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MADINA WESTCHESTER
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«Издательские решения»

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Graywood Hall — the ancestral seat, lost among the endless northern marshes. For centuries, its walls preserved an unbreakable peace, guarding the grim secrets and impeccable honor of an ancient bloodline. Arabella Graywood's life was predetermined and clear — until, one stormy night, a stranger knocked on the heavy doors of the estate. Damian. A man without a name or a past, emerging from the mist to change the course of history forever.

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PART ONE

The Apparition Chapter 1 The Stranger

That year, autumn descended upon Greyvud Hall with sudden, brutal force, as if the Lord Himself sought to remind His creatures that for the fleeting, almost blasphemous warmth of summer, retribution must inevitably follow. And beneath this sky, no power exists to delay that sentence or soften its bitterness.

Only yesterday — unless my memory deceives me, as it often does at summer's end — the heather upon the moors stood purple, heavy with the steady drone of bees. That murmur seeped through the open casements, mingling with the scent of fresh bread and that inexpressible aroma of ancient stone, which had absorbed everything: the soot of hearths, the tears of wax, the very breath of those who had dwelt here centuries before my birth. But precisely at noon, the wind shifted. The breath from the east brought cold from those lands where the sky forever presses down upon one's shoulders, and the earth utters a dull groan beneath the foot of the unwary traveler. There, birds keep a vow of silence — their voices drown in the damp, heavy air, finding no echo.

The wind carried with it the stench of decay and that marsh-damp which eats into the masonry of the foundation, into the fibers of the wood, and into the very soul of the house. No remedy exists for this poison until spring — neither the heat of the hearths, nor the incense of burnt offerings, nor the prayers I fervently utter every midnight. Though with each passing year, I have less faith that my voice reaches the ear of Him who hides behind this perpetually grey, impenetrable shroud of heaven.

I stood frozen at the window of my refuge beneath the roof — that cramped closet allotted to me forty-three years ago, when I first crossed the threshold of Greyvud Hall as a young maid hungry for service. Since then, I would not trade these sparse square meters for any of the grand chambers below. For from here, from this bird's-eye height, all is known to me: the winding carriage drive, where the gravel is already coated with the slimy film of autumn rot; the bustle of the stables, where old John fusses with the harness, cursing the damp which eats away the leather faster than he can wipe it clean with his rag.

And that sinister edge of the marshes, where even at midsummer a shadow lies, like a lurking beast awaiting its bloody harvest.

I sat and watched the mist belch forth from the lowlands.

To this spectacle I have entrusted fifty years of my earthly term — and yet I have never been able to attain that indifference with which one beholds the procession of dawns. The murk crept slowly, possessively, like a monstrous grey beast confident in its prey. It knew no haste; it savored every moment of that viscous approach, that languid, sweet hunt.

First, a pale haze timidly emerged above the water itself, where Black Brook, twisting among the hummocks, vanishes without a trace into the quagmire, never delivering its waters to the salty embrace of the sea. Then, obeying some invisible signal known only to the elements, the mist began to roil, to swell, to rise toward the heavens, seizing one span of ground after another. Within an hour, the entire sublunary world beyond my glass had evaporated, dissolved in that thick, impenetrable milk.

Greyvud Hall with its hundred blind windows, its fanciful turrets and forest of chimneys, its stables and ancient graveyard where three layers of the lords of these lands lie buried — all of it turned to a dream. All of it became a ghostly vision, a fleeting phantasm such as might be dreamed by a weary traveler lost in these parts. The trees lost their substance, transforming into phantom guardians

frozen in eternal vigil, and only the wind howled in the gaping mouths of the hearths, like a hungry dog forgotten before the coming of eternal frost.

In such foul weather, strangers avoid these lands.

The marshes do not favor outsiders — this is known to everyone who has imbibed the breath of these places with their mother's milk. The bogs possess a treacherous patience; they skillfully lure one into their snares, inexorably exacting their tribute, and no mortal exists who can deceive their greed or bypass the perilous mire without paying in full. And who in their right mind would dare to struggle through the quagmire when twilight falls upon the earth with the swiftness of a slammed coffin lid? When even the chained hounds cower in superstitious fear at the threshold, and the horses in their stalls tremble with nervous dread, sensing the invisible presence of that which is hidden from the blinded human eye?

That evening, I had already resolved to consign the candle flame to oblivion and retire to sleep, when a blow struck the wood of the back door.

It was no timid, hesitant summons of a wanderer begging for shelter, prepared to retreat meekly into the darkness before a closed door. No. It was a dull, monumental blow, delivered as if not by a fist but by the full weight of a body. A bony, hollow blow against the oak flesh of the door, causing even the walls to shudder. It seemed that someone — if it was a man — had pressed himself against the planks with his shoulder, his chest, his entire exhausted being. And waited in silence, for beyond that threshold lay for him either the end of a long wandering, or Death itself.

The candle in my hand trembled. Hot wax dripped onto my fingers, but I felt no pain — only that knock, only that silence after it, only the way the house fell still, listening to a stranger's heart at its doorstep. I stood frozen, turned entirely to hearing, and in that ringing, deathly stillness, I fancied I could hear his breath through the oak flesh of the door — heavy, rasping, broken by the long road.

I descended the stairs slowly, gripping the railing with my withered fingers. My knees had suddenly turned to dust, and my heart hammered at the base of my throat, cutting off my access to air. I physically felt that fateful knock resonating through the floorboards, the stonework, the very nerves of the house. It seemed the old manor had suddenly awakened from an age-old torpor: a second, alien heart had begun to beat in its cellars, forcing Greyvud to breathe in unison with the unbidden guest.

Richard was already standing below, at the foot of the stairs. I had not heard him descend — he always moved soundlessly when he wished — but there he was, in his dark blue robe thrown over his nightshirt, his hair not yet tied back with its ribbon. A candle burned in his hand, and in its unsteady light, his face appeared carved from old, cracked stone — as grey, as haggard, as ready for any verdict of fate.

“Open it, Agnes,” he said.

His voice was dull and even. No surprise, no fear, none of that natural wariness of a master with which one should greet night-wanderers in such foul weather. Only weariness. Only that particular, heavy resignation that settles into a man when he has ceased to expect any gifts from life and is prepared to accept any cruelty as his due.

I touched the bolt. It was not the autumn cold, to which I had grown accustomed over sixty winters spent within these walls, that breathed upon me. No. It was a different chill — deeper, more ancient, as if the abyss itself had yawned open at my threshold, releasing that which had languished in its depths for centuries. The smell of the marsh struck my face — thick, cloying, invasive. It filled the hall, subduing the scent of old wax and dried lavender, as if declaring its rights to this house.

On the threshold stood a Man.

He was of such colossal stature that I was forced to crane my neck to catch the features of his face. But the face eluded me: the murk at the doorstep seethed with grey mist, erasing the boundaries between waking and nightmare. My eyes beheld only contours: soaked rags clinging to his flesh with such shameless intimacy that the relief of every muscle could be discerned on that strong, though

deprivation-scarred, body. Water streamed from his hair and the folds of his filthy coat — black, oily, bog-water.

It pooled at his feet in a small puddle, and it seemed to me that this puddle grew, spreading across the stone flags like a sentence that cannot be revoked.

Tangled locks of raven hair fell over his hollow cheeks, hiding half his face. And in the depths of that chaos, eyes burned. They were light, almost transparent, like the standing water of a marsh when it reflects the numb, starless sky. But no heavenly spark dwelt in them. There was nothing there but that same deathly stillness that reigns over the quagmire in calm weather. A silence heavier than any shriek.

He stood straight. He did not bow. Did not lower his eyes. He looked at Richard with a composure unbefitting a vagrant. In that gaze was something ancient, something that made me recall old Mrs. Greyvud's words: "There are people who come into this world not to live in it. They come to destroy it."

Richard stepped forward. I saw his hand, clutching the candlestick, tremble — only for an instant, but I noticed. The silence stretched on.

"What do you seek?" Richard asked. His voice was low, but in that stillness it sounded deafening.

The man parted his lips. The words emerged with difficulty, as if he were extracting them from the viscous depths of the very quagmire from which he had just risen.

"Shelter," he exhaled. Hoarse, guttural, almost a whisper in which the whistle of the wind could be heard. "Food. I'll work in return."

He fell silent, drawing in air convulsively — deeply, with strain, like a mortal whose lungs have unlearned how to accept oxygen. I watched his shoulders shudder beneath the wet rags — a fine, continuous fever that seemed to make the very space around him vibrate. There was no fear in that trembling. Only cold. Only that primal, animal hunger for warmth that compels one to cast aside pride and beg for mercy.

"I'll work," he repeated, and a desperate harshness cut through his voice. "Anything you require. I have skill with horses. I can mend harness. Split wood. Any labor that requires strength."

Richard observed him for a long time. Too long for a fleeting moment. His gaze slid over the stranger's face, lingered on those transparent pupils, the hollow cheeks, that frightening, almost blasphemous straightness with which the newcomer held himself. In the master's eyes, one read not idle curiosity. It was recognition — or a tormenting attempt to recognize. The presentiment that visits a man on the edge of an abyss.

"From what region do you come?" Richard asked.

The man found no words. He merely nodded toward the window, beyond which the whitish murk raged. That gesture was more eloquent than any confession. The marsh. He had come from the depths of the marshes. At such an hour of the night. Through the mire that knows no mercy and does not return the living.

"How did you manage to cross?" Richard's voice dropped to a whisper.

"I walked," the other replied. "Where others find death, I found solid ground. Where every gaze goes blind, I saw a light. Perhaps the marshes led me by the bridle. Perhaps I led myself to this sacrifice. I do not know. I simply walked."

"Was your journey long?"

"Two days. Or three. Time has lost all meaning for me."

"Do you have a name?"

The man was silent. His Adam's apple jumped, the veins in his neck straining — he was wrestling with something inside himself. When he spoke again, his voice was even hoarser.

"Damian," fell from his lips.

He fell still. No surname. No lineage. A name — short and empty as a gunshot in the dark. Like a stone thrown into a well from which no splash ever returns.

Richard did not move. The candle in his hand guttered, hot wax streaming onto his fingers, but he did not notice the burn. He gazed at the newcomer, and in his eyes, something heavy and ancient had frozen. That which belonged not to him alone, but to all the Greyvuds — the dead and those yet unborn.

“Agnes,” he said at last, without turning. “Take some bread. Lead him to the stables. He’ll spend the night there. Tomorrow we shall test his skill.”

The words of objection died on my lips. I wanted to remind him that old John would not tolerate a stranger, that we had no spare clothes, that the man would freeze in the hayloft in such cold. I wanted to say that we were letting a convict or a murderer into the house. But I looked into his eyes — those light, transparent, stagnant eyes — and fell silent.

“Go,” Richard commanded. In that word was such overwhelming resignation to fate that argument became futile.

I went to the kitchen. Wrapped a heel of yesterday’s bread, still holding the warmth of the oven, in a clean rag. Filled an earthenware bowl with thick stew. Packed a basket, adding an old woolen blanket — the one I had saved for a bitter winter, when in my youthful foolishness I believed I could warm the entire universe with compassion alone.

When I returned to the hall, he was still standing on the threshold. Richard had vanished — I had not heard his steps on the stairs. We were alone: myself and this man whom Greyvud Hall had taken into its shadow.

“Come,” I said. My voice sounded muffled, as if from beneath deep water.

He stepped across the threshold.

Greyvud Hall grew darker. The flame in my candle drooped, shrank, pressing close to the wick like a creature that has sensed a predator. The shadows in the corners filled with tangible weight. The air became different — thicker, heavier. The walls, which had seen generations of Greyvuds, acknowledged a power before which they were helpless.

I led him through the hall, past the stairs, past the portraits of ancestors. They watched us with heavy, condemning stares. He followed behind. I heard every step — heavy, uneven. Heard the rasping, broken breathing. Felt the smell he carried with him: tar, raw peat, marsh-slime, and something ancient, primal that made my vision darken.

At the back door, I stopped. For the first time, I looked into his face by the light of the candle.

He was young. Twenty-five at most. But his gaze belonged to an old man — someone who had lost too much to remain young. His face was gaunt, cheeks hollowed, dark furrows carved beneath his eyes. His lips were cracked, with dried blood in the corners. But his eyes... they looked with that calmness that comes to those who have ceased to be afraid, because the worst has already happened.

“Did you truly come from the marshes? On such a night?”

“Truly.” His voice was cracked, devoid of deceit.

“How did you survive?”

He smiled — with just the corners of his lips, soundlessly and terribly.

“The marsh did not touch me,” he said. “Perhaps because I was already dead when I entered it. Perhaps it recognized me as its own.”

“Its own?” My voice trembled.

“One who was born in the mist,” he replied. “One who has breathed this air since his first breath. One whose blood...”

He fell silent, as if encountering an invisible barrier. As if he had spoken of a secret he was meant to keep forever.

I stepped into the murk. He followed. We crossed the yard — past the well, past the woodpile, past the old apple tree that had borne no fruit this year. The gravel crunched so loudly beneath our

feet that the sound should have awakened Greyvud. But the house was silent. Only the wind howled in the chimneys, and from the marshes a bird cried — or something that had already walked this path and knew how it would end. The dead do not speak with the living.

At the stable, I stopped. Pushed the heavy door — it opened with a prolonged creak, like an old beast in its lair.

“Here,” I said, lighting the lantern at the entrance. “Hay is in the corner. I’ve brought a blanket.”

The horses grew agitated: the old bay snorted and stamped his hoof, the black mare pinned her ears. Damian reached a hand toward the nearest stall — slowly, calmly. The mare, ready to kick, suddenly froze. She stretched her muzzle toward his palm — trustingly, submissively.

“She can sense it,” I said quietly. “That there is something... not entirely human in you.”

He said nothing. Only took the basket from my hands.

I went out, locking the heavy door behind me.

I sought refuge in my little room, but peace did not come to me. The candle burned low, shedding its last tears of wax onto my fingers; I watched my red flesh grow numb under that hot pressure, but the pain seemed distant, not my own. My gaze was fixed upon the silent shape of the stable where the man expelled by the mist now lay hidden. No spark of light glimmered there. Only thickening darkness and that dull, wary silence from which the very essence of stone shudders.

Sleep overtook me like an avalanche in the mountains. And in its depths, the murk appeared to me again — colossal, whitish, endowed with its own predatory will. It did not merely drift from the marshes — it erupted, flooding Greyvud Hall, seeping through the mute gaps of windows and the blind cracks of doors like living mercury. Cold waves filled the chambers, climbing the stairs like phantom steps, devouring the familiar world. I stood in the heart of that undulating murk, and the mist felt not icy, but blasphemously, frighteningly warm — like the breath of a beast poised at the back of my neck.

It carried not the stench of marsh-rot, but something else — that primal, forgotten call that makes the blood in one’s veins flow slower and heavier. I stood waiting, and the silence of the mist was my only accomplice in this protracted mystery.

And below, in the mournful silence of the hayloft, Damian did not know sleep. He stared into the absolute void of night, and on his lips wandered a smile — barely perceptible, terrible in its awareness. He knew: it was done. The die was cast for the sacrifice. And now nothing — neither the Judge of Heaven nor the fragile laws of men — could halt the course of fate that had begun its count beneath the vaults of Greyvud.

Chapter 2

The Master’s Daughter

On that morning when Damian first beheld Arabella, the murk above Greyvud Hall stood as such a dense shroud that it was impossible to discern one’s own hands stretched out before one. I stood motionless at the kitchen window; it seemed the universe had breathed its last, and beyond that white wall there existed nothing more — neither stables, nor marshes, nor the distant village where on Sundays a bell tolled mournfully. The sky itself had hidden itself from us behind an impenetrable, leaden veil for three weeks now, and even the most desperate birds had ceased to give voice, as if they understood: in this white silence, any sound would be a blasphemy.

I carried the breakfast tray to her chambers, as I had done every morning for nineteen years — since that very night when Arabella had burst into this world under the howling of a storm that had roared through the countryside as if the Lord Himself were enraged at Greyvud Hall for certain transgressions hidden from our understanding. The tray in my hands was habitually heavy: a porcelain bowl with a saucer painted with a delicate blue branch of thistle — the Greyvud family pattern; a teapot under a knitted cozy; a milk jug in the shape of a tiny pitcher; and honey from our own apiary

— dark, thick, smelling of heather and that particular, boggy sweetness that cannot be mistaken for anything else. The butter this autumn had churned poorly, because the cows were restless and their milk tasted bitter.

I arranged all of this each morning in the same order, and this order was as unshakeable a part of existence for me as the alternation of day and night, or as the fact that the marshes beyond the window would always breathe their heavy, damp breath. I knew every crack in the porcelain, every chip on the saucer, every spot on the silver spoon. I knew that Arabella would first sip her tea, wince if it was too hot, then put in two spoonfuls of sugar and add honey — always honey — and only then would she turn to the bread. I knew she never ate more than half, that I would later find the other half on the plate, bitten from one edge and carefully placed back, as if she wished to deceive me, to make me believe she had eaten with appetite. I knew all of this, as one knows one's craft or as one knows the way home on the darkest night.

In the corridor reigned the eternal scent of wax and aged wood. The floorboards groaned beneath my feet with that familiar, soothing rhythm — a sound I had learned down to its last note, like the voice of a mother or the rustle of rain against the window in the irrevocable days of childhood. I walked slowly, so as not to spill a drop from the porcelain bowl, and my thoughts involuntarily wove themselves into a familiar pattern: that today, as in days past, and as in days to come, Arabella would be shut away in her chambers with a book, and life would flow on serenely for her, like crystal water in an old, well-tended pond with no room for storms, no currents, no treacherous abyss hiding in the depths of our marshes.

I thought about how soon, in all likelihood, Mr. Hawthorn would arrive with another offering of roses from his greenhouse and his idle, decorous speeches about the weather; about how fortunate it was that the murk was finally clearing — though it never fully cleared, and we were all privy to this truth, yet none dared to clothe it in words. I thought about how the coming winter promised to be long and harsh, and how it would be necessary to extract from the depths of the chests the heavy woolen covers we kept for when the cold became so frantic that even in the warmest rooms, one's breath turned to white clouds of vapor. And that I must ensure the moths had not attacked the furs that no one wore anymore, but which still rested silently in the wardrobe, like a reminder of those times when Greyvud Hall was full of guests and rejoicing, not this languid, sticky silence that settled on one's shoulders like a burdensome, damp shroud.

I indulged in these reflections only to avoid thinking of something else: of how, the night before, someone had shaken our door with a monumental blow, and Richard had admitted that stranger with that incomprehensible, frightening resignation, as if he had been expecting that summons all his earthly life.

I drove from my memory the image of how, that morning, passing the stable, I had seen old John standing frozen at the entrance — he was looking inside with an expression I could not decipher: it was neither fear nor anger, but something beyond, something that compelled me to quicken my step and not look back.

Arabella's chamber door was ajar — and this circumstance already seemed to me an omen of disaster. Arabella always locked herself in when she read her books, allowing no intrusion into her seclusion. She used to say that a book is an entire universe, and one must enter it with the same reverence with which one enters a church — without haste and with heartfelt trepidation. "You wouldn't interrupt a pastor in the middle of his sermon, would you, Agnes?" she would ask, and I could find no words to answer, for she rarely went to church, but read every hour, and for her, it seemed, these occupations were clothed in equal sanctity.

I pushed the door with my shoulder, entered, and stopped on the threshold, feeling that something in the familiar picture of this morning had shifted. It was an elusive sensation — as happens when you enter a room where someone has just been weeping: the air changes, becomes heavy, saturated with something that was not there a moment before. In Arabella's chambers, the air was

exactly that — thick, tense, as if she were not simply reading a book, but conducting an invisible, fateful dialogue with someone hidden from my sight.

The room held that particular, languid half-darkness that Arabella so valued. The heavy draperies of dark green velvet embroidered with silver thread were drawn almost halfway, admitting only a narrow band of grey, sickly light that fell upon the old oak table piled high with books. In this muted, milky radiance, everything seemed illusory, unreal — as if the room had become an underwater grotto, and Arabella its only prisoner, voluntarily confined here. The walls, papered in pale wallpaper with a silvery pattern, looked damp as the masonry of an old well, and even the fire in the hearth, which I had lit at dawn, could not banish this dampness — the flame merely tossed about in the grate, casting enormous, trembling shadows upon the walls. They made the room seem even more like an underwater kingdom, where its own laws and its own particular time reigned.

On the table by the armchair, covered with a cloth that Arabella herself had embroidered last spring — delicate stems of wildflowers, still awkward but already promising talent — rested a cup of tea. I noticed it instantly, for I had brewed that infusion myself and knew what it looked like when hot — dark amber, almost brown, with a fine light foam — and what it became as it transformed into a dark, bitter liquid fit only to be thrown to the pigs or poured on garden beds to repel slugs. Now it was just that: dark, oily, with a film on its surface that burst into tiny bubbles at the slightest disturbance of the air.

Arabella sat in the deep armchair by the window, her legs tucked beneath her, her knees covered with the blanket I had knitted for her with my own hands three winters ago, when the cold had been especially fierce. The blanket was grey, with a pattern of small cables that I had knitted on long evenings by the kitchen hearth, listening to the wind's howling in the chimney, mourning something beyond my understanding. I had made it so that she might not know cold, so that there might exist in the world something warm and soft capable of warming her when I was no longer there. I often thought about this: that one day I would pass into eternity, but this blanket would remain, and she would wrap herself in it, reviving my memory. I did not know then that she would have no children — or that she would have them, but not such as I had imagined in my hopefulness — and that this blanket would turn to ashes together with the house, or rot in the bog-slime, as all vain things we leave behind us rot.

In her hands, she gripped a book — *The Garden of Lost Shadows*, a novel sent by Mrs. Blackwood from Morton with a note tied with silk ribbon. I remembered how Arabella had winced then, as if offered stale food, and had cast the book onto the table by the door, where it had lain for three days under a layer of dust. I had thought then: "Good, no need to poison the mind with foolishness while there is Scripture and the works of philosophers." But later, evidently, curiosity had prevailed.

For three weeks now, she had not parted with this novel, and I did not know whether to be glad or to grieve. Her mind was lively, sharp, demanding food as a fire demands wood. But I remembered the tales of the Knights of the Round Table and the stories of the saints she had read in her girlhood — there the world was clear, love was rewarded, and suffering was clothed in meaning. In Mrs. Blackwood's novels, however, everything was different: there people languished without cause, craved the love of those who were alien to them, and faded away in the end, leaving behind nothing but tears.

Now Arabella was reading with a peculiar, almost painful concentration. Her fingers, thin and translucent like all the Greyvuds', gripped the spine with such ferocity that her knuckles had gone white; it seemed to me that if she squeezed them any harder, she would snap the book in two, like a dry branch. She bent so low over the page that her jet-black locks fell over her cheeks, hiding her face, and I could see only her brow — white, smooth, without wrinkles, which at nineteen years of age are not to be found. And yet it seemed to me that a certain shadow was already appearing on that brow — that same bitter furrow that had scored her mother's face in the last days of her earthly term.

On the table, beside the cold infusion, rested the plate with the bitten bread — I had not been mistaken; she had not eaten even half — and a small pot of honey, which she had not touched at all. The candles in the silver candlestick were dying, wax streaming down their sides in uneven drops, frozen like tears. In the air reigned the scent of old books — that particular, sweet-bitter aroma of yellowed pages and leather bindings that always accompanied Arabella. To it was mingled the smell of dried roses resting in crystal on her dressing table. They were the remains of a bouquet brought by Mr. Hawthorn last spring; Arabella, to my astonishment, had not discarded them, but had dried them, preserving them in her seclusion. I did not know what this signified: perhaps emptiness, or perhaps that in her detachment there was room for some strange, incomprehensible tenderness.

“My child,” I said, setting the tray on the chest of drawers and approaching her. My voice sounded steady, though everything inside me had tightened with an unclear, leaden foreboding. “You have not touched your tea again. It grew cold an hour ago, or perhaps more. I will make fresh tea as soon as I go down to the kitchen. And your bread is untouched. You must eat, Arabella. You are thin as a reed already, and in autumn, strength is needed. You know the winters in these parts are long. If you do not build up your strength now, by spring you will be languishing with fever, as you did that year you turned ten, and I spent three nights by your bedside, wiping you with a damp cloth and uttering prayers that, surely, did not reach heaven, for they were too weak and full of fear.”

No answer came. Arabella did not even lift her head — only her fingers twitched convulsively on the page. I noticed how her gaze had stopped on a single line. Her eyes, which had previously moved so swiftly and greedily over the paper, devouring each word with predatory passion — now remained motionless. It seemed my charge was not reading the text, but gazing into its very depths, trying to discern what was hidden between the lines. Something left unspoken by the author, or perhaps not written by him at all, but by someone else — invisible and all-knowing.

The room grew so quiet that one could hear the wax guttering in the candlestick — with a barely perceptible hiss. This silence was unkind. It promised no peace, but waited, like a beast before its spring. In this stillness, which had flooded the chambers of Greyvud Hall, I physically felt: Arabella had frozen, turned into a single ear.

Her essence no longer belonged to this room, this armchair, or this novel. My mistress was out there, beyond the window, in the grip of the murk that stubbornly refused to clear.

“Arabella,” I called more loudly, touching her shoulder. My hand was trembling treacherously. My charge noticed it instantly — she always noticed the slightest flaw in my composure, even when she wore a mask of indifference. “What is it, child? You are paler than usual. Are you unwell? Have those attacks of pain returned, the ones that tormented you last year, when the doctor from Morton blamed the stagnant air and your unwillingness to leave these walls?”

She started, like a traveler suddenly returned from beyond. Lifted her head, and I saw her face — marked by that transparent whiteness that was the hereditary brand of the Greyvuds. On her cheekbones burned a feverish flush that boded no good. Her eyes — huge, bottomless, reaching into the very thickness of the earth where ancient roots slumber and primal darkness breathes — were wide open. In their depths was frozen an expression I could not decipher. Not fear, not joy. Something else, which made my chest grow cold. “Lord,” flashed through my thoughts, “is she seeing the same thing her mother saw in her dying hours? Is the decay that consumed the mother from within being passed down to the daughter?”

“Agnes,” she said, and her voice was muffled, as if coming from beneath deep water, from that very well into which I was afraid to look. “Did you not hear it?”

“What was I supposed to hear?” I asked, though in that same moment the truth revealed itself to me.

My hearing, trained over forty years to distinguish every breath of the house, had already caught what had interrupted her reading. What had turned the silence into waiting.

From beyond the window came a sound.

The sound was sharp, metallic, piercing — the kind that makes one cover one's ears, even though there is no direct threat in it. It was the screech of a sharpening stone against steel. Someone in the yard was honing a scythe or a knife, scraping away the rust and dirt accumulated over weeks of disuse. A rough, alien noise that had nothing in common with the habitual morning hum of Greyvud Hall: the measured thud of the woodcutter's axe, to which the house had grown accustomed as an old man grows accustomed to the morning ache in his joints; or the creak of the well-sweep, lulling as a lullaby. This sound was different. Too insistent, too... alive. It had burst into the symphony of Greyvud like a false chord, foretelling that soon all the music would go to ruin.

Arabella was already on her feet. I had not seen her cast aside the blanket and cross the room. She moved with that impulsive lightness that had always frightened me — as if she did not walk but glided over the floorboards, woven from the very murk that billowed beyond the windows. She stopped at the window, yanking the heavy drapery aside with a jerk. The light that flooded the room was so sudden after the half-darkness that I involuntarily shut my eyes. And when I opened them again — I saw her back: straight, tense, as she had not been even in her hours of grief for her mother.

My mistress stood, gripping the oak frame with her fingers, and gazed down to where, in the mist, work was being done. I saw her profile — pale, sharp, with a dark lock fallen across her cheek. Her lips were tightly pressed together, and in her eyes blazed something for which I had no name. Not curiosity, not fear. Hunger. That same predatory hunger with which she devoured her books, wishing to absorb all meanings and secrets at once.

"Agnes," she said, not turning around. Her voice was low, almost a whisper, but that whisper made my heart stop. "Who is that?" she asked.

"The new stable hand," I answered, trying to lend my voice an everyday quality, as if the appearance of this stranger from the night murk were a mundane matter. "Mr. Greyvud engaged him yesterday. From Morton, I suppose, or some other region. He's to assist old John — the stables have been neglected, and John's hands are not what they were, his eyesight clouded. The master decided a helper was needed."

"A stable hand," she repeated, and in the word there sounded a different, alien resonance, as if she were tasting it, trying it on for herself, striving to grasp its hidden meaning. "Has he... worked here before?"

"No," I cut her off. "The night brought him. Mr. Greyvud assigned him a bed in the stable until he proves his worth. Old John grumbles, of course — he always complains when the world order is disturbed. You know his temper. He complained when I rearranged the kitchen utensils, and when your father ordered the lindens trimmed, and when the horses arrived from London. He'll grumble and accept it. Everyone accepts it."

Arabella kept her silence. She gazed down, and I noticed how her fingers, resting on the windowsill, were seized by a fine, barely perceptible tremor — one that only my eye, trained over years to study every gesture and every breath of hers, could detect. I drew nearer, stood beside her, and also turned my gaze to the window.

He was there. Below, in the yard, which the mist was reluctantly releasing from its embrace, leaving on the stones wet, shimmering streaks like the trail of a giant, weary snail. He stood at the hitching post, in old John's usual place, and in his movements there was something that made me freeze. He worked silently, intently, with that frightening, predatory smoothness that did not fit with his gaunt face and the rags still clinging to his flesh. The dirt, it seemed, had sunk into his skin so deeply that it could not be washed away even with icy water from the bucket. He did not fuss, like John, who was always groaning and dropping his tools, cursing his infirmity. He simply did his work. And did it as if his hands possessed their own memory, needing no guidance from mind or eyes.

"He does not look like a stable hand," said Arabella. In her voice sounded something I had not expected to hear. Not disdain, not surprise — something else. Something she herself, perhaps, dared not name.

“All stable hands look like stable hands,” I cut in, though I knew the falseness of my words. John looked like a stable hand, for his very nature, his hands and gait, proclaimed his calling. But this stranger... he seemed one who had once been clothed in a different essence, and now, having lost everything, merely played the role of a servant. But I could not confess this to Arabella. Could not speak that he had been expelled by the marshes, that he smelled of tar and raw peat, and that in his eyes was frozen something that made one cross oneself and look away. Could not say that Richard had looked at him as if recalling something forgotten, but not wholly expelled.

“Yesterday, a storm raged,” Arabella said — not asking, but stating, as if verifying a truth she already knew. “In such foul weather, one does not travel from Morton. The roads are washed out, the murk so thick that the world disappears three paces away. Who would dare to hire himself out as a stable hand at such an hour of the night?”

“Perhaps he arrived earlier,” my words stuck in my throat, becoming heavy and cumbersome as stones. “Perhaps he waited in the village until the storm abated. Or perhaps Mr. Greyvud brought him from London itself. You know the capital: those hungry for shelter do not look at the sky. When hunger gnaws at your belly, you go in any weather.”

She turned to me, and I saw her face quite close — pale, strained, with that feverish blush that would not die. In her eyes — huge, bottomless — was frozen something I had never seen before. Not fear, not curiosity. Expectancy. The same expectancy with which Richard had looked at the threshold, before drawing back the bolt. The same that, surely, had wandered in her mother’s gaze when, an hour before giving birth, she stared at the murk beyond the window. I remember asking her then: “What do you see, my lady?” And she had answered: “Death. And life. And something else. Something that has no name.”

“Agnes,” she said, and her voice was low, almost a whisper, but in that whisper there was something that made my heart clench. “Do you believe that people come into this world not by chance? That there is One who guides their steps? That every knock at the door is not merely a sound, but a sign?”

“I believe that the Lord guides us,” I answered, feeling the dryness in my mouth hinder my speech, feeling my words become alien. “I believe that everything has its reason and its season. A time to be born, and a time to die. A time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted. A time to keep silence, and a time to speak.”

“And a time to love?” she asked, and in the question was something that made me catch my breath. “A time to love, and a time to hate. A time of war, and a time of peace. To everything there is a season, Agnes. To everything there is a season.”

She turned again to the window. Below, in the yard, Damian had finished his task and now hoisted a heavy saddle onto his shoulder — the same saddle old John always dragged with such effort, cursing the Greyvuds and their enormous horses. He did it in a single motion — easily, freely, as if the saddle weighed no more than a down pillow. I noticed the muscles in his back tense beneath the wet rag of his shirt, how they rolled beneath his skin like living knots, how his shoulders straightened as he stood to his full, frightening height. I noticed how Arabella’s fingers, lying on the windowsill, clenched so fiercely that her knuckles whitened. I noticed how she stopped breathing.

“Go, Agnes,” she commanded, not turning around. “I will come down later. I must... I must finish the chapter.”

I closed the book and remained for long minutes in a daze, gazing through the glass at the murk that stubbornly refused to clear.

“A time to love,” pulsed through my consciousness. “A time to love.”

And I prayed to heaven only for this — that this passion might not become for all of us a time to die.

I picked up the tray with the cold infusion. Paused for a moment, gazing at her back — straight, tense, suddenly become alien to me. I wanted to say something weighty, something that might block

her way, protect her, shield her from what was to come. But the words would not come. Only a single utterance, ancient as the universe itself, surfaced in my memory — the words of Scripture, which once had seemed to me mere poetic fancy. Now they burned my lips like red-hot iron.

“A time to love,” I whispered, leaving the room. “A time to love, and a time to die.”

She did not answer. Perhaps she did not hear. Perhaps she heard, but chose silence. Or perhaps she knew something hidden from me: that the hour of departure had already come, that it stood upon the threshold and waited for permission to enter, like that stranger the night before.

I descended to the ground floor. Left the tray on the kitchen table. Sat down on the bench by the hearth, gazing at the flame, which was already dying, turning into a host of crimson, pulsing coals. I watched them smolder and thought that in the chambers above, Arabella had closed the secular novel, cast it aside, and placed her hands upon another — a heavy one, bound in dark leather with brass clasps that clinked like the bolts of a dungeon. She opened the book to that very page where it is written of seasons. She drank in the text, and her lips moved soundlessly, echoing the words I knew by heart, but which I had never fully understood.

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

Arabella closed the book, laid it on her lap, and remained still, her gaze fixed on the window. The murk beyond the glass did not clear; it stood as a dense white wall, hiding the world, but my charge knew — he was there. He was doing his work in the yard. He had come. And now, nothing could be changed.

I sat in the kitchen, watching the dying flame, and thought that once, in an irrevocable time, I too had been young. I too had languished in expectation of something that would turn the universe upside down. I had waited, but it did not happen. Or it happened, but passed me by. Or I failed to read the sign, because it did not resemble the tales in books. Now I sat here, old, exhausted, with hands that remembered the curve of every spoon and every chipped cup in this house. I realized: the time that had burst in beneath our vaults was not mine. It belonged to her. To Arabella. And I was powerless to stop its flight.

Chapter 3

The Gazes

On that day when Damian first looked at Arabella as no servant should look at a mistress, I stood frozen at the kitchen window. I felt it physically: time was breaking. Not stopping — breaking, like a dry branch bent over a knee; I heard that bony crack, foretelling that the past would not return. The minutes dragged on like thick molasses in a harvest year — they caught on one another, stumbled, fell, and in every movement there was something deathlike. It was the stillness of a hunted hare that no longer seeks escape, because it has accepted the inevitability of the end.

Arabella cast aside the book. The heavy thud of the folio against the faded velvet cushions reached the kitchen like a short gunshot. That was the first blow of the hammer erecting the scaffold. I gripped the windowsill so fiercely that my knuckles went white, and waited. I knew: this would happen. I had known it from the second Damian had defiled the threshold with his presence, from when Richard had recognized Fate in him, from when the mist had grown so thick that we had begun to drown in it — slowly and inexorably.

Footsteps on the stairs — quick, stumbling, almost running — cut through the silence of the halls. Arabella had never known haste; she had always glided over the floorboards, like all the Greyvuds, who for centuries had learned not to disturb the dust of their ancestors. Now she was running. I recognized the sound of her steps — barefoot, I realized from the soft, damp slap of a naked heel on the old oak. She flew down the stairs, skipping every second one, like a child drawn to something forbidden. I looked out into the corridor and saw her back — straight, taut as a string. Her light morning dress was thrown on hastily, the top buttons left carelessly open. Her hair, which she always subdued into a tight knot, now fell over her shoulders in a black, predatory cascade, and she did not think of pinning it up.

I wanted to call out to her. My throat rattled with the words: “My child, cast aside this madness, you have forgotten your shawl, the cold will chill you to the bone.” I wanted to cry: “Your dress is unfastened, shameful before the servants, what will Mrs. Blackwood say when she sees my charge so disheveled?” Or the most terrible: “Do not breathe the same air as the one expelled by the marshes, for the marsh exacts its tribute and does not release its own...” But the words lodged in my throat, turning into that same suffocating knot that blocks one’s breath whenever the universe crumbles and you are powerless.

I could only watch as she ran out onto the porch, as she flew down the steps. Her feet in house slippers — satin, sky-blue, over which I had haggled with the merchant at the fair in Morton, fighting for every penny — stepped into the rich, oily black mud of the yard. The fabric grew wet, darkened, absorbing the dirt that would forever eat into its fibers. No cleaning, no caustic lye, with which I had for years removed stains from her clothes, would restore the satin’s former, virginal whiteness.

She did not notice. Or chose to ignore the omen. She walked toward the stable, and I followed with my gaze her tracks — deep, uneven marks of soaked shoes that had lost their shape. I realized: this was that same “time to die” of which Scripture spoke. Before, it had seemed as distant to me as the cold stars in the sky or the bookish love that cannot be found in this sublunary world. Now I understood: yesterday, I had opened the door not merely to a stranger — I had let in Mischief. But the mischief was not in him. It had slumbered in the very walls of Greyvud for centuries, and now it had awakened, stretched its shoulders, breathed in unison with the newcomer. And I was powerless to lull that beast back to sleep.

I saw her reach the stable door. Saw her freeze, as if sensing an invisible barrier. She stopped two steps from the open gap of the door. The light emanating from within fell upon her face — pale, tense, marked by that feverish blush that neither the morning damp nor the icy breath of autumn could extinguish. Within her raged a different fire.

She hesitated, and her hands — thin, translucent, with long fingers that turned the pages of books so gracefully that I sometimes forgot they belonged to a living creature, imagining them as a sculpture of cold marble in the niche of an abandoned temple — now hung limply at her sides. I watched them trembling; watched her fingers clench and unclench convulsively, as if she wished to grasp an invisible thread, but it slipped away from her into the murk.

She entered. I did not catch the moment she crossed the threshold — at that second, the wind yanked the shutter violently, and I was distracted. But when my gaze returned to the window, Arabella had vanished. Only the open gap of the stable remained, and the darkness within.

The stable of Greyvud Hall was an ancient, grim structure of hewn stone, erected by the first lord who had dared to challenge the quagmire. He had built walls where the earth was unstable and the air too heavy for breathing. He had won, but the marsh preserved the memory of its defeat, and that memory had eaten into the stone, into the wood, into the very soil beneath the foundation. Inside, there always reigned the scent of hay, horseflesh, and old leather; that particular, tangy aroma of wood that for decades had absorbed the sweat of animals and the twilight silence that fills a space when humans leave, leaving the creatures alone with their wordless knowledge.

Arabella stepped into that half-darkness and paused, letting her eyes adjust to the shadows. She would be lying to herself if she claimed she had come to check on the old black mare, who in her youth had trustingly nuzzled her warm nose against Arabella's shoulder.

She would be lying if she thought she wished to verify that the harness was intact or that the new stable hand was diligent, so that he might not disturb the age-old order of Greyvud. But she did not seek self-deception. She knew why she had come.

He stood at the back of the stable, by the stall of the old bay — a fractious beast who had never let himself be handled by anyone except John, and even then with the greatest difficulty. Now the horse was docile, his head bowed onto Damian's shoulder; Damian was stroking the animal's muzzle — slowly, steadily, with that frightening tenderness that was so blasphemously at odds with his hands, scored with scars and roughened by calluses. He had not heard her approach. Or had heard but had not deigned to turn. He continued his work, and in that absorption was something that made Arabella freeze.

She looked at his back — broad, taut, clothed in the wet rag of a shirt that clung to his flesh so shamelessly that the relief of every muscle could be discerned, every impulse of breath. The sleeves were rolled above the elbows, revealing his forearms — sinewy, strong, marked with pale scars that gleamed even in the half-darkness. On his skin beaded drops of sweat, and in their glimmer hid something that made her breath stop. She inhaled that scent — tar, horse-sweat, musty wool — something sharp, primal, for which there was no place in her chambers. That odor was coarse, it invaded her lungs, making her feel her own flesh — her clean, washed, lavender-scented flesh — differently than ever before.

She could find the strength neither to call out to him, nor to turn away from this vision. She was fascinated — not by him, no, she did not wish to know him, dared not crave his closeness — but by the power that pulsed within him. That primal, wild might that no man in her circle possessed.

William Hawthorn seemed beside him but a courteous shadow: he brought roses, spoke of the weather, smiled at the behest of propriety, and fell silent when custom demanded. In him was order, but not life. In Hawthorn's hands there was no such power, in his eyes no such abyss, in his flesh did not pulse that frightening, primal life that now appeared before her in the form of a man in stained rags. Damian grasped the currycomb — so ancient that its handle had been polished to a mirror shine by hundreds of hands that had wielded it long before him. In that gleam reflected not luxury, but age-old, honest labor, from which Greyvud Hall had always turned its pale face.

Damian turned. Not because his ear had caught her presence — she had frozen quieter than a mouse in the cellar — but because he had sensed her with his entire being. He turned, and Arabella saw his face: gaunt, marked by deep shadows and hollow cheeks; his lips were pressed so tightly together that he seemed never to have known a smile. But his eyes... they were open, and in their depths hid something that made her stop breathing.

They seemed light, almost transparent, like the standing water in a peat-bog reflecting the numb sky. But the deathly emptiness I had thought I saw at his arrival was no longer there. Something else reigned. Something that made her step back despite her will. Something that pinned her to the spot, though her entire being cried out for flight.

He did not bow. Did not lower his gaze. Uttered no sound. He looked at her, and in that look was neither deference, nor slavish servility, nor the polite mask that servants put on when meeting their masters. He looked at her as equal to equal.

"Who are you?" she asked, and her voice sounded hollow, as if she did not recognize her own speech.

She wanted to cry: "How dare you look at me so blasphemously?" She wished to say: "You should prostrate yourself, leave, rot, never defile this yard with your presence," but her lips would not obey. She looked at him, and in her chest grew so tight that it seemed her heart would tear itself

from its cage of flesh, fall upon the dirty straw, and all would see what it was — small, frightened, beating in its death-throes.

“Damian,” he said. One word. Without lineage, without title, without anything that could establish his place in this sublunary world, his right to be here, in her stable, looking at her so blasphemously.

“You were required to bow,” she breathed, and in her voice sounded something akin to a plea. Not a command — a plea. For if he bowed, the universe would return to its proper order. If he lowered his gaze, she would find the strength to leave, to lock herself in her chambers, to touch the pages of her book, and to consign his very existence to oblivion.

If he performed the ritual that declared his servitude, she could convince herself that she had not stood here, had not inhaled the smell of his flesh, had not drowned in his transparent eyes.

“I have not been taught to bow,” he replied, and in his tone was no defiance. Only truth. “I have been trained to work. To silence. To doing what is required. But to bow...” He paused, and Arabella saw his lips twitch in a grimace that resembled hidden pain or a memory that could not be expelled. “That skill I have lost. Or perhaps I never knew it. I do not know.”

She looked at him, and in her chest grew so empty that it seemed, if she opened her lips, nothing would escape but the wind that howled in the chimneys on sleepless nights. She wished to say something severe, to erect a barrier that would remind him of the gulf between mistress and servant, to return them to the world of unshakeable rules and boundaries. But the words would not come. She merely stood, pinned by his gaze, and felt her flesh begin to pulse with its own wild life, heedless of the commands of reason.

He took a step toward her. A single step. No more. But that movement was enough for her to realize: the boundary she had tried to erect no longer existed. He stopped so close that Arabella felt his breath on her face — warm, steady, imbued with that smell of tar and raw earth that invaded her lungs, made her dizzy, and made her feel as if she stood not on solid ground but on the shifting, greedy quagmire that gave way beneath her feet.

“You should not have come,” he said. Not a question. He stated it as a fact — a truth he had possessed from the very second he crossed the threshold of Greyvud.

“I am the mistress of this house,” she answered, and her voice sounded weak, uncertain, like a child repeating a memorized lesson without thinking of its meaning. “I may go wherever I wish.”

“You did not come by right of the mistress,” he cut in. “You came because I am here. You came to look at me. As one looks at something...” He paused, searching for the right word, and she noticed his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed, “...at something one fears. Or something one craves, but dares not name.”

“I crave nothing,” she lied. She knew it was a lie, and he knew it, and both of them were privy to that silent, terrible truth, which made her vision darken and her knees turn to water. Arabella felt she would fall right there, onto that dirty straw, and he would catch her, and that would be the end of everything she had ever known about herself.

“Do not lie,” — his voice held no cruelty. Only that naked truth that needs no defense. “I have been trained to distinguish falsehood from truth. I have been too long in lands where lying kills more swiftly than hunger. I have seen those who lied to themselves — they perished first. Not by the hand of a killer, no. Because they ceased to be themselves. And a person who denies their own essence is dead, even if their heart still sounds the alarm.”

Arabella looked at him, and in the depths of her chest reigned such emptiness that it seemed she could hear the echo of her own thoughts — they darted about like caged birds finding no exit. She wanted to say that he had no right to such blasphemy, that he was merely a servant whose sphere was limited to the stable, the mud, and the smell of tar, which should not mingle with her scents, her books, her existence. But she was mute. For beneath his gaze, everything she had known about herself, about the unshakability of her rank, about her right to sterile order — all of it turned to dust,

to empty words behind which stood nothing but fear. Fear of what she felt in that second; of what had languished in her forever, but had never been clothed in a name.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, and this question did not concern his trade or his sudden appearance at Greyvud in this foggy hour. It was about something else. About what he was doing now in her life, in her thoughts, in the silence that had once been her refuge but had now become a roar.

“Working,” he replied. “Doing what I have been trained to do. What has been given to me as a duty. You wanted a bow — I have not been taught. You wished me gone — I will leave at your first word. But you will not give that command.” He said this without defiance, without pride, but simply as a fact, as indisputable as the coming dawn over this stable, where he would clean the harness and catch her shadow in the windows of Greyvud.

“Whence comes such certainty in you?” — her voice trembled, and she hated herself for that weakness, for being unable to master herself.

“Because you did not reject me,” he said. “You came to the stable in slippers that have soaked up the damp, in a dress doomed to be defiled by mud, without a shawl, heedless of the cold. You came to look at me. And you did not leave when I violated custom and did not bow. You did not leave when I accused you of lying. You stand before my gaze, and I see your eyes, and I know your confusion, because I share it. And that frightens you. It frightens me as well. But it exists. And you have no power to annul what is. No more than I.”

“I do not know what you are feeling,” she said, but it was a lie, and both were privy to that falsehood. And in that lie was something that made him take another step — so close that Arabella felt the desiccating heat of his flesh through her clothes, through that ephemeral, supposedly safe layer of fabric that separated her from him and from all the primal chaos he had brought into her world.

“You do know,” he cut her off. “You know, because you looked at me as one looks at something that already belongs to you, though your mind has not yet dared to admit it. You looked at me as if I were the man who had already reshaped your existence, while you remained in ignorance of when or how it happened.”

She wanted to step back, but her feet would not obey. She wished to declare that he was mistaken, that he was blind in his audacity, that she was Arabella Greyvud, heiress of this manor, and her life was not subject to distortion by the will of one who had emerged from the marshes with a traveler’s bag and tar ground into his pores. But she was mute. For beneath his gaze, she realized: everything she had believed about herself before had been merely a mask, worn so long that her true face had been erased from memory. And he looked through the mask, and beneath it quivered something that frightened her more than any words, any touches, any thoughts.

Arabella took a step backward. Not from a desire to flee, but sensing that if she remained here another moment, another brief instant — she would do something that could never be undone. She pressed her back against the doorframe; the cold of the stone burned through the thin silk of her dress. That cold was her only remaining connection to reality, to the world where she ruled, where the laws were unshakable and everything remained in decent order.

“You must leave,” she breathed, and her voice faded to a whisper. “You have no place here. You cannot... look at me so blasphemously.”

“How?” he asked. And in that brief sound was no innocence. No misunderstanding. Only what she had feared to hear: a challenge, a naked truth, a knowledge shared by both — that this would never end.

“As at something that does not belong to you,” she breathed. These words seemed to her the most blasphemous that had ever fallen from her lips, for in them lay an admission. A confession that he looked at her not as a servant, not as a foreigner obliged to lower his gaze and retreat into the shadows. He looked at her as something he wished to possess. As something he was prepared to seize. As something that, perhaps, he had already possessed, though they had never touched.

He found no words to answer. He only pinned her with his gaze, which made her breath stop. Arabella stood frozen, her spine pressed against the cold stone; she felt her heart beating the alarm in her very throat, felt the feverish blood rushing to her cheeks, felt her flesh grow heavy, alien, knowing no obedience. She wanted to say something that would return them to the bosom of the familiar world, but speech had abandoned her. Only silence. Only that gaze. Only the scent of tar, dizzying her, and the desiccating heat radiating from his body.

Damian extended his hand. Not from a desire to touch her — she sensed this with her whole being — but so that she might see. His fingers — long, dry, with broken nails and dirt ground beneath the skin, never to be washed away forever — stopped so close that she could have felt their texture had she wished to move. She should not have wanted that. But her hand — her thin, white, virginal hand that had known no other labor than turning pages and writing letters that remained without an addressee — rose of its own accord, against her will and her prohibition. It stopped in the space, two inches from his palm.

“Do not,” fell from his lips. And in Damian’s voice sounded the unexpected. Not triumph, not the gloating of a victor. Fear. As primal as her own. Terror of what would happen the moment flesh met flesh. If they both took that step, from which there was no return.

Arabella pushed herself away from the doorframe. A step toward the exit. Another. To look back would be to perish. Damian’s gaze, as he remained in the viscous half-darkness of the stable, pierced her shoulder blades, her shoulders, her trembling fingers that could not be stilled. The mud squelched beneath her feet; the cold penetrated through the soaked satin of her slippers and the thin silk straight to her heart, but the pain was mute. Within her lived only that gaze, stitching through flesh and stone, entering that very depth where there is no salvation.

Her flight into the house was like an escape from a chase more terrible than death. Her memory retained neither the stairs nor the slammed door of her room — only the fall into the armchair, where the folio still lay, open to the pages about seasons. The letters blurred, losing their shape. In her ears thundered only her own breathing.

Arabella looked at him and did not understand how the earth dared to bear such rough flesh in the same space as her lace. In his hands pulsed a might she had thought mere idle fiction. For in our world, no one was real. No one looked as if they saw not a face, not clothing, not rank, but that her which she herself had never known before.

I stood frozen in the kitchen, gazing at the ashes of the dead hearth; in the air, I could feel time dying. My ear caught her headlong flight: Arabella burst in beneath the vaults, and her steps — wet, defiled by the mud of the yard, in those same satin slippers she would never have worn had she been in her right mind — drummed upon the stairs. Her breath broke into a silent scream. I heard the door of her room slam, heard the bolt click, and then silence.

Between them stood not etiquette, not custom, not the gulf dividing classes. The barrier was nature itself: predator and prey, having forgotten their roles, looking at each other with equal fear and equal hunger. And neither could turn away, for the first to retreat would admit defeat.

I rose, approached the glass, and turned my gaze to the stable. Damian stood on the threshold. He was looking at the windows of the second floor — toward where her heart beat behind the curtains. He stood motionless, betraying no thought, no tremor. But I knew the truth. I recognized that look: once, Richard had looked at her mother like that, and she had answered in kind, and both of them had known — the old world had turned to dust, giving way to another, where there were no boundaries, only this hypnotic gaze.

I made the sign of the cross. Whispered words I had once known by heart, but which had now lost their saving grace — for He to whom they were addressed, it seemed, had finally turned His face from Greyvud Hall, from its walls and its inhabitants.

“A time to love,” pulsed through my consciousness, like the alarm beat of blood in a wound that would never heal. “A time to love and a time to die.” And between these seasons, there is no

moment for repentance. No hour for prayer. No power to turn back and cry: “I do not crave it! Deny it! Stop it!”

Arabella stood frozen in her room, clutching the folio whose lines she could no longer see; her gaze was fixed on her own hands. They were trembling. On her pale skin was no scratch, no stain, no mark of what had happened in the depths of the stable. But they had become different. Her hands held the memory of what her mind tried to consign to oblivion: how they had risen on their own, defying will and prohibition, and had stopped two inches from his flesh. If he had not said “Do not,” she would have touched him. She knew this. And he knew it. And both of them knew: that would have been the end. Or the beginning. Or something for which there is no name in human language, because no words exist for their kinship.

She closed her eyes. In the darkness that followed, his face appeared, his hands, his eyes that had looked so blasphemously and so deep. And Arabella understood what she had been defending against all this time: she had been longing for his meeting. Not now, not yesterday, not at the moment he had shaken the door with his blow. She had been seeking him all her earthly life — in every book, in every line, in every invented tale of passion that overcomes death. She had been seeking him, not knowing whom her longing followed, until he appeared. And when he stood before her, she realized: all the past had been only a weary waiting. And all the future would be only a memory of what might have happened, had not fear seized her. If he had not forbidden it. If she had taken that step.

Arabella opened her eyes. Took the book she had been reading in the morning and turned to the final page. The heroine was dying in a forest glade, in her lover’s arms; snow fell upon their faces, and they smiled, for they felt no fear of the end — death seemed nothing, now that the sought-for had been found. She closed that trifle, cast it onto the table, and drew from the shelf another — heavy, bound in dark leather with brass clasps that clinked like the bolts of a dungeon. She opened the Scripture to the lines about seasons and read aloud, so that her trembling voice might confirm that she was still numbered among the living:

“To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.”

She closed the book, laid it on her lap, and remained for a long time in a daze, her gaze fixed on the window. The murk beyond the glass did not clear. It stood as a dense shroud, hiding the world, but Arabella knew — he was there. He stood on the threshold of the stable, looking up at her chambers. And in that look was everything she feared and everything she craved.

Chapter 4

Defilement

I ascended the stairs, and each step came with effort. As if I had not measured this path for forty years, but was stepping for the first time upon smooth, treacherous ice. The water splashed in the pitcher, the glass clinking against the rim — in the silence of the house, this sound struck the ears like a blow. I walked slowly, biting my lips, and rehearsed the lie. “My child, I have brought water, wash after your walk.” Or: “The murk is thick today, you must have wet your feet.” These empty words were meant to conceal the abyss. I was afraid to reveal the main thing: I had seen everything. “A time to die” was already lurking at her threshold.

At her door stood an oppressive silence. The stillness before a storm, when the air fills with lead, and the birds turn to stone awaiting the strike. I stood frozen, turned entirely to hearing. Arabella was

breathing quickly and unevenly — the way a traveler breathes who has barely escaped pursuit, or one who is with the last of their strength holding back sobs, afraid that a single exhale will breach the dam.

I knocked. First softly, then more insistently. In response came movement: the rustle of fabric, a groan of the floorboard, a short sob that was immediately stifled at its root.

Finally her voice came — distant and sharp as a knife blade.

“Enter, Agnes.”

I pushed the door. My gaze immediately fell upon the dress. It lay in the very center of the room, upon the light-colored rug that I myself beat each spring. The silk lay crumpled, discarded — the way a body falls when the spirit has left it. I gazed at it and could not look away. The fabric, which that morning had shone with cleanliness, was defiled with oily blackness. The stains of mud upon the hem seemed like predatory brands. The bog-filth — heavy, sticky, stinking of mire — had eaten into the fibers. This odor invades the skin and the very memory, remaining there forever.

The dress lay upon the carpet like a corpse. Something irreversible had been committed in this room. It seemed to me that the dead fabric breathed its own sinister life. The blackness upon the silk spread, devouring the light, like dark water that in flood surges from the depths of the quagmire, leaving behind only silt and silence.

Beside the dress, slightly apart, like two small, dark beasts huddled together in mortal anguish, lay the slippers. I had bought them at the fair in Morton last spring, haggling exhaustively with the merchant for nearly an hour, for he demanded twice their true worth. I still vividly remembered how Arabella had first put them on her feet, how she had walked across the room, turning her radiant face to me; the sky-blue satin sparkled like the spring heavens, and she had said then: “Agnes, they feel like clouds, as if I am walking upon the very ether.”

Now they were black. The fabric had absorbed the damp, darkened and deformed, taking the shape of the filthy paths her feet had trod. The same bog-filth that stained the dress had caked upon the satin, but my gaze was drawn to something else — small, dark fibers of hay clinging to the wet silk, and a fine golden straw caught in the buckle near the sole. I gazed at that straw, and my breath stopped.

The stable. She had been in the stable. She had shut herself in there with him, and it had not been a fleeting visit or an idle question about old John’s needs. She had remained there so long that the bog-blackness had had time to eat into the satin, and the chaff from the hayloft had tangled with the buckles, like mute testimony to her fall.

I raised my eyes. Arabella stood frozen before the mirror. She was in a single thin shift — without coverings, without shoes, barefoot; and her feet, marked by the hereditary whiteness of the Greyvuds, were now defiled by damp traces on her ankles. Her hair, which had always been subdued into a heavy knot, now fell over her shoulders in a tangled, dark cascade, and in its depths I noticed the same straw — evidence that had not been destroyed. My mistress gazed into the mirror, but not at her own face. She looked through the glass, to where the stranger’s shadow still loomed, looking at her so blasphemously, trampling every right and rank.

I stood frozen on the threshold, clutching the tray, and felt the water in the pitcher splash more violently, the glass clinking against the silver rim, betraying my fear and that inexpressible confusion that I ought not to reveal. For if she saw my trembling, she would be filled with even greater terror, and in terror she would never find the way back — to that bright and pure Arabella who patiently waited in her chambers for the “right” man with his “right” roses, ready to lead her into a “right” existence.

“My child,” I said, and my voice sounded hollow, alien, as if I did not recognize my own speech. “I have brought you water. You likely wish to wash. After a walk, freshness is always required. The murk is so thick today that even the stones weep dampness, and the air is heavy, and it seems that filth clings to the skin, even if you have not left your chambers. I will set the tray here, on the table, and then I will bring you hot tea with honey — you do love honey — and we will rest in peace, and you will tell me how your walk in the garden went, and I will share my kitchen worries: a mouse has

become accustomed to us, I have set the third trap, but she still won't give in, so cunning, so sly, as if she knows of our schemes and mocks us..."

I spoke, and spoke, and could not stop this stream, for should silence fall in the room — it would crush me with its weight. I mentioned mice, the weather, the sweetness of honey — anything, so long as I did not have to look at that dress, those slippers, her back, which stood so straight and distant that I did not recognize her familiar features. I arranged the crystal, straightened the lace of the doily, performing the eternal rituals, and tried not to see what lay upon the carpet. But it was there, and I sensed its presence, as one senses an enemy hiding in a corner: you know it is there, but you do not look, for if you meet its gaze — it becomes real, and it can no longer be willed into nothingness.

"I fell," said Arabella.

She did not deign to turn to me. She remained frozen before the mirror, and her reflection gazed at me from the depths of the glass — pale, with enormous, dark eyes that looked not at me, but through, to that distance where, surely, his shadow still loomed. She stood, and in her voice there was nothing that could betray her confusion.

Her tone was even, calm — such as it was when she spoke of the weather or of a book she had read. But I detected something else in it. Something that had never been there before. A ringing emptiness. Or, conversely — an unbearable fullness. Something that turned her speech into the voice of one who no longer belonged to this world, this house, this life where everything had once been clear and proper.

"I fell," she repeated. "In the garden. The path is so slippery after the rain, and I neglected my shawl and was in a hurry, and did not notice the wet stone. It was slick, I stumbled and fell. Right into the mud. There, under the old apple tree. You know, there is always a puddle there as soon as the rain begins, because the ground has sunk, and the water collects, and no one can divert it, no matter how many drains are laid. I fell, defiled my dress, ruined my slippers. I wanted to get up, but it was so slippery I could not move..."

She spoke, and I listened, and in every utterance there was something that made this lie a hundred times more terrible than the truth. If she had confessed, I would have known which saint to pray to, that the Lord might turn her from this man, from this destructive passion that could no longer be stopped. But Arabella lied, and in that lie lay an admission. She was not lying to me — but to herself. She tried to convince her own nature that she had merely stumbled in the garden, that the blackness on the silk was simple dirt, not that oily slime that eats into the pores forever. She longed to return to a life where class and air separated them by an unbreachable boundary. But in vain: the very oxygen in her lungs had become different.

I gazed at her hands. Before, they had seemed to me like marble sculpture, so gracefully did they turn the pages of books. Now they were red. Not from cold — but from the frenzy with which she had rubbed them, rubbed and rubbed, trying to expunge the ineradicable. On the dressing table lay a wet brush with dark bristles, and my mistress's hands blazed crimson, scored with fine white furrows from the harsh bristles. She had rubbed her flesh, feeling no pain, heeding nothing except the smell that would not go.

"My child," I said, and my voice trembled. I could no longer pretend, meekly accepting her deception. "You are covered in filth. Your hair, your hands... Weariness has overcome you. I will bring hot water, you will wash, change your clothes, and the phantasm will pass. Dirt washes off. Everything yields to water, if there is enough of it. And we have plenty: the well is deep, and this year's rains have been so generous that the water stands waiting. Wash your hair, wash your hands, put on a clean dress — and everything will be as before. As it always was."

She turned to me. I saw her face — pale, marked by that feverish blush that would not die. Her eyes, enormous and dark, were full of that same emptiness I had seen in the stranger's gaze at the threshold, and that same fullness for which I had no name. She looked at me, but I understood: she

did not see the nurse. She saw him. She saw his gaze and his hands. His image had stood before her every second since the moment she had left the depths of the stable.

“Agnes,” she said.

In her voice cut through something alien. Not a request, not a plea — a demand. She commanded me to go blind, not to dare see the obvious, to pretend that the universe had not collapsed. She longed to return to the bosom of familiar order, though we both knew the vanity of these hopes.

“Agnes, take the dress. It is defiled. Take it to the laundry, have it washed in boiling water, with caustic lye, so that no trace remains. And the slippers... take them as well. Perhaps if we rub them to exhaustion, the satin will become light again? Do you remember how we haggled for them from the merchant in Morton? He swore the silk came from London itself. They shone like clouds, and I promised to keep them sacred, to wear them only on important occasions, to preserve their pristine purity...”

She fell silent. My mistress stood in her dirty shift, with disheveled hair and hands scored by the brush until they bled. At that moment, she resembled that very drowned woman from the village legends — the one who had perished in the quagmire and now wandered as an unquiet shade. Her body had been returned to solid ground, but her soul was forever buried in the black water, deprived of oblivion and peace.

“Very well, my child,” I answered.

My voice was steady — the way I had soothed her in childhood, when night fears interrupted her sleep, and I would rock her, swearing that monsters dwelt only on the pages of books.

“I will take the silk and the satin. Everything will wash out, everything will clean. Only wash your face, change your clothes, drink some hot tea. You will warm yourself, and the phantasm will pass. Filth washes off with water, you know. Any dirt. Any.”

I bent to pick up the silk, and the moment my fingers touched the damp fabric — I was seared. Not by physical heat — no, the dress was icy, like well water in winter — but by something else, something nameless, that made my hand freeze. I took that burden. The wet, slippery silk stank of the marsh, and as I lifted it, something fell from the hem — small, golden. A straw. It fell upon the light carpet and lay there, in plain sight, like evidence that had not been destroyed.

I picked up the straw. Dry, golden, it smelled of hay — not of the marsh, not oppressive, but light and almost sweet. This smell also clung to my mistress’s hair, to her hands, which she had frantically rubbed with the brush, vainly trying to expel the odor that had eaten into her pores. I clenched the find in my fist, hiding it, not daring to look at Arabella — not letting her realize that her secret was revealed. I picked up the silk and the satin, and they burned my hands like a brand used to mark cattle, so that one might know their owner and their path.

“I will take this to the kitchen,” I said, my voice sounding alien. “I will have it washed in boiling water. With harsh soap. Everything will come out. Everything will be cleansed. Only wash your face, change your clothes. I will bring fresh tea. With honey. You do love honey. You will drink it, and the phantasm will pass.”

I left the room. Having shut the door, I pressed my spine against the cold wall and stood still, not breathing. The dress in my hands grew heavier with each second; it became unbearable, dragging me into that same black water from which there is no escape.

In my fist lay the straw — small, golden — and it burned my palm with a fire that could not be quenched or smothered by prayer. I opened my fingers, gazing at it. It lay upon my old, wrinkled skin, containing everything: her fall, her lie, and his presence.

I descended to the ground floor. Passed through the kitchen, the dead hearth, and the table with the untouched cup — the morning infusion had darkened, becoming a bitter, useless liquid. Outside, the air met me with dampness, the smell of rain, and that marsh-reek that had soaked into Arabella’s dress. I stood at the laundry, gazing at the oily blackness covering the stones. He, too, had stood here

today. Had breathed this cold. Had looked at these flags and the walls of the house, thinking of his purpose and what Greyvud offered him.

There are wounds that do not bleed, but they make the flesh itself smell different. That evening, Arabella brought beneath our vaults an odor that a century of penitent prayers would not dispel. In the cramped twilight of the laundry, I felt that smell — tar, mire, musty hay. It ate into the very masonry. No moisture would wash it away, no time would carry it off. We were doomed from then on to breathe this poison; it would become an eternal reminder of what had been done.

I cast the dress into the basket. The slippers followed. And the straw — small, golden, smelling of the hayloft and that hidden life that had blossomed in the depths of the stable while the world around Arabella turned to nothing. I bent over the basket, and it seemed to me that I was looking into a grave. Into the crypt of her purity, her innocence, and all that life I had built for her over the years, guarding it like a shrine. I had thought our order unshakable, like the walls of Greyvud — those same stones that had stood here for centuries and would stand for centuries more, for stone knows no fear of rain, wind, or the relentless march of time.

I returned to the house. Went up to the kitchen, put the kettle on the fire, took out the honey and her favorite cup — the very one with the blue branch of thistle. Arabella's mother had so treasured this Greyvud pattern that she had ordered the porcelain from London itself; Richard had been angry then, accusing her of extravagance, but she had disregarded his grumbling — she wanted her daughter to have something beautiful as an inheritance. I poured the tea, stirred in the honey, and my hands trembled so violently that the silver clinked against the edge of the earthenware. This clinking was the only sound in the hushed house, which listened to the emptiness, knowing: the former peace had dissolved, yielding to a time without sleep.

I carried the cup upstairs. Knocked. Entered. Arabella sat in the armchair by the window — in a clean dress, her hair subdued into a knot, her hands white and innocent. I looked at her, and it seemed to me the phantasm had passed: there was no dirt on the carpet, no defiled silk, only a maiden absorbed in reading. But she was not reading. She sat frozen, her gaze fixed on the window, to where the murk was reluctantly beginning to reveal the black, slimy stones of the stable. In her eyes was frozen something I dared not name, but which I recognized — so once had her mother looked, and I, formerly blind, now saw.

"Your tea, my child," I said, leaving the cup. "With honey, as you like it. Drink, warm yourself. The cold is harsh today. You must have gotten chilled when you fell. The water in the puddles is icy, and you were without your shawl. Drink, and warmth will return, and all will pass."

She did not deign to answer me. She gazed into the distance, and I pressed to the glass beside her: we saw the same thing. The stable — dark, silent — and the man on its threshold. He gazed at the windows of the second floor, at her room, at her herself — and did not move, did not hide in the shadows. He was there, and would be there forever, and there was no power to expunge his presence.

"Water washes everything away," I repeated, and these words were meant no longer for her, but for myself — so that I might not lose my mind from this odor that would not leave the room, from the silence that pressed upon my ears, and from that gaze which I felt even in the kitchen, behind locked doors, in the most secret corner of the house. "Everything washes away with water. Everything. Any filth. Any."

The door closed. My spine pressed tightly against the cold wall; numbness seized my flesh — not a breath, not a movement. In my hands, the cup slowly cooled; the tea became dark, bitter, useless dust. The silence of the corridor dictated a terrible truth: water is not all-powerful. There is filth that eats into the essence forever. There is an odor that will not be dispelled from chambers. There are moments that do not pass or fade — they take root in the breast, until one's very nature turns to mud, to smell, to that very moment which no one wishes to remember, but which no one is allowed to forget.

The way down passed as if in a fog. The bench by the dead hearth received my weary body. My hands, lying motionless on my knees, seemed alien — old, wrinkled, marked with the spots of

decay. Upon my skin was no dirt, no alien odor — nothing that would testify to what had happened. But my senses did not deceive me. The satin of the slippers still burned my skin, the silk of the dress weighed upon my hands like a tombstone, and the golden straw, resting in my palm, weighed more than all the stones of Greyvud Hall together.

PART TWO

The Fracture

Chapter 5

Cracks

That evening, Greyvud Hall summoned to dinner as to the last communion of a condemned man for whom no tomorrow exists. The candles in the massive silver candelabra flickered to life precisely at seven — so the rule decreed, a rule unbroken since the first of the Greyvuds had crossed this threshold. The tablecloth was starched to that crisp, almost glassy stiffness that I despised with my whole being: no thing brought by man to deathly perfection can bring grace. The porcelain stood in perfect formation: the soup tureen on its underplate, the knives with blades to the earthenware, the forks with tines to heaven. For two decades I had performed this ritual with the same fervor with which a priest lays out the gifts before the liturgy. But now it seemed that I was preparing not a table for a meal, but a scaffold for a sacrifice.

Richard entered the dining room first. The usual evening coat of dark blue cloth, from which I had that morning brushed the invisible dust, clothed his heavy figure; the master could not tolerate anything on his clothing that could be detected without being seen. He took his place at the head of the table, and the oak chair groaned habitually under the weight of a body that had grown drier over the years, despite all my efforts. Unfolding his napkin, Richard armed himself with his silverware and sat frozen, his gaze fixed on the emptiness opposite. To where Arabella ought to be seated.

“Where is she?” he inquired, not raising his voice. There was no anxiety in the question — only the habitual bile of a man who could not bear encroachments upon the established order. His fingers clenched the chased handles so fiercely that he seemed to be strangling an invisible adversary.

“She will come presently, sir,” I answered, though the lie burned my tongue. I did not know if she would have the strength to cross this threshold, to raise her eyes to her father and touch her fork, pretending that her world had not collapsed and that she was still the same maiden who that morning had dreamed over books of the impossible.

My place was by the sideboard, in the deep shadow, from which I could observe everything while remaining hidden from view. My hands rested beneath my apron; my right was clenched so fiercely that my nails dug into my flesh, and in that grip lay the straw. Small, dry, golden — it had burned my palm from the very moment I had picked it up from the carpet in my mistress’s room. My hand had not dared to cast it into the rubbish. The straw had traveled from pocket to fist and back, until it had become a participant in this sacred meal, where every spoon stood in its place, and every word was obliged to be a truth that no one dared to utter.

Looking at Richard, I saw a blind man. Not one deprived of eyes, but one who had erected walls of pride so high that he could no longer distinguish the abyss at his own feet. He sat at the head of the table — straight, arrogant, in impeccable cloth, with his napkin arranged according to all the rules — and did not know: the daughter he took for clear glass had already cracked. He did not notice that her dinner attire — dark green, with a collar that gripped her neck up to her chin — had never before appeared at the table.

Arabella had considered it too severe, too funereal, too reminiscent of decay. Now she had chosen it not out of taste, but as armor, trying to conceal the invisible: marks on her skin? No, there were no marks there. There lived memory. There stood an odor that refused to dissipate, no matter how much water was poured. There dwelt a gaze, seared onto her body like a burn that could not be healed only because she craved its eternal burning.

I heard her step on the stairs a minute before she appeared. Her steps were measured — measured, calm, as befits a mistress of the house proceeding to her father’s table. But my ear detected

what Richard remained deaf to: the tension of every sinew with which this path was taken. Arabella was not walking upon the familiar, worn-to-a-gloss steps — she walked upon sharp stones that lacerated her feet, but to stop would be to die. To hesitate would be to fall, and for one who had fallen in Greyvud Hall, it was no longer fated to rise.

The door opened. Arabella entered.

Her face was pale. Not that transparent, almost radiant pallor that likened her to a porcelain statue put on display for the gaze of strangers. No. It was the deathly pallor of a creature that had survived the unimaginable and was now vainly pretending that the universe had not turned to ruins. She walked straight, though her ears, surely, already heard the fateful crack of walls about to collapse at any second. All that remained for her was to maintain her posture and not betray her terror.

She took her place. Her movements were smooth, honed by years of drill, when I corrected every gesture and posture, drilling into her the rule: a Lady Greyvud must not sit like a peasant; the way her fingers gripped her silver would determine her fate in that other, higher world. Arabella unfolded her napkin, laid it upon her lap, armed herself with her utensils — and did all this so impeccably that Richard did not notice the feverish trembling of her fingers.

But I — I saw the truth. I saw how white her knuckles had gone as she gripped her fork. The moment her father turned toward the tureen, she hid her hands beneath the cover of the tablecloth, concealing them in the saving darkness from prying eyes. She did not dare raise her gaze to her parent, fixing it on the earthenware and the steel of the knife. For if their eyes met — Richard would see. He would see everything: the crimson skin rubbed by the brush until it bled, the smell of the marshes that had permeated the silk of her dress. He would see — and then Greyvud Hall would collapse completely. The order he considered unshakable, and the truth from which he drew his strength, would turn to dust, burying us beneath rubble that could never be gathered.

“You are pale today,” Richard remarked.

His voice rumbled in the silence of the dining room like a hammer blow. The master did not deign to look at her, gazing at the soup in the porcelain bearing the family crest, but I knew: he sensed something amiss, though he could not name it.

“Are you well?”

“Yes, Father,” she answered.

Her tone was impeccable — even and calm, as if she were discussing a book she had read.

“I spent the day walking. The murk is so thick today, and I neglected my shawl. I suppose a slight chill has seized me.”

She lied. I looked at her hands, hidden beneath the tablecloth, and saw their trembling. Arabella’s face burned with that strange, feverish flush that would not die; she was suffocating. Not from cold — but from the corset, which today she had laced tighter than usual, until her ribs creaked. Before, she had worn it loosely, unable to bear constraint, saying that in tightness, thoughts are not born. Now she had compressed her chest as if she wished not to breathe at all. So as not to admit into her lungs that odor which still pursued her — the smell of hay and tar, eaten into her very memory. So as not to dare to remember.

“Walking?” Richard raised his eyes.

In his intonation cut through something vague. Not suspicion — no, he believed in the unshakable order of Greyvud Hall as one believes in the rising of the sun. It was an unease for which he himself could find no explanation.

“In such murk? You know one should not go out in the fog. The paths are slippery, the stones weep dampness — a fall is inevitable. You are no longer a child, Arabella. You ought to understand that.”

“I fell,” she said.

In her voice cut through a previously unknown sharpness, a fleeting challenge that she immediately suppressed. Here, before her father’s face, the right to rebellion was forbidden her.

“My feet slipped on the path by the old apple tree. The ground there has sunk, water collects in puddles, and no one can divert it with drains. The dress is defiled, the slippers ruined. Agnes has already taken them to the laundry. Everything will wash out. Everything will be cleansed.”

She echoed my words. My feeble, empty promises that water is all-powerful, and dirt is transient. I stood frozen, and the straw in my hand dug into my flesh so fiercely that I tasted the salty tang of blood on my palm. I clenched that small, golden evidence, knowing: no element would wash away what had happened. No brush would expunge what had been absorbed into her essence. Let her bleach the silk, let her lace her corset until her bones creaked, let her look at her parent with eyes devoid of tremor — oblivion was not granted to her. I knew this, for I had seen her face in the mirror, not recognizing its reflection.

“The apple tree,” Richard answered.

In his tone appeared a heavy pensiveness, as if he had touched something he had tried to forget.

“Your mother also loved that tree. She claimed it was a good place for thinking. I never understood what one could dream about beneath that crooked trunk in the dampness, but she would spend hours there. With a book in her hands. Or with nothing at all. She would sit and gaze at the mire. I would ask: ‘What do you see there?’ She would remain silent. Only smile. So strangely, as if she knew a truth hidden from me. As if she saw something to which I was blind.”

He fell silent. I looked at him, and for the first time in many years, what stood before me was not a pillar of order, not the master of Greyvud Hall. I saw a man who had known love. One who in his youth had thought that things could be held in place if only you clenched your fists tight enough. He did not understand: there are things that slip away on their own. Or are stolen. Or drown in the quagmire while you stand on the bank, watching the bubbles rise, and know — there is no return.

“You are her likeness,” Richard whispered, and his voice faded to a rustle. “When you stand still at the window, your gaze fixed on the mire. The same curve of the lips. The same eyes. Gazing at you, I see her shadow and torment myself with the question: what did she see there? What was I unable to understand? Perhaps now you will give me an answer?”

Arabella kept silence. I looked at her hands, hidden beneath the tablecloth, and saw their trembling. In the dining room reigned the heavy heat from the hearth and the thick smell of wax, but cold struck her from within. She trembled at this kinship. At the fact that her father had exposed their shared essence. For her blood was her mother’s blood, and her soul — her mother’s soul; and she, surely, had also spent hours searching the bog with her gaze, awaiting the coming of one who would appear from the mist and take her into the depths of the quagmire.

“I do not know, Father,” she answered dully, as if she were speaking not to him, but to an invisible guest lurking behind her, in that very shadow where I stood. “Perhaps there is something hidden in the marshes that has no place beneath the vaults of this house. Something not described in books and not subject to words. Perhaps she craved what the walls of Greyvud could not give her.”

She fell silent. Richard looked at her for a long time, an unbearably long time, and I saw his face harden, returning to its habitual mask of the master — a man for whom weakness is a crack, and a crack is a portent of the end. He armed himself with his silverware, cut off a piece of meat, and began to chew. The grinding of his jaws, grinding the food, became the only sound in the room, and it seemed to me that I heard the crumbling of walls. Not stone walls — those he had built over decades out of prohibitions and unshakable truths. Each strike of his teeth was a hammer blow upon that stronghold; I could distinguish the plaster falling away and the cracks widening, through which the bog-blackness was already creeping — oily, stinking of mire and nameless sin.

“You are agitated today,” Richard pronounced, having finished his food.

He did not deign to look at her, gazing only at his plate and the crimson liquid that had appeared on the earthenware, but I knew: he sensed her tension and her feverish tremor.

“Tell me, is nothing oppressing you?”

“No, Father,” she answered, and her voice acquired that bony hardness that serves as a shield for the doomed. “Nothing has happened. The weariness of the murk oppresses me. You know this.”

Arabella armed herself with her fork. Cut a piece of bread. I watched her chew, and I saw: the bread had turned to ashes for her. It held no taste, no meaning, not a single particle of that living heat that had pierced her that morning in the depths of the stable. Each swallow came with effort, as if she were consuming stones falling into a bottomless well. The straw in my hand dug deeper into my palm; I felt blood in small drops moistening my apron, leaving damp brands, but I did not dare unclench my fist. The small, golden evidence was the only solid ground in this phantom world of lies.

“Very well,” Richard exhaled with the infinite exhaustion of a man who had stopped expecting miracles. “Tomorrow William Hawthorn will arrive. He is eager to speak of business. And of you. During his last visit, he languished from separation. He assured me he is ready for any forbearance, because you are the crown of his hopes.”

Arabella stiffened. I saw how white her fingers had gone as they clenched the silver. Her eyelids trembled, covering her eyes; she stared at the plate, at the untouched meat and the bread that had become dust. She was silent. She could not utter a word. For if she opened her lips — the dining room would be touched by a shriek. Or sobs. Or that terrible truth for which the way to these candles and this father was forbidden. To a parent who saw in her only an heiress and a hand obliged to continue the line: to marry, to give birth to successors, and to freeze in the drawing room, watching as life trickled away like fog over the marshes, leaving behind only cold and dampness.

“William is a worthy man,” said Richard.

In his tone cut through a heavy, forced conviction, as if he were trying to convince not his daughter, but his own soul.

“A respectable family. Fortune. He will surround you with the care that I cannot give. Shelter. Successors. A future. You must think about this, Arabella. It is not right to stagnate forever in your room over books. Life is short. It knows no pauses.”

He fell silent. In the dining room, silence reigned, broken only by the measured, cemetery ticking of the clock in the hall — like a hammer driving nails into a coffin lid. I gazed at my mistress: she sat frozen, taut as a string, her hands hidden beneath the tablecloth. Her face, devoid of color, cried out in pain. She did not eat, did not drink her tea. Her gaze, fixed on the crested earthenware, was blind to everything earthly. She saw him. She saw the relief of his hands, the half-darkness of the stable, inhaled the smell of hay and tar, and heard that very “do not” with which he had stopped her impulse. This whole scene stood before her, and I read it in this icy stillness, which was a hundred times more terrible than any cry.

“I will think about it, Father,” she answered.

Her voice was as empty as a well from which all water had been drawn, leaving only darkness and a hollow echo.

“I will think about William. About the good that you wish for all of us. I will think.”

Arabella rose. The starched napkin slid to the parquet — a white spot, like a patch of snow doomed to melt and turn to dampness. She did not deign to pick it up. Her step toward the door was impeccable — measured and calm, but I detected the same tension of sinews.

“Arabella,” Richard called, when her hand had already touched the oak handle.

His whisper in the deathly stillness rumbled like an avalanche.

“Your mother used to leave just like that. Every time I spoke to her of what was good. She would rise and disappear behind the door, and I would look at her back and torment myself: what was my fault? Why did she not find happiness in the house I built for her? I never found an answer. Perhaps you will reveal this secret to me?”

She did not turn. Only for an instant her shoulders trembled, as if struck by a whip, and the door closed behind her, cutting off the past from the future.

Arabella stood frozen. I looked at her back — straight, confined by the dark green cloth of her dress, with which she tried to conceal the incurable. The hesitation lasted so long that it seemed she would utter no sound. That she would step over the threshold, lock the bolt of her chambers, and remain there, in the darkness, trying to see in the window the distant light of the stable — the only truth left to her in this house of lies.

“I do not know, Father,” she answered, without turning. “Perhaps she craved something that cannot be found here. Or perhaps — she found it. Or only thought she had touched what she sought. I do not know her feelings. I do not know what she saw in the abyss of the marshes. Perhaps she saw what we are deaf to. Perhaps she was waiting for someone who would come... or someone who was already there. I know nothing.”

The door opened, admitting the darkness of the corridor into the dining room. The click of the lock thundered in the silence like a gunshot. Richard sat frozen, his gaze fixed on her empty place. He looked at the white napkin fallen on the parquet, the untouched food, the cooled tea. His face was the face of a man who has understood an irretrievable loss, but is unable either to name it or to hold it back.

“Agnes,” he called, without deigning to look at me.

His voice was dull, as if he were calling to a ghost.

“You have been with her today. What has happened to her? She has become different. I cannot grasp the nature of this change, but I sense it. Speak the truth to me. You are always more perceptive than others. Tell me, what is wrong with my daughter?”

I stood frozen in the shadow by the sideboard. The straw dug into my palm so deeply that my flesh, surely, was already split. I looked at Richard — at a man who had already lost everything, but did not yet realize the scale of the ruin. What was I to answer? Should I reveal the truth? Should I say that she had been in the stable and her world had crumbled to dust under the gaze of a stranger? That she had fallen not on the garden path, but into him — into the abyss of his eyes?

“Nothing, sir,” I answered, and this lie weighed upon my soul heavier than the truth. For a lie is like a stone that you voluntarily place upon your own heart; it remains there every second, and there is no power to cast off this burden.

“Weariness has overcome her. The murk always tires my mistress. You know this. She will recover. Everything will be as before. Everything will return to its proper order.”

He bowed his head. Picking up the napkin, he armed himself with his silverware and again turned to his meal. I looked at him and saw: the food had lost its taste for him, turned to ashes. Everything that Richard Greyvud now did was merely a ritual, with which he desperately propped up his crumbling world. His lot was to preserve the walls, until they were crossed by cracks, until the mire flooded the threshold, until the daughter he took for clear glass shattered under the weight of a truth he had no power to stop.

I left the dining room. Descended to the kitchen, sat down on the bench by the dead hearth, and unclenched my fist. My palm was defiled with blood — dark, thick, already touched by the decay of drying; in its depths lay the straw.

Sitting in the half-darkness of the kitchen, I understood: now I had betrayed neither my master nor myself. I had betrayed that truth which had been known to me from the beginning: this house had from ancient times been built on a marsh, and the marsh had patiently waited its hour. It had come, and no barriers would hold back the element when its time had struck.

I rose and pressed to the window. In the stable, a light flickered. He was there. Whether he was awake, or working, or gazing at the windows of the second floor, at her room, at her herself — I did not know. I only looked at that flame and knew: it would not go out. It would burn in the night — tomorrow, and the day after, and forever, as long as these walls stood, as long as this world endured, until we all sank into that same black water that had waited for us from the beginning of time.

I stepped back from the window. Climbed the stairs to her chambers. Behind the oak flesh of the door, silence reigned. Pressing my ear to the cold wood, I understood: Arabella was not weeping. She was not sleeping. She sat frozen in the darkness, trying to see through the fog that single light that flickered in the stable.

We feed death tea from fine porcelain, hoping for its mercy upon our refined tastes. But death knows no respect. It only waits. And when its hour strikes, it does not knock at the gates — it is already inside. It sits at our table, drinks from our cups, looks at us with our own eyes; and we call this “life,” for we know no other name for our own destruction.

Chapter 6

Light and Ashes

The murk pressed against the very walls of Greyvud Hall while it was still dark. The moment I opened the shutters, the world beyond the glass vanished — only a milky gauze remained, through which the outlines of the stables could barely be discerned: the vague broken line of the roof and a murky spot of light in the window, where he, surely, had already begun his duties. This man, it seemed, knew no sleep at all. Or he slept differently than we did.

The house awoke ill. After the previous evening’s dinner, after that tense, ringing silence that had lain between Arabella and Richard, Greyvud held its breath. The servants walked on tiptoe, spoke in whispers. Old John, they said, had crossed himself fervently when Damian appeared at dawn, and had retreated into the shadows, letting him pass to the well — not out of respect, but from that superstitious fear with which country folk avoid the incomprehensible.

I ascended the stairs with the tray. The teapot, the porcelain, the sugar bowl, the tiny cream jug, and a buttered bun dusted with powdered sugar — everything as Arabella liked it. But now this “always” was a lie. The same lie as yesterday’s words about “falling in the garden,” about dirt that would wash off, and about a world that would be restored. The filth had not gone away.

She had not closed her eyes. She sat frozen at the window in the very shift in which I had left her at dusk; her hair was loose, her hands resting on her knees as if before confession. Her gaze was fixed on the fog, to where the little light of the stable glowed, where he remained. No movement at my entrance, not a single sound. Only her profile — pale, sharpened, marked by that feverish flush that would not die, as if a flame blazed within her.

Now we would smother it. By all means within our power: the bone corset, powder, decorous words, and that proper smile that promised her a life beyond Greyvud’s threshold in the person of William Hawthorn. He had, surely, already left Sandford Manor; the hooves of his stallions rumbled over the wet road, and his carriage, polished to a mirror gleam, reflected the grey, sickly sky. He was bringing her roses. As always, he was bringing roses.

“Today William will arrive,” I said, setting the tray on the marble top of the chest of drawers. My voice sounded hollow, alien, as if I were announcing not the visit of a suitor, but the hour of an execution. “It is time to prepare. I have brought tea. Drink, warm yourself, then you will wash and dress. He will come by noon. Or earlier. You know William — he always arrives before he is wanted.”

She slowly turned her face. Her pallor was sickly, marked by that undying flush and by lips she had torn the day before in the depths of the stable; on the lower lip a thin dark thread of blood had dried. Her eyes — enormous, bottomless voids. In them was frozen that same expression I had seen decades ago, when her mother stood still at this same window, her gaze fixed on the same marshes, awaiting the one who would appear from the mist and take her away.

“Agnes,” she said evenly, the way one speaks only when the die is cast and there is no more room for argument. “Help me dress. The corset. I want it laced tight. As tight as possible.”

I bowed my head. From the depths of the wardrobe I took the dress — the color of old pine needles, with a high, closed collar; in it she had appeared before her father yesterday, trying to conceal

the irreparable. Today it would serve her again. And the bone plates, and the gloves up to the elbow. Perhaps if one walls the flesh in silk, tightens the lacing until it creaks, and hides every inch of skin, the creature that had awakened inside will suffocate and perish.

Arabella rose. She walked to the secretaire — darkened by time, on carved legs, lurking in the corner. I opened it only to dust, for there my mistress kept her writing materials. She touched it now. Slowly, as if she performed this ritual daily, though I knew — she had not touched these papers for years. She, following her father's example, preferred not to touch the past.

"What do you hope to find, child?" I asked, and my voice trembled with rising fear. I did not know the secrets of this bureau, but I knew: once, in other times, her mother had bent over it in the same way, had entrusted something to its depths, and had taken something with her to the grave, without uttering a word.

"I do not know," came the answer. Her voice sounded distant, as if she were speaking not to me, but to someone standing behind her shoulder. "Something important. I sense... it is here."

A leaf left the hiding place. Yellowed, brittle, with uneven edges — it had been folded hastily, in four, and again, and again.

"What is it, child?" I asked, and my voice sounded softer than the rustle of that paper.

She raised her eyes to me. There was no fear in them. Only recognition.

"She too loved," said Arabella. "One whom it was forbidden to love. She wavered between a proper existence and that other fate that lurked in the fog. She made a choice. I will make one too."

"You do not know her choice," I cut in. My voice became hard, dry; the way I had admonished her in childhood, when she craved the forbidden. "She stayed. Submitted to your father's will. Brought you into the world. And faded away in this house, in this very bed, surrounded by walls she hated, and air she choked on. She chose the proper life. And she met death. Perhaps she did not die of her own choice, but neither did she die of what her soul yearned for. She died here, beside us, not in the arms of the one who waited for her on the marshes."

"She did not have time," she whispered. "Did not have time to decide. Or she decided, but could not master herself. Or she mastered herself, but did not wish to... I do not know. But I know her feeling."

The leaf vanished into the depths of her corsage, pressed to her very heart. There the letter was destined to lie as a vow, a pledge, a testimony: she was not alone.

"Dress me," she said. "William is hurrying. I must appear ready."

I took the corset. Heavy, with bone plates of whalebone, with tight, merciless laces. I stood behind her. Arabella gripped the edge of the dressing table; her fingers went white, her knuckles protruding in sharp angles. I began to pull.

The lace slid — knot by knot, row by row. Her breathing became heavy, uneven, as if each inhalation cost a battle; as if the bones constricted not her ribs, but her very soul and that wild force that had awakened in her yesterday and now strained outward. I pulled, and in this rhythm I fancied something else — as if I were not dressing a bride for a suitor's visit, but tightening the noose around the neck of a condemned woman.

"More," came dully, alien. "Pull tighter."

I obeyed. More. And more. Until a rattle escaped her chest, until her nails dug into the wood of the table, leaving deep grooves. She stood straight as an arrow, resembling a statue in a cathedral — a martyr who had accepted death but had not bent her knee.

We were reflected in the mirror: she in front, I behind her shoulder. In her fist, hidden in the folds of her shift, was clenched the letter. The truth. That very truth which I had kept in the depths of my memory for twenty years and which she had found herself, for blood seeks blood.

A blow struck the door. Short, dry. I started, the lace slipped through my fingers, and the corset, drawn to its limit, tightened even more fiercely. Arabella inhaled as if struck by steel.

“William is in the hall,” came Richard’s voice from behind the barrier. His tone was even, detached — the way one speaks of the weather or of things devoid of weight. “He is waiting for you. Do not try his patience.”

Arabella met my gaze in the mirror’s depth. In her eyes blazed yesterday’s fire. And at the same time — cold. An icy, merciless cold. She was ready to go down to William, to his roses, to his bland words and his perfect love. Ready to play her part. But I knew: her spirit was not here.

“I am ready,” she said.

From the jewelry box she took snow-white gloves, pulled them onto her hands — finger by finger. Walked to the vase with William’s morning offering. The roses — tight, heavy, cut in the greenhouses of Sandford Manor at dawn — gave off such a cloying fragrance that the mind reeled. Arabella chose one, brought it to her face. I saw her nostrils flare as they inhaled that “sterile” aroma. The flower returned to the crystal, and then my gaze caught: on her finger gleamed a ring. Thin gold with a small stone, sent by William a month ago as a token of his vow. Until now, she had disdained to wear it.

“Agnes,” she said, not removing her hand from the door handle. “Will you follow me? Be there, in the hall, when I come down.”

I only bowed my head in silence. The door opened, and the heavy silk the color of pine needles rustled against the frame. The high collar of the dress hid her neck up to her chin, turning Arabella into a likeness of a severe statue. She headed for the stairs. Her figure remained straight, her steps measured, but in every movement could be guessed that tension with which one walks upon a thin blade of steel.

I pressed to the window. Below, at the main entrance, Hawthorn’s carriage stood. The black lacquer shone with a mirror gleam, blinding the eyes even in this foggy morning. The stallions stamped their hooves on the wet gravel, and all this luxury with its crests on the doors seemed a foreign body here, in the yard, steeped in tar and damp earth. At the hitching post stood Damian. He gripped the bridle of the bay and, without blinking, gazed at the porch. He was not concerned with the gleam of the carriage, nor the bustle of the servants. He waited only for her appearance.

William emerged from the carriage. A light grey coat, a cane, a hat removed in an impeccable bow. In his hands he clutched an offering — an armful of roses, so pale that they seemed phantoms in the murk of dawn. It seemed that the sweetness of these flowers penetrated through the barrier of the glass.

Below, the door banged. Richard’s voice filled the hall with the confident force of a master. William answered him — his speech rang with that mindless happiness that belongs only to people who do not know how close collapse is.

I left my post at the window and went down to the hall. Arabella stood by the hearth beside William. He poured out words about the boredom of the road and about his impatience to see her face. She listened, inclined her head, and gave him that same learned smile behind which there was nothing but cold. Richard stood frozen in the doorway of the drawing room; on his face was the satisfaction of a man who thinks order has been restored and his daughter has again turned into that obedient shadow she ought to be.

My gaze was drawn to the gold. On her left hand — the ring, put on for the first time today. In her right hand — an armful of white roses. I looked at these flowers and thought of the letter beneath the bony armor of the corset. There, at her very heart, rested a secret. “I am there, on the marsh, in the fog, with him.” Arabella had made her choice. And I knew: this could not be changed. The hour would come, and she would follow him there — into the quagmire, to him. And no wedding gold would hold her back.

Chapter 7

Lessons in Obedience

Lunch was laid in the small dining room, though only three guests had arrived. Richard ordered the family silver to be brought out — the same that was taken out at Christmas or for those whose voices decided the fate of Greyvud Hall. I carried the dishes from the kitchen, arranged the porcelain on the starched linen, and every clink of the crockery echoed in my ears like a hammer blow.

The heavy silver lay in my palms like a dead, slippery weight; it seemed to avoid my touch, knowing it had no place at this table. I checked the alignment of knives and forks, while from above, from Arabella's chambers, came her measured step. Thus a beast paces in a cramped cage, sensing that the bolts are strong and there is no freedom.

William arrived at noon. The rumble of his carriage and the slam of the door filled the yard, and then his voice burst into the hall — young, ringing, full of authority. He spoke of the murk and the boredom of the road, of how exhausted the horses were, and of his impatience to see his bride. His speech was as clear as crystal, but I wanted to shatter that tone, so that at least one living sound might escape from beneath it. In his voice there was no shadow of doubt, no aching pulse that makes a man human. It was as smooth as the polished side of his carriage: it reflected the world but did not let it inside.

"Arabella must still be dressing for our meeting," said William with that condescending warmth with which one speaks of children who have done something charming and predictable. "I always say: a woman has a right to mystery, especially in the morning hours. In London, ladies take an eternity to prepare. My mother, I recall, would not leave her boudoir until lunchtime, and then she would appear so dazzling that the drawing room would fall into silent admiration. I am sure Arabella will not deviate from this example. She has breeding, which cannot be acquired through education — it is innate. I remember, on my first visit with my father — she must have been sixteen? — she stood by the window with a book and did not even turn at our entrance. My parents doubted then: 'William, this girl is too proud for you.' But I answered them: 'Pride is what our family needs. At Sandford Manor, there is an excess of complaisance and a desire to please. I need one who looks at the world from a height, not seeking approval.' And now I see I was right. She does not ask for mercy. She waits for the world to adapt to her whim. Such women are as rare as white roses in our latitudes."

He spoke, and his words fell evenly, like pebbles smoothed by the sea. They had no roughness, none of those living irregularities that mark genuine speech. I looked at him, thinking how prophetically he was mistaken: Arabella truly did wait for the world to bow before her. But the chambers she craved had nothing to do with his plans. She had no need of London, no need of the glitter of balls, no need of the burden of being mistress of Sandford Manor. She languished for the one who at this moment was in the stable, mending harness, and, surely, was likewise fixing his gaze upon her windows.

"She will come down," Richard remarked with that unshakable certainty with which only those whose command is sacred speak. "My daughter knows of your arrival. She will not prolong your wait beyond what is proper."

I went upstairs. Arabella stood by the window with her back to the door. She had already put on that same pine-colored dress; the high collar rose so forbiddingly that it seemed not fabric but the wall of a prison. Her hair was subdued into a heavy knot, depriving every strand of its will. The silk pressed her flesh up to her chin, cutting off her breath. She stood straight, like a taut string; I saw the tension in her shoulders and her whitened fingers gripping the windowsill.

"He is waiting below," I said.

"I know," she answered. "I heard his words. About London, about his mother, about my rarity, likened to a white rose. He speaks as if I am not flesh and blood, but a precious find spotted at an auction. He judges me while I am here, not knowing: I hear him measuring my price, without asking whether I wish to be sold."

“He only wishes for your good,” I said, and these words sounded so empty that I myself found no truth in them.

“Good for whom?” She turned, and I saw her face. Pallor, a feverish flush on her cheeks, and eyes that looked through me into another distance. “For my father? For William? For this house, which stands on a marsh and seeks an heir so it may not collapse for another century? And for me? Is there even a small part of this ‘good’ for my soul, Agnes?”

I was silent. What could I say? Should I try to convince her that William would give her shelter, successors, and that respect with which the world crowns virtue? I knew: that was not what she craved. I had seen it the moment I found her in the stable before Damian, when her hands had reached for him of their own accord, defying her will. I knew the truth, but duty commanded me to weave a web of lies, as was expected of me.

“He is a worthy man,” I said. “He will surround you with care.”

“Care,” she echoed, and the word sounded like a curse. “Do you know what my mother wrote in that letter? ‘There is no air here. No life. Only walls. And you, Richard, look at me without seeing.’ She could have written these lines today. Changing only the names. Instead of Richard — William. Instead of one prison — another. But the essence is unchanged. I will remain in his chambers, listening to speeches about London, bearing his children, and suffocating. And he will look at me, remaining blind. Like my father. Like everyone in this world.”

“Arabella...” I began, but she cut me off.

“Agnes, answer me truthfully. If you could return to your springtime, if before you arose a choice between a proper existence and that from which the heart beats so fiercely it threatens to tear your chest apart — which would you choose?”

I looked at her, and a veil of the past covered my eyes. I was seventeen, I stood by the well in my father’s house, and a young man walked past, one who was fated to disappear into the city forever. He said: “You are beautiful, Agnes. I would take you as my wife.” I only laughed: “You do not even know my name.” And he cut me off: “Agnes. I know. I know everything about you.” And he smiled. And then — disappeared beyond the horizon. I remained. A year later my father died, two years after that my mother, and I hired myself out to Greyvud Hall, for there was no other path. I chose the proper life. And now I stood here — old, alone, with hands that remembered every cup and every napkin in this house, but held no warmth of palms that might have been mine.

“I would choose that from which the blood boils in one’s veins,” I said. “But I have no right to incite you to the same. For I do not know the price of that choice. Perhaps I would have found happiness. Or perhaps I would now be looking from another window at the life I rejected, grieving for what was lost. We always long for what is lost. And no one values what is found.”

She held my gaze for a long time. Then she approached and squeezed my hand. Her fingers were cold as ice, and I felt their fine, unceasing tremor.

“Thank you,” she said. “For the truth. Even if it is not the one I wanted to hear.”

She released my palm, straightened her collar, and smoothed the folds of her skirt. Stood still before the mirror. I stood behind her shoulder, gazing at her face — alien, distant. So in childhood she had looked at the portraits of her ancestors: with curiosity, but not a trace of recognition. She did not find herself in that silk, in the bone vise of the corset, or in the impeccably arranged hair.

“I am ready,” she said. Her voice was as empty as an abandoned house from which all living things had been removed.

She walked to the door. In the dining room, order reigned. The tablecloth — white, starched — rustled like an icy crust on puddles. The silver, polished to a mirror gleam, reflected the candle flames, faces, and shadows. The porcelain with the family crest — a blue thistle on a snowy field — crowned every place setting.

I looked at that thistle and thought that it would be on her wedding gifts, on the linen of her marriage bed, and on her tombstone, if she chose the “proper life.”

William sat to the right of Richard. He had already changed from his travel clothes into a home coat of fine dark blue cloth with silver-embroidered buttons. His hair was smoothly combed, his face fresh and clean, without a trace of road weariness. He sat with military straightness, his gaze fixed on the door in anticipation of the main trophy of his fate. In a tall crystal vase stood his roses — dense, heavy, cut at dawn in the greenhouses of Sandford Manor. Their scent was so fierce that it overpowered the aroma of the food. Sweet, thick, cloying — this smell filled the whole space, tangled in the folds of the linen, settled on the silver. It seemed that if this scent were visible, it would appear as a white sticky web, enveloping the living, depriving them of the will to move.

Richard sat at the head of the table. Everything showed how pleased he was: the order he had been building for years was triumphant. His daughter was obtaining a worthy husband, the name was being inherited, the walls stood strong. He looked at William, seeing in him not a son-in-law, but a support for his own will.

“She will come down any minute,” Richard said. “Delay is the eternal privilege of women.”

William laughed. His laugh was light and pleasant — such is the sound of the voices of people who have never known true waiting, exhausting hope, or genuine fear.

“Arabella may delay as long as she wishes,” he said. “I would accept an eternity of waiting for her face. In London I saw many lovely girls ready to do anything for the name of Mrs. Hawthorn. But not one would bear comparison with her. It is not a matter of beauty — many are endowed with that. Within her rests a certain inner stillness; thus only those who do not wholly belong to this world stand still. I noticed it at our very first meeting. She stood by the window, and it seemed to me that her gaze was directed not at the garden, but at some distance beyond the house and life itself. I asked my father then: ‘What is she thinking?’ He cut me off: ‘What we are not given to understand.’ And I understood: I wished to become the one who would share that knowledge with her.”

The door opened. Arabella entered.

I lurked in the shadow of the sideboard, watching her progress to the table. Her figure was straight, and her face wore that impeccable, empty smile with which I had taught her to receive guests. She approached, William rose impulsively and pulled out her chair, assisting her. His fingers lingered on the carved back longer than necessary, and I noticed how Arabella barely perceptibly drew back, unwilling to allow even a fleeting touch to her shoulder.

“Arabella,” said William, and in his voice appeared a warmth capable of melting ice. “You look wonderfully well today. This dress... it brings out the emerald of your eyes. I have always said that green is your color. You resemble a princess from a legend, imprisoned in a tower awaiting her deliverer.”

“I seek no deliverance,” answered Arabella. In her speech cut through that same note that had sounded in her childhood: when adults took her words for insolence, not sensing the bitter truth in them. “I simply exist here.”

William laughed again, not grasping the meaning.

“That is what I value in you,” he said. “Your directness and honesty. In London, people say one thing, think another, and do a third. You, however, are like clear glass. One can see right through you.”

I gazed at Arabella and saw how her fingers, hidden beneath the tablecloth, clenched convulsively. Clear glass. Right through. Oh, if only he knew that within that glass a crack had run, from the very foundation, threatening at any moment to shatter her being. If only he understood to whom her thoughts were directed now, while he poured out words about London and the charm of roses. If only he knew: her hands held not the memory of the fine kid of his gloves, but the smell of tar and hay. And in his speeches about marriage, she felt only suffocation, for the corset I had laced that morning pressed her ribs, giving no freedom to her breath.

“William was speaking of a journey to London after the ceremony,” Richard remarked with that impatience that betrays a desire to settle matters quickly, without recourse to excuses or defense.

“I think it is a good intention. You must show yourselves to society. The world must understand: the Greyvud line is not dying out; we have a future.”

“We have always had a future, Father,” answered Arabella. “The question is only what form we give it.”

She said this in an undertone, almost a whisper, but I caught every word. Richard also heard them. For an instant, his face turned into that old one, from when he was just beginning to realize: his wife was looking at the marsh, not seeing him. But he immediately looked away, lifted his glass, and drank wine.

“You will give it the proper form,” he cut off. “I have no doubt of that.”

Arabella kept silence. She touched her fork to her plate, raised it to her lips, and returned it to the table, not tasting a crumb. I watched as she studied the food on the porcelain, knowing: she would not be able to swallow even a small piece. Every time she bent toward her plate, the bone armor dug into her body, reminding her of the cage. The food was for her not nourishment, but stones to be swallowed for the sake of propriety, to convince everyone that she was here, that she was one with them.

“I hear you have a new stable hand,” William remarked, pushing away his plate and touching his glass. His tone was careless, as if he spoke of something devoid of weight. “Damian, is it? Where is this fellow from? I watched him working yesterday. A rare breed. One does not hire such men by the roadside — one must be born with that instinct. He has a skill that cannot be acquired by learning. He hears the beast before it senses his approach. My coachman, who has given thirty years to horses, admitted he has seen such a man only once in his life.”

Arabella’s fingers trembled. It was a fleeting, almost ghostly movement that no one but me would have noticed. But I saw it. Saw how her shoulders tensed and how for an instant her breath stopped. Damian’s name hung in the air like a stone thrown into stagnant water; ripples from it spread to the darkest corners of the dining room and the depths of her soul.

“He came to us a week ago,” Richard answered with the indifference of a man speaking of a household object. “He sought work. Old John is failing, a helper was needed. I took him on trial. He works well, the horses are docile. He is silent — and that is a good quality in a servant.”

“Silence is a virtue,” William agreed. “But I wish to examine him more closely. They say he is skilled with harness. Perhaps he can manage my new stallion? The animal is fractious, lets no one near. I have changed two stable hands, but in vain. Your Damian, Richard, seems to me capable of this feat. There is something in him... wild. The stallion will sense a kindred spirit.”

“Take him for a while, if you wish,” Richard said. “I raise no objection.”

“I should like to see him today,” William continued. “Let him serve dessert. Thus I shall judge his bearing. A servant who has mastered himself is worth more than one who merely cleans harness. In London, I am accustomed to servants who are invisible, yet present. It is a delicate art: to be near, but not to intrude. To be useful, without imposing. I wish to see if he possesses this gift.”

I convulsively gripped the edges of my tray. The dining room became impossible to breathe in. The order to summon Damian here, to the starched napkins and the silver, sounded like a death sentence upon our fragile world.

Richard inclined his head. His gaze for an instant darted to Arabella, checking her submission. She sat, not raising her lashes; her hands were hidden in the folds of the tablecloth, and her face wore that frozen mask she had put on at the stairs.

“So be it,” said Richard. “Agnes, see to the dessert. And let this... Damian... serve the guest.”

I left the dining room. My feet dragged on the floor, my fingers trembled. I felt that same straw in the folds of my apron — now it pricked my skin sharper than a thorn. In the kitchen, Damian was already standing by the door with a tray in his hands. He stood imperturbably, as if his name had not been bandied about at the table, as if he was not being called for a show, likened to a purebred stallion before an auction.

“You are wanted,” I said. “They wish you to serve dessert. William desires to see you.”

Damian nodded almost imperceptibly. He took the tray, and I saw his knuckles whiten, the veins on his hands swell with silent tension.

“Did he say anything else?” Damian asked. “About me?”

“He mentioned your wildness. And that his stallion will surely sense a kindred spirit in you.”

Damian smiled. In that grimace there was no trace of amusement.

“A kindred spirit,” he echoed. “Hawthorn does not know how close he is to the truth.”

He walked to the dining room. I followed like a shadow behind his back, to stand by the doorframe, to see and know everything to the end.

He crossed the threshold, and the silence in the dining room changed. The previous languid, leaden muteness disappeared; it was replaced by a numbness with which one meets the appearance of something wild and untamed. Damian walked steadily, carrying the tray; his steps were heavy and full of a confidence that does not befit a servant at a master’s table. He stopped beside William’s shoulder, and I saw Hawthorn fix him with his gaze — greedy, appraising, the way one eyes an expensive object before purchase.

“Set it here,” William said, indicating the place before him. “I wish to taste the fruits of Agnes’s labors. They say she has no equal in baking.”

Damian set down the tray. Slowly, impeccably, without a single unnecessary gesture. His face remained empty, as it had been that midnight when he stood at the threshold awaiting permission to enter. He did not deign to look at either William or Richard. His whole world had narrowed to the edges of the porcelain and his own palms. But I knew: he felt her presence. I knew — he knew how she breathed and how her fingers tore at the napkin beneath the tablecloth.

“They say you are skilled with horses,” William said, accepting his dessert fork. “Is that true?”

“I have the craft,” Damian answered.

“My new stallion is fractious and will not be handled. Do you think you can manage him?”

“I may try.”

“Are you always so laconic in speech?”

“I have been taught silence.”

I saw Arabella shudder. It was a fleeting, convulsive movement, as if struck by a whip. She did not raise her lashes, gazing at her plate, but I knew — she was catching every sound of his voice, every breath. He stood three paces away, and she dared not turn, not look at him, not even meet his eyes.

William tasted the dessert and nodded approvingly.

“Worthy,” he said. “Convey my praise to Agnes. And one more thing,” he added, when Damian had already turned to leave. “I have agreed with Mr. Greyvud. You will come with me for a week. Help with the stallion. We shall see what your true worth is.”

Damian froze. For a brief, frightening moment, his imperturbability cracked. I saw his fingers, gripping the tray, whiten with tension. He did not deign to look at William — his whole world had narrowed to Arabella. She raised her gaze, and in that blinding flash, everything collided: the secret closeness in the stable, the unfulfilled hopes, the fateful predetermination of their paths.

“Very well,” Damian said. “I will come with you.”

He left the dining room. The slam of the closing door returned silence to the room, but in it there was no longer any peace — only the echo of a fracture. Arabella sat, her head bowed; I saw how beneath the tablecloth her hands trembled convulsively. She sought no answering glance from either her parent or Hawthorn.

“A worthy servant,” William remarked, pushing away his porcelain. “I think a week at Sandford Manor will be enough to assess his character. If he manages the stallion, I will keep him in my household. I need such people.”

Richard inclined his head in agreement. He avoided looking at his daughter, focusing all his attention on the guest — on this impeccable, smooth, advantageous man who was already disposing of the future of Greyvud Hall.

“So be it,” said Richard. “I will give the orders.”

Arabella raised her eyes. Fixed her gaze on her father, on William, on the guttering candles — on everything that was called her proper existence. On her lips appeared that same smile she wore only in her hours of extreme exhaustion.

“I obey your will, Father,” she said.

In her voice reigned emptiness. In it was heard neither protest nor agreement — only scorched earth.

I left the dining room and went to the kitchen. Damian stood by the window, gazing into the darkness; his face was empty. He did not turn at my step.

“She is to marry him,” I said. “You know this.”

“I know,” he answered, not changing his position. “She will submit. For so command those who have arrogated the right to decide for her. I know.”

“And what do you hope for?”

He was silent for a long time. I gazed at his powerful shoulders and his hands gripping the windowsill. At last he said dully:

“I will do my duty. I will work for my pay. I will keep silence. I will wait.”

“For what?”

“I do not know,” he said. “Perhaps for what is fated to happen. Or for what will pass us by. I will simply remain in waiting.”

Chapter 8

The Pull

Night descended upon Greyvud Hall heavily, like a coffin lid. William had departed while it was still light, but his offering remained. The white roses, filled with the poison of sweetness, stood frozen in the tall crystal vase I had placed on the dressing table without being asked. Their scent was so fierce that it seeped into the corridors and beneath locked doors, reaching my little room, where I sat frozen on the edge of my bed, listening to the silence. I knew: she would not sleep. She lay prostrate in the darkness, counting the beats of her heart that echoed dully in her temples. Like nails being driven into the wood of her future.

I heard her measured steps — from corner to corner. The bed creaked as she rose. Then — a rustle to the window. And a long, viscous silence, broken only by the howling of the wind in the chimney and the rare clicks of cooling floorboards. I knew every complaint of this house, every breath. Now she stood frozen at the glass, staring into the murk; she craved what could not be found beneath these vaults.

She was waiting.

The roses gave off the scent of decay. I sensed this smell even through the stonework — cloying, suffocating, like the essence from an embalmer’s shop, where spring mingles with death. Cut at dawn, in the warmth of the room they had already begun to bow their heads toward the crystal, like the executed put on display. William had left them as a reminder of his right, of his power, of the coming life at Sandford Manor. But Arabella saw in them only decay. The prototype of that death awaiting her in his house, beneath the shadow of his impeccable and empty speeches.

The wind brought cold and dampness from the depths of the marsh. The window casement answered with a sharp creak that cut through the night like a gunshot. Air rushed into the room, carrying a smell I had known since my orphanhood. That same odor of wet earth and rotting roots,

the heavy moisture that rises from the quagmire and lays its seal upon all living things. But now something else pulsed within it — bitter, animal, powerful. Tar. Horse sweat. Tanned leather. Him.

The room became all ears. Arabella stood frozen at the window; her breath — ragged, impulsive — betrayed her fear of missing the moment when silence would give birth to sound. The wind fell, and in the stillness a breath rushed past — not a moan, but the semblance of a cry strangled at its birth.

The door to my little room opened a crack, admitting a strip of light into the corridor. The door to the neighboring chamber was closed, but I could see right through it: barefoot, in nothing but her shift, with her hair in disheveled waves, she fixed her gaze on the murk. And he was there. He stood frozen below, by the stable, not taking his eyes from the window. Without a call, without a gesture, without making a single move that might betray him to a watchman. He simply waited.

Darkness fell again. Her hands clutched her knees so fiercely that her nails dug into her flesh. A step toward him would be a lie. Useless to demand: “Lock the window, banish the visions, give yourself to sleep.” Pointless to warn: “This path leads to the abyss.” For she knew everything: both what could be spoken and what should be hidden. She knew: her mother had stood frozen at this same glass, gazing at the same quagmire. And her mother had gone. Not into the mist and not to the one who craved her — but into the damp earth, leaving only a letter in the depths of the bureau and a call in the blood.

The house breathed in the darkness. The beams groaned under the weight of the night; the wind, grown weary, rustled in a language understood only by the walls. In this whisper pulsed the eternal rhythm — the same with which Arabella paced the room, with which her heart beat time with something lurking in the fog. Her eyelids closed, so as not to see the glow of the candle, but the fire burned, and he, below, did not take his eyes from it. And nothing could now be changed.

Her fingers, gripping the windowsill, grew numb. Her breath left a damp patch on the glass — it faded and reappeared, like a steady pulse or the count of passing minutes. In the foggy depths trembled a reflection: pale, blurred, alien. In her white shift, with her hair in disheveled waves, Arabella seemed to herself a ghost trapped between worlds. One — where William gave roses and promised London — and another — where the air was thick with tar, and below, by the stable, the stranger stood motionless.

He was not visible. The murk stood too thick, the night was starless black, and the distance erased the outlines of the figure that — Arabella knew — was there. His presence was felt on the skin, like the heat of a cooling stove when the flame is no longer visible but the air still shimmers. This feeling pulsed in her chest, in her throat, in the very tips of her fingers that held the memory of his gaze.

Her steps about the room were softer than a rustle, but in the night silence, every creak of the floorboard thundered like a shot. By the dressing table, Arabella stopped. Her hand reached toward the vase, drawing out one rose. The scent — cloying, almost nauseating — smelled of William. The stem cracked in her fist. The thorns pierced her skin, and the pain responded sharply. Looking at the drops of blood that appeared on the whiteness of her palm, she understood the truth: this prick was the only real feeling she had had since the hour he had crossed Greyvud’s threshold.

The rose fell to the floor. Then another, a third. The flowers fell upon the carpet, shedding their petals, leaving light, phantom spots on the fabric. Arabella tore at the bouquet with a fury that grew with every beat of her heart. She crushed this cloying promise that she had not asked for and did not wish to accept.

The mirror revealed a woman who had become a stranger. The feverish gleam in her eyes and the whiteness of her shift made her look like the one whose voice had sounded in her mother’s letter. She, too, had stood frozen at this window, staring into the marshes, awaiting a newcomer. Now it became clear: the waiting had not been in vain.

Before the mirror, in nothing but her shift, she seemed alien to herself. Her physical shell no longer belonged to her — not to her father, who had raised his daughter for an advantageous match;

not to William, who thought her his rightful prize; not even to Greyvud itself, which craved an heir. But now, with her hair loose and her feet bare, Arabella felt: the mask she had worn for years had finally fallen. Her skin burned where Hawthorn's gaze had touched her that morning — appraising and cold. She ran her hands over her shoulders and chest with frantic intensity, erasing that touch like sticky filth.

At the washstand, Arabella plunged her hands into the basin. The icy water burned her wrists, penetrating to her very heart. She rubbed her skin with the same ferocity as after the stable, vainly trying to wash away the ineradicable. But the smell of tar did not rest on the surface — it had saturated her lungs and every cell of her body, which had recognized that scent before her mind had remembered the stranger's name.

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