

Astrea

by

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I find it difficult to remember a time before I wanted to be a writer. From a young age, I was fascinated by stories, especially those featuring magic. Constantly reading and re-reading *Harry Potter*, my mom was concerned I'd never read anything else, so she urged me to give *The Hunger Games* a try, going as far to pay me a dollar to finish the first chapter. I quickly became obsessed with the series and delved into the world of Young Adult literature, combing through Goodreads every day in search of my next favorite book.

During the summer of sixth grade, I grabbed a notebook and wrote a story about a group of kids who traveled back in time to the 1980's and encountered aliens. As the story grew, I realized it needed to be typed out. After a few months, I finished the book and my parents drove me to Staples to print the full draft. I remember standing there in disbelief as I held my own story for the first time. I still have this draft tucked away in a drawer at home and it remains a reminder of why I love to write.

While those early stories were science fiction, I sought out fantasy books more than any other genre, and was influenced by many series including *Six of Crows* and *The Raven Cycle*. For a long time, I was afraid to write what I loved because the scope of fantasy worlds seemed daunting. Years later, I started an extremely loose retelling of the Arthurian legends, but with King Arthur as a girl. Delving into fantasy gave me an immense feeling of freedom as I crafted an entire world, inhabiting it with my characters. Ever since then, I never stopped writing, which is why I decided to major in Creative Writing.

When I first arrived at Purchase, the idea of workshops terrified me. Writing has always been deeply personal, as I rarely shared it with anyone. Being in the Creative Writing major, I discovered how vital workshops were to improving my work. Reading the work of my

classmates and being around a community of writers has inspired me to continue with my own stories.

During my sophomore year, I decided to double major in History. I have always been interested in history and believe that historical events and people can inspire all genres of fiction. When I began crafting my senior project, I knew a historical novella would be the best way to combine my majors. This was new territory as I had no prior experience in writing historical fiction. At first, I struggled to find a time period and setting that interested me, until I read about the Great Fire of London. In September 1666, a massive fire destroyed London over five days, leaving 80,000 people without homes and forcing the city to rebuild for a modern age. I was hooked by the image of a burning London and knew it was the perfect setting to craft a story around.

Usually, I dive headfirst into writing new stories. This project was unique in that I compiled most of the research before I ever wrote the first page. My research process began with historical books that detailed the events of the Great Fire, as well as the politics and culture of 17th century London.

The Great Fire occurred at a time of political and cultural turmoil, compounding the existing anxieties of London's population. In 1660, King Charles II was restored to the throne after the end of Oliver Cromwell's rule. In 1665, the year before the fire, the last major plague struck London, killing a quarter of the population. Meanwhile, the English were at war with the Dutch. Although the fire was an accident that began at a bakery on Pudding Lane, people were convinced it was an attack by the Dutch or a punishment from God. The fire brought everyone's underlying fears to the surface, which is a theme I wanted to explore in this project.

Primary sources were invaluable to developing the story. One of the most interesting was the Bills of Mortality, which was London's way of recording deaths. The Bills show a devastating loss of life during the 1665 plague and insight into ailments that affected the everyday lives of Londoners. Newspapers from the time period detailed the fire's path of destruction. Two well-known diarists, Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn, also wrote about the chaos in London during the fire. Both diaries include descriptive imagery and insight into what people from the 17th century thought.

The main character of my novella is a young woman named Astrea. She is loosely based on the historical figure, Aphra Behn, who was known later in her life for writing plays and novels. In 1666, Behn was sent to Antwerp to spy on her former lover, William Scot. Her goal was to discern whether Scot had enough information about the Dutch to be granted a pardon and return to England. During the mission, her monetary resources drained and she received no information of value from Scot. Ultimately, she returned to London in 1667 and was imprisoned for her debts.

Aphra Behn was not in London during the Great Fire, so this novella draws inspiration from parts of her life and proposes an alternate history. What if she left Antwerp before her mission was a complete failure? What if she never went to debtor's prison? What if she witnessed this pivotal moment of London's history? Much of her life is already speculative and my story continues in that tradition. The name, Astrea, is also a nod to the codename Behn used as a spy.

In the opening chapter, Astrea returns to London and is accompanied by her maid, Margaret, and younger brother, George. Margaret is quiet and unassuming, but deeply loyal to Astrea. Meanwhile, George is restless and can never stay in one place for too long, leading to

conflict between him and Astrea. The three of them travel to an inn where they meet with Thomas Colepeper, a close family friend. A man from the upper class, Thomas is Astrea's tie to London's social world. He pays off Astrea's debts, relieving her of that burden, but she becomes indebted to him.

The fire is a compelling backdrop to the novella, but characters have always been the backbone to any story I write. For this project, I wanted to explore the complexities of Astrea, not only as an unmarried woman in the 17th century, but also someone who is confident and not afraid to command a room. The novella opens with Astrea's conflicting emotions towards William. She knows she should not love William because he is a traitor to England, but memories of him—and a letter she cannot part with—haunt her. Thus, the fire represents a cleansing moment for Astrea to move on and enter a new stage of her life. Historians often describe the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire as “a phoenix rising from the ashes,” and hopefully, Astrea's character reflects this sentiment.

My senior project consists of the first three chapters of *Astrea*, establishing the main characters in London in the hours leading up to the fire and showing how they fare during the first perilous day. As of now, *Astrea* is unfinished. Although this is only the beginning, I hope to give readers a glimpse into this life-changing event for Astrea and all of London.

Chapter One

September 1, 1666

Astrea peered ahead at the River Thames. Hundreds of ships filled the horizon, sails taught against the gray sky. Most were small white splotches, but a handful of hulking ships blanketed her view of Southwark. It was difficult for Astrea to believe she stood on the deck of a merchant ship hours ago, but she was relieved her journey back to London was over.

She bunched the folds of her blue skirt in her hands and climbed down the watermen's stairs, careful to not slip on the slick stones. She stopped before the last step where the water rested at high tide and waited for a wherry.

Their ship docked at Queenhithe just an hour ago. Although Billingsgate was not far, Astrea needed to be there before nightfall. A ride across the Thames was the quickest way there. The less time they had to lug their bags through the crowded streets, the better.

She looked back at her brother. George, a young man with shoulder-length brown hair, stood behind her. He wore a tan coat that fanned out around his wrists and two bags were slung over his shoulder.

Her maid, Margaret, lingered at the top of the watermen's steps. The underneath of her eyes were dark crevices, a symptom of the restless nights when they were aboard the merchant ship. Gray hair peeked out of her roots, bleeding into her once blonde hair. She wore a brown, wool bodice and skirt. Margaret took the steps one at a time and tugged on her bag, dragging it behind her.

“Oars! Oars!” a deep voice shouted.

Astrea turned as a wherry boat approached the stairs. The bow of the rowboat angled to a sharp tip. A man with a bushy, black beard stood with two long oars in hand, sweat bleeding into the front of his linen shirt. Behind him was a set of three benches, all empty.

The waterman oared close to the steps. George knelt and grabbed the side of the wherry, pulling it close to the stairs. The waterman stretched out his hand and Astrea stepped into the wherry. The boat rocked under her weight and she slipped onto the first bench. Margaret stepped in after her, hauling the bags. She sat beside Astrea and clasped her hands together. When they were settled, George jumped onto the bench behind them, pulling one leg close to his chest for his chin to rest on.

“Where to?” The waterman looked at George.

“Billingsgate,” Astrea answered.

The waterman’s gaze shifted between Astrea and George.

“To Billingsgate,” George confirmed.

The waterman nodded and extended his arms, heaving the oars up and down. Astrea caught her brother’s eyes, but he shrugged, and looked back at a passing ship.

She shook her head and reached into her bag, pulling out a letter. She ran her thumb over the broken seal where only a few shards of red wax remained. The rest had chipped away whenever she dared to open the parchment.

Astrea had lost count of how many times she read the letter, but the words were etched in her mind. All day she recited them, like a chant, driving herself half-mad. Yet she continued to read it for when she did, nothing with William could be attributed to one of her fantasies.

Margaret shook her head in disapproval. Although Astrea had never shared the contents with her, Margaret knew William had sent it. When they first left Antwerp, she told Astrea to

dispose of it. Three weeks had passed and there it was. Astrea knew that reading the letter was a dangerous habit, but she ached to remember.

She dangled it over the edge of the wherry and imagined lifting her fingers off the page. The parchment would be dragged along the current, the water blurring the ink, transforming the words into stains, until it was consumed by the river. Astrea knew she should do it, but knowing didn't make her anymore capable. She clutched the letter and tucked it into her bag. There it would stay, untouched by the Thames.

The waterman followed in the same direction as four other wherries. A few feet away was a Navy ship called *Defiance*, the name written on the hull. When Astrea craned her head up, sailors crossed the main deck, hauling crates and tugging on ropes to tighten the main sail.

She peered at both sides of the river. Wisps of chimney smoke danced around the church spires. To her left, buildings lined the bankside, packed in cluttered rows. If Astrea hadn't known better, it would be impossible to see the narrow streets left between for passersby.

On the other side of the Thames, across the bridge, was Southwark, filled with dense buildings that rose four stories high. Astrea looked at Deptford, the Royal Navy's dockyard. The skeleton of a new vessel sat there, its hull half complete. Other ships surrounded it, their sails rolled up, waiting for launch.

As Astrea looked upon London, her chest warmed. She only departed four months ago, but it felt like a lifetime. Those weeks in Antwerp nearly plunged her into debt, but back in London again, her worries were over, despite failing her mission. At least, she told herself, she avoided a fate like William's.

Clouds ushered in darkness overhead. Astrea flinched as rain kissed her cheeks and dampened her dress. She reached into her bag and pulled out a cloak, tying it around her neck.

She pulled the hood over her hair that fell down to her chest, all tangled and knotted from weeks at sea.

Next to her, Margaret's hands were held together in prayer. It was a habit that began on the ship whenever they encountered a storm. At sea, rain always instilled fear in Astrea too, but something about this felt like coming home.

The wherry approached the bridge lined with boxy buildings. Smoke emanated from the chimneys, joining with the gray clouds above. People crossed the bridge, heading down to Southwark, or back towards London. On the other side, larger ships stalled, their masts too high to pass beneath.

The waterman picked up speed. He steered them beneath an archway towards the center of the bridge. The water crashed against the wherry, mist spraying onto Astrea. Finally, they came to the other side.

Billingsgate was a short distance from the bridge. It was marked by a wooden wharf that extended into the Thames, filled with a dozen ships. Beyond the wharf, other boats waited to dock and unload their goods.

The waterman turned the wherry towards a set of watermen's stairs that led into the alleyway of Thames Street. Five men clung to the steps, all young enough to be apprentices. Their eyes gleamed with delight as the wherry approached, seeking a ride down to Southwark and its taverns now that it was almost night.

The waterman slowed his oars and the bow stopped in the muddy bank. George jumped out first. Astrea drew her skirt up as she crossed over the benches towards the bow. She handed the wherryman one penny and thanked him for his service.

She jumped off the wherry, holding onto George. Smoothing out the wrinkles in her dress, she climbed onto the first stair, so the mud would not stain her skirt. The rain had slowed, so she slipped off her hood and patted down the stray hairs on top of her head.

George helped Margaret off the wherry and grabbed their bags. As soon as their items were out of the boat, the waterman shouted, “Oars! Oars!”

The group of apprentices stepped forward and claimed the wherry. As the first of them descended the steps, he brushed past Astrea’s shoulder. She kept to the side, away from the others.

Dusk had settled. Astrea turned to Margaret and George. “We should make our way. Thomas wrote to me. We are to meet him at the Boar’s Head Inn.”

“The inn is not far from here.” George pointed ahead.

Astrea glared at her brother. “You presume I have never been.”

George’s face flushed and Astrea climbed up, pausing at the mouth of the staircase. The alley was full of brick and wooden buildings. People clamored in the street and stray dogs ran past them, their barks echoing. Her nose wriggled as the salty scent of fish combined with the carcasses and waste that filled the alleyways.

Stepping into Thames Street, Astrea weaved through the crowd.

“Watch out!” Margaret yelled.

George tugged on Astrea’s arm, drawing her to the side of the street.

A black coach barreled down the road, pulled by two white horses. The hooves kicked up dirt, leaving a cloud of dust behind them. Astrea drew in a breath and George let go of her.

“Are you well?” George asked.

“I am.” She gulped, hands shaking at her side. The liveliness of London had not settled over her, but she trudged on.

Astrea turned the corner. Red paint clung to a wooden door. It was faded, but fragments of lines and curves were left behind in muted strokes of red. The warning the door once bore was illegible, but not even a year’s worth of rain was enough to erase the last traces of the plague.

Her throat tightened as she remembered last summer. Margaret had knocked on her bedroom door, early in the morning, holding a letter from Elizabeth Astley. Elizabeth wrote to cancel their plans that evening, down with a fever. At the time, Astrea tossed the note aside, not knowing it would be the last words she would ever receive from her friend.

Within two days, the Bills of Mortality circulated through London. Astrea had traced her finger over the print that declared forty-two deaths from the plague that week. She rushed to the window and pulled aside the curtain to look across the street. A watcher knelt at the Astley’s door, drenching it in red paint. He formed a large cross and beneath it, wrote in bold letters: “Lord Have Mercy Upon Us.”

That first whiff of the plague sent most of her neighbors packing, until London was safe again. Well, the ones who could afford to. The rest of them were left to die, and the lucky ones, like Astrea, watched as bodies piled in the alleyways.

She remembered that summer. The heat. The rain that never came. The scent of the rotting dead. The long months kept inside. She remembered when autumn came, and the plague tamed, and the bodies were dragged beyond the city walls, piled into a mass grave.

Now when Astrea looked upon Thames Street, bustling with life, it was hard to believe the difference a year made. All around her, people smiled and trudged down a road that was once home to the dead. Had they all forgotten? Or were they good at pretending?

Margaret's hand touched Astrea's shoulder. "Astrea?" she asked. "You stopped walking."

Astrea's eyes stung, but she shook away her thoughts. "This way." She forced a smile and walked on.

She led Margaret and George down Fish Street. Both sides were filled with markets, leaving little room for passerby. Stalls were set up with crates of salted fish. An older woman stood with a white cloth drawn over her hair. Oysters were piled in a large bucket in front of her. A young woman argued with the trader about the prices, while a child bounced in her arms.

Astrea kept George and Margaret towards the middle of the street, avoiding the sellers who would try to draw them in. Ahead, she spotted the spire of St. Michael's church, situated at the center of Crooked Lane. The stone church was elegant compared to the wooden homes and taverns that lined most of the street.

She passed by the church and turned onto Eastcheap. A large, wooden sign hung from a three story building. The sign swayed in the wind and had the carving of a boar on it with *The Boar's Head* written in large letters. She smiled. Even after all these months, she remembered the way.

George pulled open the door and waited as Astrea and Margaret entered. The downstairs of the tavern was lit by candles placed on every table. Dirt caked the floorboards. Chairs were scattered around, drawn to other tables where large groups gathered. At the back wall, a staircase led up to the inn's rooms. The tavern was hazy, filled with puffs of smoke. Astrea took a deep breath. The tobacco was a welcome reprieve from Fish Street.

The laughs and chants of the patrons filled Astrea's ears, but her eyes jumped from person to shadow as she scanned the room for Thomas. She found him at a corner table. He wore

a periwig and a fitted blue waistcoat with a white cravat tied around his neck. Their eyes met and he jumped up from his seat.

Thomas strode across the inn, swerving around the tables. He was beaming when he came up to them.

“How wonderful it is to see you back in London again.” He shook George’s hand. Margaret lingered behind them. Thomas turned his attention back to Astrea. “It is where you belong.”

“I hope you were not waiting long. Thank you for meeting us here,” she said. *Thank you for everything*, the thought lingered in her mind.

Thomas shook his head. “I had business here today and I booked beds for all of you. I would have you stay with us, it is only—”

Astrea interrupted him, “Do not concern yourself. You have done too much already.”

What she didn’t say was she knew the real reason. Thomas’ new wife was not fond of his poorer relations, especially because they were his relations by choice. Astrea’s mother had been the wet nurse to the Colepeper family over three decades ago, yet something compelled Thomas to keep contact with the family. All these years later, it was as if he was a second brother to Astrea.

“Come.” Thomas motioned them across the room, back to his table. He drew out a chair for Astrea. He took the seat beside her, while George and Margaret sat opposite them.

Thomas ordered ale, mutton, bread, and cheese for the table. George dove into the mutton, while Margaret cut a piece of bread and spread cheese on it.

“This is divine,” George said, mouth full.

“I suppose one more day of hardtack would have done you in,” Astrea laughed. She grabbed a slice of bread, happy as the soft center melted in her mouth. Finally she could eat something free from the taste of the sea.

Thomas leaned back in his chair. He smoked from his pipe and turned to Astrea in a hushed tone. “How was Antwerp?”

“There is not much to say,” she answered. “I told you everything in my letter.” Her face felt hot as she remembered her desperation when she wrote to Thomas and begged him to send her money. Luckily, he had answered in time and saved her from debtor’s prison.

“I never trusted William.” He shook his head.

Astrea winced. She knew she had been a fool to believe her past with William would make him reveal any worthwhile secrets about the Dutch, but she had been hopeful, if only for the sake of the war. Now she blamed William for making her out as a fool, returning empty handed. What a joke it was to call herself a spy.

Worst of all, Thomas warned her not to go and she had not listened. At the time, she was compelled by the offer to leave London after the plague, but now all of that felt wrong. She wanted to resent William as much as Thomas did. After all, William betrayed his country. Somehow, he still had a tendency to linger in her thoughts, even as she willed them away.

“Give no mind to William. He is in the past now,” Thomas said.

Astrea nodded and sipped on her ale, feeling too sick to eat.

Thomas looked at the others. “How did you both enjoy Antwerp? I’ve never been there myself.”

“And you never will,” George chuckled.

Thomas’ eyes widened.

“You know,” George raised his glass, “with the war.”

“And you?” Thomas asked Margaret.

Margaret’s cheeks reddened. “Quite well,” she whispered.

“We kept inside most days,” George shrugged. “My sister did not want to explore much.”

Astrea sighed. Ever since he had been a baby, George was restless. She would not have brought him to Antwerp had she not needed a messenger, but he had been invaluable during her mission.

Thomas turned back to Astrea. “I presume your debts to the Rosa Noble Inn are all paid?”

She nodded. “I will repay you once I have the means.”

Thomas shook his head. “Do not trouble yourself.”

“I promise you.” Even as Astrea spoke, she knew her words were hollow. She had no husband, no income, and no connection, save for Thomas. She would be lucky to scrape up enough to survive the next month in London, let alone repay her debts.

“How has London been?” she asked.

“We are faring well. This summer was better than our last.”

Everyone at the table mumbled in agreement.

“Oh!” Thomas exclaimed. “Charlotte is with child.”

“What good news!” Astrea said. She doubted she would ever meet Thomas’ child, unless his wife had a change of heart, but it was cause for celebration, so they ordered more ale.

By the time they finished their meal, night had fallen. The tavern grew fuller, everyone settling in for drinks after a day’s work.

“I must head home,” Thomas said.

He stood and bid his goodbyes to George. “I will return on business in a few days. I hope to see you all then. We should attend the theater.”

“We would be delighted,” George agreed, enthusiastically.

Astrea didn’t agree to any plans. She would hate to have Thomas continue to pay for them. She needed to figure out a plan, but supposed that was a problem for tomorrow, seeing as it was late.

Thomas handed Astrea a rolled-up piece of parchment. Her eyebrows raised and she plucked it from his hands. Unfurling the paper, her eyes widened at the address scrawled on it.

“Have you moved?” she asked.

Thomas shook his head. “It is where your mother resides.”

She rolled up the parchment and handed it back to him. “I will not be needing it.”

Thomas rolled his eyes, but didn’t argue with her. He handed it to George. “Perhaps you will find it useful.”

George gave his thanks and Thomas departed from the group. The three of them made their way up the inn’s rickety steps, a candle in Astrea’s hand. Each stair creaked beneath their boots, but was drowned out by the conversations in the tavern below. Astrea bid goodnight to George as she and Margaret entered their room, long enough for one bed. The last few months made Astrea accustomed to sharing everything with Margaret, and tonight would be no different.

She placed the candle at the foot of the bed. They took off their skirts and helped each other unlace their bodices. They wore their white shifts as nightwear and folded up their dresses, tucking them away. Prepared for bed, they sat on the straw mattress covered with a sheet.

Margaret wove her fingers through Astrea’s hair and braided it.

Astrea fished the letter out of her bag and brought the candle to her lap. Her heart quickened when she lifted the seal and unfolded the parchment, curled at the corners from the rain. The ink was untidy and dark blots were strewn across the page.

Astrea,

This will be the last letter I write to you. By the week's end, I will be imprisoned. Forgive me, for I never had anything to tell you about the Dutch. I led you astray these weeks in hopes I could be granted my pardon and spared from the fate I now face. Surely, you must know, I had no choice. I will always remember the time we spent together, but I fear we have parted for the last time.

Yours,

William Scot

Astrea swallowed the knot in her throat. She placed the candle down on the floor. The letter was heavy in her hand and for a moment, her breath slowed. William had betrayed her, but even so, it was not pleasant to think of him in prison. He made his fate, but she sealed it by leaving him without a pardon, never allowed to return to England again. A traitor to two countries.

Margaret tied a ribbon at the end of Astrea's braid. She was quiet when she spoke. "You should not read it again."

Astrea said nothing and folded up the letter, placing it back in her bag. She leaned over, blew out the candle, and settled into bed.

"Why must you read it?" Margaret whispered in the dark.

Astrea turned away from her and faced the wall. "I wish to remember."

Silence spread between them, except for distant shouts and stomps from the patrons below. Although Astrea could not see Margaret, she felt her shake her head. "You must forget him."

"I will in time."

"It will do you good to forget him now. He never would have been pardoned. It did not matter how long you remained in Antwerp."

"I know."

"Do you?" Margaret asked.

Astrea nodded. She knew it then, which is why she left Antwerp before her debts accumulated, as difficult as the decision was. Still, it was hard not to blame herself for William's fate.

"Goodnight," Margaret said. She shifted and turned to the other side.

Astrea stared at the wall. Her eyes were heavy, but it was not time to cry. Not with Margaret beside her. Besides, who was Margaret to judge her? Astrea was tired of the comments about William. No one understood.

When she found her way to sleep, she dreamt of William. Not as she knew him, but of where he must be now: packed in a cell, left to rot besides other prisoners. "Astrea!" he yelled. His wrists were bound in chains. He heaved forward to yank himself free, but was pulled back by the weight of the iron. "Astrea!" he screamed.

"Astrea, wake up!" a voice shouted, but that time, it didn't belong to him.

She felt beside her, but the bed was cold. Margaret hovered over Astrea and tugged at her arm. "You must wake!"

Astrea groaned, as she peeled her eyes open. She was surprised to find the room darkened. Her limbs ached and her eyes closed, ready to return to sleep.

“What is it, Margaret?” she murmured.

Margaret ran over to the window. A small pane of glass overlooked Eastcheap. Astrea waited for a reply. She heard faint screams, but they weren’t from the tavern below. Her stomach turned.

“What is it?” Astrea asked again.

Margaret looked back at her. “There is a fire.”

Chapter Two

September 2, 1666

Margaret clung to the window. Her fingers dug into the wood grain as she looked down at the streets of Eastcheap. She was quiet, but her words still pounded in Astrea's mind. *There is a fire.*

Astrea threw the sheet away from her and pulled herself out of bed. The room swayed as she raced to the window. Her sight was blinded by bands of black, whether from lack of sleep or pure shock, she was not sure. Noticing her approach, Margaret backed away from the window, but kept her gaze trained on the view outside.

Astrea leaned against the window. The glass chilled her forehead. When she looked out, the street was dark. Peering up, the night burst with orange. Flames danced across rooftops, crossing from one building to the next, swaying further with each gust of wind.

Although Eastcheap's three story houses blocked much of her view, rows of buildings were lit up. The flames snaked around the streets. Each building was its own tower of fire, as the orange peaks licked the sky.

She craned her head to the side. Flames slithered up the steeple of St. Michael's and the cross burst into a fan of light. The church blazed, the walls consumed by a curtain of fire. Astrea's throat dried. St. Michael's was only a street away.

She closed her eyes and drew in a breath. There was no use to keep looking. Each second, the fire grew closer to them. It was only a matter of time before it reached the Boar's Head Inn, and when it did, she did not intend to be waiting there.

She pushed herself away from the window. Margaret waited behind her, hands folded together. She muttered a prayer.

“We must leave!” Astrea yelled to her.

Margaret’s eyes shot open. “Should we wait for word from the innkeeper? Perhaps it is under control.”

Astrea shook her head. “St. Michael’s is gone. We cannot wait here any longer.”

Margaret sucked in a breath and Astrea pulled out her bag from underneath the bed. With the candle snuffed, she could not see the contents. Her fingers slipped around her belongings, and she felt for her skirt and bodice.

Margaret and Astrea laced up each other’s bodices. Astrea grabbed a white, linen cloth and placed it around the nape of her neck. Drawing her hair up, she tied the cloth so her hair was contained. She slung her bag over her shoulder, thankful she had little to carry.

She turned to Margaret. “Are you ready?”

Margaret pulled the sheet across the bed and patted the wrinkles down. She gave Astrea a slight nod.

They slipped out of their room and into the hallway. The inn was quiet, except for the wooden floorboards that creaked beneath their weight. All the candles were blown out for the night. No one else knew of the terror that awaited them in the streets below.

Astrea blinked to discern what lay ahead. She looked between five doors spaced out in the hallway and paused. She could not remember which one George resided in, but had no time to waste. The sight of St. Michael’s was seared into her mind.

“George!” she screamed. “George, where are you?”

Margaret grabbed her arm. “You will wake the others.”

“They should be woken.” Astrea yanked her arm out of Margaret’s grip. She paced up and down the hallway, and yelled. “George!”

A door flung open. Astrea’s stomach dropped when a balding man stepped out in brown trousers and a loose, white shirt that hung off one shoulder. His eyes were half closed.

“Be quiet, girl!” he said.

Astrea shook her head. “There is a fire nearby. I must find my brother.”

The man scoffed. “A fire, you say?”

“We saw it from our window.”

He waved his hand. “It’ll be out in the morning.”

Astrea sighed. She knew fires were frequent in London. A candle left unattended was almost a daily occurrence. What she had seen, however, was different. Entire streets were engulfed. After all that happened in Antwerp, she was learning to trust herself. She wasn’t willing to risk potential danger now. Not when it was so easy to leave the inn behind.

“You will not be safe here,” Astrea said. “I have warned you.”

The man looked at Margaret. “And you?”

“I saw the same.” Margaret dipped her head in slight regard for the stranger.

The man nodded and retreated back into his room, the door slamming behind him.

Across the hall, another door opened. George emerged, barefoot and his hair unkempt from the night. A sword hung at his waist. His hand hovered over the handle, ready to draw the blade.

“What is wrong?” he asked, breathless. He ran to Astrea’s side and looked her up and down, then turned to Margaret to ensure she was safe as well.

“We have to leave.” The words escaped from Astrea. “There is a fire. Margaret and I saw it.”

“Where is it?”

“I do not know where it began, but St. Michael’s is gone.”

“Show me,” he said.

George slipped back into his room and Astrea followed, while Margaret waited by the doorway. He ran to the window and peered from side to side. When he looked back at Astrea, his eyes widened.

“We do not have long,” Astrea warned.

“We will leave,” he agreed.

George raced around the room and grabbed his belongings, throwing them into his bag. He slipped on his boots, but his hands shook as he tied them.

Back in the hallway, Margaret leaned against the wall, her eyes closed. Others roamed around her. The bald man and his wife, a younger woman with blonde hair in a yellow dress, dragged bags out of their room. He caught Astrea’s glance and gave her a stiff nod. At least he had listened to reason.

Astrea looped her arm around Margaret and they fled down the stairs. The tavern was dark. No one lingered. Astrea weaved them around the empty tables, the chairs pulled in after a night of cleaning. It was strange to see the tavern emptied, no mugs of ale scattered around or people yelling to each other.

Astrea marched towards the door. She paused with her fingers on the handle. After the mess with William, all she wanted was a peaceful return to London, but it seemed that peace did not want to find her.

She flung the door open. The first rays of sunlight peeked inside. She looked between Margaret and George. They swayed from side to side to see what awaited them and Astrea stepped outside.

She whipped her head back and forth. Plumes of smoke settled above Eastcheap in black clouds. Screams swallowed the streets. The fire raged and popped as it ate the buildings, destroying all in its wake. Dogs barked as they ran down the street, followed by people in all directions.

Across from her, a man dragged a cart piled with goods. Inch by inch, he moved, everyone else passing by him. Sweat and dirt caked his face. He screamed when he yanked on the cart, too weak to drag all he had salvaged. He dropped the handles and rummaged through his belongings, throwing out the bags of grain that weighed him down.

She wasn't sure where these people were going. She could only tell where they were leaving. Everyone was running, but what if they didn't have to? Judging by the direction of the fire, she wondered if Billingsgate was safe. Maybe they could get on a wherry to Southwark, and hide from whatever was to come. She did not think it would be possible for the fire to cross the bridge.

Astrea started walking the opposite direction of the crowd, but George and Margaret did not move.

“Where are you going?” George yelled.

Astrea turned back. “We need to cross the Thames.”

George's eyes focused on the streets doused in flames, all of which surrounded Billingsgate. “It's too dangerous. The fire might already be there.”

“And what if it’s not? This might be our best chance of escape. We need to get to Southwark.”

Astrea raised her arms towards the Northern part of London. Although the sky was hazy from the smoke, the buildings remained sturdy against the morning sky, untouched by the fire. She wondered how long they would be standing.

Astrea didn’t want to argue with George. She wanted him to trust her. George sighed and shook his head. He took a step forward, uncertain at first, then continued with speed towards her. Margaret followed, falling in line with Astrea.

Astrea was met by clouds of smoke. Her eyes watered as ash flew into her face. She coughed, placing her arm over her mouth and nose. Next to her, Margaret bent forward, coughing up the smoke. George stood over her and wiped the sweat that dripped down his forehead.

Gazing down Pudding Lane, every building had collapsed. The frames were reduced to rubble that emanated a smoky red glow. The street was vacant, swallowed up by the fire, and abandoned by its residents. Only a stray dog roamed, its brown hair singed at the ends.

Astrea’s feet grew unsteady. The soles of her shoes burned as she walked down the road. She yelped and quickened her pace, urging Margaret and George away from the hot coals and ash.

Continuing ahead, they turned down St. Mary’s Hill. The church stood tall, unmarked by the fire. Astrea shuddered knowing this church, like St. Michael’s, could be gone within a few hours.

The alleyway towards the watermen's steps was packed. People pushed each other to get closer to the Thames, but there were no wherries taking them in. Wooden chests and linens bobbed in the river, discarded from burning homes.

The watermen rowed further away, frightened by the peaks of the flames. Those already on the wherries and merchant ships watched and pointed at the scene unfolding before their eyes, as they clung to their safety on the boats.

Astrea pushed closer to the crowd. Everyone waved and screamed for the watermen. Astrea's breaths quickened, smoke settling above them. Sweat bled into her dress, soaking the fabric beneath her arms. Crushed in the mass of bodies, she reached for Margaret's hand, so they were not separated.

The crowd screamed, until a wherry approached Billingsgate. When it rowed closer, people pushed closer to the edge of the steps, all trying to get the waterman's attention.

"Sixpence for a ride!" the waterman shouted.

The crowd roared. A ride across the Thames was typically a penny, but this man was ready to profit.

"You heard me," he said. "I'll take anyone willing to pay sixpence down to Southwark."

Astrea was too far back to get the man's attention. George pushed himself in front of Astrea and squeezed between the cracks in the crowd. He towered over people and waved his arms.

The waterman pointed to a family composed of a father, mother, two young men, and a little girl, filling up all five spots. They dragged their belongings and placed what they could on their laps. One of the bags could not fit, so the father threw it into the river.

"I'll be back!" the waterman yelled.

The crowd erupted again and people scrambled through their pockets, counting their money. Astrea kept still, knowing it would not be wise to count what she had left among people desperate for escape.

George had been right. Escaping by river would be impossible. Hundreds of them clambered there, yet they would be lucky to flag down enough wherries for half of them. How many people would they have to fight through to get a ride?

Astrea looked at Margaret and George.

George read her face. "It'll be hours before we get a ride."

Astrea nodded and her throat tightened. If they waited for a wherry that would not come, the fire would reach Thames Street. They had no choice but to leave, although she knew the journey would be tough on Margaret.

"We have to walk. Maybe we can make it to Thomas," she yelled to them over the murmurs of the crowd.

"If the streets are still there." Margaret's voice was scratched from the smoke.

"They were clear an hour ago." George's face hardened.

Astrea swallowed the knot in her throat. She should have listened to George, but there was no point to mull over it now. It was done.

"Let us not waste more time," she said.

Astrea led them away and they pushed through the pack of bodies. She sucked in her breath, and stood on her toes, trying to clear a path in the mass of bodies. Everyone's weight leaned onto her. She gripped onto George and he yelled, but everyone was crammed into the alley. It was impossible for them to back away. George pushed against the bodies and formed a small line with Astrea and Margaret, until they squeezed through the crowd.

When they finally reached the outskirts of the crowd, Astrea drew in a large breath. She hunched over, breathing quickly, but the snap of the flames wouldn't let her forget. She looked down at her hands. They were coated in a gray film from the ash and soot. Astrea wiped her hands on her skirt, cleaning them off the best she could.

Astrea marched over to Margaret. Her bag rested by her feet.

"Allow me to carry your bag," Astrea offered.

Margaret shook her head.

"Please, this will be a long walk." After all that Margaret had done for her in the last few weeks, it was Astrea's turn to help.

"Only for a short while," Margaret relented.

Astrea grabbed Margaret's bag and slung it over her shoulder, alongside her own. She looked to George and the three departed down the street, deeper into London. They ran, but this time they followed the crowd. Screams consumed every corner. Ash and orange sparks flew in the air, like raindrops.

At the edge of Tower Street, people screamed, stomping over clothes thrown into the streets. It was chaos as they decided between saving themselves, or the last remnants of their lives. They could only carry so much and hope the rest survived. Everyone heaved large bags over their shoulders, bent over from the weight and coughing as they fled from the impending flames.

A father shouted out of a fourth floor window. Books were thrown askew beneath him, dirt bleeding into the pages. He hurled an armful of clothes out of the window. Two daughters ran out of the front door. The younger gripped a cloth doll in her arms and the older ran after

their belongings, tossing them into a bag. Astrea scurried around them, far from the items thrown out of the window.

They continued on, until Astrea slowed. On Lombard street now, her back ached from carrying the bags and her feet were sore. They were not far from Cheapside, and hopefully, Thomas would be there. Astrea hated that she had to turn to him once again, but what could she do? There was nowhere else she could go.

“How much further?” Margaret panted. Sweat pooled down her face and her neck, soaking into the neckline of her dress.

“Come here,” Astrea coughed. She knew Margaret needed to rest, so she brought her to the side of the road where they would not impede on passerby.

Margaret slumped onto the ground, beneath the first floor window of a tavern.

George tugged on Astrea’s arm. He drew in sharp breaths and his hands shook, as he held onto the parchment Thomas had given him. “We have to go to our mother.”

Astrea shook her head. “There is no time to spare.” She lowered her voice. “Margaret cannot be out here much longer.”

“Then you should go to Thomas and I will find mother. I have to make sure she is safe,” George pleaded.

Astrea had not spoken to her mother in four months. When she accepted the mission to Antwerp, her mother cursed her out and warned her not to save William. For a long time, Astrea heard nothing and when her mother finally wrote to her, Astrea could not bring herself to respond. Her mother had been right. She was a failure and William would forever be marked as a traitor. Despite everything, Astrea’s stomach sank when she thought of her mother out there all alone.

She looked back at Margaret, who coughed into her arm, searching for fresh air. Astrea swallowed the knot in her throat. “We must find safety as well. I worry I cannot help Margaret alone.”

“I understand—”

“We will go to Thomas’ and then decide,” Astrea told him. Their mother was far from Fish Street. They had time to get to her, but with every passing minute, she grew more worried about Margaret.

George bit down on his tongue, holding back whatever he intended to say. “I will help you today, but come morning, I will go to her.”

Astrea nodded.

George stepped back into place and grabbed Margaret’s arm to help her off the ground, now that she had caught her breath. “Margaret, we must hurry,” he said. “I understand it is difficult, but once we arrive at Thomas’, you can rest.”

Margaret nodded. George and Astrea strung her between their arms. As they trudged down the road, Astrea looked back. Fire framed the skyline, dousing every building in red. The wind fanned the flames, crawling from one rooftop to the next. It wouldn’t be long until the fire crept deeper into London. She was ready. She only hoped others were prepared for what was to come.

Chapter Three

September 2, 1666

At the corner of Bread Street, Astrea hobbled down the road. Her breaths were shallow and her legs heavy, throat burning from hours on the run. Sweat dripped into her eyes, but she tightened her grip on Margaret's arm, dragging her further into Cheapside.

Black smoke settled over London and flames scorched buildings, prowling forward with the wind. Somehow, life in Cheapside continued on. Astrea watched as a woman slipped out of a bakery, three fresh loaves in hand. Two children hopped down the street and threw a ball. No one was blind to the ash that drifted over their doorsteps like snow, but their lives were untouched by the fire that was still a distant threat.

As they approached, the children stopped throwing the ball and pointed at them. George stood on the other side of Margaret, the three of them making a line. Astrea noticed the streaks of soot that ran across his face. His brown shirt clung to his chest, sweat staining the center. The cloth had slipped off Margaret's hair and it was a knotted mess, covering her left eye as they trekked along.

Astrea wondered how she looked. When she peered down, the front of her once blue dress was darkened by the soot. She shook her head, knowing it wasn't the time to be concerned with appearances.

Astrea stopped before a four story, brick building. Windows lined the face of Thomas' house and the door was painted a pristine white. She and George helped Margaret onto the ground, so she could finally rest. Her forehead hung in her lap and she breathed heavily. George placed their bags next to her and followed Astrea to the front door.

Astrea's hand lingered on the brass knocker. She hesitated.

"We should not have come," George muttered.

"What were we to do?" Astrea turned to him. "We could not reach him by post."

"Thomas has done much for us. I never wanted to intrude upon him further. We should go to another inn."

Her throat tightened. Of course, she agreed with George. She hated running to Thomas every time she was in trouble, but she always came back because he never turned her away. She doubted today would be the day when that changed. Even if they did make their way to another inn, there was no certainty they would remain safe. She ignored George's words, lifted the knocker, and pounded it three times.

Astrea's heart hammered every second she waited. When the door squeaked open, she jumped back. A young woman peeked out of the crack in the doorway. Her hair was pulled up into a yellow cloth and she wore a brown, linen dress with an apron tied over it. Her eyes widened at the three of them.

Astrea ran her hands down her skirt, straightening the wrinkles and wiping off the ash as best she could. She cleared her throat. "Is Mr. Colepeper home?"

The maid blinked furiously, craning her head to look at Margaret and George. "May I ask who is inquiring after him?"

Astrea's stomach churned. "Please tell Mr. Colepeper that Astrea and George are here."

The maid nodded, unphased by their names. "You can wait here." She bowed, then slipped back inside, closing the door in their faces.

Astrea's hands shook and George bounced on his heels.

The door opened again. The maid lingered inside, while Thomas strode out. He was dressed in a green waistcoat and tan trousers. His eyes landed on Astrea.

He beamed. "Thank god, you are safe!"

"I am sorry to come here unannounced. I tried to find a way to Southwark, but I feared if we waited any longer..." she trailed off. The explanation would always be hollow. A way to excuse herself for running to his doorstep at any sign of trouble. This, however, was the one time everything was out of her hands.

"You are welcome here." He nodded firmly and looked at George and Margaret. "All of you are welcome to stay as long as need be."

Astrea sighed in relief. They could finally stop running. Cheapside was far enough from the fire and she doubted it would reach there. She convinced herself that by tomorrow, the fire would be out and her nightmare of a day would be tucked into the past.

Thomas stepped back inside, pulling the door open. Astrea went in first. At the center of the first floor was a set of stairs that led down to the kitchen and the servant's quarters. The staircase also climbed to the upper floors where the bedrooms were located.

Thomas looked to his maid. "Jane, prepare two rooms for our guests." He motioned to Margaret. "And show Astrea's maid her quarters."

Jane nodded and walked over to Margaret. "You may follow me," she said.

Margaret glanced at Astrea. In a house this large, it was customary for Margaret to stay with the other maids. For them, it felt strange. During their months of travel, they could never afford separate rooms for each of them, and Margaret had been a constant at Astrea's side.

Astrea watched as Jane and Margaret departed down the staircase, while she and George stuck to the doorway. She feared stepping further into the house and tracking in the ash and dirt that coated her boots.

Light poured into the home, the curtains drawn open. She peered down the hallway. Every wall was paneled with wood. Further down, a door was left ajar and there was a long table with placings set. A large portrait of Thomas and his wife hung at the end of the hallway. In the painting, Charlotte wore a purple dress, while Thomas stood behind her, hand pressed on her shoulder.

“Your home is beautiful,” Astrea said.

“Thank you for having us,” George added.

“I must show you around later,” Thomas said. “It is hard to believe this is the first time you have visited.”

Astrea nodded, but kept silent. Of course, she understood it was purposeful. There was a reason she was never given a formal invitation. She could take it as a slight, but she understood why.

Jane returned from below and ran up the staircase, a stack of white sheets in her arms.

“Is Mrs. Colepeper home?” Astrea asked.

Thomas nodded. “She is resting, but will join us for dinner.”

Astrea remembered that Charlotte was a few months pregnant. Selfishly, she worried what Charlotte would think when she woke up to guests in her home. They had never met, and this would be quite the introduction.

Jane returned and stopped halfway down the staircase. She looked at Astrea. “Your room is ready. I can show you to it.”

“That would be wonderful.” Astrea lifted up her skirt and followed Jane to the third floor. The hallway was narrow and there were three doors, but only one room was left open. Jane waited for Astrea to enter.

A four-poster bed sat in the corner. Draped across the mattress was a yellow dress. A desk was placed on the other end of the room with a water basin on top. The curtain was drawn open and beneath it was a window seat.

Astrea was speechless. It was the finest room she had stepped into in months. She could only imagine what was in the rest of Thomas’ home, if this was the space he reserved for his guests.

“I hope everything is to your liking,” Jane said, hands clasped together. “Is there anything else you require?”

Astrea shook her head. “This is perfect.”

Jane curtsied and left the room, gently closing the door behind her.

Astrea approached the desk. She dipped a cloth into the water and wiped her face, all the way down to her neck, and then passed over her hands. When she pulled the cloth away, it was gray from the soot. She shuddered thinking about how dirty she looked when she first entered Thomas’ home and was grateful that Charlotte had been resting during her arrival.

She undressed herself, rolling up her stained blue dress and placed it in her bag. She felt for William’s letter. The parchment was crumpled up beneath a layer of her clothes, so she smoothed out the wrinkles, and left the letter on the desk. For once, she listened to Margaret’s advice and did not read it.

Exhausted from the day, Astrea pulled on a clean shift that was left out for her. She folded up the yellow dress, placed it on the window seat, and tugged the curtain shut. With the room darkened, she fell into bed.

Astrea woke to complete darkness. Realizing it was late, she lifted herself out of bed, arms and legs still sore. Running to the window, Astrea threw the curtain aside. She held her breath, but in the distance, the flames blazed. Bands of orange lit the darkened night. How, she wondered, could the fire be growing?

Astrea rushed over to the desk and pulled on the yellow dress. The silk fabric was smooth to her touch. The sleeves were puffy around her upper arms and a large bow rested on her chest. She ran her fingers through her hair, untangling the knots as best she could.

She slipped out of the room and paced down the stairs. Voices rose up from the first floor and forks clattered against plates. Following the chatter, she made her way to the dining room. At the head of the table was Thomas and at the other end was Charlotte. George sat between them and across from him was an untouched plate left for Astrea.

Her face reddened. Not only had she intruded upon Thomas, but now she was late for supper. The room turned silent when she stepped inside. She felt bare as Charlotte's eyes peeled into her.

"You're awake!" George smiled.

"I am sorry to be late," Astrea said.

Thomas waved his hand in front of his face. "You needed your rest. How do you feel?"

"Very well. Thank you," Astrea said. The chair clawed against the floor and she took a seat.

Three candles were dispersed across the table. Astrea helped herself to a piece of roasted chicken, while Thomas poured her a glass of wine. Everyone's plates were almost emptied, finishing up the last bites of food.

"Astrea, I do not believe you have met Charlotte," Thomas said.

She shook her head and turned to Charlotte. She was still, chin pointed up. Her brown hair was drawn into tight ringlets that fell down the sides of her neck, brushing against her bare shoulders. The pale pink sleeves of her dress were large puffs and three pink bows sat on the bodice of the dress. Her hand rested on her stomach, which swelled in a small bump.

"I have not had the pleasure. It is wonderful to finally make your acquaintance. I have heard much from Thomas." Astrea smiled at Charlotte.

Charlotte did not smile back. Perhaps she could detect the falsity in Astrea's words. Astrea had not seen Thomas much since the marriage, and if she was honest, they rarely spoke of Charlotte.

Astrea knew little about Charlotte, except that she was the eldest daughter of a lawyer, Henry Abbott. Their wedding seemed to occur in haste and Astrea could only guess why. Thomas' first wife had passed during the plague last summer, and he seemed all too eager to marry again.

Astrea never understood how Thomas was able to marry so soon after his first wife passed. She asked him once, but was met with anger. Now it had become one of those unspoken things between them, and all traces of her were erased. How strange that people could appear in and out of lives, leaving invisible stains. And Charlotte—how little she must know.

"I have heard much about you as well." Charlotte finally answered, but she did not look in Astrea's direction.

“We are indebted to you both,” Astrea said. “Thank you for welcoming us into your home.”

Astrea dug into her food, the grumbling overtaking her stomach. She wondered how Margaret was faring, but knew this was not the time to ask. Maybe she could find Jane after they ate and ask to be taken to her.

“George was telling us of your journey. I am sorry to hear of what happened,” Thomas said. “I do wonder how the inn has fared.”

Astrea knew the Boar’s Head Inn was a common meeting place for men of Thomas’ stature, so naturally he would be concerned.

“I do not know. We left before the fire came.” Astrea hesitated, before asking what she wanted to know. “How did it begin?”

“We believe it was an attack from the Dutch,” Thomas’ jaw hardened.

Astrea’s breath slowed and Charlotte shifted in her seat.

“Should they not put an end to it?” Astrea asked.

“I am afraid it is not so simple. In time, the fire will surely go out.” Thomas said.

“They must do something,” Astrea said.

“Let us not talk about such things,” Thomas dismissed Astrea. “There is nothing to do. We will wait until the fire comes to an end.”

Astrea’s cheeks turned red. If only Thomas had seen Fish Street in flames. Then he would understand. Of course, it was easier to divulge in the comforts of his home than to remember what was happening outside.

Across from her, George's eyes widened and he shifted in his seat. He shook his head at Astrea. It was not wise for her to continue speaking. Her hand clenched around her fork and she forced down another bite of food.

"I must excuse myself." Charlotte placed down her glass and yelled, "Jane!"

Jane scurried into the dining room and helped Charlotte out of her chair. Charlotte wobbled out of the room.

"Is she unwell?" George asked.

"I am afraid so," Thomas sighed, taking a sip of his wine.

"Please tell Mrs. Colepeper that we wish her well," George said.

"I will." Thomas nodded.

Silence drifted between the three of them, filled only by their forks scraping against their plates. Astrea's head ached and the food didn't settle well in her stomach. She was not welcome in this house, even if Thomas said she was.

George looked between the two of them. He placed down his fork and stood. "I am sorry to ruin this meal, but I must depart as well."

"George, what are you doing?" Astrea hissed.

"I cannot leave our mother out there alone." He turned to Thomas. "Thank you for your generosity."

Astrea swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Surely, the fire has not reached her yet," Thomas said. "It will be safer to travel in the morning."

"The fire moves closer every hour. It could be here by tomorrow."

Thomas balked at George. "It'll be out by the morning."

“They said the same last night,” George said.

As much as Astrea wanted to believe that too, she knew better. How long would it take for Thomas to learn he was no safer than they had been yesterday? If what he said was true, and it was the Dutch, when would this finally come to an end?

Astrea did not want to go. She could remain in the comforts of Thomas’ home, and hope the fire did not encroach upon Cheapside. Then she remembered how George had followed her anywhere she asked, and had never wavered. She also knew that her mother was alone and could not escape on her own should the fire reach her. Was it fair to leave her out there? Forget the past. Certainly, she owed her mother the courtesy during this time of danger.

Astrea placed down her fork and folded her napkin back onto the table. Thomas’ eyes widened when she stood. She looked at George and said, “I will go with you.”