak points to a nearby path.

METOAK
Follow the path and you'll reach
the lake.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

HOPE

We have a boat -- You could escape
with us.

Metoak looks toward the dark, fog-shrouded forest.

METOAK

Good luck, child.

Hope runs to the path.

SUPER: 10 MINUTES BEFORE DAWN

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Hope runs towards the lake.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

On a nearby path, James carrying Elizabeth, Isaac
carrying Abigail, Jeanne and Meryl rushing towards the
lake.

JAMES

We're almost there!

They almost meet Hope but...

EXT. LAKE - FOREST - NIGHT

Hope is almost at the lake

but...

Something moves behind a tree.

A child hums. Hope is mesmerized.

She walks to the tree.

Step by step...

She's almost there and...

A NATIVE AMERICAN CHILD (10) jumps out from behind the
tree, his eyes too serious for his age.
He stares at Hope.

CHILD

Noonawi.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Hope looks at him, surprised.

HOPE

What?

(a beat)

Are you lost? Where are your
parents?

The child insists:

CHILD

Noonawi!

Hope notices the sky lightening -- it's almost dawn!

HOPE

I'm sorry --

(a beat)

I have to go.

The child bolts away and disappears into the forest.

Hope runs toward the lake...

EXT. LAKE - DAWN

James, still carrying Elizabeth, and Isaac with Abigail,
along with Jeanne and Meryl, reach the shore.

The lake and sky are veiled in thick, grey fog.

The boat is there, floating in the water, and Joseph
waits inside.

JOSEPH

Here!

The group rushes towards the shore.

JAMES

I'm so glad you waited!

Joseph gets off the boat in the low water to reach them,
his eyes widening at the sight of the injured children.

JOSEPH

Oh my God! What happened to them?

ISAAC

There's no time, you must go now!

James looks around in panic.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JAMES
 Wait- where's Hope?
 (to Joseph)
 Did you see my daughter?

JOSEPH
 No, I'm sorry- she hasn't come
 yet.

James despairs, scans around and...

HOPE (O.S.)
 Father!

Hope emerges from the forest, running towards them!
 James' face lights up.

JAMES
 Hope!

The group begins to cheer, *but...*

Joseph shouts:

JOSEPH
 WAIT!

He signals for silence. Everyone freezes.

The *SPLASHING SOUND* of oars breaking through the fog.

Louder.

Closer.

Oh God.

No.

James turns to Hope, eyes wide with terror.
 He mouths silently:

JAMES
RUN!

Hope retreats quickly into the forest.

The fog turns blood red.

Dawn breaks.

SUPER: DAWN

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Through the fog, three ghostly ships emerge on the lake, each filled with ARMED GUARDS, still as demonic spirits.

At the stern of the central ship stands him:

JUDGE VON KRAMER (60), cloaked in black, stone-cold face hidden beneath a wide-brimmed hat.

Next to him stands the **COMMANDER** (40) of the guards, his loyal servant, who has a glimpse of humanity left.

James and Meryl clutch the unconscious children. Exhausted. Terrified.

There is no escape.

The guards descend from the ships and surround the group.

The Judge steps onto the shore, his ferocious, massive **black mastiff dog** at his side.

James stands frozen as the Judge approaches.

JUDGE

Doctor Wilbur. It has been some time.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Continuous.

Hope, hidden behind the tree, watches helplessly.

When she sees the Judge, a wave of fear crashes over her.

FLASHBACK:

A brief, blurred vision.

The Judge stands before Hope.

He holds a lit fire torch.

He looks straight into Hope's eyes.

JUDGE

Witch.

BACK TO PRESENT:

Hope's eyes snap open, filled with tears.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

She grips the branches.

EXT. LAKE - DAY

Continuous.

JUDGE
(to Meryl and the
others)
The family of Reverend Thompson.
Where were you headed, in such
haste?

A silence full of guilt.

The Judge coldly gazes at Elizabeth and Abigail.

Then looks around.

JUDGE
Where's he?

He *knows* something's off.

JUDGE
Where's the Reverend?

No answers.

He gestures to the guards, that quickly grab the group!

COMMANDER
You are under arrest, in the name
of His Honor, Judge Von Kramer.

ISAAC
You can't do this!

Meryl looks at James, searching for help, but James is
paralyzed by fear.

Joseph, the boatman, grabs an oar from the boat and
strikes one of the guards!

JOSEPH
Let them go!

The guards attempt to disarm him.

The Judge raises a hand; the guards release Joseph and
step back.

What is he planning?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Hope watches from behind the trees, trembling.

The Judge whistles.

A brief, **chilling note**.

His dog lunges at Joseph!

Joseph stumbles back, falling into his boat.

The dog leaps into the boat, which drifts into the fog.

JAMES

No!! Joseph-

We don't see what happens, but we HEAR it:

JOSEPH'S SCREAMS. CRUNCHING. BONES BREAKING.

Finally, *silence*.

Red-tinted waves lap at the shore, staining the sand.

The group is shocked.

The Judge looks to the forest, where Hope fled.

He senses something is off.

James watches him in terror.

The Judge takes the path back to the village, the guards harshly push the group, following him.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Hope crouches behind a tree, breathing heavily, eyes wide in shock.

EXT. FOREST PATH - DAY

The group is pushed on the path, trudging in silence under the weight of the impending doom.

Meryl looks desperately at James.

No one dares to speak.

Hope, keeping to the shadows of the forest, follows.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Jeanne notices Hope, but quickly looks away.

The Judge's dog lifts its nose and *sniffs the air*.
Its eyes flick toward Hope's hiding spot.

The Judge turns his head slowly, his gaze on the bushes
where Hope crouches.

His eyes linger for a *moment too long*.

Jeanne exchanges a gaze with Isaac, telling him "*don't
worry*". Then she grabs her belly and moans in pain.

The guards stare at her.

She covers her mouth, holding a gag reflex.

JEANNE

I fear I may retch-

The guard looks at the Judge, who nods.

The guard lets Jeanne pass.

Jeanne stumbles to the side, leans against a tree at the
beginning of the forest. Has gag reflexes.

The guards look away, disgusted.

The Judge holds his dog, which growls in distress.

Isaac exchanges a look with James.

From behind a bush, Hope crawls close to Jeanne.

HOPE

(whispers)

Jeanne --

JEANNE

(whispering)

Listen carefully. Take the horse
from the Reverend's house. Ride
north through the forest and find
my father, William, in the village
beyond. He will save us.

Hope nods in silence.

JEANNE

(whispering)

Remember, when you reach the fork
in the path, do not --

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

GUARD (O.S.)

You there! Return at once!

Hope retreats behind a bush.

The guard grabs Jeanne, pulling her harshly from the tree and pushing her on the ground.

Jeanne cries out, clutching her pregnant belly.

Isaac lunges and *grabs a sword from one of the guards!*

ISAAC

Do not dare lay a hand on my wife!

He swings wildly, the blade cutting through the air.

MERYL

Isaac! No!

JAMES

Stay your hand!

Another guard tackles him to the ground!
The others quickly overpower him, pinning him down.

The Judge observes, unflinching.

Meryl and James rush to help Jeanne get up.

The commander steps forward.

COMMANDER

Tie him up.

The guards tie Isaac.

The Judge looks at the forest, to the tree where Jeanne leaned on.

His eyes narrow in *suspicion*.

His dog *growls*.

The Commander approaches the tree.

He reaches for the branches, pushing them aside --

There's no one.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Hope runs through the trees, breath ragged, tears streaming down her face.

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

Hope races into the village, breathless, and heads toward the Reverend's house.

EXT. THOMPSON HOUSE - DAY

Hope rushes to the side of the house. There's a horse standing calmly.

She walks to the horse, but-

A DELIRIOUS OLD WOMAN from the village, fervent and wild-eyed, blocks her path!

OLD WOMAN

"The most terrible of punishments is reserved for those who in this life have despised the mercy of God, refused His grace..."

Hope tries to push past her, but the old woman grabs her, ranting and pulling at her clothes.

HOPE

No! Please, let me pass!

In distance, the sound of marching GUARDS approaching!

OLD WOMAN

"And by their willful neglect of holy living, have provoked His divine justice."

Hope, in shock, remembers.

HOPE

The Book of Holy Living and Holy Dying --

The sounds of guards gets CLOSER!

Hope pushes the woman aside, leaps onto the horse, and takes off North just as the guards and the judge enters the village from the southern path.

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

Meryl, Jeanne, James carrying Elizabeth, and Isaac carrying Abigail, are marched through the village by the guards, followed by the Judge.

The wooden buildings tower like shadows around them.

The terrified villagers gather in silence, watching with wide, fearful eyes.

COMMANDER

The trial is about to begin by order of His Honor Judge von Kramer! All villagers of Bethlehem are required to attend!

The prisoners are taken to the church.

EXT. CHURCH - DAY

The group reaches the church.

Guards drag the villagers inside.

COMMANDER

(to the guards)
Are all the villagers here?

GUARD 1

A couple fled during the night. There are also rumors of a woman who lives alone in the woods.

COMMANDER

Send out a search party for them.

GUARD 1

At once, Commander.

As Guard 1 leaves, the commander approaches the judge and points at Isaac, Elizabeth, and Abigail.

COMMANDER

What should we do with them, your Honor?

JUDGE

Keep them aside, until they are summoned.

The commander looks around, sees the barn in distance.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

COMMANDER
(to the guards)
Take them to the barn.

The guards separate Isaac and the children from the rest of the group.

MERYL
No! My children!

JAMES
Leave them!

Meryl and James are dragged to the church, as the guards drag Isaac and the children towards the barn.

INT. BARN - DAY

Isaac, bound and furious, is thrown into the dark barn alongside Elizabeth and Abigail.

The girls, who are awakening, sob in distress.

The doors slam shut, the sound of chains locking them inside.

Isaac inhales, his face contorting in horror: *what is this foul, hellish stench?*

He looks around, but the place is too dark to see.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

Meryl, James, and Jeanne are pushed inside and forced to sit on the benches by the guards.

The other villagers sit around.

SOBS, CRIES, MUMBLES and WHISPERS.

Everyone's eyes are fixed on *the burnt, still-smoldering corpse of the Reverend*, laid out on the altar.

Jeanne and other villagers cover their noses, fighting the urge to vomit.

JAMES
(whispers)
Was it Hope following us through the woods? What did you say to her?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JEANNE

(whispers)

I hold her to take a horse and
ride to my village, beyond the
woods, to seek aid -- my father --

COMMANDER

(to everyone)

Silence! His Honor is here!

The church door *creaks* open.

Heavy silence weighs down on the room.

The Judge strides in last, a cold aura of menace
surrounding him.

Two guards close the doors behind him.

The Judge walks to the altar, as the crowd trembles in
terror.

He coldly observes the corpse.

JUDGE

Evil has indeed descended upon
Bethlehem.

He slowly turns around, facing the crowd.

His face a *mask of hatred*.

JUDGE

And I will not rest until every
last trace of it has been
eradicated.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Hope rides desperately through the dark forest.

She reaches a fork in the path and stops the horse.

Where to go?

One leads to the river, the other deeper into the forest.

The trees close in, shadows stretching ominously.

From the underbrush emerges the same child she spotted by
the lake!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CHILD

Noonawi!

Hope pulls the reins, startled.

HOPE

You- again?

(a beat)

Do you need help?

CHILD

(upset)

Noonawi!

HOPE

I- I don't understand, I'm sorry!

He rushes back into the forest.

HOPE

Wait!

She hesitates, considers chasing him.

She gets back to her senses. She has a mission!

Glances between the two paths.

The path to the deeper forest is *darker*.

She pushes the horse towards the river side.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

The Judge stands still as stone.

The burnt body of the Reverend on the altar behind him.

JUDGE

Jeremiah Thompson was a loyal
servant of the Almighty Lord.

The Judge scans the crowd with his cold stare.

JUDGE

Who *dared* doing this- to a holy
man?

Everyone stay silent, terrified.

The Judge walks through the crowd.

Step by step.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The wooden floor CREAKING painfully under his boots.

Whoever he looks at, gazes down in fear.

Men, women, elderly.

The delirious old woman who screamed at Hope sits there as well. She looks down as she mumbles to herself.

OLD WOMAN

(mumbles)

*"The most terrible of punishments
is reserved for those who in this
life have despised the mercy of
God, refused His grace--"*

The Judge looks at her.

OLD WOMAN

(mumbles)

*"-and by their willful neglect of
holy living, have provoked His
divine justice."*

JUDGE

What are you saying, woman?

The old woman jumps up.

This time, she *screams* to the crowd.

OLD WOMAN

*"The most terrible of punishments
is reserved for those who in this
life have despised the mercy of
God, refused His grace--"*

The villagers panics. Women burst in tears.

The Judge is intrigued by the reactions.

James and Jeanne exchange a gaze: *what is happening?*

OLD WOMAN

*"-and by their willful neglect of
holy living, have provoked His
divine justice."*

The old woman collapses back onto her sit.

A MAN screams.

MAN

We must repent for our sin!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

A WOMAN shushes him.

WOMAN

Shut your mouth, you fool!

The crowd erupts in chaos.

SCREAMS, SOBS, HYSTERIA.

The judge carefully observes the scene.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Hope rides on the horse up the path along the frozen river, the wind biting at her face.

Ahead, she spots the Benjamins, who fled the village the night prior.

The woman sits on the floor. She seems very sick. The man holds a lit torch, and turns, panicking.

He sees Hope.

BENJAMIN

Stop! Please stop! We need help!

Hope stops by them.

HOPE

Are you escaping Bethlehem? I'm sorry, I must rush to the next village --

His eyes flicker to Hope's horse. Desperation takes over. He lunges at her, grabbing the reins!

BENJAMIN

The horse -- give it to me!

He scares Hope with the lit torch, and as the flames get dangerously close to her face, she freezes, and-

FLASHBACK BEGINS

A flash of a woman engulfed in flames, bound to a pyre.

A little HOPE (10) is screaming.

LITTLE HOPE

Mother! Mother!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The woman disappears into the flames.

The triumphant face of Judge Von Kramer fills the full vision horizon, in front of the flames.

FLASHBACK ENDS

The man pulls Hope down the horse, and she crashes to the ground.

She's in total shock, the fire fully filling her vision.

HOPE

No -- no!

She crawls up and runs into the forest, panicking.

EXT. FOREST PATH - DAY

Hope stumbles crying through the woods.

HOPE

Mother-

FLASHBACK STARTS

A quick montage:

Hope's mother smiles at her.

Little Hope and her mother collect herbs in the forest.

Two guards grab her mother and take her away.

Judge Von Kramer smiles evilly.

Fire. Hope's mother engulfed by fire.

Fire.

FLASHBACK ENDS

Suddenly, two hands reach out of the darkness!

They grab Hope and pull her into the underbrush.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

Calm and silence are back.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Some women still weeps silently.

The Judge looks at the man who spoke.

JUDGE

Which sin were you referring to?

The man looks around, desperate.

JUDGE

I will not ask *again*.

MAN

I- I- I meant --

Meryl stands up.

MERYL

The Reverend took his own life.

The judge and every head turns to her.

MERYL

It is mortal sin. We, as his community, we share in this guilt.

The judge walks to Meryl.

JUDGE

And yet, you were fleeing without offering him a proper burial.

Meryl shakes in fear.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

In the dense underbrush, Hope sits with Metoak. It's her, who saved Hope, again.

METOAK

You must be careful, there are guards everywhere.

Hope shakes her head, her voice trembling.

HOPE

The judge arrested my family. I must reach the village beyond the forest, and ask for help.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

METOAK

Child, without a horse it will
take you a full day. There's not
enough time.

Hope buries her head into her own hands, in desperation.

HOPE

I must save them. They -- put
their trust in me.

Metoak looks at her, sorrow in her eyes.

METOAK

It's too late to save them.
(a beat)
He's here.

HOPE

The Judge... I know. He's --

METOAK

No. Something far worse.

Metoak takes a deep breath.

METOAK

Wintekowa. *The one who devours
humanity.*

HOPE

Win - tekowa?

METOAK

He is known by many names, but
Wintekowa is the oldest: a word
thousands of years old. They say
it once meant 'owl'.

(a beat)

He comes with the first snow.

HOPE

How do you know all of this?

METOAK

I come from the Abenaki nation.
For generations, my people have
told tales of a dark force -- one
that ensnares men and drives them
to madness.

HOPE

Maybe it's just a legend --

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Metoak's voice drops, filled with fear and old memories.

METOAK

I know the Wintekowa -- because
once I met him.

FLASHBACK START

Forest. After a snowstorm.

*On the snow covered floor, the vague scattered remains of
few Abenaki tepee tents.*

METOAK (V.O.)

*I was a little child. During a
snowstorm, the Wintekowa destroyed
my village.*

*Between the ruins, a wooden trunk opens, and a YOUNG
METOAK emerges, ruffled, terrified.*

METOAK (V.O.)

*My parents hid me in a trunk, and
when I came out, everyone was
dead.*

Young Metoak walks around: there's blood everywhere.

METOAK (V.O.)

The snow was red with their blood.

Young Metoak falls on her knees.

FLASHBACK ENDS

Metoak gazes into distance.

HOPE

I am sorry.

METOAK

I walked in the snow for hours,
until I arrived in Bethlehem. They
offered me shelter -- but they
pitied me, treated me like some
unfortunate beast. As soon as I
was old enough, I left to live on
my own.

(a beat)

I've been alone ever since.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

HOPE

Why didn't you look for your people?

METOAK

Because I felt guilty.

HOPE

GUILTY -- because you survived.

Metoak nods.

HOPE

I understand. My mother passed, and since then, I feel unworthy of living.

METOAK

Do not speak that way. Your mother would want you to live -- for her sake as well.

HOPE

So would your parents. And your people.

They exchange a deep, touching gaze.

Two souls connecting on the verge of the Apocalypse.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

Meryl sits on a chair in front of the altar, her hands tied to the armrests.

She's under interrogation.

All the villagers, James, and Jeanne, observe in terror.

The judge steps closer, towering over Meryl.

His eyes fix on her.

A predator cornering its prey.

JUDGE

In his letter, the Reverend wrote about the Harvest Celebration.

He gets closer.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JUDGE

About the *accident* involving your daughters.

She avoids his piercing gaze.

JUDGE

An accident so *wicked* that it caused the Reverend to question his bond with the Almighty Lord.

The judge grabs Meryl's chin forcing her to look at him.

JUDGE

And now you will tell me everything about it.

She sobs.

But... keeps silent.

His fierce expression *softens*.

JUDGE

(gently)
You are a *godly* woman, are you not?

He lets go of her. Looks at her patiently.

JUDGE

I trust you will honor the Lord by revealing the truth.

Meryl tries to collect herself.

MERYL

(sobbing)
My children -- they are innocent.

James closes his eyes. He knows what's coming. Jeanne looks at him confused.

The judge calmly observes Meryl.

His hand reaches for a **dagger** hidden under his cloak.

Quick as a lightning, *he plunges the blade through Meryl's hand*, pinning it to the armrest of the chair!

Meryl screams in agony.

The crowd cries and murmurs.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

James jumps up, a guard harshly pushes him back down.

JAMES

No! Please!

The Judge leans down.

JUDGE

(to Meryl)

Did your daughters conspire with the Devil? Did they meet with him in the woods?

MERYL

(in pain)

No! No they did not --

Jeanne turns to James.

JEANNE

We must do something!

JAMES

You don't understand, he --

The Judge grips the dagger, twisting it slowly.

Meryl cries out again.

INT. BARN - DAY

Isaac sits on the floor. Bound, exhausted, scared.

Elizabeth and Abigail sit nearby, bound, sobbing, holding onto each other. For the first time, we see the girls fully awake and conscious.

ABIGAIL

(to Isaac)

Brother -- I'm cold -- and I'm so hungry...

Isaac, heartbroken, forces a reassuring smile.

ISAAC

We will get out of here, I promise.

A moment of silence.

ABIGAIL

Are we -- are we monsters?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ISAAC

No! Don't ever speak such foolishness!

ELIZABETH

We heard what the villagers say --- about us.

ISAAC

Don't listen to them, they --

ELIZABETH

Why is father and everyone so upset with us?

Abigail sobs. Elizabeth clutches her tightly.

Isaac can't reply.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Metoak holds Hope goodbye.

METOAK

So you will not come with me? I'm leaving, and I know a hidden path.

HOPE

I cannot. I must return to Bethlehem and find a way to help my family.

Metoak nods.

METOAK

There's one last thing you should know about the Wintekowa --

(a beat)

He gets you when you're alone.

HOPE

Thank you. I will remember.

(a beat)

May I know your name?

Metoak smiles.

METOAK

Metoak. It means oak.

HOPE

That's beautiful. My name is Hope.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

METOAK

I'm glad I've met you, Hope. May
the Great Spirit protect you.

Metoak turns to leave, but Hope remembers something --

HOPE

Do you know what "Noonawi" means?

METOAK

Noonawi- it's the language of my
people. It means "follow me."

(a beat)

Where did you hear it?

**Before Hope can answer, two GUARDS burst from the trees,
grabbing them both!**

Hope struggles, managing to slip free, but she tumbles
down a steep embankment.

EXT. RIVERSIDE - DAY

Hope stumbles next to the river, gets up, and sees one
guard running down the slip, chasing her!

GUARD

You! Come here!

She's trapped! There's only a direction where she can go:
on the frozen river.

The surface, frozen, **CREAKS** creepily.

She looks at it in horror.

GUARD (O.S.)

(closer)

You are under arrest!

Hope takes a careful step on the frozen surface.

It creaks horribly -- but it holds!

Hope takes another step, and another...

*She doesn't notice a huge CRACK expanding from under her
feet.*

The guard stumbles on the river side, runs to the shore,
and stops angrily.

Hope turns around, she's now at the middle of the river.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The guard is massive, wearing a heavy armor. He puts a foot on the frozen surface, but it breaks immediately.

Hope's expression lightens: she can do it!

But under her, unnoticed...

the crack gets BIGGER, and WIDER.

She walks slowly, is almost on the other side, but --

A SUDDEN, NIGHTMARISH VISION:

Her mother's corpse, burnt, with open arms, awaits her on the other side!

Hope stops walking, shocked --

The ice cracks open!!!

Hope falls into the river and is dragged away by the current, under the ice.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

Meryl sits pale and trembling, her hand pinned to the armrest by the Judge's dagger.

Blood pools around her fingers.

JUDGE

If you won't speak, I'll hear the
true from the culprits themselves.
(to the guards)
Bring me the children.

Two guards exit the church.

Meryl lifts her head, panicking.

INT. BARN - DAY

The door creaks open as the two guards step inside.

They cover their mouths in disgust.

GUARD

What in the Hell is this --

Their torches reveal Elizabeth and Abigail huddled in the corner. Nearby, there's Isaac.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The guards approach, grabbing the girls roughly.

ISAAC

No! Don't you dare touching them!

Isaac struggles against his bonds.

As the guards drag his sisters away, something wet drips onto his face. He looks up, squinting in the dim light.

There, wedged between the beams of the ceiling, is the **gutted carcass of a cow**, dangling above him!!

INT. CHURCH - DAY

The guards drag Elizabeth and Abigail inside the church.

Meryl sobs in the corner, her hand still pinned to the chair.

ELIZABETH

Mother!

She sees her children and screams.

MERYL

Don't look at the altar! Don't look!

But it's too late. The girls look at their father's burnt body on the altar. They burst in tears.

The guards force them to sit in front of the Judge.

JUDGE

(to the girls)

Do you know why you are here?

The girls shake their heads, sobbing.

ELIZABETH

No -- your honor.

JUDGE

It is because of what you did at the Harvest Celebration.

ELIZABETH

We -- we don't remember.

The Judge leans down to them.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JUDGE

Let's see if I can help you
remember.

INT. BARN - DAY

Isaac struggles to free himself from his bonds, his wrists raw and bloody.

In the darkness, a chilling sound of GROWLING.

The Judge's dog slinks towards Isaac!

ISAAC

No! Stay back!

The dog gets closer.

Closer.

His bare, sharp teeth showing in his foaming mouth.

Isaac freezes as the dog sniffs him.

It growls, ready to strike!

Suddenly, the dog stops.

It *whimpers*, looking past Isaac **into the shadows.**

Then backs away, terrified, and darts out of the barn.

Isaac panics, glances around frantically.

The shadows seem to shift...

Something is there, moving in the dark.

EXT. FOREST RIVERBANK - DAY

Hope's eyes open.

She coughs violently, water pouring from her mouth.

Her soaked wet body is wracked with shivers.

Her eyes widen as she sees again the forest child standing next to her, his dark eyes fixed on her.

HOPE

(breathless)

You --

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

CHILD
(urgently)
Noonawi!

She pushes herself up, disoriented. She's on the muddy riverbank.

She glances at the river, seeing patches of ice floating on the surface. She has been carried downstream.

HOPE
Where are we --

Hope doubles over, coughs up more water.

HOPE
Bethlehem -- I must go back to
Bethlehem.

The child bends towards her. He's extremely worried.

CHILD
Noonawi.
(he points in
distance)
Bethlehem.

HOPE
What --
(she remembers)
Follow me.
(a beat)
You want me to follow you.

She drags herself to her feet. She points at herself, then at the child.

HOPE
I will follow you. *Noonawi.*
Bethlehem.

The child expression lightens up. He nods. Turns and rushes into the forest, waving for her to follow.

Hope, still catching her breath, stumbles after him.

The wind picks up. She shivers as she notices threatening clouds darkening overhead.

A storm is coming.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Hope and the child run through the woods.

The wind HOWLS and WHIPS through the bare branches above.

They come to a stop.

A large, dead tree stands in the clearing, its twisted branches reaching toward the darkening sky.

A *creaking lightning* shines upon the hellish scene:

Hanging from the branches are *the lifeless bodies of Benjamin and his wife*, the ones who stole the horse.

Faces contorted in terror, bodies swaying in the wind.

Hope covers her mouth, stifling a scream.

The child tugs at her hand, pulling her away.

CHILD

Noonawi!

He pulls her toward the edge of the clearing.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

Elizabeth and Abigail sob quietly as the judge interrogates them.

JUDGE

So you don't remember murdering that child? You don't remember devouring his little body, to satisfy the orders of your filthy lord, the Devil?

ELIZABETH

No --

ABIGAIL

No, no, no!

JUDGE

Tell the truth. Do you want to burn in hell, forever?

James can't resist anymore, and jumps up.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JAMES

Let them go! Can't you see,
they're just terrified children!

JEANNE

James! No!

The guards promptly push him back down.

The Judge look at him.

JUDGE

(satisfied)

It seems the Devil's foul seed has
crept into every womb of your
family, Doctor Wilbur.

James shakes in anger.

JUDGE

I should have known better and put
an end to you all back then. It
was a grave mistake to burn only
that Devil's whore, your wife.

James leaps through the guard and runs to the Judge,
ready to strike him!

Other guards stop him and take him on his knees.

James lifts his chin, fire in his eyes.

JAMES

(to the judge)

You are nothing but a *fool*. You
and your God -- this childish,
imaginary protector of yours. How
pathetic it is that you cannot
face the truth: you are utterly
alone. No one shall save you, and
when death comes, cause it will
come for you as well, there will
be nothing -- no angels to greet
you, no heavenly rewards, only...
void. And in the name of this --
nothingness, you commit murder,
inflict torture, and terrorize the
innocent.

(a beat)

I do pity you.

(a beat)

And if, by some providence, there
exists a God above, He would
surely *despise* you.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

A *surreal* silence fills the church.

No one dares to breathe.

James stands in shock of what he dared to say.

The Judge's expression *slightly* tenses.

He looks at the Commander.

JUDGE

Bury him.
(a beat)
Alive.

The guards drag James away.

JAMES

What? No!

JUDGE

Farewell doctor.

Panic fills the room, the crowd screams and cries.

MERYL

No! Please, no!

JEANNE

Doctor Wilbur!

The guards drag James away, the door close.

The Judge walks back to Elizabeth and Abigail.

JUDGE

You were speaking of the Harvest
Celebration. What is the last
thing you recall before that?

ABIGAIL

I -- I remember father reading us
a book.

JUDGE

Which book?

ELIZABETH

The Book of Holy Living and Holy
Dying --

At the mention of the book, nervous whispers and murmurs
from the crowd.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

JUDGE

Tell me more about it.

ELIZABETH

It was father's favorite --

ABIGAIL

Yes -- he used to read it all the time **when we were in the caves last winter** --

Meryl lifts her head.

MERYL

(whispers)

No, no --

JUDGE

You were -- *in the caves*?

A grim silence. The villagers froze.

ELIZABETH

Yes your honor. All the village was there.

The judge takes a step forward.

JUDGE

What were you doing --

The doors of the church burst open as two GUARDS rush in, dragging Metoak behind them!

She stumbles, but her gaze remains defiant.

GUARD #1

We found her in the woods, your Honor!

The crowd gasps.

The guards drag Metoak in front of the judge.

JUDGE

Who is this?

The villagers scream.

WOMAN

She's the savage witch who lives in the forest!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

OLD MAN

Aye, I recall her! She was raised
in Bethlehem after her village was
laid to ruin, yet she was so
ungrateful that she departed to
practice her wicked sorceries!

The Judge's eyes sparkle.

JUDGE

(to Elizabeth and
Abigail)

Have you ever encountered this
woman?

Elizabeth and Abigail glance at Metoak and shake their
heads.

ELIZABETH

No -- I don't remember ever
meeting her.

The Judge walks to Meryl.

JUDGE

Did this woman ever come near your
daughters?

Meryl looks at Metoak. *Her heart sinks.*

She knows the answer is **NO**.

But...

JUDGE

Perhaps your daughters are indeed
innocent -- perhaps this witch is
to blame for all.

The crowd encourages Meryl, glad to have found an enemy
outside of the village.

WOMAN

Aye, I have seen the witch lurking
near the village!

MAN 2

She sought to corrupt the
children, without a doubt!

Meryl's lips tremble, her face covered in tears.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (5)

JUDGE

Or perhaps that is not the case,
and your daughters are the sole
perpetrators of this heinous
murder, and --

MERYL

YES!

The judge leans in, listening intently.

JUDGE

Yes -- what?

MERYL

My daughters are innocent.

(a beat)

I have seen that woman -- the
witch. She came to my door each
night, casting her sorceries to
corrupt my children.

Metook's eyes contract in pain.

The crowd's murmur swells into a roar, and erupts in a
cacophony of shouts and curses.

VILLAGERS

Witch! Witch! It's her! She's the
one! Burn her!

VILLAGER #2

It's her doing! She's the witch!
She's cursed the children!

The Judge observes, satisfied.

Meryl is frozen in shame for the lie she told to save her
children.

Jeanne looks at Meryl in horror: she knows she lied.

VILLAGERS

(shouting,
overlapping)

Burn her! Burn the witch! Kill
her!

The Judge raises his hand.

The crowd goes silent.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (6)

JUDGE

I have seen enough.

(points to Metoak)

It is she who has brought this
curse upon your village. The
children are but puppets to her
devilry.

The crowd murmurs in agreement.

JUDGE

(to the guards)

Prepare the fire.

The guards drag Metoak toward the door, and the crowd
follows, shouting and jeering.

EXT. VILLAGE - SUNSET

Hope and the child rush sneakily into the village, the
child guides Hope towards a graveyard.

HOPE

Where are we going -- I need to
reach my family!

The child looks at her with begging eyes.

She follows him.

EXT. GRAVEYARD - SUNSET

A small overgrown graveyard.

The child leads Hope to a grave marked by a humble,
nameless cross.

The child points there. Signs to dig.

Hope understands, start digging.

Soon she finds *human bones*. She's horrified.

The child points at something. Hope sees a blue
reflection, and reaches with her hand.

A rope necklace with a turquoise gem stone.

The child gestures to her to wear it.

HOPE

You want me to wear it?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He repeats the gesture.

She wears the necklace, and --

Are those **MUFFLED SCREAMS?** Coming from a grave nearby?

Hope approaches carefully, puts her ear close to the soil.

JAMES (O.S.)
(muffled)
Help! Help --

Hope freezes.

HOPE
Father -- ?

Hope kneels. Listens carefully. Again.

JAMES (O.S.)
(weaker)
Help --

Hope sobs in shock, her body trembling.

HOPE
Father!

She digs like a madman, her fingers claws at the dirt.
Her nails break, her hands bleeding.
She doesn't stop.

She notices a nearby shovel, grabs it and digs furiously.
The dirt flies as she works, her breaths ragged and desperate.

HOPE
Father! I'm here --

Finally, the shovel strikes something solid. *The coffin.*

She drops to her knees, throwing the dirt aside with her hands. She uncovers the lid of the coffin and presses her ear to it, listening.

No sounds anymore.

HOPE
No -- no, no no, no...

Hope grabs the shovel and jams it under the coffin lid, prying it open. The wood splinters, and she pulls it up, her hands shaking.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

HOPE

(crying)

Please, father, hold on, please...

She finally wrenches the lid open.

James lies inside. Still, pale, drenched in sweat.

Is he alive?

Hope grabs his shoulder.

HOPE

Father!

He takes a gasping breath, his eyes fluttering open.

JAMES

...Hope?

Hope lets out a sob and throws her arms around him.

HOPE

I thought I lost you! I failed
you! Forgive me --

James wraps his arms around her, his strength slowly
returning as he holds her tightly.

JAMES

You didn't failed me. You saved
me, my brave, brave child.

They cling to each other, trembling from the cold and the
terror endured.

HOPE

Who did this to you?

JAMES

The judge. I attacked him. I -- I
never forgave him for what he did
to your mother, and to us.

(a beat)

What happened to you?

HOPE

I got attacked in the forest.

(a beat)

A woman saved me -- but the guards
found us, they captured her, and I
fell in the river --

(terrified)

I was sure I would die.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

James holds her tightly.

JAMES

I am deeply grateful you found
your way back.

Hope remembers the child!

HOPE

It was him -- he helped me, he --

She turns around: *the child is gone.*

JAMES

The judge -- we must stop him!

They rush away from the graveyard.

EXT. VILLAGE - SQUARE - NIGHT

Nearby the church, the guards keep Metoak to her knees,
as they finish building the pyre.

The villagers press forward, faces contorted in a mix of
fear and triumph.

VILLAGER #3

Burn the witch! Send her back to
Hell!

Metoak is silent, motionless.

IN THE CROWD:

Jeanne stands next to Meryl, who has a blood-stained
piece of cloth around her hand, and holds Elizabeth and
Abigail.

Meryl is silent, her face a mask of guilt and pain.
Jeanne doesn't dare to speak.

The Judge walks to Metoak, his voice a *venomous hiss*.

JUDGE

You shall soon return to your
master, witch.

Metoak meets his gaze, her dark eyes pure as snow.

The Judge steps back, unable to hold her gaze.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JUDGE
(angry to his guards)
The pyre!

COMMANDER
Is ready, your Honor.

JUDGE
Let the fire cleanse our land of
her wickedness.

The guards lift Metoak and drag her towards the pyre, as the roar of the crowd builds up.

Hope and James arrive running, no one notices them in the chaos of the screaming crowd.

Hope catches a glimpse of the guards dragging Metoak toward the pyre.

HOPE
(to James)
That's her! That's the woman who
saved me!

She tries to fight her way through, but the crowd shove her back. Hope struggles, tears streaming down her face.

VILLAGERS
Burn the witch!

James holds Hope back.

HOPE
She's not a witch! Please, stop!

JAMES
We can't do anything, Hope.

He's right.

It's too late.

Hope buries her face in his chest as Metoak is dragged and tied onto the pyre.

The Judge grabs a lit torch, the flames creepily reflecting on his face.

JUDGE
(to everyone)
The Devil's hand has been
revealed, and his servant shall
now face the fires of God's wrath.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

The crowd cheers, their anger and fear peaking.

Meryl sobs, unable to lift her gaze. Jeanne holds her and the children.

The Judge walks in front of the pyre.

Looks at Metoak, triumphant.

JUDGE

May the light of the Lord banish
this darkness -- forever!

He thrusts the torch into the pyre.

Flames leap upward, crackling around Metoak as they rise.

The crowd screams in angry triumph.

Hope watches, sobbing, as Metoak's eyes lock with hers across the crowd.

FLASHBACK BEGINS

Little Hope and her mother.

Little Hope's mother engulfed in flames.

The Judge smiling.

JUDGE

Witch.

FLASHBACK ENDS

HOPE

NO! No!

James holds Hope back, forces her to turn.

JAMES

Enough, Hope, that's enough --

The flames have swollen Metoak. *She is gone.*

The crowd cheers and rejoices.

JAMES

It is over --

Hope looks behind James, at the pyre.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

HOPE

Wait -- father --

The Judge lifts his hands.

The crowd goes *silent*.

The flames from Metoak's pyre burn hotter, casting an eerie glow across the square.

The Judge gestures something to the guards, and --

THE GUARDS BRING FORWARD TWO MORE WOODEN STAKES!!

The crowd gasps, confused murmurs rippling through them.

In the back, Hope and James watch in disbelief.

HOPE

What is he --

JAMES

Oh no --

The guards seize Elizabeth and Abigail from Meryl's arms!

The girls cry in terror.

JUDGE VON KRAMER

(to everyone)

The Devil's venom has seeped too deeply. These children have been corrupted by the witch.

(a beat)

Only our Lord Almighty can save them -- in Heaven!

MERYL, horrified, screams.

MERYL

No! Spare them!

(to the judge)

Please, take me! Take me instead --

IN THE CROWD:

Villagers murmur in confusion, *shock replaced their fury*.

The guards move quickly, binding the girls to the stakes.

Hope, James, and some of the villagers clash against the guards, protesting.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

VILLAGER

Let the children go!

VILLAGER 3

The witch was the culprit!

The guards harshly push the villagers back. The other guards finish tying down Elizabeth and Abigail on the pyre.

The Judge gets closer to the girls, gently strokes their cheeks.

His eyes, filled with tears, shine in emotion.

JUDGE

(to the girls)

I have sworn to save your innocent souls.

He steps back and takes a lit torch.

JUDGE

(ecstatic)

And this -- is the only way.

Elizabeth and Abigail scream.

HOPE

No!

The Judge throws the torch onto the girls pyre!!

The flames climb swiftly.

The girls' SCREAMS fill the night.

ELIZABETH

Mother! Help us!

ABIGAIL

It hurts! It hurts!

Meryl struggles against the guards, her cries desperate.

IN THE CROWD:

The villagers push forward, shouting.

VILLAGER #1

They're just children!

VILLAGER #2

Stop this madness!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (5)

Hope fights through the crowd, reaching the front.

HOPE
Elizabeth! Abigail!

The girls' SCREAMS FADE into the night.

And -- *They don't scream anymore.*

From the pyre, **only the crackling sounds of the burning fire.**

The crowd violently clashes against the guards! The guards pull out their swords, facing the rebellious.

James pulls HOPE back as the fight surges.

The guards form a tight circle around the pyres.

Jeanne drags away Meryl, both are in shock.

JEANNE
Oh God, Oh god --
Isaac -- we must free Isaac!
Meryl, we must --

Jeanne tries to pull her, but Meryl is unresponsive.

JEANNE
Please, hold on! I'll get your
son. We must leave!

Jeanne leaves Meryl and rushes towards the barn, taking advantage of the chaos.

In distance from the crowd, Hope is held back by James.

HOPE
We must save them! We --

Hope burst into tears.

JAMES
Hope -- we --

HOPE
You lied! You said this time was
different. You said --

James holds her tight. He's a broken man.

JAMES
My poor child. Forgive me, it's
all my fault, I --

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (6)

They hold each other desperately.

INT. BARN - NIGHT

Jeanne stumbles inside, gasping.

Isaac is on the floor, still bound in chains, his wrists raw and bloodied from his attempts to free himself. His face is streaked with tears.

Jeanne rushes to him.

JEANNE

My love!

Isaac looks at her, helpless and broken.

ISAAC

You were right -- we should have gone to your village, take everyone there -- now is too late.

Jeanne holds him tightly. Isaac collapses into her embrace.

JEANNE

Your -- your sisters --

ISAAC

I know.

JEANNE

How?

ISAAC

I heard everything, the screams --

Silence.

JEANNE

I'll take you out of here.

Jeanne searches frantically around the barn.

She spots an axe lying in the corner, and with one swift motion, she strikes the chains, freeing Isaac!

But... **she stumbles, clutching her pregnant belly.** She gasps, her face tightening in pain.

ISAAC

Jeanne -- what's wrong?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Jeanne looks down: water and blood stains her skirt.

JEANNE

No, no -- it's too early...

Isaac rushes to her side, lifts her to her feet.

ISAAC

We must leave!

They push open the barn doors, and step outside into the snowstorm.

EXT. BARN - NIGHT

Jeanne leans on Isaac as they stagger out of the barn.

They spot James, and Hope approaching.

ISAAC

Uncle! Cousin!

HOPE

(to Jeanne)

I'm sorry, I could not reach your father --

Jeanne smiles at Hope.

JEANNE

I am glad to see you alive and well, Hope.

(to James)

Doctor, how did you --

JAMES

(points Hope)

She saved me --

ISAAC

Uncle, we need help, our child --

James looks at Jeanne. The blood on her skirt.

JAMES

We need to find a safe place.

(looks around)

Where's Meryl?

JEANNE

She stayed by the pyre.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ISAAC

I can go alone to take her --

HOPE

No!

Everyone look at her.

Hope remembers Metoak's words.

METOAK (V.O.)

He gets you when you are alone.

HOPE

Please. We must stay together!
We'll get aunt, and leave
together.

JEANNE

Yes -- I agree.
(to Isaac)
I don't want to be parted from
you, ever again.

Isaac grabs her hands.

JAMES

And we also needs lamps for the
way!

The group moves.

EXT. VILLAGE - SQUARE - NIGHT

The flames leap higher, smoke filling the air.

The children are gone, swollen by that inferno.

The commander looks disturbed by the sight of the
children burning pyres. He casts his gaze downward,
silent.

The crowd protests and screams against the guards, who
hold them back.

Taking advantage of the chaos and the darkness, James,
Hope, Jeanne and Isaac approach Meryl, collapsed away
from the crowd.

JAMES

Sister, we must go --

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Meanwhile, Hope and Jeanne quietly grab two oil lamps left by some villagers.

The Judge watches from behind the wall of guards.

JUDGE
(to the Commander)
Our mission is accomplished. Let us go.

The Judge turns, his cloak swirling behind him as he strides away, the guards closing in around him.

Suddenly, the judge **stops**.

His head lifts, sensing *something ominous in the air*.

A sudden *GUST OF WIND*.

And... a single snowflake falls from the sky.

It slowly drifts down, eventually landing on the brim of the Judge's black hat.

The Judge watches the snowflake. He feels the tension in the air.

More SNOWFLAKES begin to fall, swirling around the crowd.

Silence fall.

The crowd stops pushing.

People begin to look around, confused.

James and Isaac gently lift Meryl.

ISAAC
Mother --

Meryl looks at Isaac, her eyes empty.

Hope feels *something is off*, as the snow begins to fall.

Then... she remembers Metoak's words!

METOAK (V.O.)
He comes with the first snow.

HOPE
The snow... the first snow!

Hope turns to James, grabs his arm.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

HOPE

Father, we must leave, NOW!

The snow is falling faster now, heavier.

The guards shift uneasily as the CROWD grows eerily silent. All eyes are on the snow, which is now falling heavily, covering the ground.

The GUARDS hold their positions, but even they seem unsure, exchanging nervous glances.

The Judge observes, emotionless.

Behind them, the FLAMES from the pyres flicker, beginning to fade.

A WOMAN in the crowd starts to cough.

Softly at first, then more violently.

Then, a MAN coughs too, his body wracked with spasms.

One by one, all villagers in the crowd begin to collapse, shaking uncontrollably.

They writhe on the ground in agony, *their limbs twitching and contorting as if gripped by an unseen force.*

JAMES

What is happening?

The guards, still holding their positions, glance around in horror.

JUDGE

What hellish trick is this?

COMMANDER

Your honor, we should leave at once --

The bodies of the villagers stop moving, finally lying still in the snow

Dead.

GUARD 1

What happened?

GUARD 2

Are they -- dead?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

Subtly, the fingers of the first woman who coughed and fell...

BEGIN TO TWITCH!

JUDGE

We can leave, at last.

And... she thrusts her dead body upwards!

Her eyes snap open – blood-red, glowing with an unnatural fire. She emits a guttural growl, inhuman and terrifying.

She launches herself like an animal against the closest guard! She grabs his neck, biting into his flesh. The guard screams in horror as blood splatters onto the snow.

Hope's eyes widen in fear.

HOPE

Father...

JAMES

We must leave!

The commander steps forward, drawing his sword.

COMMANDER

(to the others)

Hold the line!

In the background, James grabs Jeanne, Meryl and Hope, pulling them away.

The GUARDS retreat slowly. They look around, bewildered.

The commander rushes to protect the Judge, sword in hand.

The possessed woman clings to the guard like a wild animal, her teeth tearing at his throat.

The guards carefully surround her, sword in hand, but...

All around them, **all the dead begin to rise!**

Their eyes glowing the same fiery red.

They attack the guards with terrifying speed and strength! The commander fights them back to protect the Judge.

The guards attempt to defend themselves with swords, but even when wounded, the possessed villagers seem unstoppable.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

The commander pushes the Judge towards the church.

COMMANDER
We must shelter inside!

A short distance away, James, Hope, Jeanne and Meryl are surrounded by the hungry dead as well, who GRUNT and SNAP their jaws!

But -- **the dead don't attack them.**
They stand still, their glowing red eyes fixed on the group.

JAMES
They don't -- they don't attack us
--

JEANNE
Why?

Hope takes a step, and the necklace gave her by the child slides out of her shirt.

The turquoise stone -- it is slightly *glowing*.

Hope grabs it.

HOPE
It is him --

James looks at her.

JAMES
Hope...

HOPE
(whispers)
Please be silent, and stay close
to me.

James, Jeanne and Meryl follow Hope, as she makes way through the dead, who looks at them without attacking.

INT. CHURCH - NIGHT

The commander shuts close the doors. The Judge stands nearby.

Other guards BANG outside the door.

GUARD (O.S.)
(from behind the
door)
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

GUARD (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Open the door! For the love of
God, open the door!!

GUARD 2 (O.S.)

(from behind the
door)

Help! Help!!

The screams turn into SCREECHES, and blood oozes from
beneath the door.

The commander is pale, panic in his eyes.

COMMANDER

(whispers)

Lord Almighty, please protect us.

(a beat)

Your Honor, we must make for the
boat and flee this cursed place.

JUDGE

This is the handwork of the Devil!
There must be more witches among
us!

Distracted by the outside chaos, the two don't notice,
that --

Behind them...

An eerie shape begins to rise.

**It's the burnt corpse of the Reverend, slowly standing up
from the altar!!**

He attacks the commander, who screams in surprise and
start struggling with it.

The Judge rushes to the door, opens it, and whistles!

At his feet, the dead bodies of the guards, and all over,
chaos and fights.

He steps out in the falling snow, abandoning the
commander behind him, fighting with the Reverend's
corpse.

EXT. CHURCH - NIGHT

The Judge stands by the door, and his dog lunges among
the dead, reaches his owner, and fights off the dead who
gets close.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The Judge sees in distance Hope, James, Meryl, and Jeanne, escaping the village, towards the forest.

He sees that Hope has something *glowing* on her neck, **something... that keeps the dead away.**

The Judge's eyes sparkle with madness.

JUDGE

Witch.
(a beat)
I found you.

He gazes at the others, feverish.

JUDGE

You -- and your *evil helpers*.
(a beat)
No one will be spared.

He pulls the dogs collar and follows them.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Hope, James, Meryl, Isaac and Jeanne catch their breath at the forest edge.

The snow is falling harder and harder.

The group stumbles through the snow, desperate to escape the horrors behind them.

Isaac helps Jeanne, who is growing weaker by the moment, barely able to walk.

ISAAC

She's losing too much blood!

Jeanne clutches her stomach.

JEANNE

It's too early... The child -- It's too early...

Jeanne collapses into the snow, exhausted, her face pale and twisted with pain.

The group halts, the snow swirling around them, visibility diminishing by the second.

JAMES

We can't stop. We need to find shelter!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Isaac holds Jeanne, and the group pushes forward as the snowstorm intensifies.

The wind HOWLS fiercely, blurring the world into an endless white.

James hesitates, unsure of their direction.

Hope spots something -- a faint figure in the distance, moving through the storm.

It's the child! He waves his hand for her to follow.

HOPE

There! We must go there!

James and Isaac exchange a glance but trust her instinct.

The group follows, pushing through the blinding snow.

EXT. CAVES - NIGHT

The group arrives at the entrance of the CAVES, barely visible through the thick snowfall.

Hope looks around, but the child is gone when they approach the entrance.

The wind HOWLS so loudly it's impossible to talk.

JAMES

(screaming)

We need to take shelter there!

MERYL

NO! The caves are cursed --

HOPE

We can't stay out here!

The others hesitate for a moment.

JAMES

There's no other choice. We'll die out here!

They finally move toward the cave.

INT. CAVE ENTRANCE - NIGHT

Inside the small entrance, the group huddles together, their breaths visible in the freezing air.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The storm rages outside, the wind howling through the narrow cave opening.

The space is too small for all of them.

James looks around, his expression grim.

There's a dark corridor, leading deeper into the caves.

JAMES

We must venture deeper into the caves. We shall wait there until the storm has passed.

Isaac holds Jeanne, who's losing strength by the minute.

ISAAC

(whispering)

It's going to be alright --

The group walks into the dark corridor.

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

Through the blinding storm, *a dark figure moves.*

The Judge, wrapped in his cloak, marches through the snow, an oil lamp in his hand, his dog by his side, guiding him.

JUDGE

Take me to her -- take me to the witch!

The Judge's eyes scan the ground as they follow the group's trail, the storm whipping around them.

INT. CAVE - CORRIDOR - NIGHT

The group walks deeper into the cave.

Jeanne, held by Isaac, groans in pain, her face pale and drenched in sweat.

ISAAC

She's not going to make it... What do we do?

James touches Jeanne's wrist, checking her pulse.

JAMES

She's getting weaker --

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Isaac stands, panic in his eyes.

JAMES

Let us seek a wider chamber where
she may lie more comfortably, and
if the child comes I will assist.

Hope is distracted by a sound.

A feeble, soft call.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)

Hope --

The group moves forward into the caves, and at a fork
they go left.

Focused on Jeanne, they don't notice that *Hope is behind.*

Hope, distracted by the voice, takes the tunnel on the
right.

EXT. CAVE - NIGHT

The Judge arrives at the cave entrance, his dog growling
as it sniffs the air.

The Judge gazes into the cave, sensing the presence of
the group.

He walks in with his dog.

INT. CAVES - PAINTED ROOM - NIGHT

HOPE stumbles into a wide, dark room. Her lamp flickers,
casting dancing shadows on the cave walls.

She realizes she lost the others!

HOPE

Father? Isa --

She stops, her breath catching. The light reveals **ancient
paintings** on the walls.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. CAVES - CORRIDOR - NIGHT

James, Meryl, Jeanne, and Isaac move forward cautiously.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

James lifts his lamp, scanning the cave's jagged walls.

INT. CAVES - PAINTED ROOM - NIGHT

HOPE walks closer, examining the painted scenes.
Her eyes dart over the first:

FIRST PAINTING: A Native American man leaves his village.

HOPE gasps as the light reveals the next scenes:

SECOND PAINTING: The man encounters a red-eyed monster in the forest.

THIRD PAINTING: The monster devours him.

She inches closer.

INT. CAVES - CORRIDOR - NIGHT

The flickering torch reveals something lodged in the cave ceiling.

A decaying body.

The group is horrified.

James moves in for a better look.

JAMES

Whoever this is, they've been here
for weeks...

INT. CAVES - PAINTED ROOM - NIGHT

Hope nervously turns toward the fourth painting.

FOURTH PAINTING: The man rises, now red-eyed as the monster, and walks back toward his village.

FIFTH PAINTING: The villagers celebrate his return.

INT. CAVES - CORRIDOR - NIGHT

The torch lightens the pants, the jacket of the corpse -- it's a man.

JEANNE

Who is this?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

James is shaken by a **dark premonition.**

It is someone they know.

INT. CAVES - PAINTED ROOM - NIGHT

HOPE steps toward the final painted scene:

SIXTH PAINTING: The village is destroyed. Everyone is dead. The man walks away, his hands dripping with blood, his eyes **glowing red.**

HOPE
(whispers)
Wintekowa --

FLASHBACK SEQUENCE - RAPID INTERCUT

A hand unlocking the barn at night.

A message scrawled on the wall: "BOAT" written in ash.

INT. CAVES - CORRIDOR - NIGHT

JAMES
No... that's not possible --

Meryl and Jeanne get closer, as...

The torch lightens...

...A VISIBLE SCAR ON THE NECK OF THE CORPSE.

THAT'S ISAAC!!!

A shocked silence falls on James, Meryl, and Jeanne.

Behind them, in the darkness --

TWO RED EYES GLOW.

END INTERCUT
SEQUENCE

INT. CAVES - PAINTED ROOM - NIGHT

A scream echoes through the cave.

Hope turns around.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Jeanne, pale and delirious, stumbles towards Hope and collapses on the ground.

HOPE

Jeanne! Where are the others --

Jeanne lets out a sharp cry of pain, clutching her belly.

JEANNE

I don't know -- Isaac is dead --

HOPE

Isaac? What --

Jeanne screams.

JEANNE

The child -- the child is coming --

HOPE

No! Let's find my father, he will help you --

Hope stands up, but Jeanne grabs her.

JEANNE

Help me! Please --

Hope kneels down, puts the oil lamp next to her, and helps Jeanne to deliver the baby in the primitive, semi - darkness of the cave.

Jeanne screams, the child comes out quickly -- *too quickly.*

Hope shakes in fear.

HOPE

He's almost here!

The baby is out!

Hope grabs her and holds her: the baby sobs and whimpers, pink and healthy.

HOPE

It's a girl. And she's healthy.

Hope gives the baby to Jeanne, who holds her desperately.

Jeanne pulls out a small knife from her pocket and hands it to Hope.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

JEANNE

Please, cut -- the chord.

Hope cuts the chord, the two women knot it.

HOPE

We must find the others, and --

A WHISTLE pierces the air!

A brief, **chilling note.**

They both freeze in terror. They remember that sound.

THE WHISTLE, AGAIN.

THIS TIME, CLOSER.

THE JUDGE!!

Jeanne's face hardens, and hands the baby to Hope.

HOPE

No, what --

JEANNE

I can't walk. You must take her away, now!

HOPE

No! Please!

JEANNE

Save her.

HOPE

(sobbing)

No!

Hope, the baby in her arms, tries to pull Jeanne, who pushes her away with her last strength.

JEANNE

Go! Go away! Please --

The WHISTLE AGAIN, and now the DOG'S BARKIN and GROWLING is getting closer.

JUDGE (O.S.)

Witch! I'm coming for you, witch --

JEANNE

NOW!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

Hope clutches the baby, the lamp, and flees.

INT. CAVES - CORRIDOR - NIGHT

As Hope runs, she hears in the back the horrifying SCREAMS OF JEANNE, and the GROWLS of the judge's dog.

She sees a crumbling wall, passes beyond it, and kicks a rock at its base.

The wall crumbles and collapses, sealing off the corridor!

Without looking back, she keeps running.

INT. CAVES - MAIN ROOM - NIGHT

Hope, holding the baby in her arms, reaches the deepest part of the cave, where James and Meryl lie unconscious.

Hope endured too much. She staggers towards them, her face blank.

She kneels beside them, waking them.

JAMES

Hope, where -- what happened?

MERYL

(weakly)

Jeanne...

HOPE

She's -- did not make it.

Hope hands the baby to Meryl.

HOPE

The judge followed us -- I think I stopped him -- I --

The three are at the very limit of their sanity.

They glance around -- the cave is filled with remnants of old camps. Scattered clothing pieces.

Scratches on the walls mark days passed.

HOPE

What is this place?

Meryl looks at her, the weight of truth in her eyes.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MERYL

It's time to tell you everything.

James and Hope await, uneasy.

FLASHBACK BEGINS

EXT. VILLAGE OF BETHLEHEM - DAY

A vicious blizzard covers the village.

The wind howls. Snow piles up against doors and windows.

MERYL (V.O.)

*Last winter... a great storm beset
us, the worst in memory. We were
cut off for weeks.*

INT. VILLAGER'S HOME - DAY

Villagers are huddled together, wrapped in blankets.

MERYL (V.O.)

*When the food was gone -- we ate
bark, boiled leather...*

*Some boil leather scraps over a fire, their faces pale
with hunger.*

MERYL (V.O.)

But it was not enough.

A malnourished child cries weakly in the corner.

MERYL (V.O.)

*Hunger -- true hunger -- devours
the spirit. And poisons the mind.*

EXT. FROZEN LAKE - DAY

*A few villagers venture onto the ice, disappearing into
the storm.*

MERYL (V.O.)

*Some went to the frozen lake, or
the forest -- but they never came
back.*

INT. VILLAGE HOUSE - NIGHT

The house is silent except for the wind. A pair of elderly hands go limp in the cold.

MERYL (V.O.)

No help came. Bethlehem was forgotten. And, one by one, we began to die.

Children are wrapped in blankets, lifeless.

MERYL (V.O.)

The old... the children...

EXT. CAVES - NIGHT

The remaining survivors trudge through the snowstorm toward the cave entrance.

Their faces are gaunt, their eyes filled with desperation.

MERYL (V.O.)

We came to the caves hoping to escape the cold... But the hunger followed us.

INT. CAVES - NIGHT

The Reverend stands before the group, reading from **The Book of Holy Living and Holy Dying**.

MERYL (V.O.)

We prayed... and prayed...

The villagers sit in silence, their faces hollowed by starvation. Their eyes dart toward the children, dark thoughts creeping in.

MERYL (V.O.)

Prayers could not fill the bellies of a starving village. And soon... people began to look upon the children.

INT. CAVES - NIGHT

The Reverend kneels, praying desperately.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MERYL (V.O.)

But the Reverend kept praying for salvation... And then, salvation came.

EXT. CAVE ENTRANCE - NIGHT

A Wampanoag Native American family – father, mother, young boy, and a girl, enter the cave, seeking shelter from the storm.

MERYL (V.O.)

It was a family. A Wampanoag family.

The family smiles at the villagers.

MERYL (V.O.)

We knew them. In the past, we traded food and goods with their tribe.

(a beat)

Oh God... they believed they could trust us.

INT. CAVES - NIGHT

The villagers stare at them, starvation etched in their faces.

The Reverend stands, delirious, arms outstretched, smiling.

He says something to the crowd, and the villagers lunge at the family!

In the chaos we don't see what happens, but we know: the villagers are devouring the family.

Only Meryl stands aside, in horror and shock.

FLASHBACK ENDS

INT. CAVES - NIGHT

Back to present.

Meryl stands in front of James and Hope, the baby cradled in her arms. Her eyes are hollow.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MERYL

When the storm passed, we left the cave, returned to the village, and swore never to speak of what had happened -- ever again.

James and Hope listen horrified, their faces pale in the dim light.

MERYL gestures to an area of the cave, where **human bones** lie in a pile.

MERYL

I couldn't -- I -- I helped the boy escape, took him from the crowd... He ran away.

HOPE

(shocked)

I know the boy -- I saw him --

Meryl shakes her head.

MERYL

That's impossible. We found his body in the snow, after the storm passed.

(a beat)

He froze to death.

Meryl speaks more and more softly, as if she's disappearing.

MERYL

I buried him under a nameless cross in the village graveyard.

Hope reaches with a trembling hand the necklace the child gave her.

HOPE

But... this was his.

And...

FROM THE SHADOW, THE CHILD ARRIVES.

His eyes calm and sad. He walks toward HOPE.

CHILD

Noonawi.

He points toward the pile of bones in the corner.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Hope, eyes filled with tears, follows him.

One last time.

She kneels and sees *three identical necklaces with turquoises* among the bones.

She removes the necklace she's wearing, and gently places it with the others.

The child watches with gratitude.

HOPE

You just wanted to be with your family...

From the bones, the spirits of the Abenaki family rise: father, mother, daughter.

They stand solemn and pure as Gods.

The child runs to embrace them, reunited at last.

In the darkness, a luminous portal of golden light opens, revealing an endless sunlit prairie.

The family walks toward it, crossing the threshold into *everlasting peace*.

The boy turns one last time, smiling at Hope, before stepping through.

The portal closes.

The cave is cast in darkness once and forever.

Hope turns to James and Meryl.

HOPE

It's over... We can go home now.

As they start toward the exit, Hope feels something on her face.

She touches her nose -- it's **bleeding**.

The air grows cold.

From the shadows, **the corpses of all the dead village inhabitants emerge** -- including the Reverend, Isaac, Abigail, Elizabeth -- surrounding them.

All their dead eyes **glowing red**.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

Hope looks at Elizabeth, Abigail, Isaac. Sobs, terrified, heartbroken.

James pulls Hope close, while Meryl looks around, unperturbed. She gently places the baby in Hope's arms.

MERYL

We deserve this... for what we've done.

The dozens corpses' start speaking all at once: *murmuring, gibbering, shrieking, sobbing.*

The most horrifying sound a human mind can comprehend.

Their voices finally merge into a single, ominous tone, deep and resonant as a hellish choir.

HE'S HERE!!

Hope shakes in terror, but dares to speak up.

HOPE

It is you -- *Wintekowa.*

WINTEKOWA (V.O.)

I bear many names, and take many forms. I am the mountain and the hawk. I am the river and the oak.

HOPE

Why -- why do you bring such horror and fear?

WINTEKOWA (V.O.)

Bring? I bring nothing. I am a night lake, reflecting what lies within the human soul. Hunger, envy, pride... they summon me. They *feed me.*

HOPE

Not all humans are wicked!

WINTEKOWA (V.O.)

Humans slaughter the innocent, then sing praises to the murderer.

The cave begins to shake violently!

WINTEKOWA (V.O.)

There is no -- *forgiveness!*

Boulders crash down from the ceiling.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

An earthquake begins!

James grabs Hope.

JAMES

Run!

They dash toward the exit, rocks tumbling around them!

Hope clutches the baby tightly. James looks back toward Meryl.

JAMES

Sister! Come!

But Meryl stands still, her eyes vacant and empty, surrounded by the corpses.

She looks into James' eyes one last time.

Then... the ceiling collapses, burying her as the cave continues to crumble around them.

INT. CAVE - CORRIDOR - NIGHT

James and Hope, holding the baby, rush quickly through the corridor, as everything trembles around them.

They dash across a narrow rock ledge, the depth of the chasm below unknown.

In distance, there is **the cave exit!**

They are almost there!!

But...

A SHADOW appears in front of them, blocking their way -- it's the JUDGE, with his dog!

JUDGE

Hand her over, Doctor.

JAMES

I won't let you take her.

The dog lunges at James, and the two begin to struggle, teetering on the edge of the chasm.

HOPE

Father!

Hope holds the baby into her arms, trying to shelter her.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Meanwhile, the Judge gets closer to Hope!

JUDGE

Your time has come, witch!

James, wounded, manages to throw the dog into the chasm!

The Judge grabs Hope's arm, but James grabs him and pulls him away from her.

James has pulled him too hard, and...

They both fall beyond the edge of the chasm!

Hope runs to the edge, and sees that James is holding on with both his hands.

HOPE

Father!

But, behind James, swindling in the darkness...

There's the Judge, clinging at James' legs!

JAMES

Hope! You must flee!

Hope, the child into her arms, gets onto the edge, reaches with one free hand to her father.

HOPE

Take my hand!

JAMES

No! There's no time!

HOPE

Please! Please father, you cannot leave me --

The Judge, furious, is climbing up on James' legs.

All around them, the caves shakes, rumbles, boulders falling all over.

Hope freezes.

A moment of realization.

James looks deeply into her eyes.

JAMES

You must let me go.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

William rushes there, as they dig frantically.

They uncover Hope, unconscious, shielding the baby.

As the men extract both, the baby starts to cry.

The men watch the scene, shocked and moved.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Later.

Hope sits on a cart, bruised, wrapped in blankets, holding the baby.

William come and sits next to her, heartbroken.

HOPE

Thank you for saving us.

WILLIAM

I wish we had arrived sooner --
when we saw the judge's guards in
the forest, we sensed trouble.

(a beat)

And now, they are all gone. My
daughter, her husband... all dead.

(sobs)

It feels as... a nightmare.

Hope looks at the baby.

HOPE

Yet, there is still her. Your
daughter fought valiantly to bring
her into this world.

William's eyes sparkle with emotion, as he nods.

WILLIAM

Let us depart from this cursed
place, once and for all. You are
welcome to come with us to our
village.

Hope smiles, grateful.

WILLIAM

We shall forget Bethlehem, and the
evil that will remain buried in
those caves for eternity.

William walks to the front of the cart.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

WILLIAM
(to his companions)
Let's go!

William gets on the cart and takes the reins, and the horses start pulling through the snow.

As they move through the forest, Hope observes the surrounding nature.

Among the snowy trees, she sees a FOX running with her CUBS, disappearing into the woods.

We follow the fox and her cubs as they run and play on the frozen river, chasing each other and sliding.

Full of life.

Playful.

Beneath them, something is faintly visible.

Something frozen under the icy surface.

A familiar dress, small hands...

NO...

NO, IT CAN'T BE.

....

There lies Hope, her face contorted in a silent scream.

Her dead body frozen in the river from the previous day.

Back on the cart... Hope holds the baby in her arms and looks straight to us, into the camera.

She has a *subtle*, red glow in her eyes.

Is she -- smiling?

THE END