

“The Tavern Fire”

by D.B. Jackson

Boston, March 19, 1760

There was no fire when he woke. The room had gone cold and a bleak gray light seeped around the old cloth that hung over his window. He heard no wind, which was good. Tiller didn't like the wind; not this time of year. But he wanted to see gold at the window edges, and there was none.

He sighed and rolled out of bed, the ropes beneath his mattress groaning. He relieved himself and left the pot by his door, so that he wouldn't forget to empty it. He did that sometimes.

Then he dressed, donning a frock over his shirt for warmth, shrugging on his coat over that, and pulling his Monmouth cap onto his head. He stepped to the door, pausing as always at the small portrait of his mother and father. He touched his fingers to his lips and then to the drawing.

“Bye, Mama, Papa. I'll be back later.”

He opened the door, emptied the pot into the yard, and, after checking to see that the key

hung around his neck, pulled the door shut.

A leaden sky; still, icy air. Just as he had known.

He heard Crumbs before he saw him; a coarse *cawing* and the rustle of silken feathers as the crow glided down from the roof to Tiller’s shoulder.

“Good morning, Crumbs,” Tiller said. “Looks like we got a cold one today.” He fished into his coat pocket and found a morsel of stale bread, which he fed to the bird. Crumbs ate it greedily.

“We’ll find more later. I’m hungry, too.”

He started toward the cart, but before he reached it, he heard a door scrape behind him.

“Thomas!”

Tiller turned, but kept his gaze fixed on the ground. “Good morning, Peter,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry if we woke you.”

“That’s not--you didn’t. It’s time for rent, Thomas.”

Tiller knew that. Just as Peter knew that he didn’t like to be called Thomas. He hadn’t been Thomas since he was a boy. But it angered Peter when Tiller reminded him, and since Peter leased him the room, Tiller tried not to make him mad. A cousin should have known what to call another cousin. Tiller should have been allowed to remind Peter of that, at least. But he rented the room and he kept his mouth shut. He had heard bad stories about the almshouse.

“Do you have the money, Thomas?”

Tiller shook his head. “Not yet. But I will.”

“Today is Wednesday, Thomas. You know that, right?”

He nodded slowly. Yes, that sounded right. Wednesday.

“And rent--”

“A shilling by Friday,” Tiller said. “Yes, I know.”

Peter exhaled the way Papa used to. “All right then. Good day, Thomas.”

“Good day, Peter.”

He waited until Peter had gone back into the house and closed the door before walking to the cart and pushing it out of the yard onto Leverett’s Lane. It rattled loudly on the cobbles, pots and pans swinging on their hooks and clanging together, old blades and rusted tools bouncing in their wooden compartments, the empty bottles he had carefully arranged the previous evening falling over one another like drunken sailors.

There had been seven pence in his pocket when he counted just before going to bed. He could get the other five today or tomorrow. Peter wouldn’t have to put him out. That’s what he told himself, anyway. But he pushed the cart down to the wharves, his eyes raking the streets, searching for anything that he might find and clean and sell. It always amazed him, the things people lost. Books, jewelry, coins sometimes. Once, a few years ago, he had found a half-crown in the North End on Charter Street. He often went back to the same spot, hoping to find money again, but so far there hadn’t been any more. Still, that wouldn’t keep him from checking later.

He didn’t see much today, at least not right off. A scrap of metal here, another bottle there. Once he crossed over into the North End, he found a bit more: a knife with a broken blade, which might fetch a few pence; a full copy of Monday’s *Gazette*--someone would pay a penny for that, if they hadn’t read it yet; and a lady’s linen kerchief that was almost clean. He tied that to the top of the cart beside the pans, so that people could see it. It was sure to sell.

Crumbs rode on his shoulder for a short while, but then flew down to the harbor’s edge to scavenge for food. The water was still, but dark as ink. Tiller could smell salt and dead fish in the air. The wharf workers shouted at him and laughed; he wasn’t sure what the men said, but he

could tell that it wasn't kind, and he tried to ignore them. After a few minutes he made his way up from the docks.

He stopped first at the foundry on Foster Lane. Paul, who worked there, was always kind to him, and often bought an item or two. Tiller had started seeking out goods that would interest him, and earlier in the week he had found a small hammer, its head only slightly rusted, that he thought Paul would like.

He rummaged through the cart until he found it, and entered the smithy. He found Paul at the forge, his round face ruddy with the heat, his sleeves rolled up, revealing powerful forearms. Seeing Tiller, he raised a hand and stepped away from the fire.

"Good morning, Tiller."

"Hello, Paul." Belatedly, Tiller snatched the cap off his head.

"Where's your bird today?" Paul asked.

Tiller shrugged. "Eating somewhere," he said. "He'll find me later. I have something for you. Found it in Cornhill." He held the hammer out to the man.

The smith's forehead creased and he came forward. "This is very nice, Tiller," he said, taking the hammer from him and turning it over in his hands. "Very nice, indeed." He rubbed his thumb over a patch of rust. "A bit of polishing and this will be good as new." Paul looked up at him. "How much?"

Tiller gazed up at the ceiling, as if considering this, though he had already decided. "I dunno," he said, his gaze meeting Paul's for an instant before darting away. "Five pence maybe?"

The smith smiled. "Five pence seems more than fair." He dug into his pocket and took out a sixpence. "I don't have it exactly. How about we settle on six and call it even?"

“I have a penny,” Tiller said, reaching into his own pocket.

“It’s all right, Tiller. Six is a good price.”

Tiller took the coin, a grin on his face. “I found a good one, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did.”

He hesitated a moment, wondering if he should say more. At last he put his cap back on.

“Well, thanks, Paul. I’ll see you again in a few days.”

“Good day, Tiller. May the Lord keep you.”

Tiller left the shop and immediately Crumbs fluttered down to his shoulder.

“Got rent, Crumbs,” he said, holding up the sixpence.

The crow bent toward it, his beak open.

“No, you don’t. I need that for Peter.”

He slid the coin into his pocket and started pushing his cart again. He stopped at a few other shops, but didn’t sell anything more. By midday, he was back in Cornhill, and he made his way to the public houses, hoping to trade for a meal. He stopped first at the Bunch of Grapes and when the innkeeper there refused to look at his wares, he went on to the Light House. That proved no more fruitful. Against his better judgement, he then made his way to the Brazen Head, on Cornhill Street.

Mary Jackson, who owned the tavern, had never liked him. She called Crumbs “that filthy bird” and insisted that the crow stay outside. And she talked to Tiller as if he were a little boy.

He knew that he wasn’t as smart as some people, but he had gotten by on his own for a long time now. He didn’t need Miss Jackson telling him how to take care of himself.

Occasionally, though, he had something she liked, and she gave him a free meal in

exchange. He hoped that the kerchief might catch her eye.

She was at the bar when he walked in, and she greeted him with a frown. Her hair--black, streaked with silver--was drawn up in a bun, and she wore a pale blue gown with a stomacher of white linen. Tiller noticed that her stomacher matched the kerchief perfectly.

"What do you want?" Miss Jackson asked, the lines around her mouth and eyes making her appear angry. Tiller had seen her smile now and again, and each time he was surprised by how pretty a smile made her look. He thought that she should smile more. "I've told you I'm not interested in buying the rubbish you find in the streets."

"Yes, ma'am," Tiller said, stopping just inside her door and removing his cap. The tavern was crowded, and most of the people were craning their necks to see him. Tiller tried hard to ignore them. "But I have something I think you'll like." He held up the kerchief for her to see.

She stared at it briefly, wrinkling her nose. "What is that?"

"A kerchief, ma'am. A nice one. Linen it is. With a bit of cleaning--"

Miss Jackson began to laugh, and it didn't make her look pretty. She glanced back at the others and they laughed as well. "You think I want to buy someone's dirty kerchief? You're mad!"

Tiller slowly lowered the hand holding the kerchief. "I have some other. . . ." He stopped. Their laughter was only growing louder. He started to leave.

"Wait."

He faced Miss Jackson again.

"You spend some time at that other pub, don't you? The Fat Spider?"

"Yes." That was where Tiller intended to go next. It was a long walk, but Janna and Gil--who ran the tavern--they were his friends. They always fed him, even when he didn't have

something on his cart that they wanted.

She beckoned him toward the bar. "Come here. Are you hungry . . . Tiller, is it?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said quietly, still standing by the door.

"It's all right, Tiller." She indicated a stool with an open hand. "You can sit right here."

She glanced at her barman, a tall thin man with a high forehead and long plaited hair. "Johnny, fetch some chowder and bread for Tiller, will you?"

"Yeah, sure," Johnny said, and went back to the kitchen.

Tiller crossed to the bar. Some of the others were still watching him, but they had stopped laughing. He halted by Miss Jackson, who nodded in encouragement.

"That's it. Sit down."

He sat on the stool beside her.

Miss Jackson narrowed her eyes, which were the same color as her gown. "What can you tell me about that woman at the Fat Spider? Janna, right? What can you tell me about her?"

"Um . . . well . . . she's very nice. She . . . she gives me food sometimes and--"

"Where's she from? Do you know that?"

"An island somewhere, I think. Her skin's dark, and she speaks with an accent."

"I know that." She sounded the way Peter sometimes did when Tiller couldn't figure things out. But then she exhaled slowly. "Tiller, have you ever seen her do strange things?"

"You mean magical things?"

Her face brightened, and she smiled at him, a pretty, friendly smile. "Yes, that's exactly what I mean. How smart you are."

"I've seen her do that," Tiller said, pleased with himself. "I've--" He stopped, his cheeks burning. He had been about to say that he had felt her magic, too. That it made the ground hum

beneath his feet. But Janna had warned him about telling anyone that, and while Miss Jackson was being nice to him right now, he was smart enough to know it wouldn't last, and then he would be sorry that he had told her. He wondered if he had been wrong to say that Janna did magic. He knew that men and women were still hanged as witches in New England. He didn't think that Miss Jackson wanted to get Janna in trouble, but still he regretted saying as much as he had. "I've heard that some people do it," he said, keeping his eyes fixed on the bar. "It might not have been Janna. I don't know who it was."

"It's all right, Tiller. She won't mind that you told me. I want her to do magic for me. I'll pay her for it. She'll be glad that we had this little talk."

Tiller wasn't so sure. But before he could say anything, Johnny emerged from the kitchen with his chowder and bread.

"You want ale with that?" Johnny asked.

Tiller looked at Miss Jackson.

"Of course he does," she said. She smiled at Tiller again. "Janna doesn't like me very much, Tiller. Did you know that?"

"No," he said. A lie. Janna didn't like anyone very much. She liked Gil, and she was nice to Tiller, but he had never seen her show any sign of liking other people. And she sometimes said bad things about Miss Jackson. Like that she was a lying snake, and that she couldn't be trusted to care for her own Mama, much less anyone else.

"Well, she doesn't," Miss Jackson went on. "And so I need your help. I need you to convince her to do a little magic for me. Can you do that?"

"I don't know," Tiller said. "It might not have been Janna."

"Of course. But if it was Janna, what kind of magic did she do? Can you remember

that?”

He didn't know what to say. None of this had gone the way he wanted.

“I've heard people say that she does love spells,” Miss Jackson said, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Is that what you've seen?”

Tiller stared back at her, too afraid to speak.

“Do you know how much people pay her for the charms?”

When he still didn't answer, her expression turned hard. “That's my food sitting in front of you, Tiller. I want answers. Now tell me: Does she do love spells?”

Tiller nodded. “Yes, ma'am,” he whispered. “I don't know how much money she gets for them.”

“Do they work?” Miss Jackson asked, hunger in her eyes and in her voice. “Is the magic real?”

“I think so,” he said. “I've . . . I've heard people thank her.”

She smiled like someone who had just won at cards. “That's what I needed to know. Thank you, Tiller.”

Johnny put a cup of ale in front of him.

Miss Jackson stood. “Make sure he gets whatever he wants,” she told Johnny. “He's our guest. You understand?”

“Yes, Ma'am,” Johnny said.

“You go to the Fat Spider when you're done, Tiller.” Miss Jackson bent toward him, forcing Tiller to look her in the eye. “You tell Janna that I'm coming, all right?”

Tiller nodded, taking a spoonful of the chowder, which was very good. “Yesh, ma'am,” he said through the food.

She patted his arm and walked away. Johnny moved to the far end of the bar to talk to the men sitting there. Tiller was left alone. He didn't mind. He ate and he drank, and when he finished, he got up and left the Brazen Head. No one seemed to notice.

His cart still stood outside the tavern where he had left it, with Crumbs perched on the edge. The bird *cawed* crossly at Tiller.

“I didn't forget you,” Tiller said, taking a piece of fresh bread from his pocket. “Here you go.”

Crumbs took the bread and hopped to the far end of the cart. There, he began to tear at his food with his thick, black beak.

Tiller pushed the cart down Cornhill and onto Marlborough, passing the lofty spire of the Old South Church and the solid brick façade of the Province House. Soon, the closely packed houses and shops of the South End gave way to more open ground--pastures and fields, country homes and rolling lawns. Still Tiller pushed the cart, sweating now, despite the cold.

The Fat Spider sat by itself on a lonely stretch of Orange Street on the Boston Neck. It didn't look like much from the outside. It was made of old, graying wood, and it seemed to lean to one side, as if too tired to stand straight. Its shingle roof sagged in the middle, and the sign out front, which showed a fat, smiling spider crawling across its web toward a fly, had been bleached of color by years of rain and snow and sun.

Inside, though, it smelled of roasted fowl and fresh bread, pipe smoke and musty ale. Aside from his own room, it smelled more like home than any place Tiller had ever been. A fire burned in the hearth, and spermaceti candles glowed in iron sconces around the great room, casting flickering shadows on the walls.

There were never many people in the tavern, and today there were fewer than usual--just

a pair of old men sitting in the back, talking quietly. Tiller recognized them both; they came here often.

Crumbs flew to his usual perch over the hearth. Tiller went to the bar, his cap in hand. Janna was polishing the ancient wood with a dirty white rag, her back bent, her head tipped to the side.

"Hi, Janna," Tiller said.

Janna didn't look up. "Afternoon, Tiller. You hungry, darlin'?"

"No, I ate."

At that, she stopped and raised her head, her eyes hawklike--dark and fierce. He had seen men twice her size flinch under that gaze. She was small and bone thin, with white hair so short that you could see through it to her brown scalp. Her face was bony, wrinkled, and forbidding, even when she wasn't angry. Tiller had been afraid of her for a long time, but he wasn't anymore, now that he knew her.

Janna had been a slave once when she was a little girl. She had told him that. She and her family had worked on one of the islands. But when she sailed with her master to the colonies, their ship encountered a storm. Everyone was killed except Janna. Tiller didn't know any more. He had heard people say it was a miracle she hadn't been taken by another slave owner. Others said that she had been, but had eventually bought her freedom. Tiller didn't know which was true. He only knew that she and Gil owned the Fat Spider together, and that Janna didn't like to answer questions about her past.

"Did you sell somethin'?" she asked Tiller, starting to polish again.

"I did, but that's not how I got food."

"Who'd you sell to?"

“Paul, up in the North End,” Tiller said.

“He’s a good man. An’ where’d you ge’ th’ food?”

“From Miss Jackson.”

Janna scowled. “What’d she want?”

Tiller opened his mouth to answer, but then closed it again. The more he thought about what had happened back in the Brazen Head, the more he realized that he had done wrong. He didn’t know how to tell Janna. Maybe he was still a little bit afraid of her after all.

Janna straightened, resting her hands on her hips. “Tiller, what’d she want?”

“She asked me questions about you,” he said, speaking to her belly. “She wanted to know if you could do magic. She wants you to do a spell for her, so she told me to talk to you. She knows you don’t like her.”

“She’s right abou’ that last,” Janna muttered. “An’ she wanted you t’ arrange it for her.”

He shook his head. “Mostly she wanted to know if you really did magic. And . . . and she asked me to talk to you. I’m sorry, Janna.”

“Look at me, Tiller.”

Tiller raised his eyes to hers. His gaze kept sliding away, but each time it did, he forced it back.

“I ain’t angry with you. You didn’ do nothin’ wrong. You understand me?”

He stared back at her, wanting to believe her, but still feeling that he had done a bad thing.

“Wha’ kind of magic she want? She say?”

“Love spell, I think,” Tiller said. “She’s coming here to talk to you.”

“Who is coming here?”

Janna turned. Tiller stayed utterly still. Gil stood in the rear doorway, a cask of wine resting on his shoulder, anchored there by a large, powerful hand.

"Don' worry about it, Gil," Janna said. She started polishing the bar again, but she cast a quick look Tiller's way and gave a small shake of her head.

Gil walked behind the bar and put down the cask. He extended a hand to Tiller, as he did whenever they met. Tiller gripped it, watching as Gil's hand appeared to swallow his own.

"How are you today, my friend?" Gil asked, his accent more subtle than Janna's, and harder to place. He had the dark curls of a Spaniard, the pale grayish green eyes of a Scotsman, and a black beard and mustache, with long, thin braids hanging from either side of his chin; that was unlike anything Tiller had seen on any man.

"I'm fine, Gil. How are you?"

The barman frowned. "I would be better if I had an answer to the question I asked a moment ago. Someone is coming to my bar, and Janna is unhappy about it. I would like to know why."

Janna rolled her eyes. "Tiller, would you like an ale?"

"Yes, all right."

She filled a tankard and handed it to him. "Why don' you take a seat over there near th' fire."

He did as he was told, knowing why she was sending him away. He sat with his back to the bar and stared into the hearth. But he listened.

"It's Mary Jackson," Janna said, her voice low. "She sent tha' boy here t' get me t' do magic for her."

"Mary Jackson. She owns a tavern, does she not?"

“Th’ Brazen Head.”

“Do you know what kind of magic she wants?” Gil asked.

“Uh huh. She been chasin’ tha’ merchant o’ hers for more than a year now. She wants me t’ spell him. Make him see her different, or somethin’.”

“So cast your spell, make her pay a lot of money, and send her on her way.”

“Yeah, I know,” Janna said. “But I don’ like her usin’ Tiller tha’ way. He’s barely more than a child.”

“I’m not a child,” Tiller said, loud enough for both of them to hear.

He heard Janna sigh, then heard her walk out from behind the bar.

“You weren’ supposed t’ be listenin’,” she said, sitting down across from him, a small smile on her lips.

“I’m not a child,” Tiller said.

Her expression sobered. “I know you’re no’. I’m sorry for sayin’ that.”

“I might not be smart like you and Gil, but I get by all right.”

“Yes, you do. Bu’ tha’ don’ give her th’ right t’ use you as a way of talkin’ t’ me.”

“Maybe I used her,” Tiller said. “I’m the one who got free food.”

Janna stared at him for a moment and then burst out laughing. “Well, tha’s true enough, isn’ it?” She eyed him a moment longer, shaking her head, a big grin on her face. Then she patted his arm, stood, and walked back to the bar.

Tiller sipped his ale, pleased with himself. It wasn’t every day that he managed to make Janna laugh like that.

The feeling didn’t last long. A few minutes after Janna left him, the door to the tavern opened, flooding the great room with silver light. Tiller twisted around in his chair and saw that

Miss Jackson had come.

She stood at the entrance to the tavern for a moment, squinting in the dim light. Her gaze passed over Tiller as if he wasn't there and settled on the bar where Janna stood, a scowl on her lean face.

"There you are, Janna," Miss Jackson said, as if she and Janna were old friends. She walked to the bar, pulling off her mitts and unbuttoning her coat. "What a lovely aroma. What are you cooking?"

"Chowder," Janna said stiffly.

"Would you mind spooning me a bowl? I must try it."

Janna eyed the woman, her tongue pushing out her cheek. But then she stalked into the kitchen, returning a few seconds later with a bowl and spoon, which she placed on the bar. "Four pence," she said.

"Yes, of course," Miss Jackson said. But she didn't pull out her purse. Instead, she took up her spoon and tasted the chowder.

"Oh, that's very good. Even better than my own. And I grew up eating chowder."

Janna frowned, picked up her polishing rag, and started to make her way to the far end of the bar.

"Hold on there, Janna. I'd like to talk to you about something."

Janna stopped and faced her again. "Yes, Mary, what is it?"

A cold smile flitted across Miss Jackson's face. She glanced briefly in Tiller's direction. "There's something else I'd like you to do for me," she said, her voice dropping. "I'll pay whatever you normally charge, but I want it done today."

"Uh huh. And wha' would tha' be?"

“I think you know,” Miss Jackson said, still speaking quietly.

Janna walked back to where Miss Jackson sat. “No,” she said.

“You don’t know?”

“I won’t do it.”

“Won’t do what?”

“I won’t be castin’ a spell for you. I don’t care how much money you have.”

Miss Jackson glanced around quickly, like she thought that lots of people were listening. Tiller was. But the two old men in the back didn’t seem to care what she said.

“You don’t even know what kind of magic I want,” she told Janna, whispering now.

Janna grinned, her teeth sharp and pale yellow. “You wan’ a love spell. You wan’ tha’ man you fancy t’ leave his missus and come ‘roun’ t’--”

Miss Jackson stood abruptly, spilling her chowder onto Janna’s bar. “How dare you!”

“I don’t like you usin’ my friends t’ ge’ t’ me. I don’t like you comin’ ‘roun’ my place an’ pretendin’ you an’ me got anythin’ in common.” Janna crossed her arms over her chest and raised her chin. “I don’t like you.”

“I will not be spoken to in that way! Certainly not by a Negro! I don’t hold with slavery, but I believe a lashing would do you some good!”

Janna laughed. “My Mama always though’ so, too. Turns out she was wrong.” She started to mop up the spilled chowder. “I think i’s time you were leavin’, Mary.”

Miss Jackson didn’t move. “I need this done.”

“You’ll have t’ find someone else t’ do it.”

“Ten pounds.”

Tiller’s mouth fell open. Ten pounds! He couldn’t remember ever seeing that much

money.

Janna didn't even look up. “No.”

“Fifteen.”

Janna picked up the bowl and spoon, and started toward the kitchen. “Goodbye, Mary.”

Miss Jackson leaned forward, her hands on the bar. “There are those in Boston who would be quite alarmed to learn that a witch lives here in the city,” she said, her whisper sounding harsh, like a spitting cat.

Janna halted.

“There are clergy--men I know--who would relish the chance to hang a servant of Satan.”

“You can't prove anythin'.”

“I don't have to. I'm a Christian woman and you're a Negro, a former slave. My word against yours. Be smart, woman. Who do you think people will believe?”

Janna walked back to the bar and carefully put down the bowl. Gil loomed in the doorway behind her, but he hung back and kept silent.

“All I want is one spell,” Miss Jackson said, whispering again. “Cast it, and you have nothing to fear from me. You can have the money, and you can keep your tavern.” She surveyed the room, her lip curling. “Such as it is.”

Janna took a long, weary breath. “One spell, you say?”

Miss Jackson smiled, opening her hands. “That's all.”

“An' otherwise you'll tell everyone tha' I'm a witch.”

“You leave me no choice.”

Janna shrugged. “My answer is still no.” Her expression went stony. “Now get out o' my place.”

Miss Jackson looked like she had been slapped. Her eyes were wide, her cheeks pale, her mouth open in a small 'o.'. At last she drew herself up and said, "Fine, then! You'll be in prison by nightfall."

She was halfway to the door when a booming voice said, "Wait!"

Miss Jackson stopped.

"I will do this magic you want," Gil said, stepping to the bar.

"Gil, no!"

"Forgive, Janna," Gil said, his gaze never leaving Miss Jackson's face. "She forgets herself sometimes. Just as she forgets that I do not work for her or follow her commands."

Miss Jackson walked slowly back to the bar. "You can do magic, too?" she asked quietly.

A sly smile lifted the corners of his mouth. "I have some skill, yes." He tapped the bar with his hand. "Put your money here, and I will cast for you."

"Gil--"

"Get the tablet," he said to Janna.

She shook her head. "Don' do this. Jus' let her go."

"Get the tablet."

Tiller had never seen such fear in Janna's eyes. She walked out from behind the bar and over to the hearth. She dragged a chair over, and stood on it so that she could reach a large square slab that hung over the fireplace. Tiller had seen it on the wall before, but had never paid much attention to it. It was similar in color to the bricks used to build Faneuil Hall, and it was covered with strange lines and symbols. Given how Janna cradled it in her thin arms, Tiller guessed that it was heavy.

"Do you want me to carry that, Janna?" he asked.

She merely shook her head and carried it back to the bar.

Miss Jackson had placed several coins on the wood.

“Good,” Gil said, when Janna placed the tablet before him. “Now, fill a cup with ale.”

“Gil--”

“Ale, Janna.”

She filled a cup. Gil reached below the bar and produced a stoppered bottle that could have been just as old as that clay tablet. The glass was clouded and stained, and the cork was as black as pitch. Gil placed the cup of ale on the tablet. Then he unstopped the bottle and held it over the cup. Muttering to himself, he allowed three drops of clear pink liquid to drop into Miss Jackson’s ale.

Tiller found that he was on his feet, straining to see what happened when the two liquids mixed. He saw nothing unusual, but he felt that same vibration in the floor that he felt when Janna cast her spells. Only stronger. Much stronger. It was as if the bar was a giant violin, and Gil had just dragged a bow across its strings.

“What now?” Miss Jackson asked, sounding a little nervous.

“Now, you drink,” Gil said. “Drink it all. And when you are done, go back to your home, and wait.”

“That’s it?”

“That is it.”

She picked up her ale, hesitated for an instant, and then drank. It took her several minutes to finish the cup, and in all that time, no one spoke. When at last she finished, she looked expectantly at Gil.

“Now he’ll come to me?”

“I swear that he will,” Gil said. “Go home and wait.”

“Yes, all right. Thank you.” Miss Jackson stood, pausing to eye Janna. Tiller thought she might say something, but in the end she merely turned away and hurried from the tavern.

“What’d you do t’ her?” Janna asked, when the woman was gone.

“I sent the man to her, just as she wanted.”

Janna shook her head. “Tha’s no’ all you did. There’s always more with your magic.”

“Tiller,” Gil said. “I am going to roast venison tonight. Will you stay and eat with us?”

Tiller beamed. “Sure I will, Gil. Thank you.”

“Good. In the meantime, have another ale.”

Gil walked back to the kitchen, Janna staring after him. After a few seconds she seemed to remember that Tiller was still there.

She filled a new cup with ale, and brought it to him.

“Here you go, Tiller,” she said kindly.

“I’m sorry, Janna. I shouldn’t have said anything to Miss Jackson.”

“Don’ worry ‘bout it,” she said. “Gil took care of it.”

* * *

Tiller drank that second ale and two more, enjoying the warmth of the fire and the feeling of having his rent in this pocket. As the day wore on, and the sky outside the tavern began to darken, the great room filled with the scent of roasting meat, so that Tiller’s mouth watered and his stomach growled.

More and more people came to the Fat Spider. By the time Gil emerged from the back bearing a huge platter of food, the tavern was as crowded as Tiller had ever seen it. Somehow, men and women from all over Boston knew to come. Maybe the smell of Gil’s venison had

drifted through the streets. Maybe word of his feast had spread from home to home. Whatever the reason, it was a night unlike any Tiller could remember.

He ate and he drank until he'd had his fill, and then he had more. Eventually he must have dozed off at his table by the hearth. When he woke, sometime later, most of the people were gone. Gil stood beside his chair, firelight dancing across his features and gleaming in his eyes.

“I want you to stay here tonight, my friend. It is late for you to be walking home.”

“But my cart. And Crumbs.”

“They will be fine. You have my word.” Gil smiled. “Crumbs has eaten well.” He draped a blanket over Tiller and pulled over another chair so that Tiller could rest his legs. “Is there anything at your home that you need?” Gil asked. “Anything dear to you, that you must have?”

“Just the picture of my Mama and Papa.”

“A painting?” Gil asked.

“A drawing.”

“How big?”

Tiller held his hands a few inches apart. “Like this.”

Gil nodded. He strode back to the bar and spoke in low tones with Janna. She cast a quick glance Tiller's way, but then nodded, drawing a small knife from a pocket of her dress. Tiller recognized the blade. It was the one Janna used when she drew blood from her arm for a conjuring.

Tiller saw her step back into the kitchen. Moments later, he felt another pulse of magic. It was weaker than what he felt when Gil made Miss Jackson her drink, but still it made the

tavern floor hum.

Janna reemerged from the kitchen, stepped out from behind the bar, and walked to Tiller's makeshift bed carrying the portrait.

"Here you go, darlin'," she said. "Sleep well."

"Thank you, Janna," Tiller whispered. He studied the drawing, front and back. It was his. He touched his fingers to his lips and then to the images of his parents. "Goodnight, Mama, Papa."

He propped the picture against the back of the second chair, settled back down, and was soon sleeping once more.

He woke again several hours later. The tavern smelled strongly of smoke, and he could hear Janna and Gil speaking at the doorway, their voices lowered.

"What've you done?" Janna asked him.

"I have done nothing. I granted her wish. The rest she brought to the casting herself."

"Tha's no'--"

"You said it yourself," Gil told her. "Her merchant has a wife. Did she not expect that when the man came to her, the wife would follow? Mary was foolish."

"Bu' your spell--"

"Did nothing more or less than I promised it would. Her man came to her. That he did so clumsily, making no attempt to hide his destination. . . . That is not my fault."

"His wife started th' fire?"

"I know nothing for certain."

"Sure you do," Janna said, a smile in her voice.

"If I were to guess, I would say that the fire started upstairs, in Mary's bedchamber. And

that many items were thrown in anger, including a candle or two, or perhaps an oil lamp.”

“You a dangerous man, Gil.”

Gil said nothing, and when Janna spoke again, she sounded worried.

“It looks like th’ whole city’s burnin’.”

“It is not. Only a portion of it.”

“Still, look at it. Who knows how many’re dead?”

“I know. None.”

“Gil--”

“None are dead, Janna. You have my word. You also have my word on this--She will not be back, and she will not threaten you again.”

“Gil?” Tiller called. “What’s happened?”

“Go back to sleep, my friend.”

“What time is it?”

“After midnight, but still several hours before dawn. You should be sleeping.”

Tiller got up from his chair and crossed to the tavern entrance. “What’s happened, Gil?”

Gil didn’t answer right away. “There is a fire.”

“Where?”

“Near your home. There was a great wind, and it pushed the flames all the way to the water’s edge.”

Tiller peered out into the night. Janna was right. It did look like the whole city was ablaze. The sky over Boston glowed a baleful inconstant orange, and dark smoke billowed over the spires and rooftops.

“I am sorry, Tiller,” the barman said, looking down at him.

“That’s all right, Gil.” Tiller sensed that he was pardoning Gil for more than sad tidings.

“Pushed them from where?”

“What?”

“Pushed the flames from where to the water?” But Tiller already knew the answer.

Gil glanced at Janna, who still stared out toward the city. “From th’ Brazen Head,” she said quietly. “Tha’s where this started.”

“You say that Miss Jackson isn’t dead?” Tiller asked.

“She is not,” Gil told him. “I swear it.”

Tiller nodded. “Good. She gives me food sometimes.”

* * *

Historical Note: Early in the morning on March 20, 1760, a fire started at Boston’s Brazen Head Tavern, which was owned by Mary Jackson. Driven by powerful winds, the fire consumed three hundred forty-nine buildings and homes, left more than a thousand people homeless, and destroyed more than one hundred thousand pounds worth of property. Miraculously, no one was killed. To this day, the cause of the fire is unknown.