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Kirill Borgia

**ECHOES FROM THE WOMBS
OF TARTARIA**

Erotic Saga

4

Kirill Borgia

**Echoes from the
Wombs of Tartaria — 4**

«Издательские решения»

Borgia K.

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«Издательские решения»,

An immortal archivist fleeing his own century boards a southbound train into the fading Russian Empire — drawn by whispers of a forgotten female cult tied to the lost soul of Tartaria. As desire, memory, and ancient bloodlines entwine, Yarosvet Zorich is pulled into a shadowed world where beauty becomes ritual, motherhood becomes power, and the past refuses to stay buried.

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Echoes from the Wombs of Tartaria — 4

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The Eighth Echo

The first light of morning spilled softly through the curtains, warming the room and gilding the quiet forms lying together. Yarosvet stirred awake first, feeling the combined heat of two bodies pressed close against him. The blanket lay discarded on the floor during the night, leaving them all bare, the lingering warmth wrapping him like a living cocoon.

He turned slowly, eyes tracing the curves and lines of the two women. Taissia's body was supple and flexible, the lean muscle of her limbs taut beneath smooth skin, her chest rising and falling with measured breaths, nipples brushing lightly against his fingers as he let his hand drift along her side. The curve of her waist, the gentle swell of her hips, the soft slope of her thighs — everything pressed close, intimate, yielding under his touch.

Beside her, Lena was a study in contrast. Her form was stronger, more athletic, the definition of muscle visible along her abdomen, arms, and legs. Even in sleep, there was a subtle tension in her body, a readiness that hinted at controlled power. When his hands wandered over her hips and thighs, the firmness beneath was unmistakable, her skin warm, responsive, each contact sending small shivers through him. He traced along the soft swell of her chest, feeling the hardness of her nipples through the skin, the subtle rise and fall of her body beneath him.

Yarosvet's fingers explored freely, gliding over shoulders, ribs, the gentle swell of bellies, hips, and the subtle press of buttocks, tracing every curve and plane, every line of muscle and softness. Taissia stirred, a soft murmur escaping her lips as her hand found the length of him, moving with careful deliberation. Lena's fingers followed, pressing along his side, cupping him, coaxing a response, the warmth and friction of skin on skin sending waves of awareness through him.

Their movements grew bolder as consciousness fully returned. Taissia pressed herself closer, letting her chest brush against his arm, hand gliding over his stomach, teasing with a softness that contrasted Lena's firmer, more deliberate touches. Lena's strength was evident in the way her hands explored him, along his hips and thighs, gripping and sliding with a confident rhythm, fingers brushing and circling, coaxing, urging. Each of their reactions was different — Taissia's fluid and yielding, Lena's deliberate and precise — but both equally alive in their desire to touch and be touched.

Yarosvet's own hands traced along the planes of their bodies in turn, over breasts, hips, thighs, shoulders, chest, feeling the contrasts: Taissia's tender curves, soft yet alert; Lena's muscular firmness, responsive and exact. The three of them moved together in a silent, intricate dance of warmth and touch, the room heavy with the scent and heat of skin, every gasp, murmur, and subtle shiver a wordless conversation of intimacy and trust.

Time seemed to stretch in that golden morning light, the three of them entwined, exploring each other freely. The contrasts — Taissia's softness and flexibility against Lena's athletic strength — made each motion electric. Fingers traced and pressed, teased and lingered, over bellies, over buttocks, over thighs, a symphony of sensation that spoke of closeness, abandon, and the quiet surrender of bodies in perfect, unspoken harmony.

Lena shifted closer, the soft weight of her hair brushing his chest as her cheek traced a path downward. Yarosvet felt the tender press of her mouth on his shaft, the heat and moisture a stark contrast to the smooth skin of her hands sliding along him. His lips parted, a word on the verge of escape, but before he could speak, Taissia leaned in, her own mouth pressing against his, a sweet, insistent kiss that silenced him.

The juxtaposition was electric — Lena's lips moving with delicate precision, the subtle motion of her tongue and teeth over his member, the gentle friction sending shivers up his spine, while Taissia's kiss held him captive, soft and firm at once, claiming him with the familiar confidence of someone who knew exactly how to dominate and soothe simultaneously.

He could feel the heat pooling at the meeting of their bodies, the contrast between Lena's tender attentions below and Taissia's fiery, sweet insistence above. His hands moved almost on their own, tracing the curves of hips, the line of thighs, the softness and firmness that shifted beneath his fingers. Their breathing mingled with his, a shared rhythm of awakening, touch, and need.

Every movement, every sigh, every brush of skin on skin was amplified by the closeness of the three of them — the subtle differences of their bodies, the tension and release in their muscles, the yielding and the firmness, all converging into a single, electric intimacy. Yarosvet's voice, suppressed by Taissia's lips, became a low hum, an accompaniment to the delicate, deliberate exploration unfolding around him, a testament to the trust, desire, and abandon they shared.

Both girls already knew that he did not like kissing lips that had just enclosed his cock. Their awareness made every movement deliberate. Taissia lingered briefly on his lips, tasting softly, before letting her mouth drift downward along his chest, her tongue tracing a slow, teasing path over the warm skin, fingers following, gliding along ribs and the gentle slope of his abdomen.

At the same moment, Lena shifted lower, her attentions deliberately focused. Her lips and tongue pressed over his scrotum, teeth grazing lightly, exploring with a careful, coaxing rhythm. She yielded the main length to Taissia, letting her friend guide and claim, while she attended to the sensitive flesh just below, the contrast between the two approaches sending sharp, electric shivers through him.

Yarosvet closed his eyes, letting the morning light blur at the edges as his hands roamed over the smooth curves of the two bodies pressed against him. One hand slid over the gentle swell of Taissia's buttocks, kneading softly, feeling the subtle firmness beneath his fingers, while the other traced the roundness of Lena's hips, pressing and caressing with equal care.

He felt Taissia's lips envelop him, warm and deliberate, sliding over his cock with slow, teasing movements, each press and glide sending sparks of sensation through him. At the same time, Lena's hands and tongue explored his scrotum, her fingers brushing lightly over the sensitive skin of his testicles, coaxing and teasing, a deliberate counterpoint to Taissia's attentions. The rhythm of their touch, one consuming and one teasing, wrapped around him like a living pulse, each sensation heightened by the contrast between them.

A subtle shift beneath his hands made Yarosvet pause, and as he opened his eyes slightly, he realized without a word that they had silently swapped places. The sensations changed immediately, and the difference was electric.

Taissia's lips, tongue, and teeth now moved over his scrotum, tracing and teasing his testicles, the flicks of her tongue delicate yet insistent, the soft nip of her teeth sending sharp, thrilling jolts through him. Every press, glide, and careful nibble was precise, measured, different from the broader, more yielding warmth he had felt before.

Meanwhile, Lena's mouth now enclosed him, her lips sliding over his taut, rigid shaft, straining upward with eager insistence through slow, deliberate suction, the movement firmer, deeper, more commanding than before. Her tongue traced intentional patterns, circling, pressing, coaxing, every motion distinct from Taissia's teasing. He felt the contrast sharply — one soft, precise, playful; the other deeper, warmer, more encompassing — each stimulating him in its own way, heightening every nerve ending in a pulse of pure sensation.

Yarosvet's voice broke the moment, casual and unhurried, as though discussing breakfast rather than the intimate contact between them. "Well, did you sleep well in the new place?" he asked, the words slipping out with the same calm tone he used when they had stayed with him before, only now carrying a subtle implication — that before, with Inga and Zlata around, such closeness had been impossible.

Both girls responded with equal nonchalance, fingers and lips still busy. Taissia released him for a moment, a faint smile playing on her lips. "Yes, perfectly," she said, her voice calm and playful.

“Though... it was so hot last night with the three of us, I think it’s time to replace the blanket with some lighter sheets or a duvet cover.”

Lena’s fingers lingered, teasing over his cock, her tone equally casual. “Absolutely,” she added with a grin. “Much easier to move like this without the heavy blanket.” Their words were everyday, lighthearted, almost domestic, yet every syllable carried the warmth and intimacy of their morning, making the casual conversation pulse with quiet, shared desire for Yarosvet.

Yarosvet let out a quiet, measured sigh and spoke in the same calm, almost casual tone. “Perhaps it’s time to get up?”

The girls understood the hint immediately. Slowly, they began to slide off the bed, their bodies tracing a languid path downward. Taissia pressed soft, lingering kisses along the length of his left leg, from the curve of his hip to his toes, every movement teasing, intimate, yet measured. Lena mirrored her, hands and lips moving over the right leg, the warmth of her breath and the gentle flicks of her tongue sending shivers through him.

Their motions were unhurried, each kiss and caress an exploration of familiar terrain, playful yet tender. The contrast between Taissia’s fluid, graceful slides and Lena’s firmer, athletic touch made every second a vivid, electric sensation, as if the morning itself were bending around their quiet, deliberate devotion.

They lingered there a moment longer, their breaths slow and even, their lips tracing the tender arches of his feet. Each kiss, each soft stroke of tongue upon his soles felt almost reverential, as though the ritual itself carried a quiet, wordless gratitude for the night before. Then, with the same calm grace that had marked every motion, they withdrew — Taissia first, straightening, her hair falling over her shoulders like a spill of dark silk; Lena next, brushing a stray lock from her cheek with a shy, sunlit smile.

Without a word, they slipped away to their rooms, their bare feet whispering against the polished floorboards, the morning light following them through the open doorway. The sound of water soon came from the adjoining rooms — splashes, faint laughter, the rustle of linen. The scent of soap and warm skin began to drift through the air, mingling with the aroma of coffee that had already begun to rise from the kitchen below.

By the time they gathered again at the breakfast table, the scene had shifted entirely. The air was bright, filled with the hum of quiet domestic life: the gentle clatter of porcelain, the creak of wicker chairs, the distant cooing of doves outside the veranda. Taissia appeared first, hair still damp, the narrow mahogany collar gleaming faintly at her throat; she wore a light morning dress that brushed her knees, the fabric pale and translucent in the sun. Lena followed in a similar mood — fresh, alert, her skin glowing faintly from the cold wash, her eyes alive with an unspoken spark.

Yarosvet greeted them with his usual composure, as though the morning had been nothing more than a pleasant dream. Yet in the quiet exchanges — the meeting of eyes over steaming cups, the brief brush of fingers as they passed the bread, the faint, knowing curve of Taissia’s lips — something lingered, intimate and warm.

Outside, the day had fully awakened: sparrows darted in the garden, the scent of lilac drifted in from the veranda, and the world seemed once again peaceful, renewed, as if the house itself had drawn a deep, satisfied breath.

Breakfast unfolded in quiet brightness, the morning air drifting in through the veranda, carrying the scent of dew and warm earth. The table gleamed with simple, pleasant order — fresh bread, steaming eggs, a pot of jam, and the soft aroma of coffee mingling with sunlight. Over the clatter of cups and the faint rustle of linen, the conversation turned to the day ahead: the girls planned to continue their acrobatics on the lawn, still amused by yesterday’s near success, and Taissia, with her usual spark, insisted that Yarosvet finally teach them some boxing — “for discipline and grace,” as she put it, though her eyes betrayed a hint of mischief. Yarosvet only smiled, agreeing that perhaps a few lessons in footwork might indeed suit the morning.

At that moment, Marfa entered, carrying a fresh dish of butter and a basket of rolls. Her presence, brisk and capable, always seemed to shift the air from playfulness to quiet order.

“Marfa,” Yarosvet said as she set down the tray, “the other day you mentioned that the Polivanov estate somewhere west of us stands empty. Why is that? What happened there?”

The maid gave a short, knowing sigh. “Ah, that place, sir? Been standing empty these two years now. The old master, merchant Polivanov, died sudden — heart, they said. A good man in his way, though not lucky with his sons.”

Taissia looked up with quiet interest. “What do you mean, Marfa? What sort of people were they?”

“One played cards, lost near everything,” Marfa replied, crossing her arms. “Thought he was cleverer than the world. The other tried to patch it up, borrowed from the bank — and that was the end of it. The land’s in pledge now, though the house still stands. Only it’s not the same without people: the garden’s overgrown, the shutters hang crooked, and the place looks lonely. Used to be fine furniture there — French mirrors, velvet chairs — but when the servants scattered, they took what they pleased. Some say even the old samovar walked off by itself. As for the sons — one’s said to be in Rostov, drinking what’s left of his pride, and the other vanished south, maybe to Odessa. Neither’s been seen here since.”

Lena frowned slightly. “So no one lives there at all?”

“Only the wind,” Marfa said simply. “And sometimes foxes. They say the shutters bang at night, as if someone’s still walking through the rooms. But I wouldn’t go near it after dark, not for all your acrobatics, young ladies,” she added with a knowing glance. “Though they say, sometimes, if you’re very still, you can see a light moving behind the shutters, as if someone — or something — still wanders the rooms at night.”

Taissia laughed softly. “Then we’ll visit it by daylight.”

Marfa only shook her head, muttering something about the folly of youth, while Yarosvet sat thoughtful, turning his spoon slowly in the cup, his gaze distant — as if already picturing the silent, abandoned house hidden somewhere beyond the rolling fields.

Yarosvet lifted his cup, letting the steam drift across his face, and said in a measured tone, “Yesterday, we saw someone riding across the fields in that direction.”

Marfa gave a small, weary sigh. “Ah, that was likely one of the bank’s men, or some creditor come to see to the property. They’re the ones deciding the fate of the house and the land now, I’d wager.”

Yarosvet’s gaze lingered on the distant fields. “And the merchant’s wife — where did she go?” he asked quietly.

Marfa shook her head, her expression somber. “Ah, Varvara Petrovna... she passed away several years before her husband, struck down by consumption. Delicate woman she was, never strong, poor soul. After she died, the family seemed to be shadowed by one misfortune after another — debts, bad judgments, servants leaving, and the sons... well, each took his own path, and none could restore what was lost.”

Yarosvet stirred his cup thoughtfully. “And by misfortunes, you also mean... the merchant expanded his business recklessly?”

Marfa nodded, her lips pressing into a thin line. “Yes, sir. He’d traded in grain and flax at first — usual for these parts — but then, they say, he became... fascinated with live merchandise.”

Taissia frowned, leaning slightly forward. “Live merchandise? What do you mean, Marfa?”

The maid exhaled slowly, shaking her head. “I don’t know the details, miss. Just what people whispered... that somewhere down in the Kuban he began buying young girls from unscrupulous men, and then selling them on to different estates. That’s all I’ve ever heard, and it was only gossip, of course. But that sort of business... well, it never ends well, as you can see.”

Marfa gathered the empty dishes and bustled toward the door, her steps brisk, leaving a faint trail of lingering warmth and the soft clatter of porcelain behind her. Once she had gone, Yarosvet and the girls exchanged a brief, silent glance, the weight of her story still hanging in the air.

Taissia's eyes gleamed with a mix of mischief and excitement. "After a tale like that," she said softly, "I can hardly wait to see the abandoned estate for myself. Perhaps that's where we ought to start our day. Acrobatics, boxing, even the horses... they can wait a little while longer."

Lena nodded, her smile quick and conspiratorial, as if agreeing to a plan that promised both thrill and adventure. Yarosvet only allowed a faint, indulgent smile to touch his lips, sensing the energy and curiosity that would carry the morning forward.

When Andrey heard that his master intended to visit the neighbouring Polivanov estate, a faint shadow crossed his face — so quick it might have gone unnoticed, yet Yarosvet caught it at once.

"What is it?" he asked evenly. "You seem less than pleased with the idea."

The coachman straightened, wiping his hands on a rag. "Nothing, sir," he said after a pause. "I'll have the tarantas ready in no time. Just..." — he hesitated, glancing toward the distant line of trees where the old estate lay hidden — "you'd best be careful there. Folks say the place isn't right. There's been talk — voices at night, lights behind the shutters, you know. And the dogs, they never go near that road. They howl and turn back every time."

He fell silent for a moment, then added quietly, "Still, if you wish it, I'll drive you. Only — don't linger there after dusk."

Not half an hour after breakfast, they were already rolling together along the sunlit road that cut through the fields — the very one where, just the day before, they had spotted that mysterious carriage passing toward the west.

The road narrowed as they drew nearer to the Polivanov estate, the soft rumble of the tarantas wheels sinking into the hush of tall, uncut grass. The morning sun slanted low, gilding the fields and glimmering faintly on dew still clinging to the wild oats along the verge. Ahead, through a thinning line of poplars, the house slowly emerged — first the white tops of its chimneys, then the grey, weathered roof and the pale façade beneath, veined with the dark stains of years without care.

It was a broad, once-elegant manor, two storeys high, its windows shuttered unevenly, like the blind eyes of an old animal that still breathed but no longer saw. The porch sagged slightly to one side; a single shutter hung loose, tapping now and then against the frame with a dull, hollow sound. The courtyard, once swept and gravelled, was overrun with grass and thistles. Here and there, pieces of old harness, a broken wheel, and the splintered remains of a trough lay half-buried in the weeds.

To one side stood the remnants of a stable, the gate hanging from a single hinge, its timbers green with moss. Beyond it stretched what had once been an orchard — rows of gnarled trees twisting against the light, their branches heavy with unpicked, half-wild fruit. A faint scent of rot mingled with the sweetness of apples carried through the air, mingling strangely with the quiet hum of insects and the far-off rustle of reeds by the river.

The estate had not collapsed, yet it seemed to breathe a long, tired sigh with every gust of wind. It was not ruin so much as abandonment — every corner still holding the trace of what had been: an echo of laughter, the ghost of voices, the shape of vanished life. Even Taissia, always quick with a jest, grew still as the tarantas creaked to a halt before the gate.

Stepping from the tarantas, Yarosvet glanced around, letting his eyes take in the courtyard's small intricacies. "See how the stones have sunk unevenly into the grass? No one has tended this path for years," he remarked, nodding toward the scattered remains of the old cart.

Taissia crouched slightly, brushing her fingers over the moss-covered log. "And look at this," she said. "The trough's split cleanly along the grain — someone must have tried to move it in a hurry."

Lena's gaze drifted toward the orchard. "Look at the orchard — rows of trees, gnarled and bare, their trunks scarred and leaning. No one has pruned them in years; the ground is littered with fallen branches and dried leaves left from last autumn."

Yarovet's attention shifted to the stable. "Even empty, the stalls seem alive somehow. The beams groan with every whisper of wind."

Taissia, stepping closer to the house, added softly, "It feels as if the place is watching us, waiting for someone to stir the silence."

Lena nodded. "I've never seen a manor breathe like this. Abandoned, yet somehow... aware."

Yarovet inclined his head, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "Keep your senses sharp. Even a quiet courtyard can hide more than weeds and splintered wood."

A sudden, heavy thud echoed from somewhere behind the manor, followed by the startled whinny of a horse. The sound seemed to shake the still air itself. Yarovet and the girls froze, exchanging quick glances, each sensing the tension in the courtyard rise like a living thing.

Before any of them could move, the front doors of the house creaked open. A figure stepped onto the sagging porch, his posture measured, hands resting lightly at his sides. The wind caught the edges of his coat, and for a moment, he simply watched, quiet and deliberate. No introductions were offered, no name was given. For now, he was simply a presence — a stranger in the abandoned estate, and an unexpected one at that.

Taissia shifted slightly, her eyes narrowing, while Lena instinctively moved closer to Yarovet. Even the horses in the tarantas snorted uneasily, sensing the sudden shift in the atmosphere. The manor, which had seemed merely tired and abandoned moments before, now felt alert, almost alive, as if it, too, were watching the newcomer.

Yarovet's hand rested lightly on his coat, his gaze steady. "Stay calm," he murmured, more to himself than anyone else, "and observe."

The figure on the porch shifted slightly, and the morning light revealed him more clearly. He was a man of middling height, neatly built, dressed in a dark frock coat that seemed almost formal for the abandoned courtyard. Yellow gloves covered his hands, a faint sheen of dust clinging to them, and his face was lined with habitual frowns, as though each sunbeam and waft of wind were an inconvenience.

He adjusted his posture with a stiff, precise motion, the very embodiment of official neatness. There was an air of meticulousness about him: the crease of his trousers, the polished edge of his boots, the faint scent of papers carried beneath his coat.

Yarovet and the girls remained still, observing him. There was nothing immediately threatening in his bearing — no drawn weapon — but the very precision of his movements suggested a man accustomed to authority, to rules, and to making others follow them. Yet beneath that formality, one sensed a careful avoidance of direct confrontation: a man who would execute unpleasant orders but preferred them carried out quietly, through paper, signature, and protocol rather than force.

He lifted a gloved hand slightly and inclined his head with precise stiffness. "Good morning," he said, his voice flat, formal, almost clipped. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Yarovet returned the nod with equal calm, his tone measured, matching the stranger's formality. "We are your neighbors from Lipovka," he replied. "We merely happened to be passing through the area, exploring the surroundings we have not yet familiarized ourselves with."

The stranger's thin lips pressed briefly into a line, then relaxed into the faintest semblance of a smile. "A pleasure, of course," he said, glancing over the courtyard with a professional detachment. "You are fortunate with the weather today." His eyes flicked from the manor to the overgrown grounds, and then back to them, the unspoken implication hanging in the air: your visit is noted, and your departure is expected promptly.

Taissia and Lena exchanged a subtle glance, sensing the underlying edge beneath the formal politeness, while Yarovet's gaze remained steady, noting the meticulousness of the man's stance, the calculated distance he kept, and the hint of impatience behind his carefully neutral words.

Yarovet lifted his fingers to the brim of his hat and gave a slight, measured bow, meeting the stranger's gaze steadily. "I am Yarovet Alexeyevich Zorich, Collegiate Assessor."

The man on the porch regarded him, eyes flicking over Yarosvet and the girls, as if weighing something carefully. A faint crease formed between his brows, and he pursed his thin lips. Finally he spoke, voice precise and deliberate: “Grigoriy Pavlovich Mosolov,” he said. “I am not the owner of this estate. It belongs to the bank I represent, and at present I am otherwise engaged and cannot afford you the usual courtesies.”

Before anyone could speak further, heavy, rhythmic thuds echoed again from somewhere behind the house, accompanied by a distant whinny of a horse.

Taissia glanced toward Yarosvet, a faint smile on her lips. “Seems the bank has taken to demolishing its own property,” she quipped lightly, trying to mask the tension.

Mosolov’s thin lips pressed into a line, and his eyes flicked toward the noise. His voice, flat and sharp, cut through the moment. “The bank manages its estate as it sees fit,” he said, the words carrying an unmistakable edge. “And now I wish you all a safe journey onward.”

The dull thuds from somewhere behind the house repeated.

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Mosolov’s thin lips pressed into a line, and his eyes flicked toward the noise. His voice, flat and sharp, cut through the moment. “The bank manages its estate as it sees fit,” he said, the words carrying an unmistakable edge. “And now I wish you all a safe journey onward.”

Before they could respond, a woman’s cry rang out clearly from somewhere behind the house, sharp and urgent, carrying over the courtyard and cutting through the morning air.

Yarosvet’s gaze immediately snapped toward the sound, his posture tightening. Taissia’s playful smirk vanished, replaced by a tense frown. “That didn’t sound like anything friendly,” she murmured, her brow furrowing. “Hardly the sort of noise a bank estate would make.”

Mosolov’s eyes sharpened, and his tone became even firmer. “I suggest you keep to your own path and refrain from interfering in matters that do not concern you,” he said, the words carrying unmistakable finality.

“As a neighbor, I might well have done the same,” Yarosvet said evenly, his gaze steady on Mosolov. “But as a Collegiate Assessor, I am bound to investigate what is happening here.”

The effect was immediate. Mosolov’s rigid posture faltered just slightly, a flicker of unease passing over his precise composure, though he quickly masked it with a faint tightening of his lips.

Mosolov’s eyes narrowed, his voice clipped. “There are... unforeseen circumstances. A trespass upon the property — an unwelcome presence, so to speak.”

Yarosvet gave a subtle tilt of his head, his gaze unwavering, and spoke with measured authority, “Then I suggest you take the trouble to explain what is happening here.”

The repeated cries and thuds from behind the house drew their attention once more.

From the doorway stepped a second man. He was a tall, imposing figure, likely around forty, with the bearing of someone who had long been accustomed to command and to being obeyed. His clothes were well-cut, though worn with a casual elegance, as if style mattered less than presence; a polished cane rested lightly in one hand, catching the morning light with a subtle gleam. His features were sharp, his movements precise and unhurried, betraying a confidence born of experience, a certainty that obstacles could be moved aside with either persuasion or force. Even in his composed appearance, there was an undercurrent of readiness, a quiet assurance that he could enforce his will if the situation demanded it.

“Grisha, what’s the matter — still dawdling on the job?” he said, his tone sharp beneath the veneer of civility.

Mosolov’s thin lips pressed together, a visible flush of embarrassment crossing his features. “A Collegiate Assessor has arrived...” he murmured, barely audible.

Without breaking his stance, the newcomer drew a new Nagant revolver from beneath his coat, the polished steel glinting in the morning light, and leveled it calmly at Yarosvet. His expression remained composed, almost polite, yet a chilling edge ran through his words.

“Too many Collegiate Assessors wandering about,” he said smoothly, cold irony in his voice. “One fewer wouldn’t be noticed.”

Yarosvet’s gaze remained steady, almost casual, as if the revolver aimed at his chest were merely an inconvenient accessory. “Forgive my curiosity,” he said evenly, tilting his head slightly, “but I wonder — are you, by any chance, the Governor himself, since you have taken it upon yourself to manage the fates of those placed under your charge?”

The words, calm yet pointed, carried a weight that belied their measured delivery. The man’s hand wavered slightly on the grip of the revolver, a shadow of surprise passing over his composed features, while the faintest tightening around his mouth betrayed that Yarosvet’s implication had landed precisely where intended. Without lowering the Nagant, he spoke, voice smooth, carrying a subtle chill beneath the civility.

“Not the Governor, if that is your thought, not yet,” he said, letting a faint trace of irony touch his words. “A former officer, now a dealer in estates and properties. And, naturally, acting in concert with the bank that holds this place. That is all you need to know.”

Even as he spoke, his revolver remained leveled, steady in his hand. Yet in the careful precision of his posture, in the almost imperceptible tension along his shoulders, there was the unmistakable air of a man accustomed to taking what he wanted — by word, by deal, or, if necessary, by force.

Mosolov’s eyebrows shot up, a quick flicker of panic crossing his otherwise composed face. “Arkadiy Mikhailovich, put the revolver down,” he urged, voice tight, betraying his unease. “Mr. Zorich and his companions were about to leave anyway.”

Before the man could respond, another voice cut sharply through the tension. “Yes, Arkadiy Mikhailovich, put the gun down — or the former officer will remain a former dealer sooner than you think.”

From the side of the tarantas, Andrey appeared, previously unnoticed. He held a stout side-by-side hunting shotgun, barrels leveled with calm precision at the man, stock braced firmly against his shoulder. His posture radiated controlled authority, the implied threat unmistakable.

The man’s eyes darted to Andrey and the gun, then back to Mosolov. The Nagant in his hand remained raised, but the careful steadiness of Andrey’s aim forced a flicker of doubt into his stance.

Yarosvet’s gaze held firm on the man before him, his voice calm but tinged with a quiet authority that brooked no challenge. “If you mean to claim this estate,” he said, inclining his head with measured grace, “it would serve you better to avoid beginning your dealings with the neighbours in outright hostility.”

His words lingered in the air, deliberate and weighty, each syllable heavy with the power held by his office as a collegiate assessor. For a fleeting moment, even the steady aim of the Nagant seemed to waver, the charged tension trembling like a current beneath the stillness of the morning.

After a long beat, Arkadiy Mikhailovich’s fingers unclenched. With a sharp, almost abrupt motion, he lowered the Nagant, letting it rest loosely in his hand. A forced smile flickered across his lips, thin and controlled, betraying a hint of irritation.

“Very well,” he said smoothly, voice even, though the edge of tension lingered. “What is it that you unbidden guests desire here?”

Mosolov shifted uneasily behind him, glancing at Andrey and the poised shotgun, while Yarosvet and the girls held their ground, calm but watchful.

“Am I mistaken,” he asked, inclining his head just enough to emphasize observation, “or did a woman’s cry just reach us? Perhaps you could see fit to explain what is happening here.”

Arkadiy Mikhailovich’s forced smile faltered for a fraction. He glanced toward Mosolov, then at the direction of the distant commotion, the morning light glinting off the Nagant in his hand. For

a moment, the carefully maintained composure wavered, the polite facade slipping just enough to reveal a flicker of unease.

Arkadiy Mikhailovich's smile tightened, more a grimace now than politeness. "Ah, that girl," he said, waving a hand toward the distant doorway. "Seems a local — once a lodger, I gather. Refuses to leave. She's holed herself up in the ice cellar beneath the house, barricaded the door, and shows no inclination to come out willingly."

Mosolov shifted uneasily beside him, glancing toward the sound of muffled thuds from the house. Even the faintest breeze seemed to carry the echo of the girl's defiance, a stubborn note that hung in the overgrown courtyard.

"I see," Yarosvet said, "and indeed, by all notarial rules, this presents a difficulty. One cannot, in good faith, sell an estate pledged to the bank as 'vacant' if it is in fact occupied — even by a single member of the household staff or lodger. The law treats any resident, however minor, as a living claim upon the property."

He paused, letting the weight of the statement settle. "So the estate cannot simply be considered empty, and any transaction purporting to treat it as such would be, at best, invalid."

Mosolov shifted uneasily, ears twitching at the faint, muffled cries carrying through the air. Even Arkadiy Mikhailovich's forced composure showed the slightest strain, a flicker of tension betraying how Yarosvet's words had unsettled the careful posture of authority he tried to maintain.

Yarosvet's gaze swept over the two men, voice calm but edged with quiet authority. "Perhaps I can be of assistance," he said, "if you allow me to ascertain what is taking place here, and cease brandishing firearms so carelessly. I would far prefer that any cries we hear be those of women rejoicing, of delight and happiness, rather than of fear or pain."

He made a subtle gesture toward Andrey. Reluctantly, the coachman lowered his shotgun, the stock settling against the ground with a muted thud, while the tension in the courtyard shifted slightly, giving the first breath of space for words instead of threats.

"Perhaps your companions," Mosolov muttered, his voice low, "might manage to persuade this... wild girl to leave her cellar."

His words carried a hint of reluctant hope, as though he believed that the presence of the women could coax the girl into compliance. Arkadiy Mikhailovich's stance remained rigid, revolver still in hand, though the tension around his shoulders had eased slightly under Yarosvet's calm scrutiny.

"Follow me," Mosolov said curtly and stepped down from the porch, his boots grinding the gravel. He moved stiffly, like a man forcing his own determination to hold against unease.

Yarosvet gave a brief nod and gestured for the others to come after him. They skirted the side of the house where the ground fell into shadow — a damp, neglected strip littered with last year's leaves and the brittle stems of dead nettles. The air grew colder there, heavy with the smell of wet earth and moulding wood, as though sunlight itself seldom reached that side.

They were nearing the northern side of the house when the sounds grew clearer — a dull, rhythmic pounding, muffled by the earth but relentless, echoing through the damp air like the heartbeat of something trapped beneath the ground. Between the blows came faint cries, indistinct yet unmistakably human.

"Over there," Mosolov said curtly, his tone tight. He strode ahead, coat flapping, the others following in silence. The path sloped downward, skirting the damp side of the house where moss and nettles thrived in the perpetual shade. The air grew colder with every step, thick with the smell of wet clay and mould. Ahead, half-buried in the earth, stood the cellar — squat and sullen, its plaster streaked with moisture, the whitewash long turned to grey. An oak door, bound in iron, shuddered faintly under the repeated blows that struck it.

A broad-shouldered man stood before the entrance, his back turned to them. He wielded a short, heavy log like a hammer, driving it against the door with a dull, punishing rhythm. Each blow sent a tremor through the ground and a low echo through the slope. His coarse linen shirt clung to his

back, dark with sweat and earth, the collar open on a thick neck. A worn leather belt held a holster, the revolver within catching a pale gleam of light as he shifted his stance.

Mosolov stopped a few paces behind him. “That will do, Frol,” he said sharply. “We have company.”

The man lowered the log, turning his square face toward them. His eyes, small and pale beneath the ridge of his brow, flicked briefly from Mosolov to Yarosvet and then to the women, measuring, uncurious, as if they were yet another task to endure. He gave no greeting — merely wiped a sleeve across his mouth and waited.

“Frol,” Mosolov continued, his tone clipped and official, “our guests wish to see what your... tenant refuses to yield. Perhaps their presence will persuade her to act with more reason.”

Frol grunted — a sound more of effort than agreement — and stepped aside, leaving the door half-spattered with mud, the iron hinges groaning faintly in the cold air. From beyond the thick wood came a muffled, desperate sound — not loud, but distinctly human.

Yarosvet’s gaze lingered on the door, then on Mosolov. “So this,” he said quietly, “is the cause of all your commotion.”

For a moment, only the echo of the last blow hung in the air — dull, uncertain, like the tremor of a plucked string. Then, from behind the thick oak, came a voice. At first it was only a hoarse cry, muffled by the wood and the damp, but soon words began to form — harsh, tangled, unmistakably human.

“Go away! — you hear me? Go! This my house! Mine! You no touch!”

The voice broke, then rose again, half sob, half fury.

“I live here! You leave me — you leave me be! I go nowhere, nowhere!”

Each phrase struck the air with raw, uneven rhythm, the words slurring under a foreign accent — something southern, perhaps Balkan or steppe-born — yet clear enough to sting the ear.

Mosolov flinched slightly, as if the woman’s rage had reached through the door and found him. Frol stood motionless, his massive shoulders gleaming with sweat, while Yarosvet’s expression tightened; he listened not merely to the words, but to what trembled behind them — fear, defiance, a loneliness that clung to the sound like frost to metal.

Yarosvet stood for a moment, listening to the echoes fade against the damp wood. Then, quietly, almost as if not to disturb the stillness, he turned to Mosolov.

“What’s her name?”

Mosolov scowled and gave a curt shrug. “How should I know?”

Yarosvet nodded once and stepped forward. The air near the door was colder, seeping up from the stones. He rested his palm lightly against the rough oak and spoke through it, his voice calm and even.

“No one means you harm,” he said. “My name is Yarosvet. We’ve come from the neighbouring estate — Lipovka. I only wish to speak with you.”

A harsh, frightened cry broke from within:

“Go! I say go! You lie — all of you lie!”

He didn’t move back, didn’t raise his tone. “We live not far from here. You must have seen the smoke from our chimneys. “There are three of us — travellers, not officials. My companions are Taissia and Lena; we have only recently settled at Lipovka. I promise, we mean no harm. Tell me, please... what is your name?”

For a few heartbeats, only the whisper of wind through the awning answered him. Then, from the shadowed hollow behind the door, came a hesitant, tremulous sound — the same voice, but stripped of its fury:

“...Aisha.”

A pause. Then, hurriedly, as if correcting herself —

“Asya. I am Asya.”

He let his hand linger on the rough oak, pressing lightly, almost as if to offer reassurance, and whispered her name — “Asya” — letting it settle between them like something fragile yet real.

Behind him, Mosolov shifted his weight with a snort of impatience, but Yarosvet’s gaze remained on the door — on the breath of warmth that seemed, at last, to answer from within the chill of the earth.

Taissia stepped closer, her voice soft yet carrying across the chill of the slope. “Asya... are you cold in there?”

The words, gentle and concerned, contrasted sharply with the rough timber and the lingering echoes of anger from within. For a moment, silence answered her, save for the faint tremor of the door under Yarosvet’s resting hand. Then Asya’s voice came again, quieter this time, less defiant, tinged with uncertainty.

“Cold... yes... but I stay... my house...”

Taissia’s tone softened further, almost coaxing. “We won’t hurt you. We just want to know you’re safe.”

Asya’s voice trembled through the thick oak, low and wary. “No... no safe... if I come out... they... they kill me... take... my house...”

Yarosvet’s hand rested lightly on the rough door, grounding the moment with calm authority. “Who are you, then? Are you the mistress of this house?”

The girl’s reply came ragged, breathless, halting:

“No... no... not mistress... they... they gone. All gone... died or leave... I... I live with them... few years... then... then I leave too. But... I... I come back... nowhere else...”

Yarosvet’s gaze softened slightly, still measured, as if weighing each syllable. “So you belong here, at least by right of shelter?”

“Yes... I... I stay... my house...”

He pressed his palm lightly against the rough oak, letting the warmth of touch bridge the distance. “Do not cry out any longer, Asya,” he said gently, his voice low, carrying both calm authority and reassurance. “I will speak with them now and all will be well. You have nothing to fear while I am here.”

From within, her voice wavered, halting and clipped:

“W-well... you... promise? They... they not hurt me?”

“I promise,” he replied softly, deliberately, letting the words linger in the narrow space between them. “Remain where you are. You are safe. I will take care of this. Nothing will happen to you.”

A pause followed, a quiet settling of the raw edge of fear. The tremor in her tone eased slightly, replaced by a wary attentiveness, the alertness of someone long forced to guard herself, listening but no longer screaming.

Yarosvet straightened, his gaze sweeping over the courtyard, resting briefly on Andrey with the shotgun, then returning to the two men. His voice carried easily across the gravel and the slope, calm yet carrying a weight that could not be ignored.

“Mister Mosolov,” he began, “and you, Mister — » He paused, letting his eyes meet the taller man’s, precise and unwavering.

“Rudnev,” the man replied, his voice even, though the faintest tremor betrayed his caution.

“Mister Rudnev, listen to me carefully,” Yarosvet continued, his tone carrying across the gravel and the slope, calm yet imbued with quiet strength. “You have before you a choice — exactly two courses of action for what happens next. The first...” He let the pause stretch, letting the tension thrum in the air. “The first will bring nothing but gunfire, uproar, and inevitable corpses. I do not advise it.”

A subtle flicker of unease passed over both men’s faces. Yarosvet’s gaze, calm but piercing, held them there.

“The second,” he said, his tone now carrying a faint warmth of counsel, “is the one I recommend. It is simple: the bank wishes to sell this abandoned estate, this house and land, and you, Mister Rudnev, have just discovered the very buyer you hoped for.”

He let the words settle, then inclined his head slightly, a faint, measured smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “Congratulations — you have just found a purchaser. Proceed wisely. You may consider yourselves fortunate: you have before you exactly what you sought, without unnecessary bloodshed.”

The weight of the statement, delivered with quiet command and visible calm, seemed to still the morning air itself. Even the persistent tension in Andrey’s posture eased fractionally, the shotguns’ barrels lowering just enough that the sharpness of threat softened into cautious observation.

Yarosvet’s gaze swept over the estate, taking in the leaning stables, the scattered debris of carts and troughs, and the gnarled, half-wild orchard. His voice carried across the courtyard, calm yet precise, each word chosen with care, as if the very figures he spoke were etched in the air before him.

“Gentlemen,” he began, “let us speak plainly. This house — two stories, wooden, built with care for its time — I would value at eight thousand rubles originally. The stables and barn, simple yet sturdy, add roughly three thousand more. The land itself — fertile, with orchard and meadows — another two thousand.”

He let a brief pause give weight to the numbers, then allowed a faint smile. “But let us not ignore the state of affairs. The wood has aged, paint peeled, shutters crooked, roofs sagging — all told, a reduction is warranted. In its present condition, I would assess the estate’s value at twelve thousand rubles. A prudent bank, I imagine, would ask no more from a buyer.”

He shifted his gaze from Mosolov to Rudnev, voice sharpening with a touch of practical cunning. “And here, Mister Rudnev, is where your interest comes in. The bank wishes to sell quickly, and you, as intermediary, will see the opportunity. I would expect a fair purchase price, reflecting both the estate’s diminished condition and the potential for profit. Tell me, what do you propose?”

Mosolov’s thin lips pressed together, a faint crease deepening between his brows. His eyes flicked rapidly from the gnarled orchard to the scattered debris, and back to Yarosvet, as though calculating margins and liabilities on the spot. The formal stiffness of his posture remained, but a subtle tightening in his fingers betrayed an unease he could not entirely hide. Even in his neat frock coat and yellow gloves, he looked small against the raw expanse of the estate — the dust and decay conspiring against the polished order he preferred.

Rudnev, in contrast, allowed a slow, ironic smile to touch his lips. His eyes glimmered with the faintest spark of appraisal, the trained gaze of a man who measured opportunity as surely as he measured distance on a battlefield. He shifted the weight of his cane, letting it tap once against the gravel, a quiet punctuation to his attention. There was no fear, only calculation — a tempering of interest with cold amusement at the subtle display of knowledge before him.

Frol remained immovable, a silent wall beside the cellar steps. His large hands rested lightly on the stock of his revolver, shoulders squared, jaw firm. He said nothing, made no motion beyond the slight adjustment of his stance, but his eyes — narrow, watchful — betrayed the readiness to act at a word. Every measured beat of his breathing seemed to echo the quiet force he carried, a living weight that reminded the others this was no idle observer.

Mosolov opened his mouth, a faint protest curling at the corners, but Rudnev’s hand lifted slightly, cutting him off before a word could form.

“Today is indeed a fortunate day,” he said smoothly, voice even, yet carrying that unmistakable undercurrent of command. “Fortunate not only for Mister Mosolov, but also for you, Mister Zorich. I had intended to deal with this estate purely out of goodwill toward the bank. In truth, I have more pressing matters — much more profitable ventures — demanding my attention.

“So yes,” he continued, a slow sweep of his gaze taking in the sagging roof, the mossed stables, the half-wild orchard, “I am willing to let you have this property. Even in its current state of decay, it holds the promise of value, rising with the general development of the region.

“As for the price,” he added, a subtle narrowing of his eyes, “that is a matter best kept confidential. I suggest we step aside and speak privately.”

Taissia and Lena lingered at the edge of the courtyard, their eyes following Yarosvet and Rudnev as they moved aside, toward a narrower lane that skirted the orchard and led to a small rise shaded by ancient willows. Sunlight dappled the ground through the sparse leaves, catching the dust motes that swirled with each measured step. The slight incline gave them a vantage point, allowing the girls to observe without being seen, the distant hum of insects and the creak of the orchard trees providing a quiet backdrop to the conversation unfolding.

“Your father seems to know his property well,” Mosolov remarked beside them, voice dry and precise, as he adjusted the yellow gloves on his hands.

Taissia smirked, unable to resist a jab. “Clever with real estate, perhaps. But if we’re honest, he understands women far better than he does houses,” she said, eyes glinting, and Lena stifled a laugh.

Through the shifting shadows, they saw Rudnev finally extend a card toward Yarosvet. The assessor took it, examining it with the same calm precision he brought to every detail. A brief handshake followed, firm and measured, signaling the conclusion of an understanding that neither girl fully heard but both instantly grasped.

After a few more exchanged words, Rudnev turned back toward Mosolov. “We may depart,” he said, his voice carrying easily across the courtyard. “The transaction will be concluded this week.”

Taissia and Lena exchanged glances, their curiosity tempered by the satisfaction of witnessing the subtle orchestration of authority and experience. The estate, for all its decay and quiet disorder, had already yielded the outcome Yarosvet sought — at least for now — and the girls felt, in that moment, the palpable thrill of being on the edge of events larger than themselves.

Yarosvet turned slightly toward Andrey and Lena. “See them off,” he said, his tone calm, almost conversational. “Make sure they leave the estate... safely.”

Andrey nodded, his expression unreadable as he hefted the side-by-side over his shoulder, while Lena fell into step beside him, her movements alert, eyes sharp. Together they guided Mosolov, Rudnev, and Frol along the overgrown lane, past the orchard and toward the sound of the impatient horses, their presence a silent assurance that the estate remained observed and controlled.

Once the distant sound of boots on gravel had faded and the men were out of sight, Yarosvet turned back toward the half-buried cellar, the chill air rising from the doorway carrying the faint scent of damp earth. Taissia followed, her eyes scanning the shaded path as they approached the oak door, the weight of the previous commotion still lingering in the courtyard behind them.

At the door, Yarosvet rested a hand on the rough wood, feeling the steady chill beneath his palm. He spoke softly, leaning close enough for his words to carry through the thick oak. “You may come out,” he murmured. “Nothing will harm you now. No one intends to hurt you.”

From within came a cautious, hesitant voice, no longer angry but tinged with surprise. “Really... you... bought... my house?”

“Yes,” Yarosvet replied evenly, his tone calm and reassuring. “And you shall remain in it, just as you have. It only needs a little care, which I can arrange without difficulty, through friends who know how to set things in order.”

A faint pause followed, then the soft rustle of movement beyond the door. Her next words were quieter, more measured, though still uncertain. “I... I stay? Really stay?”

“Of course,” he said, pressing a hand gently against the wood as if to bridge the barrier between them. “You have a right to your home. Nothing here will force you out. You are safe.”

Through the thick oak, the tone of her breathing shifted, the tight edge of fear slowly giving way to cautious relief. Outside, the shadows of the cellar seemed to relax as well, as if the old, abandoned walls themselves recognized that, at last, a measure of trust had entered their quiet domain.

Yarosvet and Taissia waited in silence. For a moment, nothing stirred — only the faint whisper of wind across the weeds. Then came the dull clank of a bolt being drawn back, followed by the slow, reluctant creak of hinges. The cellar door shifted, opening just enough for a breath of chill air to spill out, sharp and earthy, like the exhale of a buried well.

From the shadowed mouth of the doorway stepped a tall girl, moving with wary slowness. She wore a short, fur-lined jacket — too thin for the damp chill she had endured — and her lips and fingers were bluish, her face pale with cold. The contrast between the warmth of the morning and the frost still clinging to her skin made her seem almost spectral, as though she had been carved from the darkness she emerged from.

Taissia instinctively took a half-step forward, ready to catch her if she stumbled, while Yarosvet simply watched, his expression calm, attentive, giving her space to face the light and decide whether she still wished to trust it.

The girl stepped fully into the light, blinking, as though the day itself were too bright for her eyes. She was tall — taller than Taissia by a margin — and so slender that the fur-lined jacket hung from her shoulders like a borrowed garment. Her movements were cautious, measured, yet not timid: there was a certain poise to her, an inner balance that made even her exhaustion appear controlled.

The sun revealed skin pale from cold, drawn tightly over a fine-boned frame: the line of her collarbones sharp beneath the open collar, the wrists narrow and almost fragile. Beneath the loose folds of her sleeves one could glimpse the wiry definition of her arms — muscles lean and firm, like those of someone accustomed to labour rather than leisure.

Her face, oval and high-cheeked, carried the stamp of foreignness. The eyes were almond-shaped, deep brown with a wary sheen; the brows dark, gracefully arched; the lips dry but full, trembling faintly from the cold. A few strands of dark, slightly wavy hair had escaped her braid and clung to her temples. The air, still cool from the cellar, traced her breath in faint clouds as she looked from one stranger to another.

There was something raw about her — an unvarnished, almost feral grace that made her seem both vulnerable and unyielding. The warmth of the afternoon touched her cheeks with the faintest colour, but her stance remained tense, ready to retreat at the first false move. She looked like a creature who had survived the dark on her own terms and was still uncertain whether daylight could be trusted.

Taissia, unable to contain herself, darted forward and threw her arms around the girl with impulsive warmth. A faint gasp escaped Asya's lips — half surprise, half disbelief — yet after a heartbeat she returned the embrace, hesitantly at first, then with a sudden, trembling sincerity, as though the contact itself thawed something frozen inside her.

When she lifted her head, her dark eyes found Yarosvet. There was wonder in them, and a trace of confusion — the look of one who has not yet decided whether she is awake or still dreaming.

He stepped closer and extended his hand, his voice quiet, steady. "Come," he said. "You should walk into the sun. It will warm you faster than any fire."

Asya's gaze lingered on him for a moment, searching his face for deceit, and finding none. Then she drew a slow breath, gently freed herself from Taissia's hold, and turned back to the heavy door. The iron latch groaned as she pulled it shut, sealing away the damp breath of the cellar.

Without a word, she began to move — not quickly, but with the slow, weary gait of someone relearning the world above ground. Her fur-lined jacket brushed the withered weeds as she passed; the air trembled faintly behind her, scented with earth and cold stone. Step by step, she crossed the yard and walked around the corner of the house, toward the lane where the visitors — and Andrey with Lena — had gone moments before.

The three of them emerged from behind the corner just in time to see the departing carriage — its rear wheels bouncing over the uneven road, a cloud of dust trailing behind like a torn banner. The sharp clatter of hooves faded into the distance, swallowed by the stillness that followed.

Lena came running toward them, her braid flying loose, a bright flush of excitement on her cheeks. She caught Asya's hands in hers — and gasped. "Good heavens, you're frozen!" she exclaimed, and at once began rubbing the girl's fingers briskly between her palms, as though trying to will the warmth back into them.

Asya looked at her, eyes wide with a kind of quiet astonishment, then, as if obeying an instinct older than thought, drew Lena into a sudden, fierce embrace. The contrast between their bodies — one still cold from the underground chill, the other alive with motion and heat — seemed to fuse them for an instant into one trembling, human whole.

And then Andrey approached, the double-barrel resting easily in his arm. His boots left dark prints on the soft earth, his expression unreadable — watchful, perhaps still uncertain. Asya turned to him, hesitated only a moment, then stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him as well. The gesture was simple, uncalculated — an act of raw gratitude. He stiffened, startled, but did not move away. Only the barrels of the shotgun dipped slightly, as if bowing too, before the awkward, wordless peace of the moment.

Asya released Andrey at last, her arms falling loosely to her sides. For a moment she stood still, as though unsure what to do next — then lifted her face toward the sky and closed her eyes. The pale sunlight, thin yet tender after the long chill of the cellar, touched her skin like a benediction. A faint colour began to return to her cheeks; her lips parted slightly, and her chest rose with a deep, unhurried breath, as if she were tasting life itself anew.

No one spoke. Even the breeze seemed to hold its breath. Lena and Taissia stood close together, their eyes softened with a kind of reverent curiosity, while Andrey, the shotgun hanging idly at his side, and Yarosvet alike found themselves unable to look away. There was something in the girl's stillness — a quiet, wild grace untouched by shame or vanity — that drew the gaze almost against one's will. She seemed both fragile and unbroken, half-woman, half-creature of the fields, and in that fragile poise beneath the sun there was a beauty raw enough to unsettle even the most guarded heart.

Yarosvet's voice cut through the quiet. "How long were you down there?"

Asya did not stir. Her eyes stayed closed, her face turned to the sun, lips barely moving. "Since morning," she said in her soft, uneven manner. "Yesterday — when they come, look everywhere — I hide in attic. Between old beams, behind sack of hay. Dark, quiet... I sit there all night. I hear steps, doors, voices. But they not see me."

She paused, letting out a faint laugh, more of disbelief than mirth. "Then morning come. I sleep little while, under beams, behind hay sack. They climb up, shout, try grab me. I think — that is all for me. One man raise gun — yes? I throw small wooden beam at him, run. Through narrow boards, to cellar. Bolt strong still. I make it just in time."

Taissia, who had been watching her with sharp, quiet eyes, tilted her head. "And the fur coat?"

Asya gave a quick, tired smile. "Always hangs there. Down in cellar. For when bad things happen."

Yarosvet regarded her steadily, noting the soot on her neck, the trembling in her hands that she tried to hide. "You were well prepared," he said.

Asya opened her eyes — almond-shaped, dark brown, alert and wary, yet with a flicker of surprise that caught the sunlight. "When you run with wolves," she murmured, each word weighted by her accent, "you learn howl like them."

The silence that followed was almost reverent. Even Andrey, still holding the shotgun, stood wordless, his gaze caught by that strange mix of fragility and untamed grace that seemed to radiate from her.

Lena glanced at Asya, concern knitting her brows. “You must be starving,” she said softly. “You need to eat, rest a little.”

Asya shook her head, voice low and still carrying the accent that lent her words a clipped urgency. “Food... yesterday finish. Today I go... hunt... but these... uninvited people, they spoil all plans.”

Yarosvet stepped closer, speaking firmly but gently. “Enough,” he said, his tone leaving no room for argument. “Andrey, bring the carriage around.”

Andrey nodded sharply, his boots crunching over the gravel as he hurried off, ready to obey.

Turning to Asya, Yarosvet’s voice softened, carrying reassurance. “We’ll take you with us for now, to Lipovka. There, you’ll eat, drink, rest, and gather yourself. Afterwards... we’ll return together, and deal with this house, and everything else waiting here for years. It can wait a little longer, if needed — no need to rush.”

Asya’s dark eyes swept over her new friends, then to the house that had sheltered her all these years. She gave a careful, measured nod, acknowledging both their words and the promise of the days to come.

The tattered tarantas rattled and groaned along the uneven track back to Lipovka, every jolt and sway pressing the four closer together. Asya, still chilled to the bone, found warmth seeping into her limbs simply from the close, human heat surrounding her. She pressed her arms against her torso, feeling the steady presence of Yarosvet beside her and the gentle, familiar weight of Taissia’s shoulder brushing her own.

Lena, unable to resist the need to release the tension coiled in her chest, let out a small, nervous laugh. “Remember when that hulking brute — Frol, wasn’t it? — stood at the door like some beast guarding the gates of hell? I thought we’d never get past him!”

Taissia chuckled softly, nudging Asya’s elbow playfully. “And the way Rudnev leveled his revolver at Yarosvet... I swear, I thought I’d faint right there. I never imagined such a mix of courage and madness could exist in one morning.”

Asya let herself smile faintly, warmth spreading not only through her chilled limbs but through a cautious ease in her chest. Even though the tarantas creaked with every step, jostling their bodies together, it no longer felt threatening. Instead, it was a strange, comforting intimacy — an unspoken bond formed from fear, laughter, and relief.

The countryside stretched past them, fields turning gold in the morning sun, but inside the cramped carriage, the world had shrunk to the immediate warmth of each other, the lingering tension of the morning slowly giving way to shared smiles and light-hearted recollections.

The tarantas came to a halt at the familiar gravel of Lipovka’s entrance, its wheels sinking slightly into the soft earth. From the doorway, Savely appeared almost at once, his weathered face etched with concern, eyes darting between the approaching carriage and the figures within. “Where have you been? I feared — ”

Yarosvet raised a hand, cutting off the words before they fully formed. “No need for worries, Savely. We have a new guest — almost from the Antarctic, it seems,” he added with a wry smile. “She’ll need the bathhouse warmed without delay, or she’ll fall ill.” The old man nodded briskly, already setting off to carry out the order, muttering under his breath as his boots crunched along the path.

Once inside, they guided Asya into the familiar warmth of the living room. The soft light spilled over the polished floorboards and the well-worn furniture. Marfa emerged from the kitchen doorway, eyes widening in surprise at the unexpected visitor, but quickly composing herself with a polite, welcoming smile.

Yarosvet stepped closer to Asya, offering gentle guidance as he helped her remove the heavy fur coat. The room filled with the scent of damp wool and faint traces of the forest that clung to her garments. Beneath the coat, Asya was dressed in a simple, faded dress, the fabric thin and worn,

its once-pristine surface dulled by time and repeated use. The sleeves were slightly short, revealing slender, pale forearms, and the hem was lifted just above her knees, ragged at the edges, allowing her lean legs to move freely.

Every line of her slight, wiry figure became visible: the subtle definition of her shoulders, the delicate curve of her ribs beneath the fabric, the lean length of her legs. Even in such modest attire, there was an undeniable resilience in her stance, a quiet strength tempered by the day's ordeals. The room seemed to take a collective breath, all three noticing the frail, almost ethereal form, yet sensing the vitality beneath it.

Taissia gave a small, approving nod to Lena, who had taken Asya's hand in hers. "We'll get you warm first," she said softly, "and then you'll see — Lipovka isn't so harsh as the world outside."

Asya's eyes widened at the sight of the steaming teapot, the golden crust of the fresh pastries, and the glistening fruit that Marfa had hurriedly set on the table. She barely paused, her fingers trembling as she reached for a piece of warm bread, tearing it in her hands with an eagerness that betrayed weeks of hunger. A faint flush rose to her cheeks, and she looked momentarily embarrassed, as if aware that her ravenous haste might seem uncouth, but the sharp pangs in her stomach refused to be ignored.

Taissia and Lena watched quietly, sharing knowing glances, their own hands reaching for the food with more measured gestures, as if silently reassuring Asya that this indulgence was not only permissible, but deserved. Even Yarosvet, seated nearby, allowed her the space, sipping his tea calmly while his eyes followed her with a subtle, approving attention.

Asya tore into the fruit, juice running down her fingers, then tore at a pastry with rapid bites, her body leaning forward hungrily. Each swallow seemed to grant her a fraction of warmth and comfort stolen from the chill of the morning, and a small, almost imperceptible sigh of relief escaped her lips. Gradually, her movements slowed, and the feverish intensity softened into a careful, yet still eager rhythm. She glanced at her new companions, eyes meeting theirs with a fleeting smile, half-apologetic, half-grateful, silently acknowledging the rare kindness she had stumbled into.

Asya's voice, still tinged with her accent, wavered slightly as she looked from one to another. "Th-thank... you," she murmured, her dark eyes meeting theirs in turn. "But... why? Why you do all this for me? I... I never can repay you for... for everything."

Yarosvet shook his head gently, a faint smile touching his lips. "Asya, you owe us nothing. Just stay warm, eat, and recover. That is enough."

Taissia leaned forward, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Besides, we enjoy your company already. No repayment required — though I suppose you could tell us some of your stories once you're rested."

Lena chuckled, nudging Asya lightly. "And it's good to have another mouth at the table. We could use your appetite — keeps everyone on their toes."

Asya lowered her gaze for a moment, cheeks coloring slightly, before looking up again, a mixture of shyness and wonder on her face. "You... you are very kind. I... I don't know... I... thank you," she repeated, her words stumbling but sincere.

Marfa hovered nearby, refilling teapots and arranging pastries with careful hands, glancing at the girls with quiet satisfaction. The warm steam rose between them, mingling with the soft light of the late morning, and for a fleeting moment, the tension and fear of the morning seemed to dissolve entirely, leaving only the simple comfort of food, warmth, and unexpected friendship.

Savely's voice carried through the warm, timbered room, calm but edged with a hint of impatience. "Banya's ready, sir," he announced, wiping his hands on his apron.

Taissia shot a questioning glance at Yarosvet, eyebrows arched, lips pressed in that silent, unmistakable query: will he join them? Yarosvet's eyes met hers briefly, and he gave the faintest, almost imperceptible shake of his head, conveying everything without words.

“Come along, Asya,” Taissia said softly, reaching for her friend’s arm. Lena fell into step beside them, and together they guided the shivering girl toward the bathhouse, the promise of warmth and steam ahead.

Left alone in the sunlit quiet of the sitting room, Yarosvet sipped the last of his tea, the aroma mingling with the faint scents of pastries and dried herbs. Savely lingered nearby, a knowing look in his eyes. “Andrey told me of your morning’s... adventures, sir,” he said, his voice low but tinged with awe.

Yarosvet allowed a small, wry smile. “Yes, it seems the day started with more excitement than anticipated,” he replied lightly, though his mind traced every turn, every tense moment in the yard.

Savely leaned closer, lowering his voice. “And is it true, sir? That you’ve bought the old Polivanov estate?”

“Not yet,” Yarosvet said evenly, setting his cup down. “I’ve reached an understanding with the owner — purchase is arranged, but the transaction is not complete.”

Savely’s brows knitted, the lines of worry deepening. “I’ve heard of this Rudnev... dangerous sort, sir. Involved with money and men who don’t answer questions politely. There’s ill talk about him in the district. I’d... I’d watch yourself, if I were you.”

Yarosvet inclined his head slightly, considering, his expression composed but his senses alert. “Thank you, Savely. One can never be too careful in dealings with such men,” he murmured, a quiet warning echoing in his mind even as the warm light of the room tried to soothe the lingering tension.

Yarosvet set down his teacup, eyes thoughtful. “Andrey acted admirably,” he said, his tone even but appreciative. “Truly, he saved the situation this morning.”

Savely’s expression softened, a faint, almost proud smile tugging at his lips. “He certainly deserves your praise, sir. But... he’d say himself that he was only doing his duty.”

Yarosvet raised an eyebrow. “Only doing his duty, you say?”

Savely leaned closer, lowering his voice to a confidential whisper. “Between us, sir... you should know. The Mirolyubovs, when Andrey was a young man, took him in. He’d found himself in trouble — an unpleasant affair, very dangerous. Originally, he was one of the... less lawful sort. A robber, of sorts. But he quarreled with the wrong people, and they intended to finish him off. He acted first, and then fled. The Mirolyubovs — kind souls — trusted him and hid him. Ever since, he has been faithfully at their service.”

Yarosvet nodded slowly, letting the story settle. The man’s past lent a new weight to his calm, silent efficiency. He glanced toward the door where the girls were now, warmth spilling from the bathhouse into the room, yet he kept the story in mind, understanding fully the depth of loyalty that could only be forged in blood and trust.

By the time Yarosvet had settled into the wicker armchair on the veranda, letting the sun’s warmth seep into his shoulders and thaw the lingering chill from the morning, Taissia and Lena appeared, freshly invigorated after the bath, guiding Asya toward him. The girl’s earlier pallor and wildness had ebbed; she now carried herself with the poise of someone who had reclaimed both warmth and composure. Her frame, still slender, gleamed with a quiet vitality, and the wild shimmer in her dark, almond-shaped eyes had softened into an alert intelligence.

She halted before Yarosvet’s chair, lowering her head in a formal, almost deferential bow. “Thank you, sir,” she murmured, her accent still noticeable, careful and precise, “for saving me. I... I do not know how to repay you.”

Yarosvet waved the concern aside, a gentle smile playing at the corners of his lips. “It is nothing at all, Asya. Any young lady in trouble deserves a helping hand. Consider this but a trifle.”

He gestured to the space beside him. “Sit, if you will. And, as thanks, tell me your story — how you came to be in that cellar, and all that befell you. I wish to hear it from you directly.”

Asya hesitated for a moment, then, with the same quiet decorum, moved to take the seat next to him, her posture poised yet relaxed, her gaze meeting his with a mixture of gratitude and curiosity.

The morning sunlight pooled around them, warming not only their bodies but the moment itself, lending a sense of calm and promise to the day that had begun in chaos.

Her's story began in a small aul tucked against the foothills of the Kuban mountains, where the wind ran sharp through the narrow valleys and the sun gilded the peaks at dawn. Her family was poor, fragile against the world's cruelty. Her father was gone, her mother dead, and the elder brothers, pressed by necessity, sought a path for her survival, arranging her passage through a shadowed middleman. It was a life she did not choose, yet one she could not refuse.

She had been brought to the Polivanov estate almost by chance. The merchant, widowed and hard, had turned to the trade in human lives, yet in her he saw something of a daughter lost to time — a spark that stayed his hand. He did not sell her; she became a quiet presence in the house, inhabiting the daughter's abandoned rooms, wearing her faded dresses, learning the rhythm of an empty home. She spoke little, observing more than acting, moving among the corridors and stairways like a ghost known only to itself.

The sons of the house — initially wary, suspicious of the quiet shadow among them — soon ignored her entirely, absorbed in their own schemes and follies. She performed small duties: tidying, carrying, tending, ever careful not to leave a trace beyond necessity. The house became her world, its walls the measure of her days, its silences a companion more constant than any human.

When Polivanov died, two years past, the estate fell into neglect. The sons' quarrels and mismanagement emptied the rooms of servants, furniture, and order. Asya left briefly, but no other place offered her the security of the house she knew by memory: each stair, each doorframe, each window ledge, every shadow familiar. She returned, and it became her refuge. She lived among the quiet, gathering what sustenance she could, drawing water from the well, foraging for berries, and preserving the habits and belongings of the girl who had once been the mistress. In the deserted rooms, she grew cautious, alert, and endlessly patient, a creature of the house's rhythms as much as of her own will.

Her days unfolded in careful routines, each a small act of survival. At dawn, she would slip quietly into the overgrown orchard, eyes scanning for the twitch of rabbit ears or the gleam of a bird among the tangled branches. Fingers nimble, she set snares and traps, learning the rhythms of the wild as she had learned the rhythms of the house. When supplies ran low, she would wade to the riverbank, scooping up crusted bread discarded by passing travelers or gathering shellfish in secret coves, always alert for the sound of distant hooves or human voices.

Strangers' visits turned the estate into a labyrinth of hiding places. Bank inspectors, curious passersby, or wandering peasants might appear unexpectedly; she would vanish to the attic, crouched in the dust and shadows, listening to their footsteps echo across the empty floors. The creak of a shutter, the faint jingle of a distant key — each sound a signal, each pause a potential threat. Sometimes she would peer from behind the faded curtains, eyes wide, heart thudding, but never revealing herself.

Even in solitude, she occupied the house with quiet authority, tending what little garden could still bear fruit, mending tattered clothing, and arranging the few remnants of the Polivanov household as if to honour its absent mistress. Her survival was a blend of instinct and ingenuity: catching game, conserving food, avoiding notice, and mastering the precise balance between movement and stillness. Nights were spent curled near the hearth, or in the shadows of the attic, listening to the wind through the broken shutters, tracing every memory of the house as though mapping a secret world.

Though months passed in isolation, she did not feel lost. The estate had become both sanctuary and mentor, teaching patience, resourcefulness, and quiet vigilance. In every shadow, in every hidden corner, she had learned the art of being unseen yet alert, resilient yet graceful — a solitary force in a house that no longer belonged to anyone else but her.

When her story of trials and solitude drew to a close, Yarosvet spoke, his voice low and measured, each word carefully considered. "And... your real name? What did your parents call you?"

Asya met his gaze steadily. “Aisha,” she said, each syllable careful, tinged with the accent that marked all her speech. She paused, then added, “But... with Polivanov... they call me Asya. Easier for them, I think.”

“I see,” he said. “Aisha is the name you were born with, and Asya is what the house gave you.”

A faint shadow of a smile crossed her face, fleeting but present. “Yes... Asya. It... fits me here. Not wrong, not bad... just... different.”

He let the moment hang quietly. “And now,” he continued, “you may stay Asya, or Aisha, whichever feels like home. No one here will demand otherwise.”

Her dark eyes glimmered with something between surprise and relief. “Home,” she repeated, tasting the word. “I... like... home.”

Taissia, who had listened quietly until now, finally spoke, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. “And... Asya, how old are you, then?”

Asya blinked, counting on her fingers, her voice hesitant but deliberate, each number carefully measured. “I... fourteen... fifteen... maybe fifteen when... Polivanov... bought me. Now... now I... eighteen.” She paused, as if tasting the number on her tongue, then nodded slightly, confirming it.

Taissia exchanged a glance with Yarosvet, a faint smile tugging at her lips. “Eighteen,” she murmured, as if committing it to memory, “and already so much lived.”

Lena could not help herself. “Asya,” she said with a mischievous sparkle, glancing at Yarosvet, “you have... quite an interesting figure.”

Asya’s cheeks flushed immediately, and she lowered her gaze, fidgeting with the edge of her sleeve.

“Have you always been so... slight?” Lena pressed, curiosity twinkling in her eyes. “Or did all this... hunger of yours change you recently?”

Asya considered the question, her voice soft, hesitant, but still carrying the accent that coloured her speech. “I... never was plump,” she admitted, a faint smile tugging at her lips. “Though I... never lacked appetite.”

Yarosvet’s voice carried a gentle curiosity. “And what is so unusual about the figure of a tall, slender girl?” he asked, his tone warm, inviting.

Lena’s lips curved into a sly, knowing smile. “One must... see for oneself,” she said, her gaze flicking between Asya and Yarosvet.

Yarosvet turned to Asya. “And you... what do they mean by that? Can you... show?”

Asya’s eyes widened slightly, a flush creeping across her cheeks. She looked around, seeking some hint of support from Taissia.

Taissia, however, offered none. She leaned back slightly, her tone casual but firm. “Here, we are all friends. No one has reason to be shy.”

Asya’s gaze flitted between them and Yarosvet, her hands fidgeting at her lap. Her blush deepened, and she remained silent, caught between curiosity, embarrassment, and the strange comfort of their company.

Lena let her hand brush lightly against Asya’s arm, a teasing spark in her voice. “You know... in the bath, you didn’t seem at all shy. And now — are you embarrassed around Yarosvet? Never... been with a man, perhaps?”

Asya’s cheeks deepened in colour, her eyes flicking to the floor. A rush of heat mixed with a strange, unfamiliar curiosity coursed through her, and she felt caught between shame and a quiet wonder. Her lips parted slightly, then pressed together, as if to stop the tremor in her voice. She murmured, “No... never... they — Polivanov... and the sons... they... never...” Each word trembled with memory, the echo of fear and caution lingering in her chest.

Lena arched an eyebrow, half in amusement, half in curiosity. “Really? Not once? Never tried? Never touched?”

Asya swallowed hard, her fingers tightening slightly at her sides. Her eyes darted to Yarosvet, seeking the calm anchor he always provided, yet she could not hide the whirlwind inside: a mingling of disbelief, awkwardness, and the faintest glimmer of wonder at the world beyond her solitude.

Taissia's eyes softened as she looked at Asya. "You see... it was Yarosvet who saved all of us," she said gently, her voice carrying both warmth and quiet authority. "He helped me escape from the police, from that hateful, alien family that sought to control me."

Lena leaned closer, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "And he saved me from poverty," she added, "from having to wonder how to sell myself or my... talents for a few extra coins. He's made things different for all of us."

Taissia smiled, the edges of her mouth curving with a light teasing warmth. "So you see, he is for us like a father — to daughters, a husband — to wives, a master — to those in love who are... devoted to him. To feel embarrassed around him now is as foolish as being shy of a doctor whose only wish is to help."

Asya's chest tightened slightly at the words, her mind swirling between gratitude, awe, and the faint, strange flutter of something unfamiliar. She looked from Taissia to Lena, then to Yarosvet, and a small, hesitant smile tugged at her lips. Perhaps, she thought, it really was time to stop fearing the very hand that had reached out to guide her.

Yarosvet's voice came as a balm to the charged silence that followed the girls' words. "My dear Asya," he said quietly, with that unhurried warmth that made his tone sound both paternal and intimate, "they forgot to tell you one thing. Here, nothing is ever done by force. Everything that happens under this roof — every touch, every confession — exists only because someone *wants* it to. You are free to keep whatever you hold within you, just as you are free to share it, when and if your heart desires. No one will demand it of you."

He spoke without ceremony, as if reminding her of some natural law rather than proclaiming a rule, and in that calm assurance there was a strange power — gentler, perhaps, than command, yet no less firm.

Then, with a faint smile that softened the depth of his gaze, he let the tension slip away, as one releases a hand too tightly held. "Tell me," he said, almost conversationally, "have you ever been to Rostov-on-Don?"

The sudden ordinariness of the question, its earthy geography after so much hidden trembling, seemed to unfasten the spell that had bound the air.

Asya's fingers tightened faintly upon her knee, and for a heartbeat she seemed to weigh her answer, as though the question had stirred something best left unsaid.

"I was there once," she said quietly. "Not long before... all was over. When they close the gates and send servants away. I go with them, to Rostov. I think — maybe I find work, or little place to sleep."

Her voice steadied, but her gaze drifted somewhere beyond the room, toward some dim memory that still smouldered in her mind. "City was too big, too loud. Too many people, too much talk. I try stay with woman from kitchen, but she have no room, no time. After one week I come back. No place else for me."

She gave a small, helpless shrug, the corner of her mouth twitching in a shadow of a smile. "I not made for city life, I think. City make you small. Like you can vanish, and nobody care."

The words hung in the air with that fragile, trembling honesty peculiar to her nature — not a complaint, but the quiet confession of someone who had already known disappointment too soon.

Yarosvet watched her in silence for a moment that seemed longer than it was. Something in the simplicity of her words — that unpolished, unguarded truth — touched a deeper chord than any display of tears could have done.

He did not reach for her hand nor offer comfort; instead, his manner softened, the way light softens when passing through dust-laden glass. "It's no small thing," he said at last, his tone even,

deliberate, yet with a trace of warmth beneath. “To go away and then come back — not because someone waits for you, but because the place itself calls you back.”

He gave a faint, almost invisible nod, as if to confirm his own thought. “You may not have chosen the house, Asya, but it seems the house has chosen you.”

His words were neither pity nor praise — rather, a kind of recognition, quiet and grave, as one survivor to another. And for an instant, Asya’s eyes lifted to his with the uncertain gratitude of a creature unused to being understood.

Taissia, who had been following their exchange with that feline attentiveness of hers, let her gaze linger on Asya with a quiet curiosity.

“Your accent...” she began, drawing out the vowels as though tasting them. “It’s not from here, is it? Who are you really — by blood, I mean? You sound as if half your words were born somewhere south of the Don.”

Asya hesitated, uncertain whether to smile or withdraw. “My father — Kabardian, my mother — also from mountains, like me. We... all Circassian,” she said slowly, her *r* soft, her vowels drawn and uneven. “I call myself Asya here, but my parents — they gave me Aisha.”

Taissia nodded, a faint smile tugging at her lips, as if she had solved a pleasant riddle. “That explains it,” she said. “You’ve got that tone — like there’s always a song hiding in your speech.”

Asya lowered her eyes, a faint, uncertain smile touching her lips. “I try to talk plain,” she murmured, “but sometimes it slips through.”

Lena, lounging nearby, gave a soft laugh. “Don’t try too hard,” she said. “It suits you.”

Taissia could not contain her curiosity. She bent slightly toward Asya, hands resting lightly on her knees, eyes intent. “If... if you were sold, and then again, and ended up with Polivanov... how did you avoid... the attention of men?” Her question trembled between caution and genuine wonder.

Asya’s dark, almond-shaped eyes dropped, tracing a line on the veranda floor. She inhaled softly, then let her words spill slowly, each one weighted with memory, each pause trembling like a careful step on fragile ice. “At... at first... they... they value my... my virgin,” she whispered, accent thick and curling each consonant around the syllables. “They... they not... let anyone... spoil it.”

Her gaze flickered up, catching Taissia’s eyes for a fleeting moment. “And... when... I... come to Polivanov... he, old man... he see in me... his... his dead daughter. He... he guard me.” Her voice wavered, the faintest quiver betraying her lingering grief. “Harsh... yes... frightening... sometimes... but... with me... he... he was gentle. I... I am sorry... he... he gone.”

The veranda seemed to pause with her, the air suspended, warm sunlight brushing over the quiet tension. Taissia and Lena shared a glance of muted sympathy, while Asya’s shoulders slowly eased, the weight of long-hidden memories settling into the quiet trust of those listening.

Taissia’s curiosity refused to relent. She leaned in, a mischievous glint in her eyes, voice softer now, almost conspiratorial. “And... and you, Asya... never... never wish to... be with a man? Never... never feel... love?”

Asya froze, her fingers tightening slightly on the edge of her skirt. Her dark, almond-shaped eyes darted between Taissia and Yarosvet, a mixture of embarrassment, hesitation, and something like wonder flickering across her face. She swallowed, the words coming slowly, thick with accent and careful weight. “I... I... never... think... like that. Not... not with them. Not... not there. I... I... had... other... other... things... to live... to... survive.”

Her gaze fell to the sunlit floorboards, and for a long moment she remained silent, letting the question hover in the warm air, unspoken desires and fears suspended between them.

Yarosvet smiled, a gentle warmth in his grey-brown eyes, and spoke with a calm, even tone. “Now, Asya, you will have plenty of time — not only to visit Rostov, but to... experience life, to feel, to grow, perhaps even to love. There will be time for everything a girl ought to have.”

He paused, glancing around the old, quiet rooms, then returned his gaze to her. “Tell me... how much do you think will need to be done inside? What shape is your house really in?”

Asya blinked, genuine surprise softening her dark, almond-shaped eyes. “You... you buy... house... never... never look inside?” she asked, accent thickening each syllable.

Yarosvet let out a low, easy laugh, the kind that brushed off concern without dismissing it. “I was rather... preoccupied with saving you,” he admitted, his smile hinting at both amusement and apology. “The rest... there simply was no time for the rest.”

Asya’s mouth opened slightly, a mixture of disbelief and admiration crossing her face, as though trying to imagine the audacity of a man buying a house without ever stepping inside — yet she could not help a faint, amused smile at his explanation.

Asya drew a small, thoughtful breath, her dark eyes flicking toward the distant memory of the old Polivanov house. “House... it... it good,” she began, accent thickening each word, “for... for my taste, yes. Not... not like this one,” — she gestured faintly at the sunlit room around them — “but... one can... live there. Furniture... almost none — taken... all gone. Dirt... yes, much... need clean. Floors... not broken. Wallpaper... need... change in places, paint... little touch. Still... it... can live, yes.”

Her tone carried the quiet authority of someone who had known the house intimately for years, who had survived within its walls and read each corner like a map of her life. Even in her simple words, a sense of care and measured judgment shone through, as if she had walked its empty rooms a thousand times, imagining what could be restored and what could not.

Yarosvet adopted a mock-serious tone, his gaze settling on Asya as if measuring the weight of her opinion. “So, in other words,” he said slowly, “you do not recommend tearing the house down and building a new one in its place.”

Asya’s eyes widened in sudden alarm. Her hands shot up, fingers splayed. “No! No, no... house... it... it cannot be broken! Old... old and... good!” Her voice trembled with a mixture of shock and indignation, accent thickening each syllable.

Yarosvet chuckled, the stern mask slipping from his features. “I jest, Asya. You are the mistress here — your judgment rules. If you say the house lives, then live it shall.”

A small, relieved smile flickered across Asya’s face, and she nodded, her tension easing as the absurdity of the imagined destruction faded into laughter.

Lena’s brow furrowed as she asked, “Do you... have any papers?”

Asya blinked, slightly puzzled, her accent thickening her halting speech. “Papers? I... I no understand.”

Yarosvet, however, caught the meaning instantly. “We will need to address this soon,” he said softly, his tone careful yet assured. “Once Taissia’s own papers are in order, we shall go to Rostov without delay and see that every necessary document for you is properly arranged — so that you may be recognised as the rightful mistress of the Polivanov estate. Nothing must be left unfinished.”

Asya’s eyes widened, disbelief and awe warring in their depths. “I... I understand right?” she asked. “You... you serious? You... spend so much money for it?”

Yarosvet looked at her with a boyish mischief, his gaze bright and teasing. “Formally, yes,” he said. “Once the transaction with Rudnev is complete, I will be recorded as the owner of the estate. But in practice... I cannot give it the attention it deserves. That part — managing, maintaining, making it liveable — will be entirely yours. You shall be its mistress in every meaningful sense. For that, of course, you must have all your documents in order.”

Yarosvet’s gaze flicked briefly to Taissia and Lena, noting the subtle expressions on their faces. Neither betrayed the slightest trace of envy or resentment; their eyes, bright and attentive, held only curiosity and warmth, as if sharing in Asya’s astonishment rather than begrudging it.

Noticing his glance, Taissia spoke up, her voice careful yet lively. “Perhaps we should consult Yeseniya. She might help — or offer some useful idea.”

Yarosvet arched an eyebrow. “And what sort of idea do you mean?”

Taissia's eyes flicked to Asya, then back to him. "The estate... we might find a way to use it in the interests of our... mission. So that, even if it doesn't earn its keep, at least it won't become a financial burden."

A faint, approving smile tugged at Yarosvet's lips. "Prudent thinking," he said, his tone warm. "I admire your foresight."

Asya's voice was soft, almost hesitant, yet carried a trace of curiosity. "Excuse... what mission you mean?"

Her eyes flicked between Taissia and Yarosvet, sharp and perceptive despite her gentle tone, as if she understood far more than she allowed herself to speak.

"Yarosvet," Taissia began, "is a man unlike any other. He has... unusual gifts — ways of helping certain women ensure they bear the right children, the ones who might thrive and shape their lives well." She paused, letting the idea settle, then continued, "In town, we have a friend — Yeseniya — who leads a considerable women's society. She has already aided us greatly in many ways. She is wise, influential, and utterly trustworthy. She could help with your papers, guide you in the estate, and perhaps even shield us from men like Rudnev and others who might bring trouble."

Asya listened attentively, her dark eyes reflecting both awe and curiosity, clearly weighing the possibility that such allies truly existed, and that she was not entirely alone in the world.

Yarosvet considered for a moment, then said, "Perhaps it is best we pay her a visit without delay. There is no need to await word from Inga about Taissia's documents. I must settle the matter of transferring funds and paying for the estate, and Rudnev's office is, naturally, in town as well."

He turned to Lena, his expression mild but intent. "Do you know where in Rostov one might find the post-telegraph office?"

Lena nodded, a trace of her usual sharp amusement in her tone. "Not far, master. Close to the boulevard where we first met. It is easy to find."

"Excellent," Yarosvet said, a faint spark of satisfaction in his voice. "Then we shall set out for the town tomorrow morning and take care of all that is necessary."

Asya's eyes brightened at the prospect, and she gave a small, eager nod.

Taissia, ever practical, interjected with a note of caution. "The tarantas, as we discovered today, offers little room for four. Short rides between the estates are tolerable, but the journey to Rostov might prove uncomfortable."

Yarosvet's lips curved in a subtle, amused smile. "I have no objection to riding alongside Andrey," he said, as if the suggestion merely added to the small adventure, leaving the practicalities of space and comfort to be endured with good humor. "Moreover, tomorrow we might accomplish two things at once. We can pass by your estate, Asya, to see the house for ourselves and take a closer look at the grounds. It will give us a better sense of what must be done — the work to restore the house will bring the estate back to life and deter any who might be tempted by its empty, abandoned appearance."

Asya nodded readily, yet Yarosvet caught a glimmer of something elusive in her gaze — an unreadable shadow beneath the surface, a quiet mystery that made her response more than mere agreement.

Taissia reminded them that they had intended to practice acrobatics with Lena today. Then, if Yarosvet did not object, he could give them all a lesson in boxing — a skill whose importance had been underscored by the morning's events. Turning to Asya, she asked whether the girl knew how to fight.

"I do," Asya replied, her accent coloring each word, "though perhaps it is not skill, but instinct. I strike with whatever is at hand, bite, scare... and show my wish to kill, yes?"

Taissia's eyes sparkled with delight, and even Yarosvet gave a small approving clap at such frankness.

Lena, curiosity bright in her gaze, asked whether Asya could shoot. The girl admitted that she had only ever fired a gun a few times, but that she had become proficient with a bow — a crude, handmade one — while surviving alone in the estate, since anything that could shoot had long been taken away by the former owners.

Both girls' eyes widened in admiration. "You actually made the bow yourself?" Taissia exclaimed, scarcely believing it.

Asya shrugged lightly, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "Ah... it is nothing difficult," she said, her accent coloring the words. "The secret — find good hazel bush, yes? And a string that fits just so. That is all."

Lena exchanged a glance with Taissia, both clearly impressed by the resourcefulness behind the simple, matter-of-fact explanation.

Yarovet's voice carried a hint of curiosity as he mused aloud, "Then I suppose you must know your way around a knife as well."

Asya, however, did not answer immediately. Instead, she asked, with a faint frown, "Where... my coat?"

Lena darted inside the house, returning moments later with the warm, well-worn fur coat. Asya slipped her arms into the sleeves and, with a practiced hand, delved into the lining. Her fingers emerged clutching a knife, and she held it up for inspection.

It was a remarkable blade, clearly the work of a skilled craftsman. The handle was polished and smooth, shaped to fit her hand perfectly, the steel gleaming with a subtle, almost predatory gleam. Every detail spoke of careful forging and patient sharpening, a tool meant to serve faithfully and last a lifetime.

With a swift, fluid motion, Asya seized the knife by the blade and, with a short, precise flick of her wrist, sent it flying. All eyes followed the arc of the steel as it sailed through the air, embedding itself with a sharp, almost feral precision into the thin trunk of a young birch several paces away.

The girls squealed in delight, while Yarovet's gaze fixed keenly on Asya. "Again," he said, a hint of challenge in his tone.

Asya darted to the birch, swiftly extracting the knife embedded in its thin trunk. With measured steps, she returned to her spot, holding the blade firmly once more. She adjusted her stance, took a deep breath, and let the knife fly. It sailed through the air, landing with perfect precision, again embedding itself into the young tree.

Taissia's eyes widened in astonishment. "I would never have believed," she exclaimed, "that from that distance, one could throw a knife and hit a sapling no thicker than my wrist... and not just hit it, but have it stick!"

Lena could only nod, her expression a mix of awe and exhilaration, while Asya's cheeks flushed faintly, a mixture of pride and bashful pleasure at the attention she had earned.

Yarovet held out his hand. Asya, obedient and steady, approached and placed the knife gently into his palm. He turned it over, weighing it, feeling the balance and the temper of the blade as one who knew such things. "This... resembles the knives of the Caucasus," he murmured, his brow lifting slightly. "Where did you acquire it?"

Asya's dark eyes met his. "When Polivanov... he buy me," she said, her words carrying the soft lilt of her accent, "he also buy this from trader. I hide it when they take estate apart. Since then... always with me."

A flicker of shadow passed over her face. "If they ever force cellar door... I let it speak for me," she added, quiet but unmistakably resolute.

Yarovet regarded her for a long moment, impressed by the combination of care and readiness, the silent promise held within that small, hand-forged blade.

Remaining seated, Yarovet cast a measured glance at the birch, seemingly frozen in expectation. Without a flourish, he let the knife fly. The girls only caught, in the flicker of the motion,

that he held it not by the blade, but naturally in his palm, thumb securing it with casual precision. The steel bit into the slender trunk with a muted thud.

Taissia and Lena shouted, voices high with pride for their master's skill, while Asya, seized by a sudden, uncontrollable rush of emotion, leaned forward and pressed a brief, impulsive kiss to his beard, scarcely aware of her own boldness.

Everyone pretended the kiss had been nothing out of the ordinary. As Asya turned to retrieve the knife from the birch, Taissia's eyes sparkled with anticipation. "You and Asya must teach me and Lena to strike true, to hit our targets as skillfully as you do!" she exclaimed, her voice alight with excitement and wonder.

She laughed softly, the thrill of possibility shining through. "Just think of all that awaits us — acrobatics, horseback riding, boxing, knife-throwing, archery... so much to learn, so much to discover." Her gaze darted between her friends, brimming with delight and the promise of endless adventure.

The day proved as warm and golden as the one before, the air so soft and fragrant it might have been the height of summer rather than spring. In the quiet hour before luncheon, Taissia decided it would be a pity to let the time slip idly by — they ought to do something useful, something lively. She suggested they begin their long-promised acrobatics.

Turning to Asya, she asked whether the girl had ever stood on her hands or tried doing splits. Asya blinked, clearly puzzled by the question — until Lena, laughing, dashed down the veranda steps onto the soft grass and, with a light sweep of her skirt, turned two cartwheels in succession, quick and effortless, her dress flaring like a bright bell.

Asya's eyes lit up at once, a gleam of challenge and delight awakening in them.

Taissia seized Asya's hand with a gleeful little cry and tugged her away — past the veranda, around the corner of the house, through the garden where lilacs had already begun to open, and into the small grove beyond.

Yarovet made a faintly reluctant gesture, saying there was no need for him to follow — he had matters enough to occupy himself with. Lena turned to him at once, eyes sparkling with amusement. "Oh no, you don't," she said lightly. "We'll need an audience — for motivation, if nothing else." Taissia laughed at that, calling over her shoulder that Lena was quite right, and before he could find a reply, she drew Asya along again — through the garden alive with scent and colour, toward the same sunny clearing beyond the grove where Inga and Zlata had been tumbling with them the day before.

Lena fell a step behind with Yarovet as they followed the others through the sunlit garden. Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper, her lips curving in a playful smile. "Taissia and I," she murmured, "we mean to tame her — for you. So just be yourself, and act as though nothing at all is happening."

Yarovet glanced sidelong at her. "A dangerous undertaking," he said. "Wild things bite."

Lena only grinned wider, her eyes gleaming with mischief. "Then it's a good thing you've a taste for danger, isn't it?"

Lena, standing at the edge of the clearing, turned to face Taissia and Asya with a bright, conspiratorial smile. "For what we're about to do," she said, her tone playful yet assured, "freedom is essential — absolute freedom."

The word *freedom* seemed to strike a chord in Asya. Her dark eyes flickered, the corners of her lips curving in faint, almost involuntary agreement. But before she could ask what Lena meant, she saw her begin to move with brisk, decisive grace — unbuttoning, loosening, slipping out of her garments one by one, until not a single thread remained. The spring sunlight caught on the pale smoothness of her skin; she stood unashamed, alive, her hair gleaming like molten bronze.

Asya froze, breath caught somewhere in her chest. Her glance darted to Yarovet — he was sitting calmly on a fallen birch trunk at the edge of the glade, one arm resting on his knee, his expression composed, thoughtful, entirely untroubled by the scene before him.

Then Taissia laughed softly — that bright, ringing laugh that seemed to belong to the open sky — and began to undress as well, with the same easy confidence, as though shedding her clothes were no more curious a thing than loosening her hair before sleep.

Asya stood motionless for a few moments, her breath uneven, her hands caught halfway between impulse and restraint. Before her, the two girls — radiant and unashamed — moved as if the sunlight itself had come alive in them. Their bare limbs flashed among the dapples of gold and green, their hair — hastily gathered and knotted to keep it from flying loose — gleamed like ribbons of fire and honey.

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