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Hester Prynne's Arrival and the Scarlet Letter: Chapters 1-4

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter," the story begins with the arrival of Hester Prynne in a Puritan settlement in 17th-century Massachusetts. Let's explore the events that unfold in the first four chapters, which set the stage for the novel's themes of sin, judgment, and resilience.



Chapter 1: The Prison-Door

The novel opens with a description of a prison door in the Puritan settlement. The prison door symbolizes the harsh judgment and punishment that await those who transgress the community's strict moral code. Outside the prison, a group of Puritan townspeople gathers to witness the punishment of Hester Prynne, who is about to be released from prison. Hester is condemned for the sin of adultery, and her newborn daughter, Pearl, is a constant reminder of her transgression.

Chapter 2: The Market-Place

Hester is led to a scaffold in the town's market-place to endure public humiliation. She wears a plain gray gown and a scarlet letter "A" on her chest, symbolizing her sin. As Hester stands on the scaffold with her infant daughter, the townspeople judge her harshly. Hester, however, displays a quiet strength and dignity throughout the ordeal. The crowd speculates about the identity of Pearl's father, but Hester remains silent.

Chapter 3: The Recognition

In this chapter, we learn more about Hester's past. She was married to a scholar from England, but he sent her ahead to America while he finished his studies. Years passed without any word from him, leading Hester to believe that he had perished at sea. This is when her affair with another man took place, resulting in her pregnancy and subsequent punishment.

Chapter 4: The Interview

After her public humiliation, Hester is taken back to the prison to await her sentence. While there, she has an encounter with her estranged husband, Roger Chillingworth. Chillingworth, a physician, arrives in the settlement and takes up residence in a house near the prison. He disguises his true identity and assumes the role of a doctor. Chillingworth is determined to discover the identity of Pearl's father and seeks revenge on the man who wronged his wife.

As we journey through these early chapters, we witness the harsh judgment of the Puritan society, Hester's resilience in the face of public humiliation, and the introduction of key characters like Roger Chillingworth. The scarlet letter "A" and the scaffold serve as powerful symbols that shape the events and characters in the novel.

