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Taniel Lo

Anima Vita



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Аннотация

What if your eccentric aunt left you a magical forest, a grumpy keeper, and a raven with an attitude problem?

Annie thought she was signing up for paperwork. Instead, she got lynx cuddles, raccoon thieves, and a man who blushes every time she calls him «sweetie.»

Anima Vita is strange. Messy. Wonderful. And it might just save her soul — if it doesn't get her killed first.

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Chapter 1

Late August. The air is still warm, but there's already a subtle, barely perceptible chill hanging in it, and it smells of copper from fallen leaves and damp earth. The taxi, crunching over gravel, stopped in front of tall cast-iron gates. Entwined with wrought-iron grapevines, an ornate inscription was visible on them: «Anima Vita.»

I paid the driver, and the car, turning around, disappeared around a bend in the forest road, leaving me in a ringing silence. The rustle of leaves and the distant cry of a bird only amplified it. I looked down: in my hands, I was unconsciously clutching a sheet of heavy paper with the elegant but timeworn logo of a law firm. And that very letter, attached to the dry language of the will.

«My dear,

If you are reading these lines, it means curiosity has outweighed common sense. And that is a good thing. «Anima Vita' is not just a patch of land. It is a breath. It is a covenant. The month you will spend here is not a formality. It is a trial, both for you and for this place. Care for my wards. Listen to the forest. Do not seek magic — allow it to find you.

The house and everything in it is at your disposal. Damon, the keeper, will help, but do not expect enthusiasm from him. He is devoted to «Anima Vita' more than any relative, myself included.

With hope,

Margaret von Dreyer»

«To refuse means to forfeit the inheritance entirely,» I muttered, raising my eyes to the gates. «Well, Aunt Margaret. If you're inviting me to play your game — let's give it a try.»

My childhood and early adolescence I spent on Grandma's farm — the smell of hay, hands in the dirt, messing around with yard dogs and the sheep I helped to herd. As a child, I knew how to read the pre-storm sky and knew every wild strawberry clearing. And then I grew up and, it seemed, traded boundless fields for endless corridors, my anxiety becoming an old friend — annoying, but familiar.

And then — bam! — in the middle of this closed loop, I'm offered a month's stay on a private nature reserve somewhere in the middle of nowhere. From that one sentence wafted not just a return to childhood, but a whiff of mystery, old money, and a complex mixture of smells — lavender from the garden, floor polish, and something wild, animalistic, something that awakened a long-forgotten instinct in me.

I tore my eyes from the letter. Beyond the gates stretched a well-kept gravel path leading to a single-story stone manor in the Art Nouveau style. The house seemed solid and squat, as if it had cozily sunk into the earth beneath a massive roof of dark slate. It looked old, but not neglected: clean windows, tidy shutters, wild grapevines twisting up its walls. To the left, the roofs of enclosures were visible; to the right, the glass wall of

a greenhouse glinted in the sun. And behind the house began a dense, slightly hilly forest, stretching toward the blue of distant mountains.

Before I could find a bell or a side gate, the heavy oak door of the manor creaked. A man stepped out onto the porch.

He looked like he'd stepped off the cover of a magazine about the rugged romance of the wild. Tall, in a worn, dark flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. Jeans tucked into sturdy boots. Sharp features, a tense, square jaw with a light stubble, and eyes the color of young pine needles in morning mist held the silence of backwoods and a secret, animal life. And those eyes were now studying me from the top step of the porch — without open hostility, but with such dense wariness that I felt uneasy.

«Damn,» a dumbfounded thought flashed through my head. «Aunt Margot really could have warned me that the keeper here is... well, all of this.»

As he descended the steps, his movements were confident and economical, like a predator's. A few steps away from me, on the other side of the gate, he halted.

«Damon,» he introduced himself curtly, his voice low and slightly hoarse. He didn't offer his hand, just nodded toward my suitcase. «Margaret wrote that you would be coming. There's no time for a slow start. Feeding is in an hour. Let's go, I'll show you where you'll be staying.»

His gaze slid over my city coat and neat shoes, and a barely noticeable, skeptical crease flickered at the corner of his mouth.

He was waiting for my reaction, the first word or action in this new, strange world.

I deliberately slowly looked him over from head to toe, finally fixing my gaze directly on his eyes.

«Good afternoon, Damon, pleased to meet you. I had a good trip, thank you. A little tired, though. Oh, how kind of you to get right down to business. Well then, show me where I'll be living, Well, aren't you a sweetheart,» I said with heavy sarcasm.

The corner of his mouth twitched, but not into a smile. Rather, a fleeting expression crossed his face — that he had seen right through me and appreciated my audacity. The cold green of his eyes remained impenetrable.

«Afternoon's been lousy,» he countered dryly, looking at the heavy clouds gathering over the forest. «Don't thank me yet. Save your gratitude. You're going to need it.»

He turned his back, demonstrating the conversation was over, and pushed the massive gate leaf. The cast iron groaned, but yielded easily. «Let's go. Don't forget your luggage.»

Damon didn't offer to help with the suitcase, but simply walked ahead along the gravel path, clearly expecting me to follow. His broad back in the worn fabric was a silent reproach to my supposed city-bred softness.

Along the way, he threw out short, tightly wrung explanations, without looking back:

«The main house. Kitchen, library, your room is on the east side. There's hot water, but the water heater is temperamental.

For housekeeping matters — see Victoria. She takes care of the house. The enclosures on the left — that's where Lyra and the others are. On the right, the greenhouse and the physic garden; Luka, the vet, looks after those. You'll meet them later.»

I silently nodded to his back, trying both to memorize the route and to quell my inner irritation. What gave him the right to speak to me like a raw recruit on a parade ground? But my anger began to smolder, giving way to another, far more vexing observation: I couldn't tear my eyes away from his back. A broad, straight back under the rough flannel, with the clear silhouette of shoulder blades. And shoulders... God, what shoulders. Not the kind absurdly pumped up in a gym, but the natural, powerful kind, built not for a mirror but for real work.

On the porch, he finally stopped and turned around, assessing whether I was keeping up.

«The rules are simple. Onto the sanctuary grounds — only with my permission. No going into the forest alone. Don't tease the animals, don't hand-feed them without permission. Any questions?»

As he spoke, a shadow detached from the house's cornice and swooped down smoothly, settling on the old cast-iron lantern grate beside me. It was a large black raven. Its feathers shimmered not with blue, but like polished sterling silver. It cocked its head to the side and stared at me intently with one gleaming eye. In its beak, it clutched something small and glinting.

Damon glanced at the bird, and something akin to annoyance flashed across his face.

«Corbin. Pay him no mind.» But his tone carried a strange, almost respectful note.

The raven cawed once and dropped a small object at my feet. It turned out to be an old, verdigris-encrusted fragment of a clock spring. Then it flapped its wings and disappeared around the corner of the house.

I bent down, picked up the find, straightened up, and said:

«I have a million questions, but they can wait until I've found the bathroom. Thank you for the thorough briefing.»

With those words, I took my suitcase, walked past him into the house, and brushed his shoulder lightly.

My shoulder only grazed his arm, but I felt the muscles under the rough fabric tense. He didn't recoil, but stepped sharply aside, letting me pass; his gaze grew even colder, if that was possible.

A sharp, almost physical wave of shame hit my temples. God, what am I doing? Taunting him like a schoolgirl? But along with the shame, another, strange current ran through me — an awareness of his strength, hidden under his shirt, and his instantaneous, restrained reaction. He had flinched back as if I'd burned him. Or was he afraid of touch? «Wow,» another bitter-ironic thought flashed through my head. «With a fuse like that. Too bad it's clearly pointed in the wrong direction.»

«The room is at the end of the corridor to the right,» he threw over my shoulder, not moving from the spot. His voice was

level, but with apparent irritation. «The key is in the lock. The washroom is across the hall.»

I walked down the long corridor, feeling his fixed gaze on my back. The smell of old wood, wax, and dried herbs hung in the air.

The room turned out to be spacious, but ascetic. A high ceiling, a parquet floor that creaked underfoot. A large window faced east — looking out onto the clearing before the forest. A simple bed with a wicker headboard, a dresser, a writing desk, and a chair. On the desk stood an empty vase and a stack of clean linens. Everything was clean, but without frills.

As I looked around, my eye caught an oval mirror in a dark wooden frame above the dresser. Out of curiosity, or perhaps to reassure myself that I was still here after this insane day, I stepped closer.

From the mirror, a tired woman looked back at me, with a face I jokingly called «too ordinary to remember.» Chestnut hair, unruly across my shoulders after the journey, set off the urban pallor of my skin — a sad contrast to the tan of my small town years. Brown eyes — not bottomless and mysterious, like in novels, just brown, currently shadowed by the blue of sleeplessness underneath. The only thing I liked about myself were my cheekbones, sharp, despite all my love for pizza. «At least my lips aren't bitten,» the next thought flickered. On the whole — the face of an office worker, slightly lost in someone else's fairy tale. I grimaced at my reflection. «Well then, heiress?

Shall we?»

Turning from the mirror, I heard sounds drifting in through the open window: a distant, hoarse roar (Lyra, probably), a calm male voice humming a tune (most likely that very Luka), and the ceaseless rustle of leaves.

In my hand, I still clutched the clock fragment gifted by the raven. On the brass surface, beneath a layer of patina, a fine engraving could be made out — not numbers, but rather a tangled pattern resembling a labyrinth.

About ten minutes later, after I had managed to find the washroom (old-fashioned, but with working plumbing) and somewhat collected myself, Damon's clear, low voice came from deep within the house:

«Fifteen minutes, at the main enclosure. Don't be late. Lyra dislikes when her schedule is disrupted.»

There was no hint of invitation in his tone. It was an order.

I rolled my eyes indignantly — luckily, he couldn't see it — and opened my suitcase. I had left his skepticism at our meeting unremarked, but now I decided to answer differently. My grandmother had taught me the most important thing: if work lies ahead — dress and act accordingly.

I changed into thick, well-worn jeans, an old t-shirt, and threw on a black zip-up hoodie. On its back, a sarcastic inscription read, «Life's a bitch, and so am I.» I put on sturdy, high-laced boots, tied my hair into a bun, and went downstairs.

Halfway down the corridor, I thought I heard a soft creak of a

floorboard behind me. Turning around, I saw no one, but a black tail with a silver sheen flickered out of the shadows, disappearing around the corner. Corbin, it seemed, was watching me.

Chapter 2

The hall smelled of freshly brewed coffee. The kitchen door was ajar, and a soft clinking of dishes drifted out from inside.

Damon was waiting by the open front door, leaning against the frame and looking toward the forest. Hearing my footsteps, he turned around. His gaze, swift and assessing, swept over my new appearance — the worn jeans, the defiant hoodie, the practical boots. His eyebrows rose for a second, not in approval, but rather in surprise. He noticed the difference: it wasn't just a change of clothes, but a transformation into someone practical and... familiar. The skeptical crease by his mouth didn't go anywhere, but a shadow of appraisal appeared in his eyes, replacing contemptuous indifference.

«Well, did you take note of that?» flashed through my head with a mix of gloating and strange excitement. I had managed to surprise him. A small victory. But why the hell did his slow, studying gaze make the blood rush to my cheeks? It's just a look. Though, looking at those cheekbones and that stubborn jawline, it's easy to forget about simplicity.»

«Quick,» he noted, and that single word held a hint of disappointment. He had clearly expected a delay. My readiness turned out to be an unexpected move, slightly disarming.

He silently nodded toward the path leading to the enclosures and walked ahead, but this time not as briskly, allowing me to

walk beside him. He began to speak again, and his tone became a little less detached, more businesslike.

«Our main resident is Lyra. A Caucasian lynx. Independent, intelligent. Today is her check-up. We'll need to go into the enclosure, let her sniff you while I check her paws and coat condition. You need to stand calmly, don't look her directly in the eyes for too long, but don't turn away either. Breathe evenly. She'll sense if you're afraid.»

He cast a quick glance at me, as if checking my reaction to this information.

We approached a spacious enclosure, fenced with high mesh netting, with trees, boulders, and a small stream inside. In the shadow of one of the boulders, blending with the stone and the shade, lay a large cat. Her fur was smoky gray with dark spots, and when she slowly raised her head, I was pierced by two burning amber discs. The gaze was aware, incredibly alive and intelligent, full of wild, primal focus.

Lyra stood up, stretched with unhurried, regal grace, and, not taking her golden gaze off me, took several silent steps in our direction, stopping a meter from the mesh. She sniffed the air, the wide tufts on her ears twitching.

I sat down on the ground, cross-legged, in front of the enclosure entrance and extended my hand toward the mesh at a sufficient distance for her to smell it, but not reach through the openings.

«Hello, my good girl,» I said affectionately. «What a beauty

you are.»

Damon froze. He had already started turning the key in the enclosure lock, but my movement stopped him. He spun around sharply, alarm flaring in his eyes — not for me, but for the animal, for a breach of protocol.

But before he could say anything, something unexpected happened.

Lyra slowly approached the mesh. Her powerful paws stepped soundlessly. She inclined her head and deeply, noisily inhaled the air several times, sniffing my palm. Her amber eyes narrowed, studying me. Then she let out a low, hoarse sound, something between a purr and a rumble, and... lightly, almost politely, rubbed her cheek against the mesh where my hand was. It was a gesture of acknowledgment, of greeting.

Damon exhaled. The expression in his eyes shifted to profound amazement. He watched in silence for several seconds, his stern face utterly disconcerted.

«She... doesn't do that with newcomers,» he finally said, his voice muted, almost to himself. «Usually, she retreats deeper into the enclosure and observes from the shadows. For weeks.»

Something inside me both lurched and unfurled at the same time. This was more than just «quick.» This was... acknowledgment. From him. From a man whose approval, I realized with annoyance, had for some reason already begun to mean something.

He looked at me again, and now his gaze held not just

appraisal, but burgeoning curiosity. He slowly turned the key, opened the gate slightly, but didn't enter, signaling for me to stay put.

«Lyra, come here, girl,» he called calmly but confidently.

The lynx, after casting one last perceptive glance at me, turned and trotted gracefully over to Damon, allowing him to conduct a quick examination of her paws. He worked quickly and professionally, his large hands unexpectedly gentle.

I stood still, watching. Those very hands, which seemed built for hard labor, now moved with surgical precision and care. The contrast was staggering. Against my will, a thought raced through my head: «God, if those hands could just...» The thought broke off, unfinished, which made it all the more searing. I abruptly looked away.

While checking, he said, without looking at me:

«You didn't bait her with food. You didn't try to establish eye contact. You... sat down. Lowered yourself to her level. And you spoke. In a voice...» He faltered, searching for the word. «In which there was no fear. There was respect.»

Having finished the exam, he released Lyra. She made a circle around the enclosure and returned to the mesh opposite me, lying down nearby, simply observing.

Damon came out, locked the gate, and wiped his hands on his trousers. He stood, looking down at me, and I could feel his intent gaze once more.

«How did you know how to do that?» he asked directly. The

question didn't sound like an attack, but like a genuine desire to understand.

«I love animals,» I answered simply, shrugging. «And they love me.»

I stood up and brushed off my jeans.

«In the city, I volunteer at homeless shelters,» I added, a little quieter. I said it almost offhandedly, not expecting a reaction. Just to fill the silence. And so that he might understand that I'm not quite the helpless city-dweller he took me for.

Damon listened in silence. He didn't reply, only nodded. But it was a different kind of nod — not a formal one, but one signifying that the information had been noted and something in his internal picture of the world had shifted.

«A good thing,» he finally said, and his voice lost some of its icy hoarseness. The warmth breaking through the ice in those two words heated me far more than the morning sun. «But here... they're different. Not homeless. They are guardians.»

He looked at Lyra, who, lying down, was slowly wagging the tip of her tail, as if listening to our conversation.

And in that moment, I saw him not as a watchman, not as an overseer, but as a person for whom this place was not a job. It was something sacred. Something personal. And he had just opened the door to this sanctuary of his, just a crack. A sharp, almost painful wave of tenderness mixed with an inexplicable sadness. He was so beautiful when he spoke of his work. So whole. And so... hopelessly alone in this role of his, guardian of guardians. I

suddenly had a wild urge to say something that would erase that sadness from his face. But I just nodded silently, understanding that any words now would be superfluous.

«Let's go,» Damon broke the pause. «I'll show you the rest. And introduce you to Luka. He's in charge of their health.»

The keeper led me further along the path. In the next enclosures, I saw creatures no less remarkable: a fox with fur the color of autumn copper and an incredibly intelligent gaze; a pair of raccoons whose facial «masks» were not black, but silvery-gray — they were busily washing something in a basin of water, glancing sideways at me; an owl with feathers shimmering bronze, who sat completely motionless, though I could feel her all-seeing attention.

Unexpectedly, Damon stopped and, without looking at me, said:

«The hoodie. „Life's a bitch...“»

He paused, and I saw his shoulders give a slight shudder. Was he... laughing? No, it was more of a quiet snort, a suppressed, internal sound.

«Cheeky,» he stated, and for the first time, a shadow of something remotely resembling approval crept into his tone. Or, at least, an acknowledgment of my audacity.

The path led to a small, cozy building resembling a laboratory with large windows. From the open door, over the sounds of Vivaldi, a pleasant baritone voice drifted out, humming along. A young man in glasses and a light-colored lab coat, adorned with

several bright stains that looked like marker traces, appeared in the doorway. Seeing us, he smiled broadly, but his gaze lingered for a moment on Damon's motionless figure, as if checking if it was okay.

«Ah, company!» he exclaimed, his voice carrying genuine, slightly hurried joy. «I thought you were patrolling in proud solitude again, Damon. Luka,» he introduced himself, now turning to me and wiping his hands on his coat before extending one. «Pleased to meet you! Finally, a living face instead of a black-and-white photograph from the file.»

The rush of his friendliness was so unexpected that I lost my footing for a second. After Damon's behavior, it was like a sip of hot tea in a blizzard. I almost physically felt the vise of tension inside me unclench. «Well, there you go,» I thought with relief, «at least someone here is normal.»

His handshake was warm and energetic, and his gaze, glancing over my hoodie, sparkled with merry mischief.

«And with taste, I see!» He gave an appreciative chuckle.

I laughed involuntarily, and the sound was sincere and light. But then, out of the corner of my eye, I caught Damon's figure. And that fleeting contrast pierced me with a strange thought: Luka was like a ray of sun — pleasant, warm, but... simple. He lacked that magnetic, dangerous depth, that tension of silence that emanated from the man standing behind. And for some reason, even breathing more freely next to Luka, I couldn't turn my inner gaze away from that difference.

Damon, standing a little apart, crossed his arms over his chest. His face had turned to stone.

Could my laughter, my relaxation be irritating him? Or was he just jealous of the attention? The last thought was so absurd and so tempting that I nearly snorted. «No, Annie, don't get your hopes up. He's just guarding his daily routine from an invasion of noisy elements.» But even that sober thought couldn't suppress the burgeoning feeling: for some reason, I wanted even a trace of a lively reaction to appear on his stone face, too. And for it to be my doing.

«Annie,» I smiled back, picking up his light tone.

«Annie! Excellent. Well then, how do you find our abode? Lyra didn't frighten you? She's a lady with character,» Luka continued, as if afraid a pause would set in.

«Character is when they growl and hiss,» Damon said quietly, still looking away. «She sat down and listened.»

Luka just waved a hand.

«I see, I see, contact has been established! Lyra is our best diagnostician. If she accepted you, it means your soul is in order. Unlike some,» he winked, less confidently, in the keeper's direction.

Damon snorted and turned away, pretending to study a branch of the nearest tree with extraordinary interest.

«Come in, come in,» Luka gestured, inviting me into the building. «I'm actually on a coffee break. I'll show you our mini-lab, tell you who's sick with what, and most importantly — who

our biggest thief and troublemaker is.»

Inside, it smelled of antiseptic, fresh herbs, and coffee. A steaming mug stood on the table; around it, laid out in perfect but idiosyncratic order, were medical instruments, stacks of papers, and several strange objects: dried plants, bundles of feathers, a small, glittering stone.

The atmosphere here was different — scholarly, slightly mad, but open. Luka rattled off facts and jokes, and I nodded, trying to absorb it all. But part of my attention, like a compass needle, stubbornly deflected back toward the door.

As Luka was animatedly explaining the vaccination system, Damon did not follow us inside. He remained outside, leaning against the door frame, in a strip of sunlight and shadow. He didn't interfere, didn't leave, but his silent presence was palpable, like a quiet, watchful shadow on the threshold of two worlds.

Suddenly, a black flash darted through the open window. Corbin settled on the windowsill, cawed once — demandingly — and stared at Luka, or rather, at the jar of cookies on the table.

«And here's our feathered tax collector!» Luka laughed. «Corbin, old boy, your share's already been given out today!»

But he still took out a cookie and offered it to the raven. The bird deftly took the treat, but instead of flying away, turned its head and stared directly at me. In his jet-black eye, a spark of understanding seemed to flicker. He muttered something under his beak, cast an appraising glance at the desk, and... dropped a small, smooth, dark-blue pebble, like polished river glass, from

his talon onto the windowsill. Then, with a flap of wings, he vanished.

Luka shook his head, smiling, and picked up the little stone.

«Did he bring you a 'gift,» too? He has a mania — trading shiny things for food. And this pebble... you know, it looks like the ones found by the stream deep in the forest. In that very place where Margaret used to go to meditate.»

At the mention of the «deep forest,» Damon, who was standing in the doorway, pushed off the frame abruptly. His face went rigid.

Chapter 3

«Luka,» his voice snapped, sharp as a whip crack. «Enough. No need for empty fairy tales.»

Damon shifted his heavy gaze to me.

«Anna, in one hour — evening patrol and feed distribution. Be at the main shed.»

Luka's words and Damon's sharp reaction worked like a chemical reaction. Something clicked inside me. It wasn't just a secret — it was his secret. And his desire to hide it made it a thousand times more alluring. My heart beat faster, but no longer from fear — from excitement.

«Meditation?» I immediately seized on Luka's words, spurred on by Damon's reaction. «By the stream? That sounds amazing.» I couldn't contain my curiosity. «Luka, I actually have a free hour. Could you show me?»

Luka's face lit up, but the vet immediately cast a quick, wary glance at the door. Damon took a step forward, and his shadow fell across the threshold, as if barring the way.

«Anna, that is no place for... beginners' meditations,» he said, his voice lowering, filling not just with warning, but with restrained tension. «The trail is difficult. Dangerous in parts. And it is not part of your duties.»

But Luka, caught up in my enthusiasm and clearly wanting to needle his colleague, couldn't help himself.

«Oh, Damon, don't be so dramatic! The trail is actually quite picturesque. Margaret used to spend hours there, said the 'silence truly speaks' there. And the stream really is special — the water is so clear, as if it glows from within. And the stones are all so smooth...»

He lowered his voice, pretending to share a great secret:

«They say if you make a wish at the largest boulder, where the silver moss grows, it will definitely come true. Provided, of course, the forest accepts you.»

«Luka.» His name wasn't a gunshot, but a low, ominous rumble before a storm. Damon stepped across the threshold, seeming to swallow all the free space, the light, the air. He positioned himself between us, cutting Luka off from me, and his green eyes turned flat and dead, like ice over deep water.

Suddenly, the room felt airless. Not from fear — from the awareness of his power. This was what he was like when truly provoked. Not just stern, but primal, elemental. And damn it, it was both terrifying and incredibly sexy. I felt goosebumps run down my spine.

«You are not a tour guide here. Your lab reports are overdue. And you,» he turned to me, his gaze sharp as a blade, «will busy yourself with the feeding schedule. The documents are in the library on the desk. Everything else — not now. And certainly not at your whim.»

He spoke as if I weren't a person, but a disobedient mechanism in need of repair. And I stared at his clenched jaw, thinking how

much I wanted to erase that expression of absolute, unshakeable control from his face.

His tone left no room for discussion. Luka sighed, theatrically raising his hands in a gesture of surrender, but the corners of his eyes still hid sparks of defiance.

Suddenly, from outside, from the roof, came a loud, insistent cawing. Corbin, it seemed, hadn't flown far. He cawed again and again, rhythmically, as if mocking the scene.

Damon drew a sharp breath, his jaw tightening. Irritation radiated from him in waves.

«The schedule. The library. In one hour — at the shed. Clear?» He stared directly at me, demanding not consent, but unconditional obedience. The air in the room grew thick, electrified by this silent standoff.

«Aye, aye, Captain!» I straightened up, feigning exaggerated military bearing. «Order accepted for strict execution, Mister Keeper!» I saluted with two fingers to my temple.

Luka snorted, but immediately coughed into his fist, seeing a short, dangerous flash ignite in Damon's eyes.

Damon only narrowed his eyes. My stunt hadn't amused him — he saw in it not submission, but another act of defiance, a mockery of his authority.

«Good,» he clipped, and the short word landed like a trap snapping shut. Turning on his heel, he walked out, slamming the door roughly with such force that not only the windows rattled, but the instruments on Luka's desk, too. A moment later, his

choked, furious shout, directed at the raven, came from outside: «Corbin, out of the way!» A loud flurry of wingbeats and heavy, rapid footsteps crunching over gravel followed.

I stood, listening as his footsteps faded. The door was still vibrating. «Wow,» I breathed out at last, feeling my knees go weak. «You’ve really done it now, Annie. In way over your head.» But there was no regret in it. There was a wild, exultant thrill. He had lost his composure. Because of me. And now between us there wasn’t just a wall of misunderstanding, but a crack, one you could peer into. And I definitely would.

Luka exhaled, taking off his glasses and wiping them on the hem of his coat.

«Phew. Our fearsome guardian of order is in fine form today. Please, don’t be offended by him, Annie. He’s just... overly serious about everything connected to Margaret and this place. The forest, that stream... for him, it’s not a recreational area. Too many... strange things have happened there.»

He walked to the window, made sure Damon was out of sight, and turned to me. A mix of puzzlement and genuine curiosity was frozen on his face.

«But here’s what’s interesting... You lit up at the mention of the forest. Usually, people back down after a dressing-down like that from Damon. Or get scared. But you — it’s like you’re deliberately courting trouble. Why?» The young man was waiting not just for an answer, but for a key to me.

«I’m just very curious,» I shrugged again, but my voice

sounded quiet and serious. «Luka, what kind of strange things were you talking about exactly?»

Luka bit his lip, casting another glance at the door. He was clearly torn between a desire to finally share and caution in the face of Damon's anger.

«Strange things...» he began carefully, lowering his voice almost to a whisper and moving closer. «Well, for example, the way the animals here behave. You saw Corbin. He's not just smart. He... understands the essence of things. Brings exactly what holds meaning for the person it's intended for.»

«And Lyra... she's not just a lynx. She somehow... senses the essence. Intentions. Illness. Anxiety. Once, she wouldn't leave the side of an enclosure with a young deer for three days, even though it looked absolutely healthy. On the fourth day, it developed sepsis from a hidden infection. We made it in time. She warned us when we still saw nothing.»

Luka walked over to the desk and picked up that very dark-blue pebble.

«And this... stones like these are only found at that stream. Badgers bring them; they're found in tree roots after a storm. And they're always warm. Just slightly. Regardless of whether they're lying in the sun or the shade. Try it.»

He handed me the pebble. It was incredibly smooth, as if polished over a thousand years, and from its surface emanated a barely perceptible, constant, living warmth — like the body of a sleeping animal, not a stone. The heat was inside, not outside.

«Damon believes you can't go there. That Margaret was... maintaining something in balance there. And that it's now his responsibility. But I... I'm a scientist. I'm curious. But I'm also a bit unnerved. Because sometimes, during a full moon or before a big storm, sounds come from there... Not animal sounds. More like... the echo of a distant crystalline ringing. Or a whisper in a language you don't know, but for some reason, you feel.»

He shuddered, as if coming to, and hastily returned the pebble to the windowsill.

«So. Now you know everything I do, and please, not a word to Damon. He already thinks I'm a frivolous upstart.»

«Deal,» I gave a conspiratorial wink. «I need to head back to the house and sort out those papers, but I really hope we can soon have... tea, to celebrate a wonderful acquaintance.»

Luka broke into a wide, radiant smile.

«That would be wonderful!» he exclaimed, but immediately muffled his voice and glanced around. «I happen to have a new herbal blend, very soothing. Or coffee, if you prefer. I live in the little house by the greenhouse. Drop by some evening, when our guardian of order is out on his night patrol.»

He gave a friendly nod, and I caught a genuine joy in his gaze — at having found an ally in curiosity here.

Chapter 4

Leaving the laboratory, I headed toward the house. On the way, I noticed Damon. The keeper stood with his back to me by the far enclosure, intently writing something in a notebook. His posture was tense, coiled, like a predator frozen before a leap. He didn't turn around, but seemed to feel my gaze on him: his back grew even straighter, and his shoulders turned to stone.

The library turned out to be a spacious room with a high ceiling. Entering its cool twilight, steeped in silence, I found that on the huge oak desk there indeed lay a folder with the schedule. A heavy candelabra stood beside it, and on the desk surface, as if deliberately left for a guest, lay an open, worn book with a bookmark. Margaret's diary. The air here smelled not just of old books, but of a faint, bitterish aroma of lavender and wormwood. Dried bundles hung by the fireplace, like talismans.

On the open page, the handwriting was nervous, hurried:

«Corbin brought a shard of mirror today. It reflected not my face, but the lights deep within the Threshold. They are growing brighter. The silence beyond the Arch hums like a taut string. Burrow warned me, but I must hold the line. D. helps, but he does not believe. He only serves. To believe, one must see. Or hear the Whisper. I fear for him. For all...»

Below followed several lines, meticulously crossed out with black, furious strokes, over which was written, large and clear,

as if carved with a knife:

«DO NOT GO TO THE ARCH ALONE.»

As I was reading into these lines, trying to make out even a single word beneath the ink blots, from outside, in the blue of the approaching evening, came a soft rustle of wings. Silently, Corbin landed on the oak windowsill of the library. He did not caw, merely tapped his beak against the glass — once, distinctly. This time, there was nothing in his beak. He looked at me, then slowly, almost solemnly, turned his head toward the forest — toward where, according to Luka, the stream lay — and stared at me again with his black, bottomless eye. There was no threat in it. There was patient expectation and knowing. Then he cawed — a solitary, clear sound that sliced through the silence of the room — and dissolved into the deepening dusk.

At that moment, from deep within the house, as if in answer to that sound, came heavy, inexorable footsteps. Damon had returned. A moment later, his voice, muffled by distance but distinct, carried from the front hall:

«Fifteen minutes, at the shed. Bring a lantern. Don't be late.»

Making a mental note to return to the diary, I left the house and found Damon in a small shed next to the kitchen porch. The space was crammed with sacks of feed, buckets, tools, and smelled thickly of grain, dried herbs, and leather. He stood with his back to the door, silently arranging something into metal bowls.

I froze on the threshold, letting my eyes adjust to the twilight.

And again — that back of his. That very one. Now, in the faint light filtering through a dusty window, it seemed even more massive. He moved in that cramped space with the grace of a large beast in its den.

He didn't turn at the sound of footsteps, but his movements became slightly sharper, more precise, as if he had felt my presence through his skin.

«Have you studied the schedule?» he asked, still not looking at me, as if conducting a conversation with empty space.

He arranged the bowls into an impeccable row on a wide wooden bench. In each lay different food: fresh cuts of meat, special pellets, a mix of grain and chopped vegetables.

«This is for the predators: Lyra, Oswald the fox. This is for the raccoons and the badger. This is for the birds and rodents from the greenhouse. We deliver to the points. My half — left side of the territory. Yours — right side, around the house and the greenhouse. Any questions?»

At last, the keeper turned around. In the yellow light of the single bulb, his face looked tired, but composed. His gaze fell on me, skimmed over my work clothes, paused appraisingly on my boots, and stopped at my face. There was no trace of the former icy wall in his eyes, but there was a dense, impenetrable seriousness in them, like a man carrying something very heavy on his shoulders.

He handed me two lanterns: one a regular electric one, the other old-fashioned, kerosene, with green glass.

«The electric one — for the route. This one,» he pointed to the kerosene lantern, «is for the raccoons. They adore it. They turn it on and off like a toy. Don't let them break it.»

In his tone, when he spoke of the raccoons, a shadow of restrained tenderness flickered, then immediately receded, as if he were ashamed of this weakness.

«Let's begin. I'll walk you through the points the first time.»

Damon picked up his bowls and stepped out into the descending blue twilight. The air had turned prickly with night dampness, smelling of decayed leaves and distant woodsmoke. The first stars were appearing in the sky.

As I followed him to the first point — a little house for the raccoons — he suddenly, without slowing his pace, threw over his shoulder:

«The library. You were there. You saw the diary.» It wasn't a question, but a heavy, flat statement. He was waiting for my reaction.

«I was,» I confirmed shortly, matching his pace.

He stopped abruptly, his broad back becoming a motionless block against the darkening forest. Then he set the bowl on the ground by the enclosure entrance and, at last, turned to face me. In the yellow light of the lantern, his face seemed carved from dark wood, and in the depths of his eyes smoldered two tiny points of reflected flame.

«Margaret was... not of this world,» he said at last, and his voice, usually so steady, cracked, exposing something raw and

painful. «She saw through things. And knew things she shouldn't have known. What she wrote... it's not delirium. Those are warnings.»

He fell silent, listening to the rustles inside the little house, from which impatient snuffling and the clatter of claws already sounded.

«She didn't leave this here by accident. She wanted someone... to see. Or to take up the burden. I guard the grounds. I keep order. But her work... her knowledge...» He ran a palm hard over his face, smearing the lines of weariness and pain in the darkness. «That's a different depth. And a different danger. Luka is right to talk about the strange things. But he doesn't see the whole picture. He marvels at wonders. I, on the other hand, have seen... the cost.»

He looked straight at me, and in that moment, his gaze was stripped of all its usual severity. There was raw, defenseless warning in it — almost a plea.

«That's why I say — don't go into the forest. Especially there. It's not just a place of power. It's... a Threshold. And it's not always closed.»

I met his gaze, in which there was nothing but truth. And fear for me. I stood before him, clutching the lanterns in my hands, and understood that I had lost. Not to him. To myself. Because now, after he had shown me this hidden side of himself, I could no longer look at him as an obstacle or a pretty toy. He had become real. Complex, wounded, carrying someone else's

burden.

At that moment, a curious little face with a silvery mask poked out of the little house. The raccoon, completely ignoring Damon, headed straight for me and, sitting back on its hind legs, stared at the kerosene lantern, making clicking sounds of impatience.

Damon, as if waking from a heavy sleep, nodded at the bowl. «Time. Put it down. But step back right away. They'll beg for more, but the portion is law. And...» he paused, and his voice grew quieter, but clearer, «thank you for not denying it about the diary.»

He said it with unexpected, stark directness, before turning and disappearing into the darkness toward his own points. His figure dissolved into the night, but the weight of his words remained hanging in the cool air, mingling with the rustle of leaves and the greedy crunching of the raccoons tucking into their supper.

I crouched down in front of the enclosure, setting the lantern beside me.

«Hello, little bandits!» I said quietly, so as not to startle them. «I'm Annie. I'll be feeding you now... well, if that grouch...» I nodded in the direction Damon had disappeared, «won't object to my methods.»

There were two raccoons. They froze for a second, ceasing to chew, and stared at me with their shiny little eyes. Their silvery «masks» made the expressions on their faces incredibly vivid. One, slightly bolder, crept cautiously closer, stretched out his wet

nose, and noisily, busily sniffed the air. The other stayed by the bowl, but his gaze, too, never left me.

The bold raccoon, it seemed, had delivered a verdict of «not dangerous.» He let out a short, satisfied chatter and suddenly reached a little paw not toward the food, but toward the lace of my boot, gently tugging at it, as if testing the quality of the weave. The second one, emboldened, came over and, sitting back on his hind legs, began to diligently «wash» his face, glancing at me through his fingers — a classic raccoon gesture that could mean anything from nervousness to the highest degree of interest.

They were clearly reacting to my voice and calm posture. Neither one even tried to snatch the bowl or show aggression. They behaved more like inquisitive, slightly thieving, but overall friendly children.

At that moment, from around the corner of the greenhouse, Luka appeared. He was carrying some kind of cardboard box, but, seeing me sitting on the ground surrounded by raccoons, he stopped dead in his tracks, and his face broke into a wide, radiant smile.

«Well, would you look at that — you've already been accepted into the gang!» he laughed quietly, so as not to frighten the little animals. «Meet Rascal (he nodded at the one tugging the lace) and Scratcher (that was the one 'washing'). Our chief troublemakers and inspectors of new equipment. Careful — Rascal is likely assessing right now whether he can untie that lace and add it to his treasury.»

Setting the box on the ground and crouching down at a distance, the vet watched this silent scene of introduction with obvious pleasure.

«Damon, of course, is a grouch. But he's right about the main thing: no joking around with the forest path. I'm glad you didn't run off after his growling. So, you're here for the long haul?»

As I chatted with Luka and the raccoons, I noticed in the darkness, at the very edge of the forest beyond the greenhouse, two faintly glowing points. Yellow, dim, like smoldering coals. Those were eyes. Not an owl's or a fox's. They were too low to the ground and watched too intently and knowingly, without blinking.

«Luka,» I called quietly, not taking my eyes off them. «Look. There's someone there.»

A moment later, I made out a heavy, squat figure melded with the shadow at the very edge of the trees. The creature didn't move, didn't breathe. It simply was — a hard, dark clot of night, observing. Then, without making a sound, without a twitch, it turned smoothly and, silently, with dignity, walked off into the forest, dissolving into the black gap between the trunks. Its appearance and disappearance were so deliberate, filled with some ancient ritual, that goosebumps ran down my spine.

«Ah, that's him,» Luka said quietly, following my gaze. «Don't be afraid. That's Burrow.»

«Who?» I turned to him, still feeling the chill on my skin.

«An old badger. Wild. Not from our enclosures. He lives deep

inside, but here, at the edge, he has... a watch.» Luka spoke with an uncharacteristic seriousness and reverence, without a shadow of a smile. «Margaret used to say he's older than everyone here. A guardian. If he came out and showed himself — it's not without reason. It means he's seen you. Or the forest is looking through him.»

I peered into the darkness again, but there was nothing there now except impenetrable night gloom. The feeling didn't leave me: I had just been assessed by someone ancient, utterly other, not bound by our laws.

«And does he often... appear like that?» I asked, turning back to the raccoons, who seemed not to have noticed the badger's appearance at all.

«Always with new ones,» Luka nodded. «But he never comes out to the house itself just out of idle curiosity. That means you've caught his attention. It's a good sign. Though... yeah, a bit creepy.»

He paused, and then, as if catching himself, added in his usual, more cheerful tone:

«But don't even think of feeding him or trying to pet him. He's not a pet. He's... a judge. He decides himself whether to approach or not. Usually — not.»

I nodded, still under the impression. The feeling of that gaze — heavy, measuring — still clung to me like dew.

«Rascal and Scratcher,» I repeated affectionately, leaning toward the raccoons to distract myself. «Very pleased to meet

you.»

I gave them their allotted portions and stayed to watch them eat. Rascal and Scratcher enthusiastically fell upon the bowls. Scratcher, more methodical, periodically set aside the tastiest morsel, «rinsed» it in imaginary water, and then ate it. Rascal devoured everything in sight, but in the process managed to come over and poke my knee with his wet nose, as if to say: «More!» or «Thank you.»

Luka, observing this scene, smiled.

«They're both rescues. Margaret picked them up by the road, still blind little fluffballs. She said they had 'a spark of human mischief' in their eyes. And, it seems, she was right.» He stood up. «I've got to go — experiments with vitamin supplements await. But remember about tea! My door is always open.»

He left, abandoning me with the raccoons and the rising hum of the night. When the bowls were empty, Rascal and Scratcher didn't scatter. They sat down next to me, almost touching me with their sides, and began a thorough toilet: licking their paws, washing, casting contented glances my way. They had clearly decided that I was now part of their evening ritual.

Suddenly, both raccoons froze in unison, as if on command. Their ears stood up, their noses quivered, catching an unfamiliar smell or sound. They were looking not at me, but toward the forest, where Burrow had disappeared. Even their relaxed playfulness had evaporated in an instant, replaced by a deep, primal wariness.

From above, from a branch of the old oak, came a quiet, hoarse croak — almost a whisper. Corbin sat there, indistinguishable from the twigs, watching. Then he glided down and, settling on the greenhouse fence, began fiddling with something in his talon.

Chapter 5

At that moment, from the other side of the grounds, out of the darkness, Damon materialized, having finished his rounds. The beam of his flashlight plucked me from the gloom — sitting with two hushed raccoons — and the raven with his treasure. He froze a few steps away, becoming part of the night landscape.

«Everything all right?» The keeper's voice in the ringing silence came out sharper than he had likely intended. The raccoons flinched, but didn't scatter, only pressed themselves closer to me, as if to shelter.

His gaze slid from me to Corbin and the metallic glint clutched in the beak, then back to me. In the light of the lantern, a complex spectrum played across the man's face: habitual wariness, deep exhaustion etched into his features, and something else... vexation, or a barely perceptible glimmer that his certainty in my «unsuitability» had cracked.

«Lyra is asleep. Oswald ate everything. Time to close up the grounds,» he said, but didn't take a single step forward, didn't betray impatience. He was giving me time.

He was giving me time. Not rushing. Not ordering. It was such a small, such an incredible concession after a day of ceaseless commands. A strange, aching gratitude flooded me. He saw this moment — my peace with his charges — and respected it enough not to barge in. For the first time today, there was no war between

us. There was only the night, the silence, and this fragile truce. I extended my right and left hands to the raccoons, palms up. «Good night, little bandits. Until tomorrow.»

Rascal carefully poked his damp, warm nose into my palm, then quickly, shyly licked my fingers, leaving behind a sticky trace. Scratcher acted more ceremoniously: she slowly, with dignity, placed her prehensile little paw onto my hand, looked me straight in the eye, and let out a short, purring chatter, more like a bird's chirp.

Then, as if on an invisible signal, they turned and dashed toward their little house, glancing back once at the threshold — one last, quick look — before disappearing inside.

From above came a loud, metallic clack of a beak. Corbin, it seemed, had been waiting for precisely this moment. Plunging off the fence like a stone, he flew so low that the beat of his wings gave off a chill, and dropped a small, shiny object at my feet. An antique key, dulled with age. It fell onto the soft grass without a sound.

Before I could stir, the raven soared upward and dissolved into the black maw of the open library window.

Damon observed this entire scene in deathly silence. And only when Corbin had vanished did he exhale, heavily, with a rasp.

«He's marked you,» he said, and in his strained voice there was no longer any anger or irritation. Just a statement of fact. «And the animals... they accepted you. Faster than I counted on.»

Damon took several steps forward, and the beam of the lantern caught the dull gleam of the key in the grass.

«It's from her casket. The one in the library, on the mantelpiece.»

In his words, there was only a dark respect, incomprehensible even to himself. For the bird's choice. Or for what the bird had discerned in me.

He bent down — slowly, almost ceremoniously — picked up the key, and held it out to me. In the harsh light of the lantern, his fingers, rough and crisscrossed with scars, seemed surprisingly careful.

I didn't take the key right away. I looked first at his hand, which was extending a tiny, rusty piece of metal to me with caution, as if it were a sacred relic. The contrast was maddening. That feeling flared up in me again — the desire to touch not the key, but those scars. To ask where they came from. To understand what pain he was carrying.

«Take it. But...» his voice faltered, «open the casket tomorrow. In sunlight. Everything connected to her personal belongings... carries an imprint. It might hit hard.»

He averted his gaze, staring into the impenetrable darkness of the forest.

«Come on. I'll see you to the house. The night here... changes properties after sunset.»

His words didn't sound like an order. It was a silent agreement, a ritual established after a day of trials. He stepped back, letting

me pass first, and prepared to follow, lighting my path through the dark, now-starless yard.

And as I walked forward, feeling his light on my back, and his footsteps just centimeters behind me, I felt a strange sense of safety. The very kind that emanates from a predator who has decided you are not prey.

«Damon, do you live in the house?» I asked into the silence.

Behind me, he stumbled for a second over an unseen stone. The lantern in his hand shook, and shadows danced wildly around us.

«No,» he answered after a heavy pause, and his voice in the darkness sounded muffled, as if from underground. «I live in the old gatehouse by the far entrance, at the edge of the reserve. Where the true forest begins.»

He took a few more steps, and I felt his presence behind me grow tangibly closer, as if the night itself were thickening around us, forcing him to stay near.

He was so close I could almost feel the warmth of his breath on the nape of my neck. His voice, low and muted in the darkness, enveloped me, mingling with the scent of pine and damp earth. It was unbearably intimate. In this closeness, under the pressure of the night and his confession, all my daytime thoughts had turned into something quiet and serious.

«Margaret insisted someone be there. At the very edge. To listen. And to warn, if... it awakens.» He said it as if «it» were a very specific, undeniable threat.

We reached the porch of the main house. Damon stopped at the bottom step, not crossing the symbolic line. His face in the yellow light of the lantern resembled a mask carved from wood by long years of silent vigil.

«Don't forget to lock the door for the night,» he said, and the phrase sounded like an instruction, but the subtext was clear: «Take care of yourself.»

«Tomorrow at seven — breakfast in the kitchen. Then cleaning the enclosures.»

He fell silent, and in the quiet, you could hear him struggling to find the words.

«And... thank you. For the raccoons. You handled it properly.» Damon nodded to me, and it was the first sincere, unarmored gesture I had seen from him.

Something inside me quivered and spilled over in a warm, aching wave. Before I could find the words, he had already turned. The light of his lantern drifted into the darkness, growing smaller and hazier, until it became a solitary yellow star, floating away toward that very edge of the forest — toward his gatehouse on the border with the silence, which, perhaps, was that very «something.»

The house greeted me with a dead silence that swallowed all sounds, and the smell of old wood. On the oak table in the front hall lay a note, written in neat handwriting: «Annie, there's stew in the fridge. Heat it up in the microwave. Kettle's on the stove. — V.» Victoria, that very local helper, had already taken care of

things, like an invisible, benevolent spirit.

Approaching my room, I noticed that the door to the library was slightly ajar. Inside, perched on the back of the armchair by the fireplace, sat Corbin. He was dozing, his beak tucked under his wing, but one eye, black and gleaming, opened a slit and tracked me unblinkingly as I passed by.

I turned into the library instead of going to the bedroom and sank into the armchair opposite the raven.

Outside the window, the night was moonless, yet incredibly starry. And somewhere in the distance, in the direction where Damon had disappeared, at the very border of forest and sky, a faint, greenish glimmer pulsed for a moment. Like a gigantic firefly — but too large, and moving unnaturally. It flared and then extinguished, as if someone had briefly opened and slammed shut a door to another world.

«I think you know more than anyone here,» I whispered, not looking at the bird, but rather into the darkness of the room.

Corbin slowly turned his head, withdrawing his beak from under his wing. His black eye, catching the dim light from the corridor, seemed like an abyss into another dimension. The raven didn't caw, didn't move. He simply waited.

Then Corbin quietly clacked his beak — dry and distinct, like a lock snapping shut. He hopped down from the armrest and, waddling, headed for the mantelpiece. There, among books and dried plants, stood a small wooden casket with mother-of-pearl inlay. Its lock was antique, intricate.

The raven jabbed his beak at the lid, then turned his head. His gaze spoke clearer than words: «Well?»

And at that moment, from the garden, came a soft but insistent scraping — as if a shovel were being thrust into the earth. Or claws scratching stone? The sound cut off as suddenly as it had begun.

Corbin bristled, ruffling his feathers. He let out a low, guttural grumble — more predator than bird — and froze, listening to the silence that had once again descended upon the house. His attention was torn between me, the casket, and whatever was lurking outside the window.

«Is it dangerous out there?» I asked cautiously, nodding toward the dark garden.

Corbin, slowly, almost humanly, nodded in reply. Once, distinctly. His gleaming eye narrowed.

Then he let out a quiet, bubbling caw, full of alarm, and launched from the mantelpiece, settling onto the upper frame of that very window. He pressed against the glass, craned his neck, peering into the darkness. His body tensed, like a coiled spring.

Outside, there was no more light. Instead, I now heard a different sound — not scraping, but a quiet, barely perceptible rustling through the fallen leaves. It was moving around the house, unhurriedly, in a circle, as if something large and heavy were pacing the perimeter. The rustling came from one side, then the other.

Corbin turned his head to look at me — with that unnatural,

avian swivel of a full one hundred and eighty degrees. In his gaze there was no panic, but high vigilance, as if he were standing guard. He cawed again, but this time the sound was quiet and directed, as if he were trying to tell me something without attracting the attention of whatever was outside.

Then he descended back to the casket and jabbed at it with his beak again — insistently, as if to say: the answers are here, inside, not out there, in the impenetrable, rustling darkness.

«All right...» I breathed out. «All right...» Of course, I was nervous. But curiosity was stronger.

I stood up, took the casket in my hands, and sank back into the armchair, flicking on the lamp.

«Will you stay with me, while I open it?»

Corbin cawed once — curtly, affirmatively — and flew from the mantelpiece to the armrest. He settled there, pressing his warm side against my arm. His feathers smelled of rain, forest, and something metallic, like old coins.

The raven sat motionless, watching my hands, and then shifted his fixed gaze to the window, continuing to stand sentinel. His presence was surprisingly calming, despite all the strangeness of the situation.

In the lamplight, the casket seemed even older and more mysterious. The mother-of-pearl shimmered with iridescent reflections. I inserted the key into the elaborate lock. It slid in perfectly, and its turning ended with a quiet, final click — as if the last pin had fallen into place. When I turned the key, the

mechanism emitted a melodious, high-pitched chime — nothing like the sound of an ordinary spring.

The lid of the casket opened easily. Inside, there were no jewels, no money. There lay:

Several yellowed photographs: a young Margaret stood beside that very stone arch in the forest, but in the picture the arch looked new, almost polished, and from its opening poured a soft, inexplicable light. Beside her — a dark, blurred silhouette, human-like, but with unnaturally long limbs.

A sheet of paper rolled into a scroll, bearing the same familiar handwriting. A brief entry: «They do not come to do harm. They come because the boundary is thinning. The Heart-Stone will show the way when the time comes. Trust Burrow. Listen to Corbin. And let Damon guard the threshold — it is his duty and his pain. Forgive me for drawing you all into this.»

From the bottom of the casket, freed from its silken wraps, emerged a strange whistle of dark, almost black bone, etched with carvings in the pattern of a bird's wing. Tied to its head was a short cord of soft, darkened leather — exactly the length to lie freely against the throat. It hung limply, waiting to be lifted and worn again.

And finally, lying on top of everything, as if it had just been placed there — a small, perfectly round pebble the color of dark amber.

I picked it up. It was warm, almost hot to the touch, and pulsed in my palm with a barely perceptible rhythm, like a living heart.

The moment my fingers closed around the stone, Corbin let out a quiet, approving coo. And outside, in the garden, the rustling suddenly ceased. A complete, oppressive silence reigned.

And in this new, crushing silence, a new sound arose: a quiet but insistent scraping somewhere in the distance, in the direction of my bedroom. Once. A pause. Two more times. As if someone were politely but persistently asking to be let in.

And then the sound shifted. Footsteps — no, not footsteps, but a quiet, heavy dragging along the corridor. And a new scrape — this time at the door to the living room, next to the library. It was drawing closer.

Chapter 6

I slipped the whistle around my neck, hid it under my t-shirt, and shoved the stone and the note into my pocket.

«Corbin. Should we open it?»

The raven shook his head in refusal, his feathers bristling. He let out a sharp, hissing caw, full of alarm, and shot upward, landing on the floor right in front of the door — blocking the way physically, wings spread wide. His black eye blazed in the lamplight, screaming without words: «NO.»

The scraping came again. This time louder, more impatient. It was followed by a quiet, deep sigh that seeped through the wooden walls of the old house — a sound no animal I knew of could make.

Corbin, not taking his eyes off me, reached out with his beak and pulled one of the photographs from under my hand — the very one with Margaret by the arch and the strange silhouette. He dropped it in front of me onto the open page of the diary. My gaze fell on another entry, previously unnoticed:

«If they knock at night — do not answer. If they scrape — do not open. It is not an enemy. It is a guardian of the threshold who has lost its way. It seeks the path home, but its time has not yet come. Its voice can lead beyond the veil. Give it a sign that you are not prey. A sign of fire. Or a sign of music from NOT HERE.»

Corbin looked at the whistle hidden under the fabric, then at the window — and then back at me. As if to say: «There is your sign. But be careful.»

Cautiously, I approached the door and sat down on the floor cross-legged right in front of it. I spoke.

«I will not let you in,» my voice was quiet, calm, yet gentle. «You cannot come in. But I will help. As soon as I understand how.»

I took out the whistle, pressed it to my lips, and froze, listening.

The scraping stopped instantly. Beyond the door, an absolute, thick silence reigned — it seemed even louder than any sound.

And then I heard a soft, sliding rustle — as if a huge, heavy body had crouched down or pressed itself against the wood on the other side. It was accompanied by a quiet, vibrating hum, like a cat's purr, but far lower and more complex. As if an entire organ of stone pipes were sounding somewhere in the depths.

It was not a sound of aggression. It was a sound of... attention. Anticipation. The creature beyond the door had stilled and was listening.

Corbin, slowly, nodded with approval. The tension was easing. He looked at the whistle in my hands, and then at the door, as if granting permission.

The air in the room grew dense, charged with expectation. Instinctively, I understood: the sound of the whistle would not be ordinary. It would be a key, a signal, a melody for whatever

waited on the other side — not just of the door, but of ordinary reality. The quiet hum behind the door flowed continuously, turning into a patient, almost hypnotic backdrop.

In the same gentle voice, I said:

«And now, my good one, you need to leave. It is too soon for you to be here.»

A deep breath — and I blew into the whistle.

There was no sound.

Instead of sound, a wave of silence burst from the whistle — tangible, thick — spreading outward from me, and for a moment the world lost all its noises: the ticking of the clock, the creak of wood, even my own breath. I saw Corbin's feathers lift from that soundless impulse.

Beyond the door, the vibrating hum cut off. A single sound came: a quiet, almost grateful click, like stone slabs closing together.

Then — a light, receding rustle across the corridor floor. It grew quieter and quieter, until it faded completely. The pressure of the presence beyond the door vanished, leaving behind only the night's chill and the smell of the old house.

Corbin let out a heavy sigh (or what resembled one) and walked over to me, poking his beak at the whistle, and then, affectionately, almost tenderly — at my hand. His black eye looked at me with a silent question and, it seemed, deep respect.

And then, from the front hall, came a loud knock at the main door. Heavy, resolute. And Damon's voice, strained to the limit,

but controlled:

«Annie! Are you all right? Open up!»

He must have run here from the gatehouse — his breathing was audible even through the thick door. Corbin cawed once, short and reassuring, toward the corridor — as if to say: «It's over. You can come out.»

«Coming!» I shouted toward the entrance and turned to Corbin. «Thank you. If I had been here alone...» My voice broke off. A thought raced through my head: «But what if not for him... not for both of them. This raven and... that man behind the door.» The thought that Damon had raced here, hearing the noise, made my heart clench in a strange, warm spasm. «May I pet you?»

Corbin froze, his gleaming eye studying my outstretched hand. Then slowly, almost ceremoniously, he inclined his head, offering the back of his neck — where the feathers were especially smooth and iridescent. It was not simply permission. It was a gesture of trust.

My fingers touched the feathers, and I felt unexpected warmth and a faint crackling, like a cat's fur on a dry day, but deeper, vibrating. He let out a quiet, guttural coo, almost a purr.

From the front hall — another, more insistent knock. «Annie!» Damon's voice was full of alarm, now on the verge of panic.

Corbin, breaking the moment, carefully pulled away and nodded toward the exit: go, open it. He himself launched up onto

the high back of the armchair by the fireplace, to observe from there, blending into the shadows.

I walked into the front hall and opened the heavy door. On the threshold — Damon. No jacket, in a stretched-out t-shirt, breathing rapidly, as if he had just been running. His face was pale, his eyes wide, darting, taking in me, the corridor, the space overhead. In one hand he was clutching not a flashlight, but a hefty iron poker, like a club.

Having convinced himself I was whole and apparently unharmed, he exhaled sharply, his shoulders dropping. But the tension held fast.

«What happened?» he burst out, stepping inside without an invitation and immediately beginning to sweep his gaze across the front hall, peering into the corners. «I... felt it. At the border. A wave. Silence. And then... an ebb. It was here. At the house. With you.»

He turned, and now in his eyes, alongside the alarm, there was genuine horror, mixed with astonishment.

«What did you do?» he asked almost in a whisper, and his gaze fell on the thin cord peeking out from under the collar of my t-shirt. He recognized the material. His face twisted. «You opened the casket. And... used THAT?»

And then something inside me snapped. Suddenly, for myself (and certainly for him), I freaked out completely.

«You know what...» my voice dropped almost to a growl. «You.» I jabbed a finger into his chest. «YOU are the one who

needs to explain to me what the hell just happened here!»

Grabbing him by the shoulder, I dragged him into the house and shoved him toward the kitchen.

«Corbin!» I shouted, raising my voice. «Join the conversation! If you please!»

My outburst seemed to paralyze Damon. He let himself be grabbed and pushed, unresisting, his eyes wide with shock. Usually, such audacity would have provoked an instant, harsh reaction, but now only deep bewilderment and, perhaps, guilt showed in his face.

I shoved him into the kitchen. From outside, in the corridor, came the soft rustle of wings — Corbin flew through the doorway and settled on top of the kitchen cabinet, where he could see everything, like a judge at the bench. His gaze was serious and unyielding.

Damon, leaning against the table, looked from me to the raven. He was breathing heavily, but no longer from running — from the surge of emotions.

«You're right,» he said hoarsely at last, lowering his head. «I should have... warned you. Explained. But I thought if you didn't know, you wouldn't meddle, and everything would stay calm. I was wrong. I've been wrong from the moment you arrived.»

He raised his gaze to me, and in his green eyes there was not a trace of coldness or superiority left. Only weariness, responsibility, and fear.

«What was knocking... was a Guardian of the Threshold. Not

an animal. Not a ghost. A creature from... from beyond the Arch. It appears when the boundary thins. Usually, it just wanders the forest, not coming close. But tonight... it came to the house. To you. That has never happened before.»

He threw a glance at the whistle against my chest.

«And this... is the Whistle of calling and warding. Margaret made it from... from the bone of that same Guardian who died on this side, protecting the boundary. Its sound is not for our ears. It is a signal in their language. A command. A request. You... you ordered it to leave. And it obeyed.» Incredible amazement sounded in his voice. «I felt that command from a kilometer away. It was... pure. Without fear.»

He looked away, clenching his fists.

«I guard the boundary from our world. From fools, hunters, the curious. But I cannot command them. I only... hold them back. And you... in a single day...» He didn't finish, his gaze drilling into me again. «Just what kind of person are you, Annie? And what did Margaret see in you?»

As he spoke, I acted on autopilot, unable to stop. I took out the kettle, poured in water, set it on the stove. Brewed a whole pot of strong tea. Darted to the shelves, feverishly opening one after another in search of something sweet. I desperately needed a source of serotonin, before the night's events tipped me into hysterics.

My movements, sharp and mechanical, seemed the only thread still tethering me to reality. The clinking of dishes, the

clatter of opening cupboards — all of it filled the heavy silence.

Corbin watched me from the shelf, turning his head with my every move. He quietly clacked his beak when I shook an empty sugar bowl.

Damon observed in silence. He didn't try to stop me or help. He understood that I needed to do this. His own breathing was gradually evening out.

In the depths of one of the shelves, behind a jar of buckwheat, I found a tin box with a faded label. Inside — chocolate-chip cookies... That'll do.

The kettle began its quiet song. I set two cups on the table, without asking. My hands trembled slightly as I spooned in the tea leaves.

Damon slowly slid the box of cookies I had found across the table toward me and spoke, watching the steam rising from the kettle's spout.

«I didn't want you to come up against this so soon. I wanted... to protect you. Both this place, and you. It was a poor calculation. Forgive me.»

The last word came hard for him, but it sounded sincere. He waited for me to pour the tea; his large, scar-etched hands lay on the table palms up — a gesture of vulnerability and openness, unthinkable for him just a few hours ago.

Corbin descended from the shelf and settled on the back of an empty chair, completing the strange, but no longer hostile, trio at the kitchen table in the pre-dawn hours.

Chapter 7

I poured the tea and sat down across from Damon.

«Can you have cookies?» I asked the raven. «Or have you already eaten your share?»

Corbin cawed once — the sound was clearly offended and full of dignity. He stretched his neck out pompously and stared at me as if I had insulted his entire raven lineage at once.

Damon couldn't hold back a short, hoarse exhale that could almost be taken for a chuckle. The corners of his mouth twitched.

«He can't stand being taken for an ordinary bird,» he explained, and to my surprise, a warm, almost paternal forbearance sounded in his tone. «His 'share' he most likely traded from Luka during the day for some shiny trinket. But... he does respect cookies, especially vanilla ones. Just don't crumble them.»

As if confirming his words, Corbin hopped from the back of the chair onto the seat and settled with the imperturbable air of a king awaiting a handout. His black eye intently tracked the movement of my hand toward the box.

Damon took his cup, scalding his fingers but not pulling it away.

«Thank you,» he said quietly, looking at the steam. «For the tea. And for... not running off screaming after all this.»

He took a sip, winced at the heat, and the last traces of panic

gradually faded from his face.

«So now you're in the know. Fully. And you have... Margaret's tools.» He nodded at the whistle. «And her trust, if Corbin brought them to you. What... what are you going to do?»

His voice held none of the old command or distrust. There was a question, respect for her choice, and a deep, weary readiness to accept it, whatever it might be.

«In the know?» my voice cracked into a near-shriek, but I stopped myself. I closed my eyes and took several breaths. «I don't understand anything... There's this place. It's home to wonderful animals. Beyond that — the forest. In the forest — an arch. Beyond the arch — beings called Guardians. Margaret — my distant, unknown relative — was the 'keeper' of what?! The Arch? The Guardians? The fabric between worlds is thinning? Why? How do we stop it? What happens if we don't? Who are these Guardians?»

Each of my questions landed like a whip crack. Damon flinched. He set his cup down on the table with such a clatter that the tea spilled over.

«Keeper... of the balance,» he forced out, clenching his fists again, but now not in anger — in a desperate attempt to gather his thoughts. «Not of the Arch. Not of the Guardians. Of the very fact that this gap between worlds... exists. It's supposed to be thin, like a spiderweb. Only... magic is supposed to seep through it. That very 'soft' magic that makes the animals smarter, the stones warm, and the silence — speaking.»

He raised his gaze to me, full of torment.

«But something went wrong. Either on that side, or here. The boundary is thinning, becoming fragile. Not just energy, but... entities are beginning to seep through. The Guardians — they're like border guards. From their own side. They're not evil. They're just... other. And they're worried, too. What came to your door — it wasn't aggressive. It was... lost. Searching for an anchor in our world that holds firmer.»

He looked at Corbin, seeking help. The raven slowly nodded, as if confirming his words.

«Why is this happening? I don't know!» Damon's voice broke. «Margaret tried to find out. In her diaries, there are hints... about a disruption of the balance somewhere far from here. About a 'muffled hum in the earth' that started a few years ago. Perhaps we are to blame ourselves. People. Our... blindness. Our drive to tear everything apart and build over it.»

He took a deep breath.

«What will happen if we don't stop it? The boundary will tear. And then it won't be just one lost Guardian coming through. Everything that's on the other side will come through. And we don't know what that is. Margaret feared it would swallow our world. Or merge it with theirs into some nightmare chaos. And to stop it... you have to understand the cause. And, possibly, cross to that side to eliminate it there. But that's...» He fell silent.

Corbin answered — low and mournful. The raven looked at me, then at the whistle on my chest, and a silent question was

written in his gaze: «Are you ready? Are you the new keeper?»

Damon followed his gaze.

«She chose you, Annie. Not me, not Luka. A distant relative from the city. There has to be a reason for that.»

«Well, isn't this a holiday,» I murmured. «What luck.» I sighed with irony and let my head drop onto the table. «All right,» I said after a pause. «I need to sleep... Tomorrow, after rounds, one of you...» I shifted my gaze from Corbin to Damon, «will take me to the Arch.»

Damon shot up so abruptly that his chair crashed to the floor.

«NO!» his voice thundered, full of primal fear. He slammed his palm on the table, making the cups jump. «That's not up for discussion! You don't understand! One wrong step, one glance in the wrong direction — and you could lose your mind. Or simply not come back, dissolve into that mist that hangs at the threshold! Margaret prepared for years before she approached it closely!»

His breathing quickened, his eyes white with horror. He looked at me not as an ally, but as a madwoman hell-bent on the abyss.

Corbin, on the contrary, didn't stir. He sat on the chair, and his black, impenetrable gaze shifted from the enraged Damon to me, slumped over the table. Then he slowly, very slowly, nodded. Once. Distinctly.

That nod seemed to disarm Damon. He froze, staring at the bird.

«You... you agree with her?» his voice became a hoarse

whisper. «You want to destroy her?»

Corbin let out an impatient caw and launched up, landing on Damon's shoulder, despite his tension. He jabbed his beak at Damon's temple, then toward the window beyond which the forest began, and then — toward me. It was a complex, almost eloquent gesture: «She is not Margaret. She is different. And the time is different. Waiting is not an option.»

Damon closed his eyes, his face contorted with inner struggle. When he opened them again, what showed in them was not victory, but surrender to something greater than his own fear.

«Damn it,» he exhaled. «Fine. But not tomorrow. The day after. Corbin and I will only escort you as far as the glade. Not one step further. My duty is to guard the perimeter from this side. If something goes wrong...» He didn't finish. «We'll be with you. But at the glade itself... beyond that, you'll go alone. Or with Corbin, if he decides to fly closer. But Annie...» he looked at me, and his voice faltered, «please. Be careful. As you've never been in your life.»

He pulled back, lifted Corbin from his shoulder, and carefully set him on the table. The movement was tender, full of a deep bond between them.

«And now... sleep. I'm staying in the house tonight. In the living room.» He said it not as an offer, but as a decision. He was no longer going to let me be alone this night.

Corbin, having gotten his way, pecked at the last cookie and, with a flap of his wings, flew off deeper into the house, in the

direction of the library — to his usual post, apparently.

I was left in the kitchen with Damon, who silently picked up the chair and began gathering the cups; his back was still tense, but no longer seemed hostile. The pre-dawn blue was beginning to blur the blackness outside the window. The longest night of my life was drawing to an end.

«What time are rounds?» I yawned. «There's probably no point going to bed now, is there? Maybe coffee?»

The corner of Damon's mouth twitched again. This time it was definitely an almost-smile, bewildered by my ability to think about mundane things after everything that had happened.

«7 AM,» he said, washing a cup with unexpected thoroughness. «You're probably right, there's no point in sleeping now. But there's no television here. The antenna got torn off by a storm two years ago, and fixing it... I just never got around to it.»

He placed a clean cup on the drying rack and turned, leaning against the sink.

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