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Kirill Borgia



**ECHOES FROM THE WOMBS
OF TARTARIA**

Erotic Saga

Kirill Borgia

Echoes from the

Wombs of Tartaria — 1

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Аннотация

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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*“Wisdom cometh not only with the turning of years,
but with the remembrance of lives once lived and long
buried.” — from the old tongue, long forgotten*

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Prologue

“Curious choice, sir. Such fine silver hair... And that beard — why, it’s almost royal,” the barber murmured, brush in hand, stirring the dye like a cautious apothecary mixing poisons.

The man in the chair remained silent at first. His reflection, blurred in the mottled mirror, showed a broad forehead under receding strands, deep-set eyes the colour of river silt, and a mouth that looked as though it had once smiled easily but now did so only from habit. He lifted his gaze, met the barber’s in the glass.

“I am travelling south,” he said quietly, “and in the south, I shall begin again.”

The barber chuckled, not unkindly. “We get many of your kind through here. Men who shear away the past. A mistress with a husband and a revolver. A misdeal in cards. An overfriendly treasurer. It’s always one of those, give or take a bottle.”

He dabbed the brush into the thick paste, then paused.

“But you — no, not like the others. You’ve the look of someone leaving not just a city, but a name.”

No answer came. Only the dull buzz of the clippers, the sound of the blade whispering along the scalp like a secret.

Outside, the station’s loudspeakers groaned a delayed announcement. Somewhere, the scent of oversteeped tea mingled with coal smoke and damp wool. The man’s overcoat

steamed faintly at the shoulders. He had not removed it.

“South, eh? Kazan? Astrakhan? Or further still — one of those towns with names that taste like honey and dust?”

The man closed his eyes. “Further.”

The barber shrugged and dipped his brush again, now with the focus of a priest anointing a reluctant convert. With one hand, in slow, deliberate strokes, he began darkening the client’s once-silver beard, turning the regal frost into the coarse shadow of a younger man’s defiance. With the other, he guided the clippers across the scalp in smooth, methodical passes, each stroke peeling away the last traces of age and memory. Tufts of grey hair drifted to the floor in silence, mingling with the sharp, bitter scent of ammonia.

“Well,” he said, half to himself, “I hope the lady’s worth it. Or the loot. Or whatever past you’re hoping this new colour might fool.”

There was a pause. Then a dry smile.

“There is no lady. And nothing to bury,” the man said. “Only something long forgotten... that must be unearthed.”

The barber raised an eyebrow but said nothing more. The clippers whirled again, chewing through time. Soon, the silver was gone, replaced by a severe ash-brown, efficient, unsentimental — the kind of colour that left no footprint, no shadow, nothing for memory to clutch at. The sort of colour that disappeared in a crowd.

Outside, a whistle blew. A long, drawn-out sound like a yawn

across centuries. The man stood, paid, and gathered his hat.
He stepped into the station mist, now not quite himself.
But not yet someone else.

Date of Birth

The narrow corridor echoed faintly with the tap of the attendant's boots before the gentle rap on the door interrupted the compartment's quiet.

“Will you be requiring dinner service, sir? Or perhaps expecting company tonight?” the conductor inquired, his eyes briefly assessing the solitary occupant.

The man stirred from his reverie, glancing up with a measured calm. “I travel alone,” he replied simply, voice low but carrying a quiet command.

The attendant's gaze flickered, a subtle nod acknowledging the unspoken — two seats purchased, yet only one passenger. Status, wrapped in economy but spoken in silence.

“Very well, sir. I shall prepare accordingly.”

The door closed softly, leaving the man once more to the soft rocking of the train and the slow, steady hum of the rails.

He waited until the conductor's steps had faded into the rhythmic clatter of the corridor before reaching into the inner pocket of his travelling coat. From a slim leather case he withdrew a small sheaf of papers — worn, faintly scented of coal dust and tobacco. His fingers, still bearing faint traces of dye at the nails, unfolded the official booklet with care.

The Imperial passport opened stiffly, its pages buckled at the corners. His gaze moved slowly over the printed lines, his own

name emerging like a stone from a thawed riverbed.

Surname: Zorich

Given name and patronymic: Yarosvet Alexeyevich

Rank or estate: Collegiate Assessor, Civil Service

Year of birth: 1831

Place of birth: County of Arzamas, Nizhny Novgorod
Governorate

Occupation: Retired archivist, Ministry of Internal Affairs

Marital status: Unmarried

Faith: Orthodox Christian

He paused here, the corner of his mouth lifting — not in mockery, but in something quieter. A rueful softness. Christian, yes... by ink. And by silence.

He turned the page.

Distinguishing marks and appearance:

Hair grey, full, worn long. Beard thick, same colour.

Eyes grey-brown.

Height above average.

Build firm.

Speech measured.

No visible scars or deformities.

A man who had once been one thing, and now had made

himself another.

He closed the passport slowly, slipping it back into the case. The train's motion grew more insistent, a soft jostle like memory knocking at his shoulder. Somewhere beyond the pane, beyond the soot-streaked glass, the south was waiting.

And so was the past.

It was not the change in appearance that troubled him — not really.

That could be explained, after all. Men dyed their hair; men shaved their heads; men wore spectacles when they no longer needed to, or stopped wearing them though their vision blurred like melted wax. Vanity, illness, grief, devotion. A dozen reasons fit for a dozen fates. No stationmaster, no district inspector would raise an eyebrow at such things. If they did, they would interpret them through the lens they understood best — romance, crime, ruin, escape. Not truth.

But the true fracture lay not in the dates or descriptions, but in what was absent — and what no ink could confess.

He stared once more at the date: *1831, County of Arzamas*. A precise line. A year that sat obediently in its place, pinned to the paper like a dead moth.

And yet, the man whose hands now held the passport looked no older than forty-five. Perhaps less, if the carriage lighting were kind. According to the document, he had been born sixty-five years past. A detail no conductor would question aloud, though any sharp eye might pause, if only for a beat. The conductor had

addressed him with instinctive deference — not the overplayed politeness one grants to infirmity, but the clipped reserve given to men still in full command of themselves. That alone would have been enough to raise a silent question.

But the deeper crack lay not in the dates, nor in the ink, but beneath them — in a silence too old to name. For the man whose name appeared on that page had buried his parents, Alexei Zorich and his wife, Velina, more than a century ago. He remembered the scent of pine resin on his father's hands, the lull of his mother's voice — long extinguished, long mourned, yet now as close as the weight of the paper in his palm.

He had wept, once, at her grave. Then he had lived on.

The date in the passport was wrong, yes. But not in the way it would appear. It was not *too early*. It was far, far too late.

There were no clerks left alive who remembered entering that name. No priest who had inked it into the registry. No neighbours to say what sort of child Yarosvet Alexeyevich Zorich had been — solemn, bright-eyed, strange.

All of them, long beneath the earth. He alone had remained.

Not unchanged. No, not that. His features had softened over the years, not from indulgence, but from long acquaintance with silence. The voice, once crisp, had settled into a gentler register — still firm, but less inclined to interrupt. His hands no longer bore the calluses of youth, yet moved with the economy of someone who had laboured, and remembered how not to. But the *thread* had never snapped. Not fully.

What had once been called memory had become something else.

And now, it seemed, it was time to follow that thread once more — into the south, into the heat, into the names that had been stolen and buried in ash.

He opened his eyes. The passport lay still in his hand, patient, mute.

He slipped it back into its case. Then folded his arms across his chest, and listened to the soft chant of the rails beneath him, as though the earth itself were humming some old lullaby he had not heard in many, many lifetimes.

Name the Name

The village lay quiet beneath a soft, lavender dusk, the kind that stretched long shadows from the low timber houses, where smoke from cooking fires curled lazily upward, twisting like the memories that cling to old wood. It was the mid-eighteenth century in Russia, a time suspended between the fading echoes of old world rituals and the hesitant stirrings of change. The land itself seemed to breathe with the slow rhythms of seasons and faith, each day a prayer spoken in the rustle of birch leaves, the distant tolling of church bells, the murmur of voices raised in ancient hymns.

Here, in this small pocket of the vast empire, lived a boy unlike the others. While most of the village children answered without hesitation to names as common and worn as the paths they ran — Sergey, Petr, Ivan — he bore a name that was a curious melody to their ears: Yarosvet. It was a name that set him apart, an outlier in the familiar chorus of boyhood calls.

From an early age, this difference had nestled in his chest like a quiet question that neither grew louder nor found easy answer. The name felt heavy and bright all at once — strange as the flame of a candle in a dark room, both a guide and a reminder of distance. He noticed how, when others gathered in rough laughter and games, his name would ripple among them like a thread pulled too tight, the sound unfamiliar, almost foreign.

One afternoon, while the sun hung low and golden over the fields, Yarosvet approached his father, a man whose face bore the steady marks of seasons spent in hard labour and quiet resolve. The man's hands were calloused but gentle, and his eyes held a calm patience, as though the burdens of life were bricks he laid carefully each day, without haste or complaint.

"Father, the boy began tentatively, "why do the others — like you — have names like Ilya or Ivan, but mine is... different? Why wasn't I given a name like theirs?"

The father looked down at him for a long moment, his gaze steady and without impatience. "Your mother gave you your name," he said simply, as if that should explain everything.

The answer, however, unsettled more than it settled. Yarosvet's brow furrowed in thought, the sound of distant church bells mingling with the faint rustling of the leaves outside. That evening, seeking the deeper meaning his father had not offered, he went to his mother.

Her hands were soft and warm, weathered like old leather yet full of life. The room was dim, the flicker of the hearth casting shadows that danced like spirits on the walls. She looked at him with eyes that seemed to hold stories older than the village itself.

"Mother," he asked quietly, "why did you give me this name? What does it mean?"

She smiled then, a slow, almost sad smile, as if recalling some long-forgotten song. "A name is more than a word, Yarosvet. It is the soul's first breath, the spark that sets a man's path alight. It

carries the weight of blood and earth, the voice of the ancestors speaking through time.”

She paused, her gaze drifting toward the window where stars began to prick the darkening sky. “Most names here are common because they come from elsewhere — names taken from foreign tongues, names that do not sing the language of our land. Those who carry them wander without roots, like leaves caught in a stranger’s wind, never quite belonging.”

Her voice grew quieter, more intimate, as if sharing a secret guarded fiercely by the past. “But your name, my son, is fire and light. It comes from the very heart of this soil, from the ancient words that speak of strength and dawn. It is a name that will not let you forget who you are, no matter how far you travel.”

The boy felt a strange warmth spread through him, as if the name had shifted from being a simple sound to a living thing — a flame that danced beneath his ribs, steady and sure. It was a name that set him apart, yes, but also bound him to a destiny written deep into the bones of the land.

Yet even in that warmth, a seed of unease took root. The other boys called him strange. The world outside the village seemed vast and indifferent to the weight of a name. And though his mother’s words lingered like a hymn, Yarosvet could not yet see the full measure of what it meant to carry a fire that both illuminated and burned.

As the night deepened and the stars spilled across the sky like scattered silver coins, the boy lay awake, listening to the

quiet hum of the earth and the distant echoes of the church bells. In the stillness, he imagined the long path ahead — one lit by the stubborn flame of his name, drawing him onward through shadows and light, through the dusty roads of an empire that was both home and wilderness.

There, in the silence between heartbeats, the first threads of his fate began to weave themselves — threads that would bind him to a story older than memory, a journey into the heat of the south and the secrets buried beneath ash and time.

Time passed the way rivers pass through woods — steadily, almost silently, wearing down stones not by force, but by patient touch. The boys he had once chased through fields and splashed with in spring brooks grew broad in the chest, slow in the joints, and bowed in the eyes, as if the years had begun whispering to them in a different tongue — one of duties, burdens, and nights spent half-sleeping beneath the press of roofs they now owned.

Their voices grew deeper, coarser, roughened by tobacco and responsibility. They spoke more of debts and grain, of fathers-in-law, of aching backs and colicky infants. In gatherings, the laughter became more restrained — not extinguished, no, but trimmed, as one trims the wick of a lamp so it does not burn too bright, too fast.

And Yarosvet? He remained.

It was not merely that he had no children tugging at his sleeves or wife waiting with tired affection at the gate. His face, his gait, the very cadence of his breath seemed untouched by

the years. While others thickened and greyed, he still wore the outline of twenty-five, the kind that poets claimed in ballads and village girls measured suitors against — not consciously, but with a kind of wistful expectation that rarely found fulfilment. His skin, though often wind-bitten and sun-warmed like any man's, lacked the sallow weariness that crept into his friends' cheeks. His eyes had not dulled; they remained sharp, not with youth's recklessness, but with its clarity.

This did not go unnoticed.

At first, it was a source of camaraderie. “Yaroshka,” they would call him, slapping his back after drink, “will never change. He'll dance at our grandchildren's weddings with a girl on each arm.” There was laughter then, but beneath it — something quieter. A shifting.

As the years lengthened, the gap widened. Men who had once sworn they would never be tamed were now arguing with wives over which son should inherit the plough. Their tempers shortened, their silences lengthened. And when Yarosvet entered a room, when his boots fell silent on the floorboards and his glance swept around with that same unhurried poise — it stirred unease.

Not hostility. Not yet. But a distance. The kind that grows not from betrayal or envy, but from the quiet instinct that some boundary of nature, unspoken and ancient, has been transgressed — gently, perhaps, even unconsciously, but unmistakably.

He noticed it first in the eyes of the women.

Those who were once girls — braiding each other's hair, giggling behind hands when he passed — were now matriarchs with greying temples and slow steps. And their daughters, who now cast sidelong glances and whispered his name with the same breathless awe, did not see him as their fathers' contemporary. No — they saw him as a man just ripening into his prime.

He, too, looked. He would be less than honest with himself to deny it.

The glances of the young women struck him not with pride, but with a kind of aching sweetness. There were many he had held affection for — genuine, sincere affection that made his heart stir and the world soften. He loved easily, but not shallowly. Some had hair like the inner silk of chestnuts; others moved with a grace that made one forget conversation. Their laughter, their cleverness, the curve of a brow or the way they pressed a finger to their lips when thinking — each opened something within him. And always, always, he meant to choose. To settle. To stand still.

But that was the trouble.

When every spring brings another bloom, when the world keeps offering a fresh sweetness, and when your soul, like your face, refuses to age with the others — how does one stop? When your friends must choose before their hair greys, before their knees stiffen, before their chance runs out — you do not have to. And so, perversely, you don't.

Choice became his cage. The very abundance of life's invitations left him, ironically, untouched by all of them. Like a

man at a feast who samples every dish but finishes none, not out of gluttony, but because he fears that to choose one is to close the others forever.

And so he remained unmarried, unrooted, drifting not from place to place — no, he never wandered far — but from affection to affection. A steady flame to all, and yet never quite burning with one.

There were whispers, of course. Not cruel, but persistent. “Why is Yarosvet still alone?” some would ask, their eyes searching his face as if the answer might be written in the smoothness of his skin or the calm of his mouth. “He’s waiting for someone,” others would murmur. “Someone special. Maybe someone who’s not born yet.”

He never explained. He never argued. Sometimes he would smile, distant, as if the question itself was a leaf blown past his shoulder by the wind.

And perhaps it was.

For in the quietest places of his heart, beneath the layers of time and memory, he suspected that even if he gave his love — fully, truly — to some fair creature of the moment, it would not stop the river of years. She would age, and he would not. Her laughter would falter, her hands grow spotted and slow, and he... would remain.

To love, for him, was to prepare for mourning.

And so he remained silent — a man with the face of twenty-five, the eyes of fifty, and the heart of one who had already buried

the spring more times than he could count.

Of course, he did not remain forever the youthful shade of twenty-five. Time, in its subtle cruelty, does not abide one's wishes; it bends and warps even the most steadfast illusions. When he stood over his father's grave, weathered and solemn, he might have been mistaken for a man of thirty-five — his features sharper, his shoulders broader, yet shadowed by a weariness that no youth could feign. That day, the scent of pine resin lingered heavier in the air, mixing with the bitter tang of fresh earth, and the solemn hymns sung by the priest felt both foreign and achingly familiar.

Twenty years later, when he laid his mother to rest beneath the same ancient soil, his reflection in the polished silver cross looked closer to forty. The corners of his eyes had begun to carry faint creases, not deep but persistent, like the first furrows carved into a once-virgin field. His hair bore the salt of early greys, though he fought them with careful rinses and powdered powders — a modest defiance against the slow reclaiming hand of age.

Yet by then, most of his companions — those boys with whom he had once run barefoot through rye fields, shouting the names of the wind — had long followed their parents into the earth. They had passed beyond the sight of the living, leaving behind wives thick with sorrow, sons shaped by their fathers' hands, and daughters weeping at graves that grew mossy and forgotten.

But he remained.

In a world shifting and folding upon itself, he was a solitary

remnant of a time others had surrendered to. His bed — once empty save for the chill of loneliness — became a strange refuge where generations met in passing. The granddaughters of those long-gone friends, both married and unmarried, sought solace or distraction in the quiet strength of his presence. Their eyes, wide with stories untold and promises whispered in the dark, spoke of desire tangled with regret. They saw in him not just a man but an anchor in a world unraveling too fast, a steady flame against the creeping cold.

He did not chase them as a man might pursue the fleeting warmth of youth. Nor did he bind himself with vows or promises. Instead, the encounters were gentle — moments carved out of mutual loneliness and the unspoken understanding that life's course often leaves hearts adrift, seeking harbor wherever they might find it.

Yet even as his flesh settled into the lines and shadows of middle age, something within him resisted the full surrender. The mirror, at times, reflected a man touched by time but not conquered by it. There was a paradox in his bearing: he carried the weight of years in the depth of his gaze, yet moved with a grace untouched by the slow tremors of age. A quiet power hummed beneath his calm exterior, a rhythm not of this earth, or at least not of its common reckoning.

It was as if his very nature was split between two worlds — one bound by the ticking clock of human frailty, the other governed by a different, stranger measure. And so he stood between them,

a sentinel not just of his own passing years, but of secrets deeper than memory, and time's own hidden fractures.

The past and the present wrapped around him like the rails beneath the train — endless, inevitable, and softly humming the lullabies of all that had been lost and all that still waited to be found.

Of course, such a strange existence could not remain unexplored by the restless curiosity of youth, nor by the growing questions of a man caught between time's steady march and his own lingering stasis. In those quiet moments between dusk and dawn, when the household settled into its familiar rhythms and shadows grew long against the flickering candlelight, he sought answers — as much from the silence as from the voices of his parents, while they still breathed.

His father, Alexei, was a man of few words and many smiles — a man who measured life in glances and unspoken understandings rather than in explicit truths. When asked why the boy seemed to resist the years, why he lingered like a shade untouched by the common fate of man, his father only chuckled softly, eyes gleaming with a secret amusement. The elder Zorich's lips would curl into a knowing grin, as if privy to a jest played by the cosmos itself, and then his gaze would drift away, lost among the worn wooden beams of their home.

It was his mother, Velina, who offered words — though not always words easily grasped by a child's mind. She spoke of things that seemed wrapped in mystery, cloaked in half-

remembered legends and the hush of ancient rites. Her voice, low and melodic, carried a weight that settled into the boy's bones, though the meaning often escaped his youthful understanding.

"The secret lies not in the body alone," she said once, fingers tracing idle patterns on the coarse fabric of her shawl. "It is in the right beginning — the proper conception, the sacred seed. There is a power in the feminine, Yarosvet, a force older than these lands, older than even the stones beneath our feet. This power once thrived in the worship of a forgotten cult, a cult of women whose strength shaped the very soul of the world."

He remembered how her eyes flickered then — fierce and distant, as though reaching beyond the dim walls of their home to something vast and unseen. "That cult vanished with Tartaria," she whispered, "buried beneath the ash of time and the silence of conquerors. But its blood, its ancient fire, still lingers in those who are born from it, in names and destinies that do not bend easily."

He pressed her for more, as a boy presses the stars for meaning. But the answers remained elusive — shadows flitting just beyond reach, like the murmur of a distant song half-forgotten. Velina smiled, a sadness threading through her lips, and told him to guard his name, for it carried within it a destiny both bright and terrible.

These early lessons — half fairy tale, half warning — etched themselves deep in his heart. They shaped the quiet solitude that grew with him, the sense that he was set apart not merely by

chance, but by blood and fate. And so, even as the world around him trudged onward — with its common names and ordinary hopes — he carried his singularity like a secret talisman, a burden and a gift intertwined.

The years would deepen that understanding, though never fully unveil it. And now, long after the voices of his parents had faded into memory, those whispered fragments of ancient lore haunted his steps as surely as the past pursued him, and the south awaited with its promises and its dangers.

Over the first seventy years of his life — the “first half,” as he now thought with a crooked smile — Yarosvet Zorich had drunk deeply from the wells of the world. His body, lively and unburdened by the dull torpor that claimed others with the passing decades, lent itself to work and wonder alike. He had learned the crafts of carpenters and the patience of shepherds, the balance of blacksmiths and the silent rhythm of fishermen. He had guided horses and cured hides, mended shutters in wind-whipped barns and brewed kvass that drew praise from the most sceptical lips in the village. And all the while, his mind — equally untouched by rust or rot — fed upon scarce books, travellers’ tales, overheard sermons and market gossip, snatching up fragments of the human mosaic like seeds tucked away for later spring.

Life had taught him much — not only how to survive, but how to savour. The crackle of firewood, the ache in muscles after honest toil, the quiet lustre of dew on barley — these were not

lost on him. Nor were the pleasures of company, of laughter, of a woman's glance across the threshing floor. He had lived keenly, and had not yet wearied of the banquet.

He had no siblings to divide fortune with — no elder brother to follow, no younger sister to shelter. From the moment his mother passed, her shawl still warm from her shoulders, the house and all that came with it became his alone. And though at first the inheritance seemed like a solemn shrine to be guarded — a barn built by his father's own hands, the iron kettle blackened by decades of soup and silence — it soon revealed itself as something more: a vessel for movement, a base for freedom.

His father, Alexei, had been no ordinary peasant. Quiet and watchful, he was one of those rare men who had managed, by slow cunning and restrained pride, to purchase a plot of land from the very noble whose name once hung over their family like a signet ring pressed into wax. He worked it well, too — the fields bore generous wheat, the livestock fattened in time for market, and the granary seldom knew famine. His mother, Velina, kept the home with that curious blend of warmth and quiet grandeur, as if she were merely performing the memory of some distant, regal station.

And for some years after their deaths, Yarosvet kept the estate much as it had been — only quieter, cleaner, more orderly. But over time, it was not the estate that changed. It was the gaze of those who passed him in the lane. In youth, their looks had held admiration, then envy, then unease. But now... now they

began to thicken with something darker. Suspicion. And beneath it, fear. Not because he had done wrong, but because he had not aged with them — had not bowed, greyed, stooped, faltered. Men he had taught to lace their boots now leaned on canes and muttered behind fences. Women who had once blushed in his presence now crossed themselves in silence as he passed.

They began to avoid meeting his eyes, and if they did, the glance was quick, sideways, searching. A child, once scolded for throwing stones at his gate, whispered to his mother that “the devil lived there, and didn’t die like folk should.”

Yarosvet did not wait to become a tale. He sold off what he could — discreetly, patiently — and converted the rest into a quiet stream of coin sent monthly by the noble’s house, who gladly reclaimed the land for a price. One day, he left no more smoke curling from the chimney, no more footsteps crunching the frost.

No farewells. No announcement. No explanations.

Only the silent closing of a wooden door, the squeak of a cart’s wheels turning toward the road — and the knowledge that the place where he had learned to speak and think and wait and wonder was no longer a haven, but a lantern drawing moths.

He carried no bitterness. Only instinct.

And instinct, he knew, was older than thought.

At first, he made for Petersburg — that northern city with its foreign bones and borrowed face, which called itself a capital the way a masquerader calls himself a prince. It rose not from

swamps, as the schoolbook poets loved to chant, but from a quill's idle flick across a map — an afterthought scrawled in Latin ink and diplomatic breath, by which a Swedish city was declared Russian, and the Romanovs were granted a gilded roost far from the scowling vigilance of old Muscovy.

He walked its wide and shallow streets like a man re-entering a dream he had never chosen. Here, the stone facades preened themselves in borrowed symmetry, columns aping Roman temples, porticoes plastered with pomp. Here, the wind from the Gulf pressed like a damp glove against your lungs, and the light — cold, dispassionate, foreign — spilled over the Neva's flat sheen as if reluctant to stay.

Petersburg was a city of surfaces. Of polish and performance. And though the merchants came with furled sails and full purses, and the carriages clattered proudly along Nevsky Prospect, it always felt like something built *over* — a stage set atop a graveyard, whispering not of growth, but of replacement. Here was no slow blossoming of a soul, no crooked lanes worn into being by centuries of boots and hooves and sorrow. No, here the soil had been overwritten, the native river banks buried beneath imported marble and imported customs, all to give shape to a fantasy: a Europe with frostbitten teeth.

But Yarosvet did not come for the splendour. He came because it was the furthest one could get, in spirit and in story, from the little house of his youth. And because in Petersburg, no one asked where you were from — only what you were

wearing, or *buying*, or *seeking*. The city, like a grand old coquette, took lovers nightly and remembered none of their names in the morning.

He lived modestly at first — a rented attic room on the Vasilievsky Island, above a printer's shop that always smelled of hot lead and drying ink. His window looked out onto rooftops where gulls perched like bored sentinels, and from which he watched the city breathe its sighs of mist and smoke. The landlady, a widow with two fat marmalade cats and a penchant for gossip, charged little but noticed much. She once remarked, while pouring him weak tea, that he “looked well for his age,” though she had never asked what age that was. He returned her smile with a silence she found oddly soothing.

During the day, he wandered. He walked the embankments where officials in starched collars paraded with diplomatic stiffness, and where ragged boys sold old coins and dirty postcards to distracted foreigners. He listened in taverns and train stations, at the mouths of alleys and the corners of markets, collecting fragments of news, half-muttered rumours, the whiff of some deeper movement beneath the city's surface rituals.

And everywhere he went, he looked — not just with the eyes, but with that old instinct which had once told him when to leave, when to wait, when to step sideways into silence. He was searching for something. Not yet a name. Not yet a place. But a pull, faint and low, like the vibration of a plucked string somewhere beneath his ribs.

In Petersburg, he saw what had become of the Empire. And what had been carefully smothered.

He saw how old rites had been ground down to etiquette, how names of power had been flattened into baptisms, how the women who once gathered herbs beneath the moon now sold onions in silence beneath church bells that rang in Latin time. He watched the generals swagger and the clerks scurry, the matrons simper and the students burn — and through it all, he heard no voice that spoke the language of his mother. Not Velina's dialect, but the deeper one, the older one, that lived in the cadence of her lullabies and the reverence with which she stirred barley in spring.

They had built this city as an outpost, yes — but not of Russia. No, it was an enclave of some other realm, seated precariously on the back of a sleeping bear. The “window to Europe,” they had called it — but windows, after all, were not meant for passing through. They were meant for *watching*. For *measuring*. And, perhaps, for *containing*.

The city was not without its charms. There were nights he stood at the edge of the Winter Canal, when snow fell so softly it seemed ashamed of itself, and felt something like stillness — not peace, but the hush before a revelation. He met women there, too: emboldened milliners, clever-eyed dancers, a widow who claimed to be descended from Swedish nobility and wept in her sleep. They shared beds and bottles and sometimes secrets, but he never stayed long. They were of this city. He was only *passing*.

through.

It was not a home. It was a mirror — one that distorted as much as it revealed.

And the more he saw of it, the more he remembered his mother's words — spoken once on a midsummer night, when the fields smelled of crushed clover and smoke:

“You must remember, Yarik,” she whispered, tucking a woollen shawl around his shoulders on a frost-bitten evening. “However thick the ice, the river still runs beneath. What the eyes see is what floats. But the soul — if you give it eyes — will see what sinks and feeds the roots.”

He had not grasped her meaning then. Not truly. But the words had settled somewhere in him, like embers folded in ash.

And now, stirred by time and motion, something in him began to glow again. Dimly. Uneasily. As if some current, long buried, had begun to move under the weight of years.

That northern city with its foreign bones and borrowed face could be cruel, yes — but it could also be accommodating to a man with a measured tongue, a quiet step, and coin that bore no questions on its breath. It had long ceased to be a place of princes and proclamations; it was now a city of forms, queues, doors that opened only if one knew which shoulder to lean with. And in this, Yarosvet learned quickly.

Peterburg could not grant peace, but it could provide something more immediate — reinvention.

It was there he met men who knew men who once served as

secretaries to men whose brothers were married to women whose uncles had stood beside the desks where the records were kept. Not always forged — no, the Empire was too vast for that. It did not require forgery, only a plausible angle, a name spelled slightly differently, a date nudged forward or back like a chess piece on an unused board.

In truth, there was no single passport in the Russian Empire — not in the way westerners imagined. There were internal passports and travel documents, merchant identifications, guild certificates, residence permits, peasant booklets, exile papers, and bureaucratic attestations that passed as identification only in certain provinces or under certain seals. Who issued it depended less on law than on custom — and on who was asking.

If one were a peasant, the volost clerk would scrawl a name in the communal ledger and issue a stamped paper good for a few versts and no further. If one were a tradesman, the guild could inscribe one's craft into a small blue book lined with grease and soot. For officials, the Ministry of Internal Affairs maintained files — but even these were porous, amended or lost in fire, flood, or favour. Priests, too, kept records of baptisms and burials, but they wrote more slowly than time moved, and death did not often wait for ink to dry.

And so a man with neither enemies nor debts, who bore himself with sufficient gravity and had the right acquaintances in the right corners, might simply appear — newly registered, newly documented, newly plausible. Not invented from nothing,

no. Simply... revised.

And Yarosvet Zorich had become very good at revisions.

Not loudly, not often. But enough to remain in step with the decades. Enough to possess, now, a small book bound in state leather that declared him sixty-five — though his reflection had never quite agreed. A paper that bore the name he had always carried, but tied it to a life with neater edges, shorn of contradictions.

A man who could now, with unhurried confidence, board a southbound train and raise no questions beyond the conductor's silent curiosity.

The First Echo

He had not meant to linger in Saint Petersburg. Cities such as this, stitched together from limestone and delusion, always left a taste of iron in his mouth. Yet linger he did — for days, then weeks — drawn less by purpose than by a kind of static tension in the air, a low thrumming of expectation. There were errands, of course, and arrangements. But the thread that led him south did not begin with a name on paper. It began with a hand.

Not his own. Hers.

She had called herself Olga Vladimirovna, with a self-mocking emphasis on the *-vna*, as though the patronymic were a relic borrowed from a trunk of old dresses. Her hair was lacquered into high coils, her voice carried a crackling husk of expensive cigarettes and more expensive boredom. They met — quite by accident — at a salon on Sadovaya, a place full of lazy ferns and arched mirrors, where people came to speak of poetry while meaning quite other things. She had been there with her daughter, a dull-eyed thing in pale gauze who kept checking the time and sipping soda water as if she feared thirst more than boredom, while she herself had taken to flirting with him not out of genuine interest, but the idle cruelty of women who suspect they are past the point of being courted. She touched his hand as one touches the menu in a foreign restaurant: with amused curiosity.

“You’re not really sixty-five,” she said, peering down at his palm as though it were a wine stain she meant to decode. “I mean — this hand. It’s *impossible*. I must be losing the last of my senses.”

He offered one of his smiles — the sort that asked no questions.

She didn’t return it. Her eyes had narrowed.

“You shouldn’t be here,” she added, less to him than to herself.

“Is that so?”

“I don’t mean in *this room*,” she said, finally glancing up. “I mean — *here*. In the world. There are lines that should close. Yours never did. They just... taper off into something else.”

He had not expected to be unnerved by a woman in pearls. But something in her tone — that soft chill beneath the coquetry — made his fingers curl reflexively.

“You’ve read too many romances.”

“I don’t read at all,” she said. “But I do *see*. I told you — I’m no gypsy, no chiromancer. I don’t believe in fate. But hands don’t lie. And yours... yours belonged to someone else first. Or perhaps to no one.”

She said it plainly. No tremble in her voice. As if noting a missing button.

He started to rise, politely — an excuse forming.

She caught his wrist.

“Wait. Please. I don’t mean harm.” A pause. “Tell me something. Your mother — was she... like you?”

"My mother," he said slowly, "was a Russian woman. Her name was Velina."

The name seemed to catch her breath.

"I thought so," she murmured. "Velina. That's no name from any church calendar."

"No," he agreed.

"She may have been a... *kukla*," Olga Vladimirovna said, as though testing the word on her tongue. "*Doll* is the wrong word. It means something else. A... channel, maybe. A vessel. In the old sense."

He frowned. "*A vessel for what?*"

"For something that's gone now. Or almost gone. Do you know the story of the river beneath the ice?"

He didn't answer. She went on anyway.

"They say that when the steppe freezes, it hides the current — but doesn't stop it. The water still moves, swift and clear, under a crust of silence. Our lives are the ice, Yaroslav —"

"Yarosvet," he corrected her absently. "Not Yaroslav."

She blinked. And smiled, faintly. "Yes. Of course it is."

Then she touched his palm again. This time almost reverently.

"I think your mother came from before the frost. From before we forgot that it was women who carried the flame. There was a time when all of life was born through Her — when men built temples, not to gods with swords, but to the womb that gave them breath. Your mother knew. Maybe she didn't say it so directly. But she remembered. And something in you remembers too."

Her eyes darkened, drawing on some ancient well of memory. She was one of the witches — the *ved'ma*, the *vedayushchaya mat'* — the knowing mother who saw beyond the surface and carried the old wisdom. They worshipped the Great Mother-Creatrix, called Matrosmira. Her name holds the secret of origins: “Matr’ — the Mother, ‘ros’ — the dew, the sacred moisture of life, and ‘mir’ — the world, the vast universe she embraces. Together, her name sings of the living pulse flowing through earth and soul alike.”

She leaned closer, voice dropping to a whisper. “But when the Christians came, eager to rewrite the old songs and reshape the land’s memory, they twisted her name, telling tales that she was ‘Mat’ Sira Zemlya’ — Mother Damp Earth — stripping away the sacred dew, the breath of life, the true meaning buried beneath layers of time. They sought to sever the thread tying the world to her living essence.”

Her gaze lingered on his palm, where faint lines seemed to shimmer with a forgotten language. “Your mother never forgot. And neither has your blood. That is why you are here, drawn not by chance, but by the silent summons of something older than names and empires.”

As though for the very first time he beheld the woman before him. She was nothing like his mother — entirely different, foreign almost. Yet, beside her, he felt that faint, elusive echo he’d known as a child when close to his mother. Perhaps it was merely longing, a hunger for what was lost, stirring quietly within him.

He studied her face with a slow, deliberate gaze — an attempt to map the years etched in the fine lines that curled like whispered secrets around her eyes and mouth. She was about fifty, or so he guessed, yet time had dealt with her a curious kindness. Not the harsh, chiseled mark of age that hardens the spirit, but the soft patina of experience — an elegant trace of storms weathered and victories quietly won. Her skin bore the faintest shimmer of twilight, the kind that lingers when daylight succumbs to evening's tender hush, and her eyes held a depth, an unspoken story woven through decades, like faded embroidery on worn fabric.

There was a noble bearing in her posture, as if bloodline and fate had conspired to sculpt a woman who once commanded rooms with a glance, whose beauty was never loud but insistent, like the slow bloom of a rare flower that unfolds only in secret gardens. Her hair, streaked with threads of silver, tumbled with a natural grace, unburdened by artifice, framing a face that balanced strength and softness, pride and sorrow — a face that carried the memory of youth, not in its freshness but in its quiet resilience.

He felt something familiar stir beneath the surface — a vague echo of the tender moments with his mother long past, a ghost of warmth that neither time nor distance could erase. Perhaps it was longing, or the uncanny way certain presences conjure lost fragments of ourselves. She was no mother, no replica of her, yet in the space between them, Yarosvet sensed a fragile tether — a

breath of forgotten lullabies and whispered truths that had once cradled him through his earliest dawns.

He fixed his gaze on her, the steady quiet of his eyes probing beneath the surface, seeking the hidden truths behind her words. “How is it,” he asked slowly, each syllable weighed with deliberate care, “that you know such things? About Matrosmira, about the ancient truths so deeply buried beneath the dust of ages and the iron hand of those who sought to erase them?”

She offered him a smile — soft, almost fragile, as if wrapped in the mist of long-forgotten memories and sorrow that lingered like a shadow cast by a dying fire. “I know them only by hearsay,” she confessed, her voice carrying the gentle cadence of a secret kept for generations. “If you call it hearsay — then yes, it is the murmurings handed down through the lips of my grandmother. Stories that were never meant for many ears, spoken in whispers when the night was thick and the world less cruel.”

Her eyes, dark and deep, flickered with a glimmer of something both distant and intimate, as if she held a key to a locked chamber in time. “It is said that my ancestors, on the maternal line, were among the ved’mý — the witches of old, the knowing mothers who bore the gift of sight, the ancient wisdom to read the hand, to pierce the veil of what is seen and what is hidden.” Her fingers brushed lightly over her palm, as though feeling for a trace of the power she once inherited. “That gift came to me as well, a fragile thread in the weave of my bloodline. But today...” She let her words drift, heavy with regret, “today,

those true teachings have slipped away, vanished like smoke on the wind, lost so completely that even my daughter — blessed with a happy marriage these past two years — remains childless. The line falters, the knowledge fades, and the world forgets.”

A hush fell between them, the weight of ancestral loss settling in the air like a dense fog. Her gaze met his, and in that shared silence there was an unspoken understanding — of roots tangled in shadow, of fires once blazing now reduced to embers, and of a fragile hope flickering faintly against the night.

He turned his head, slowly, as if some unspoken current had drawn it — not her words alone, but the soft bitterness beneath them, that taste of loss which the tongue does not forget. The daughter still lingered nearby, half-shadowed by the arch of a marble column, her figure poised in a slant of golden gaslight that caught on the fine gauze of her sleeves and made her skin appear even paler than it was.

She had not moved much since they entered. One foot rested lightly atop the other, as if unwilling to commit itself to direction; her gloved fingers toyed absently with the rim of a crystal glass, which she neither raised to her lips nor let go. The profile she offered to the room was delicate, nearly classical in its restraint — the chin soft, the cheekbone high, the brow proud but not severe.

Earlier, he had read her stillness as boredom. A cultivated ennui, perhaps, the sort young women acquired at finishing schools and matinees, where silence passed for mystery. But now

— after her mother's words — it was something else he saw.

Not idleness, but fatigue. Not indifference, but an ache held carefully within the architecture of good breeding. She was not disinterested. She was waiting. Not for a man, nor for attention, but for the world to return to her that which it had promised and then withheld.

There was nothing dull in her eyes, only the grey sheen of disappointment, polished over time into something that could almost pass for serenity. Her beauty was not worn; it was buried — like spring beneath frost. The kind that made you wonder not what she had been, but what she might yet become, if someone thought to warm her.

He watched her longer than he meant to. Not out of desire. Not yet. But out of that strange tenderness which stirs when one glimpses, however briefly, another soul quietly enduring the weight of things never spoken aloud.

She turned her head just slightly — whether she noticed him watching or simply shifted from habit, he could not say — and for a heartbeat their gazes touched. Hers flickered, then lowered. And something in his chest folded inward, wordless and sudden.

“What's her name?” he asked, not quite meaning to, the question slipping out in a voice softened by something other than curiosity.

Olga Vladimirovna smiled — not with triumph, but with a trace of amusement, the way a seasoned hostess might acknowledge a guest's hesitant move toward the piano.

“Samira,” she said, as if savouring the syllables. “Not quite Russian, I know. She was named for her grandmother — on her father’s side.”

She paused, then added, as if anticipating his next breath:

“My late husband was of Ottoman blood. Old Istanbul. His mother used to sing in a language I never learned, but it made the child sleep more deeply than Russian lullabies ever could.”

The name hung there a moment — *Samira* — faintly perfumed, faintly foreign, like a silk scarf bearing the scent of another shore.

Zorich turned his gaze back to the daughter. *Samira*. It did fit her, though he hadn’t known until now what he’d been looking at. He’d seen only the surface — pale gauze, idle fingers, the slow flick of a glance toward the clock. But now, with the name breathing through her like an echo from the Levant, the rest of her face came into sharper focus.

There was a southern tilt to her eyes, the corners drawn with a languid grace that resisted haste. Her lashes were thick and dark — not merely from artifice, but by the blessing of blood. The arch of her nose bore something of the East, proud yet slender, as though carved from an older, warmer lineage. And her hair, though pinned with fastidious care, betrayed its true texture in the stray wisps that had escaped near the temples — glossy, heavy, touched with something near black but not quite.

She looked less like her mother now, and more like a story one had heard long ago in a room with shuttered windows and a

brass lamp burning low.

He had thought her merely delicate. Now he saw her as veiled. Not in fabric, but in ancestry — in a hush of forgotten voices, in a shadow of sea-salt and spice, carried across generations.

The realization brought a kind of hush within him. Not awe, not yet. But something slower. A recognition. As if a page had turned in a book he did not remember opening.

Olga Vladimirovna was silent for a moment, her eyes not yet leaving his, as if searching his face for something she had once seen long ago, in someone else entirely. Then, with a sigh so soft it barely stirred the air between them, she asked:

“Do you have children?”

The question struck him not with awkwardness, but with a strange stillness, as though it had been waiting somewhere under his skin, unacknowledged.

“I don’t know,” he said at last — honestly, without performance.

“Perhaps you’d know better than I.”

He held out his palm to her again, not with challenge, but with that same involuntary openness with which a man might open a window in a stifled room.

She took his hand more gently this time, cradling it in both of hers as though it were something fragile that nonetheless had survived much. Her eyes traced the lines in his skin not as a reader scans a page, but as a woman searches the smoke above a candle flame.

“You have many,” she murmured at last, almost reluctantly.
“But I cannot tell — ”

She looked up at him now, her voice low, nearly reverent—
“ — whether they are behind you or still ahead. The thread is there. Strong. Woven deep. But time has tied a knot I cannot undo.”

Her fingers closed lightly around his. She said nothing more.
And for a long moment, neither did he.

He waited for her next question, already sensing its shape before it passed her lips — if indeed it would take the form of a question at all. It would not, he realised. No. What was coming would be a proposal. And not the kind men made in parlours, over rings and formalities — but the sort only a woman could give voice to. A woman, or a mother.

But instead of addressing him, Olga Vladimirovna turned, her gaze drifting past him like a tide shifting its attention. She raised one elegant hand and beckoned.

The girl — Samira — came forward at once, without hesitation but also without eagerness, as though drawn more by instinct than intention. She settled beside her mother in a movement that was both reserved and natural, like a cat who had not yet decided whether to sleep or flee.

And then he smelled her. Not her perfume — though there was some trace of jasmine or myrrh in the folds of her gauze — but her. The scent of a woman’s body in summer: clean, warm, barely touched. The scent of linen warmed by flesh and breath.

There was something else, too — something recent, faint and raw — the olfactory trace of sorrow not yet voiced.

She was married, yes. The ring was there, discreet, dignified. But her skin — as far as he could judge from the soft hollow of her collarbone framed by the dove-grey plunge of her gauze dress, from the fine-grained smoothness of her wrists, and the pale, tender stretch of neck exposed when she tilted her head — carried no memory of passion. No imprint of fingers that had trembled to touch her. No echo of a man who had truly claimed her, or rather, been claimed by her. Her fragrance was not that of possession, but of promise. Of longing, still unanswered. No shadow of lips that had ever lingered long enough to make her forget herself.

Olga Vladimirovna did not introduce them. She did not need to. Instead, with an unblinking calm that came only from years lived in places where shame had no purchase, she asked,

“Would you want to have a child by this man?”

Samira’s breath caught, almost imperceptibly, but she did not flinch. She turned to him — fully this time — and looked into his eyes.

And in that look, he saw not confusion, nor modesty, nor even surprise. He saw the golden flicker of an ancient awareness — something older than either of them, something older than words.

She was beautiful.

Not the clumsy, shouted beauty of society’s debutantes, but the quiet radiance of dusk falling over desert stone. Her features

were fine and finely set: the sweep of her cheekbones, the dusk-glow of her skin, the almost imperious line of her nose. There was something Eastern in her, unmistakably — Ottoman, Persian, some whisper from the Silk Road that had once wound through every empire.

She was, he thought, as if stepping into a half-remembered dream, a Shahrāzād. But not the one of painted illustrations and childish tales — no, this one was flesh and silence and lineage. This one did not spin stories to delay death. She *was* the story. The untold one. The one yet to be born.

Samira looked away, not in shame but in something deeper. A tremor passed through her lashes as she turned toward her mother. There was no word, no sigh. Only a pause, like the hush before a vow, and then the smallest nod — barely more than a breath given form. But it was enough. Enough to shift something in the air between them. Enough to make him feel, absurdly, that a door had opened in a room he had not known he was standing in.

It was, perhaps, more than Olga Vladimirovna had expected. The swiftness of her daughter's assent — so unburdened, so quiet, and yet so final — seemed to momentarily disarm her, as though she had merely lit a candle and found herself blinded by flame. Her brows rose slightly, then gathered, searching for something mundane to hold on to — some point of reentry into the world they had all just stepped beyond.

“What is today?” she asked, softly, turning to him. “The date.

The day of the week.”

He answered without moving his eyes from Samira’s lips — lips that had not spoken a single word to him, and yet had just changed the course of his evening, perhaps more. Her mouth was still, parted ever so slightly, the lower lip fuller than the upper, with that faint sheen of heat that comes not from drink but from breath held too long. He gave the date in a voice that felt older than him, slower. It might have been raining outside, or snowing. He would not have noticed.

Olga Vladimirovna hesitated for no more than a breath. Then she straightened, recovered. Her tone was almost formal now, but not unkind.

“Then tomorrow will be too late,” she said simply, folding her gloved hands in her lap. “If you have no other obligations for the evening... we would be honoured to receive you at our home. It isn’t far.”

She looked at him with the calm assurance of a woman who no longer bartered with fate but conversed with it. And he understood, with sudden, startling clarity, that the invitation was not hers alone to extend — nor his alone to answer.

He inclined his head, just slightly, and answered in a voice that did not quite belong to the same man who had come to this reception intending only to endure it.

“I am free,” he said.

And the words, once spoken, did not vanish into the usual trivialities of polite conversation. They hung there instead,

between the three of them, like the scent of unseen blossoms opening in the dark. He was free. This evening. Perhaps longer.

Olga Vladimirovna nodded, more to herself than to him, as if confirming some quiet calculation. Then she rose — not abruptly, but with the stately measure of someone accustomed to being followed. Samira stood as well, adjusting her shawl, her gaze lowered now, but not out of modesty. It was composure. Will. A thread of something older than consent had woven itself into her bearing, and now it shimmered faintly in the turn of her shoulder, the lift of her chin, the pace of her breath.

He rose last.

They did not say goodbye to the hosts. Olga Vladimirovna took his arm as if it had always been hers to claim, and Samira walked a step behind, silent, poised, yet touched by something faintly tremulous — as if she were walking not toward a man, but toward some ancient door in herself long sealed.

Outside, Sadovaya lay drowsy under its lamps. The gaslight shimmered on wet stones; carriage wheels murmured in the distance. No one spoke as they made their way through the garden gate.

And yet all three, in their own quiet depths, were listening for the same thing — Not a voice. Not a word. But the moment when silence ceases to be silence, and becomes the world holding its breath.

The air in Olga Vladimirovna's drawing room was thick with the scent of bergamot and polished wood, a subtle perfume of calm civility that barely masked the taut wires beneath. The lamp's golden glow spilled over delicate porcelain cups, their thin rims trembling with fresh tea. She poured for him herself, the leaves swirling darkly in the small teapot, before giving a slight, almost imperceptible nod to the maid — a slender girl whose lashes brushed her cheeks like whispered secrets. The servant moved quietly, a shadow obeying a silent command, adding more hot water to his cup with the solemnity of a ritual. Somewhere beyond the drawn curtains, Samira was likely preparing herself, the soft rustle of silk and muted footsteps a distant prelude to the evening's forthcoming act.

Yarosvet leaned back, a wry smile playing on his lips. "Thank you," he said, voice light but edged, "but if you pour any more, I'm afraid I'll burst."

Her eyes glinted, calm and unreadable. "That is precisely the point," she replied smoothly, as if they shared a joke.

He laughed softly, thinking her words a teasing jest, a delicate dance of words and meanings. Yet before he could take another sip, the maid returned, this time carrying a large silver pitcher, its surface burnished but heavy with purpose. She stood silently beside Yarosvet, the cool weight of the vessel resting firmly in

her hands.

Olga Vladimirovna's voice lowered, steady as a command. "If nature calls, do not hesitate. This vessel is yours alone. Today, all who gather here are 'svoi' — one of us. No need for masks, no need for borrowed manners. You needn't bother with empty proprieties or blush for any wish."

He stared at the pitcher, at the calm assurance in her eyes, feeling the weight of something unspoken, a strange intimacy forged in candour and quiet permission.

She smiled then, faint and knowing, as if inviting him to set aside all pretense. "Nature does not blush. Neither should truth."

Yarosvet set his cup down slowly, the moment hanging between them like a delicate thread — half invitation, half challenge.

The silence in the room was no longer innocent. It deepened, thickened — like old honey left too long in the jar, waiting for the warmth of a hand. Samira had long since vanished into the deeper corridors of the house, behind a door that had closed with all the solemnity of a chapel veil. Somewhere beyond, the sound of fabric against fabric could almost be imagined, though nothing stirred the quiet here, save the softest shifting of feet.

Yarosvet rose, not hurriedly, but as if moved by a force both inward and ancient, the whisper of inevitability. Olga Vladimirovna met his glance and gave the faintest tilt of her chin — not command, not approval, merely the acknowledgment of a role being fulfilled.

The maid, still silent, stepped closer. She bore the silver ewer with both hands, and with practised poise, held it before him — not placing it down, but standing with it, as though offering some relic of forgotten rite. Her eyes were lowered, her breath calm. A shadow with hands, obedient not to orders, but to the laws of ceremony.

He moved as if led through a dream, his hands steady though his pulse was not. There was, in this moment, no hesitation — only the strange obedience of a man whose body remembered something his mind dared not name. The belt gave way with a muted click, the clasp surrendering like a secret, and the fabric loosened around him, as though grateful to be dismissed from duty. From the shadows beneath, he emerged — not as some crude assertion of virility, but as a quiet testament to vitality unclaimed by age.

The air touched him, and he touched it in turn. A line of warmth pulsed faintly along his length, not with desire but with presence, the quiet dignity of a form that had weathered time without surrender. No obscene youthfulness marked him, no vulgar pride — only the solemn fact of flesh still able, still sure. In its repose, it seemed not meant to conquer but to serve, an instrument of something older than passion: purpose.

And she watched.

Not with hunger, nor even appraisal, but with that particular attentiveness reserved for sacred implements before they are put to use. Not a man's pride, nor a woman's shame, stood between

them — only ritual. Only the slow drift of understanding that this, too, was part of the act.

He felt no humiliation. There was no room left for that. What had begun as embarrassment had already been carried off, like the steam from the tea — leaving only the curious vertigo of surrender. He had stepped into a role without being told its name, and her gaze told him only this: *you are not the first, and you will not be the last*. And that, strangely, comforted him.

The sound that followed was quiet, contained by silver walls and the hush of heavy curtains. A release that was less bodily than symbolic — a letting go not merely of fluid but of something older, older than memory, older than language.

He sighed faintly. The kind of sigh that follows pain or prayer. And as he moved, as if to retreat from the threshold of absurdity, her voice stopped him — low, composed.

“Not yet.”

The maid, obedient to some signal he did not see, turned and carried the vessel toward her mistress.

Olga Vladimirovna did not rise. She waited, hands composed in her lap, until the girl approached and tilted the ewer with the delicacy of a wine-pourer at court. The contents fell into her empty cup with a thin sound, absurdly delicate. Not much — just enough to tint the tea with a mystery.

Yarosvet stared, breath held, as if awaiting the next movement in some ancient liturgy. She lifted the porcelain to her face, breathed in — not deeply, but with a kind of reverence — and

then sipped.

Her lips touched the rim slowly. Her eyes, above the cup, never left his. And though she drank with the grace of habit, he knew instinctively: this had not been done lightly.

Nor had it ever, truly, been done for him.

She set the cup down with the same unhurried grace with which she had raised it, as though each gesture belonged to a sequence of acts long rehearsed but rarely performed. Then, without a word, she extended her hand — open, palm tilted forward, a motion devoid of haste, devoid of affectation.

It was not a beckon. It was not even a request. It was a summons. Silent, assured, and complete.

Yarosvet stepped forward.

He did not fumble to adjust his clothes. Did not reach to rebuckle or to hide. There was no pretence left in this room — only the soft murmur of ceremony still unfolding. The folds of his trousers, loosened and parted, brushed faintly against his knees as he moved. The curve of his belly, faint and firm, rose and fell with the rhythm of breath, and between them — himself, still present, neither flaccid nor erect, but simply there: *ready* in the older sense of the word, as a blade is ready when unsheathed, as a candle is ready before the flame.

Olga Vladimirovna did not rise. She sat as before, her posture straight but unrigid, her head held in the natural poise of one who has not bowed in many years. Her eyes met his with the quiet that comes from knowing — not guessing, not hoping, but *knowing*

— that the moment now at hand had been earned by time, by blood, by silence, by something older than them both.

Her right hand lifted, hovered, then settled.

She did not grip. She did not fondle. She *held*. The way a midwife holds a newborn still slippery with the heat of entry. The way a candleholder bears the base of a flame that has not yet chosen to leap. Her palm curved under his shaft, lifting it just enough to feel the weight — not heavy, not exaggerated, but real, human, present.

She looked.

Not down, not up, but into him — through the hand, through the warmth that passed skin to skin, through the faint pulse she felt beneath her thumb. Her brow did not furrow; her lips did not press in judgment. She studied him with the gaze of a sculptor, not seeking perfection, but essence. Line, proportion, readiness.

For a breath or two — or was it longer? — she remained that way. Still. Holding. Observing. Not assessing, as a lover might, nor marvelling, as a girl might. Simply confirming. Mechanically, almost without thought, she brushed a droplet from the tip of him. And what she found there — whether it was the tone of the skin, the temperance of the flesh, the memory held in its warmth — pleased her. Her fingers withdrew with the same composure with which they had come. No flourish. No shame. Only a parting, as of a hand returning from holy water.

She rose.

Slowly. Silently. Like a priestess from her kneeling. Not to

Speak. Not to explain. But to move on to the next page in the rite that had no name, only necessity.

He did not move. Not yet.

He stood where he had been touched, his breath unhurried, his body still bared, his mind adrift not in arousal but in a kind of quiet awe — at her poise, at the simplicity of the act, at how little of himself had resisted being offered. There had been no dominance in her touch, no ownership. Only the assertion that *this* — this, too — was part of what must be seen before they continued.

And so it had been seen.

And now something waited. Not behind him, not ahead, but just out of reach, like a curtain not yet drawn aside.

She looked at him with an unflinching calm, her voice low, yet resolute: “You may undress right here. No one will lay a hand on your clothes.” The words hung in the air, simple, unadorned, but heavy with unspoken trust. Without another glance, she turned on her heel and slipped quietly from the room, leaving behind only the faint scent of lavender and the whisper of her departing steps.

The maid remained — a shadow of soft efficiency. Her eyes held no judgment, only the patient care of one accustomed to such moments. She stepped closer, fingers deft but gentle, tracing the edges of fabric as though reading a secret script. One by one, the layers fell away — first the heavy coat, its weight dissipating like a last breath; then the shirt, cool against his skin

as it slipped over his shoulders; trousers followed, unfastened with careful fingers, exposing the bare flesh beneath. His body stood revealed, vulnerable yet unashamed, the quiet intimacy of the act wrapping around him like a shroud woven from silence and trust.

Then, just as the last thread slipped free, the maid's voice fell to a hush — soft, tremulous, almost involuntary. “You are very beautiful,” she whispered, the words hanging like a secret between them, fragile and startling in their sudden intimacy.

Every movement held a tactile poetry — the faint brush of fingertips, the subtle shift of muscle beneath soft palms, the slight catch of breath as warmth met cool air. Here, in this secluded space, he was unmade and remade, not by passion or desire, but by ritual — an offering, a surrender to something older than words.

The maid's fingers closed gently around his hand — warm, steady, a soft yet undeniable claim. Her touch was quiet authority, a tether pulling him through the heavy door behind which her mistress had vanished. The corridor beyond was narrow, walls cloaked in shadows that seemed to breathe, their muted silence thick with unspoken rites. The faint echo of their footsteps mingled with the scent of damp stone and distant incense, drawing him deeper into this intimate sanctum.

The second maid awaited at the corridor's end — her presence a quiet mirror of the first, yet carrying an older grace, a knowing tempered by years. Her uniform, crisp and modest, framed a

body that moved with patient deliberation, hands ready to serve the unvoiced commands of tradition. She regarded him with steady eyes — not as a stranger, but as a vessel entering a sacred passage.

He stepped forward, shedding the remnants of hesitation as he lowered himself into the steaming bath. The water enveloped him, hot and dense, a molten embrace that seeped into every sinew, coaxing the tension from his muscles and the dust from his skin. The air hung thick with the mingled scents of rosemary and beeswax, swirling gently around the confines of the tiled chamber.

Her hands emerged, slick with fragrant soap, tracing slow, purposeful lines across his flesh. Each stroke was a delicate caress, yet carried the weight of ceremony — fingers gliding over the sharp ridges of his collarbone, the hollow of his throat, the tense planes of his back. The soap foamed and slipped, warm and yielding beneath her touch, gathering the grime and fatigue of his journey as though washing away the past itself.

The air in the bathing chamber was thick and heavy, laden with the scent of steam, rosemary, and beeswax. The warm mist curled around the figure immersed in the water, his skin flushed pink from the hot embrace of the bath. His muscles relaxed, the tension of the journey slowly uncoiling, as the second maid's careful hands traced languid paths across his body — each touch an unspoken invocation of cleansing and renewal.

The door opened silently, and she entered — the mistress

of this house, draped in a diaphanous negligee of pale silk that clung to her form like a whispered secret. Her eyes, dark and fathomless, fixed upon him with a calm command, yet softened by something almost tender, a quiet fire burning beneath her composed exterior.

The second maid dipped her head in a silent farewell and retreated, her footsteps fading until only the quiet hiss of the bath and the charged stillness of the room remained.

They were alone. In the warm haze of steam and scent, the air thick with promise and quiet power.

She moved with measured grace, her footsteps light as she approached and settled herself upon the low pouf beside the bath. The silk of her gown shimmered faintly in the diffuse light, rippling with every subtle movement. The atmosphere seemed to shift, charged now with something intimate and solemn, the very walls of the chamber bearing witness to the delicate rite unfolding within.

“I hope you will understand,” her voice was steady but gentle, “no matter how strange this may seem to you.” Her gaze held his, steady and unwavering. “I am a mother. I must know who I allow into my daughter. I must be certain.” She paused, the slightest crease forming between her brows, a hint of the weight she carried. “I need healthy grandchildren.” The words hung in the air, deliberate and measured.

Her fingers lightly touched the sheer fabric at her throat, drawing a breath that seemed to steady her resolve. “I say

grandchildren,” she continued, voice softening, “because I hope for twins.” A faint, wistful smile flickered at the corners of her lips. “It has happened before in our line. I myself have a twin sister.” She glanced away briefly, eyes distant, tracing memories woven deep into her bloodline. “Samira was born alone, but now... now, there is a possibility.”

His eyes held hers, a flicker of surprise and uncertainty crossing his face, yet his voice was steady when he spoke, though his words were measured, cautious. “Twins... That would be a rare blessing.”

She inclined her head, accepting the truth of his words without hesitation. “Rare, yes. But not impossible.”

A silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken thoughts and ancient hopes. Then she rose, her movement fluid and deliberate. “Please, stand,” she commanded softly.

He obeyed, rising from the bath, water cascading down his skin in slow rivulets. The heat clung to him still, a tender haze enveloping his body as he stood before her. She lifted a small copper ewer, its surface glinting faintly in the muted light, and poured cool water over him, the liquid tracing deliberate paths down his chest and gathering at the curve of his hips.

Her gaze lowered to him — more intent now, more searching. Where before, in the parlour, her observation had been casual, almost indifferent, now her eyes roamed with a meticulous hunger. Her hands followed, no longer tentative but authoritative, exploring with the precise curiosity of one seeking truth in flesh.

She took hold of him, not gently, but with a firm, almost clinical strength — bending and lifting, the weight and texture of him laid bare beneath her touch. Her fingers probed with care and intent, pressing, feeling every contour with a tenderness that bordered on reverence. The warmth of her hands contrasted with the cool air, and he felt the subtle pulse of her scrutiny.

Her inspection moved lower — she cupped the scrotum in her palm, fingers spreading softly, the skin delicate and yielding beneath her touch. She examined, palpated, seeking confirmation in every subtle detail. The room seemed to hold its breath, the only sound the soft splash of water and the quiet murmur of her careful ministrations.

In that charged stillness, he felt exposed not just physically but in the fragile spaces between thought and feeling, where ancient hopes mingled with present vulnerability. She was no longer merely a woman, no longer just a mother; she was the guardian of a lineage, the keeper of secrets written in flesh and blood.

Her eyes met his again, steady and unyielding. The moment stretched, taut and shimmering with unspoken promise.

Her experienced gaze travelled down to him with an appraisal sharp and discerning. “You carry well the strength of your line,” she murmured, voice low, almost reverent. “Such firmness... such form — it speaks of vitality and purpose. Not every man bears such a gift.”

Her fingers, deft and sure, lifted him gently yet insistently, bending him upwards, tracing the taut skin with careful fingers.

“See how it holds, how it responds,” she said, her tone threaded with quiet admiration. “There is power here, tempered by restraint — a balance most rare.”

She cupped his testicles again — with deliberate tenderness, her touch respectful, as if honouring something sacred. “Strong, healthy,” she whispered, “exactly what I hoped to find. Such form, such weight... It speaks well of you. And well for her.”

She stood, smoothing her gown with one sweep of the hand, the silk catching the lamplight like poured milk. Her gaze returned to his face — unflinching, now almost softened.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “For understanding.”

Then, raising her voice just enough to carry: “Anfisa.”

The second maid reappeared without a sound, as though waiting just beyond the veil of steam. The mistress gave a small, precise nod and withdrew, her bare feet whispering against the warm tiles, leaving behind only her scent and the echo of command.

Anfisa lifted the copper ewer once more, and the water she poured now was cool and decisive, sluicing down his body, tracing the grooves and hollows where soap still clung. The foam broke and slid from him like shed skin, collecting at the base of the tub before vanishing into the drain with a gurgling sigh.

Another shape moved through the steam — the first maid had returned. She bore in her arms a great towel, thick and soft, warmed near the stove. Without a word, she stepped behind him, wrapping it around his shoulders, then his torso, drawing it close

with a gesture that felt at once maternal and ritualistic. She patted him dry with slow, confident movements, her palms pressing firmly into flesh — across his chest, his belly, his hips, down the curve of his back and the long planes of his thighs. There was no haste, no embarrassment. Only the quiet finality of a rite nearly completed.

Then she took his hand again — the same hand she had held before, in another room, a lifetime ago — and said softly:

“Come. The young mistress is waiting.”

Still nude, still warm and damp from the bath, he followed her through the tiled passage and back into the corridor. The air beyond the steam-room felt sharper now, more real. The lamps flickered low, casting long shadows that moved like memories.

As they walked, he turned slightly toward her and asked, his voice measured, “And the husband? Where is he tonight?”

The maid did not stop walking, but her hand on his tightened slightly.

“You are in the lady’s house,” she said in a hush. “The husband keeps his own. Tonight, the young mistress sleeps here — with her mother. No one will disturb you.”

He was silent a moment. Then, glancing at her sidelong, almost idly: “Do you often have... guests like me?”

For a breath, the maid said nothing. Her brow furrowed faintly, as though the question were foreign, unexpected. Then she looked ahead again, and her voice returned — lower, touched with a strange pride.

“No,” she said simply. “Madam is... particular. Even before the wedding, she would send away suitors who displeased her. She trusts no one easily. Not with her daughter.”

She slowed her step, glancing toward him. “You are the only man invited here since the wedding.”

Another pause. Then, quieter still, as if sharing a secret she herself barely believed: “You are the only one she let near her... since the girl became a woman.”

The door opened without a sound, and warm lamplight spilled out like honey, thick and golden, licking across the tiled corridor and catching faintly on his damp skin.

The maid stepped in first, still holding his hand, and then released him with a gesture half-formal, half-silent — like a veil being drawn. Without a word, she bowed slightly and withdrew, the heavy door gliding shut behind her with a click soft as a kiss.

He stood motionless on the threshold.

Before him stretched a chamber unlike any he had seen in this house — a room steeped not in the restrained elegance of Russian aristocracy, but in something older, silkier, dreamed. It was not large, yet it breathed expansiveness. The light came not from a single source, but from many — small brass lamps mounted in niches, their flames guarded by coloured glass, casting a slow-drifting haze of amber, coral, and indigo. The shadows they birthed moved gently along the walls, as if stirred by the rhythm of some silent music.

The floor was hidden beneath carpets — layer upon layer

of them, deep-piled and vibrant, their patterns of stars, birds, and vines blooming beneath his bare feet like garden paths in a forgotten myth. The air was dense with scent: dried rose petals, burnt sugar, cardamom, and the faintest trace of musk, not vulgar but ancient — like a perfume locked for years in a lacquered casket and only now released.

Canopies of gauze fell from the ceiling in soft swags, forming slow arcs above and around a low, wide bed that sat like an island in the centre of the room. The bedding was a symphony of fabrics — crushed velvet, embroidered silk, linens faded with age and love. Cushions were strewn carelessly yet artfully, as if a child had once played at being queen and the room had quietly accepted the fantasy as law.

There were traces of girlhood still here — delicate things left untouched by time. A carved wooden chest with its lid slightly ajar, revealing a nest of dolls with painted faces and glass eyes that reflected firelight. A vanity table cluttered with combs, little bottles, and a cracked porcelain horse. On the wall beside it hung a framed square of faded embroidery, uneven stitches spelling out a name in Arabic script, childlike and proud.

He saw no sign of her.

The room was empty of movement, but not of presence. She was here — somewhere — held in the folds of the curtain, the warmth of the sheets, the breath of scent that lingered near the pillows. Her essence was woven into every fibre.

He remained at the threshold, one hand resting against the

carved doorframe. The air touched him like a whisper, and though the heat from the bath still clung to his skin, a new warmth was growing — quieter, deeper, blooming behind his ribs.

The silence was not empty, but expectant.

He did not call her name.

He knew she would come.

He remained still, not wishing to shatter the delicate hush that hung over the chamber. The silence had its own language here, and he had learned, in his long life, that certain silences are better read than broken.

But then — like a note plucked gently from the string of an unseen instrument — came a voice from behind the standing screen.

“Don’t be shy,” it said, and it was not a girl’s voice, but a woman’s: low, warm, textured like silk brushed against the grain. “I’m already shy enough for the both of us.”

The words lingered in the air, curling through the haze like perfume. They were spoken without tremor, but with a softness that revealed their truth. There was no irony in them, no coyness — only a strange, tender honesty that struck more deeply than any flirtation might have.

He turned toward the screen.

Its painted panels rose to shoulder height, lacquered with pale gold and etched with faded figures — gazelles, date palms, and women in flowing robes. He moved slowly, barefoot upon the carpets, his breath steady, careful not to tread too heavily upon

the moment.

As he stepped around the edge of the screen, the room revealed her like a curtain parting on a long-guarded stage.

She was seated before a low mirrored vanity, her back to him — though not entirely, for the mirror caught her face and framed it in glass and shadow. She wore a penuar of fine gauze, loose at the shoulders, one strap having slid down the curve of her arm. Her dark hair was unbound, falling in soft ripples down her spine, and the lamplight touched its waves with bronze.

She saw him the moment he stepped into view.

Their eyes met in the reflection.

Her eyes, large and almond-shaped, held him at once — not in boldness, but in something deeper: surprise, uncertainty, an unguarded curiosity that made her seem even more naked than if she had stood. For a heartbeat they regarded each other in the silent intimacy that only mirrors permit — an echo of the real, and yet more raw in its truth.

Then her gaze shifted.

Lower.

She looked down.

And in the mirror he saw her face change — not dramatically, but with a quiet shock that rippled through her features like a sudden breeze across still water. Her brows lifted slightly, her gaze widening in soft astonishment. Her lips, pale and full, parted as if to speak — but no sound came.

A breath, perhaps.

Or the beginning of one.

Her fingers, which had been folded in her lap, now gripped lightly at the edge of the dressing table, and her posture stiffened by a thread's width, though she did not turn her head. She continued to look at him only through the glass — like a child afraid to break the spell of a dream.

And he — he stood still as a statue carved from breath and flesh, the air around him warmer now, more alive, each pore on his skin pricked open by the heat of her eyes.

He watched her a moment longer in the mirror — the stillness of her frame, the parted lips, the breath she had not quite drawn. Then, his voice broke gently into the hush, low and composed, tinged with an edge of humour so soft it felt almost like concern.

“Forgive me... Did I startle you?” he asked. “Or have I merely imagined it?”

For a second, nothing changed. Then she blinked, as if emerging from under water, and her lips curved, slowly, reluctantly, into a smile — not one offered to charm, but one stolen from her own wandering thoughts.

She let out a small sound — not quite a laugh, but something more intimate: a breath caught in amusement, tempered by disbelief.

“I...” she began, then paused. A flush rose at the base of her throat, blooming delicately against the golden undertones of her skin. Her fingers fidgeted with a strand of her own hair, then dropped it, as if aware she was behaving like a girl.

"I think," she said at last, still facing the mirror, "I've never really seen a man before."

Her voice was quiet, but the words landed between them like a confession laid bare upon silk.

She turned then — not fully, but just enough for her profile to appear beyond the frame of glass. Her eyes remained on his, now with a steadier gaze, though it held a shimmer of wonder still. "Not... like this," she added, more softly. "Not... as he is. Not whole. Not *real*."

Her tone had no artifice. It was not flirtation, but something rawer. A girl's honesty, caught off-guard in a woman's mouth. She seemed almost surprised by her own words — as though they had formed without permission and now lingered, exposed and irreversible.

Her hand rose and touched her collarbone, fingers tracing the edge of the fallen strap. She looked at him again, this time directly, without the barrier of the mirror.

"You don't look... as I imagined," she said, and then her smile curved deeper, with that strange blend of shyness and private delight. "You're more."

The light trembled slightly in the oil lamp beside her, as if the room, too, had exhaled.

He remained still, yet the warmth beneath his skin spread slowly, not from modesty or pride, but from the recognition of something long silent being named at last. He was no stranger to women's praise — but this, this was something else. It came

not from admiration, but from astonishment. As though she had opened a book she thought she understood, and found new, trembling pages beneath the old.

He stepped toward her, unhurried. The silence that stretched between them was not empty — it was thick with something expectant, like the air before thunder. His bare feet moved noiselessly across the deep pile of the carpet, the warmth of the bathing chamber still clinging to his skin.

And she turned.

Not sharply, not startled — but with the languid grace of one who already knew he would come close. Her shoulders moved first, then her head, her hands remaining folded in her lap. When their eyes met without the intermediary of glass, something shifted.

She was lovelier like this.

In the mirror, her beauty had already stirred the blood — there was allure in the shape of her cheek, the curve of her neck, the fall of raven-dark hair against ivory silk. But now, without the filter of reflection, the illusion was gone — and what remained was real. More arresting. More tender. The shadows of her lashes were longer in truth than in glass; the flush of her cheeks more alive; her lips parted not with the stillness of image, but with breath.

She looked up at him fully now. Her gaze roamed over him once more, as if unable to help itself: from the lines of his collarbones down the wet shimmer of his chest, to the place

where the lamplight caught him fully — exposed, unguarded, unapologetically male. And then back — upward — to his face, as though seeking something there to hold on to.

He watched her with calm intensity, his own breath steady.

“You’ve never seen a man,” he said softly, “and yet you speak without fear.”

Her lips trembled with a half-smile, as if the truth of what he’d said reached her, but did not contradict what stirred in her breast.

“I think...” she began, and her voice was hushed now, huskier than before, “perhaps it’s because you have come to me before.”

She did not look away. Her eyes searched his, even as her fingers toyed absently with the edge of her robe, its silken knot slowly loosening at her waist. Her gaze drifted lower again, then rose — slowly — to meet his.

“In dreams,” she added. “Not just once.”

The air between them grew warmer, almost liquid in its thickness.

“Always the same shape,” she said, with a touch of wonder, “and always the same eyes. And I... I always knew you were not entirely of this world.”

She was speaking not to flatter, nor to seduce, but to confess — to give shape to something long held in silence, now forced into language by the sheer, undeniable reality of him standing there before her, unhidden.

Her hand lifted, hovered near her throat.

“You stood there, just as you do now... And I would wake

before you touched me.”

A pause. She tilted her head slightly.

“But you are here now. And I’m not waking.”

He took one step closer — and then another. The silk of her robe stirred faintly as the air between them tightened. Now there was no more distance to measure; he stood so near she could have breathed him in.

She did.

That close, his presence was no longer merely seen but felt: a slow radiance of heat, the scent of clean skin and bathwater, the subtle weight of his masculinity made real — not imagined, not dreamt, not feared.

And something changed in her.

The wonder did not vanish — it remained, like the shimmering wake of moonlight on still water — but behind it, something else lit her eyes. A gleam of mischief, soft and feline, curled at the corners of her mouth. The solemn girl before the mirror gave way to something younger, brighter, even wilder. Her lips, which had trembled with awe, now curved into a smile just this side of daring.

Gone was the listless beauty he had seen on Sadovaya that first time — wrapped in furs, her gaze veiled and remote. This girl, sitting before him now with her robe slipping from one shoulder, looked like she had stepped through fire to find herself.

And yet—

Just as her fingers inched forward, then stopped — just as her

breath caught in her throat — the bravado flickered. The girl who could smile at dreams now sat utterly still, eyes fixed on him, her hand hovering just a hair's breadth from his hip. The boldness faltered into a gentler shyness, as if she suddenly remembered the sheer truth of his nearness, of his body bared entirely to her gaze.

She looked up.

“May I...?” she asked, barely more than a whisper.

It was not innocence that coloured her question, nor pretence of it. It was reverence. Not for his status, nor his seniority, but for the simple gravity of the moment. For all that her body ached to know, and all that it still feared to reach for.

Her fingers trembled slightly in the air between them. Waiting.

She could have touched him without asking — he saw it in the longing that clung to her like perfume — but she didn't. Something in her had been taught to ask, even here, even now.

She waited for his word.

He gave her the smallest of nods, accompanied by a smile that tilted one corner of his mouth — a gesture not mocking, but gently amused, like an older boy permitting a younger girl to try the reins of a quiet horse.

“If you must,” he murmured, voice low and warm, “then be brave about it.”

She gave a breathless laugh — more sigh than sound — and for a moment her lashes dipped, as if she were gathering herself. Then, slowly, like a child touching something wondrous and half-

forbidden, she reached for him.

Only one hand moved.

The other remained at her side, clutched around the edge of her robe — but the hand that rose toward him was trembling slightly, its fingers parted, unsure of how to shape their purpose. There was no practised seduction in her touch — no confidence, no finesse. She did not wrap her hand around him as if she knew what he liked. She merely let her palm hover, then rest, lightly, along his shaft.

Just that.

And yet—

A slow breath left him. Not from pleasure, not yet, but from recognition.

She had not lied. Not to him. He, who had known the touch of many — maids and mistresses, dancers, widows, laughing students in candlelit rooms — he knew the practiced hand, the sly curl of a knowing wrist, the greedy softness of lips that aimed to impress. He had known all the theatres a body could perform. But this — this was different.

Her hand was warm but unsure, as though it half-feared to mar him with the press of its awe. She touched him not like a man, but like a mystery — one she had seen only in shadowed dreams. There was no skill in her fingers, but there was a tenderness so pure it bordered on reverence. And that, he found, undid something in him more swiftly than any clever mouth ever had.

Her mother's hands had been deft, purposeful, unflinching —

hands of a matron who knew what must be done and why. But Samira's... Samira's were something else entirely.

This hand had never been taught.

This hand belonged to the girl in the tower, to the dreamer behind the veil, to the princess who woke in the moonlight to find the shape of her desire standing at the edge of her world.

She looked up at him then — not shyly, not boldly, but as if checking to see whether she had hurt him, or somehow done it wrong. There was nothing coquettish in the glance, no angle of performance. Only sincerity, and breath, and the flicker of something ancient in her blood that had stirred for the first time.

He did not speak.

He didn't need to.

Her fingers adjusted slightly, curling — not grasping, not stroking, only adapting to his shape, as if her hand wished to remember it forever. She said nothing, but the silence was so full it trembled.

And somewhere deep inside him — below the surface, below even the flesh — something answered.

And he answered her — without words, without motion, save the slow, deliberate yielding of his body to hers.

What had rested in her hand like something exquisite and asleep began, little by little, to awaken. Not with abruptness, not with aggression, but with a quiet inevitability — as the tide returns to shore, as sap stirs in trees when spring draws near.

He hardened.

He grew.

Right there, within the cradle of her open palm.

She gasped — not sharply, not in fear, but with a kind of delighted dismay, like a girl watching the spell she spoke aloud actually take form before her eyes.

“Oh no,” she whispered, laughter bright behind the whisper. “Stop. Stop growing. Please.”

But her hand didn’t let go.

He looked down at her then — this moon-eyed creature with the palm that trembled and clung — and he let out a breath of laughter so low it might’ve been mistaken for a purr.

“Too late, I’m afraid,” he said. “You’ve stirred the mountain, little one. Now you must hope it does not walk.”

She covered her mouth with her free hand, biting back a giggle. But her eyes stayed where they were — wide, awestruck, half-mad with some emotion she could not name. The kind that tasted like panic but felt like joy.

“I didn’t mean to,” she said, though neither of them believed it. “I only wanted to know...”

He tilted his head. “Know what?”

“What it felt like,” she said, her voice barely a breath now. “To touch something real. Something...” Her gaze dropped again. “Something a dream would never dare show me.”

And still she held him.

Still he thickened — slowly, magnificently, filling her grasp with the heat and weight and living power of a man whose body

had known patience and whose desire, once woken, did not easily go back to sleep.

Her fingers adjusted, uncertain again, as if she wasn't sure whether to draw away or hold tighter. The robe slipped from one shoulder as she shifted, and a sliver of her bare collarbone caught the amber light. Her lips parted, not for words now, but for breath — and the air between them was no longer innocent.

No, not innocent.

But still holy, somehow. As if the gods, in their long slumber, had cracked open one dreaming eye to watch.

She pulled back her hand just a fraction, brow furrowing with gentle concern, her eyes searching his face.

“Does it hurt?” she asked, voice soft and almost hesitant, as if fearing to break something fragile.

He let out a low chuckle, that dry, half-teasing sound of a man who's walked long enough through the wilds of life to know its absurdities.

“Not at all,” he said, the corners of his mouth twitching into a faint smile. “Though I daresay it's a curious thing to ask. Would you have me complain in front of you?”

She blinked, her mouth twitching in a shy grin, but he caught the unspoken question in her gaze — her fear that he might recoil, that something might go wrong in this delicate communion of flesh and will.

And yet, inside, his thoughts moved quietly but firmly, like a river beneath the surface.

In youth, he mused, he would have spilled himself like molten silver, wild and unbridled, before the maiden's hesitant touch.

But years — decades — of knowing, of tempering desire like a blacksmith tempers steel, had taught him better. He could hold back the flood, savour the moment's slender thread, and let the feeling grow slow, patient, full-bodied.

This was a different kind of strength.

He glanced down at her hand, tracing the line where her fingers met his flesh, and felt an odd warmth — not only of flesh but of something deeper, almost sacred.

“I’ve learned the value of restraint,” he said quietly. “Experience grants a certain... mercy. It lets a man enjoy without losing himself.”

Her eyes softened, as if she understood more than his words said, and the air thickened between them with that strange alchemy of trust and wonder.

She looked down, eyes widening as the breadth of him grew beyond what her single hand could fully encompass. With a hesitant breath, she brought the other hand into play, sliding it gently to meet the first at the base, her small fists pressing, knuckle to knuckle, like two halves closing around a precious treasure.

Yet even then, a portion of him — thick, proud, the head crowned in its smooth, shining flesh — remained free, teasing, untamed.

Her fingers tightened instinctively, as if to contain a wild thing

barely held in leash, and she marveled at the warmth pulsing beneath her skin, a heat so vivid it seemed almost alive.

For a moment, her gaze flickered up to his, seeking permission, reassurance — a silent question spoken without words.

And in that instant, the room grew still, as if the very air waited with bated breath for what would come next.

He met her gaze with a slow, approving smile, the kind that held no judgment but all the quiet strength of a man who had weathered far more than a single touch.

“Careful,” he murmured, voice low and warm, “you might just tame what’s meant to be wild.”

His fingers found hers, gentle but firm, guiding, as if to steady a trembling bird perched on his palm.

“You have the hands of a storyteller,” he said softly, “telling secrets with each careful stroke.”

There was no rush in him now — only a deep, simmering patience, a knowing that this moment was theirs alone to shape, to stretch thin like silk between fingers.

Her eyes glimmered, mischief returning to them, but tempered with that fragile new respect.

“I’m learning,” she whispered, as if confessing a sacred truth.

He chuckled — a sound like gravel sliding softly in a quiet stream — and pulled her hand just a little closer, feeling the pulse beneath, strong and steady, alive.

“Then let us write this story together,” he said, “one careful

chapter at a time.”

The room seemed to breathe with them — shadows dancing faintly on the walls as two souls, hesitant yet eager, crossed the threshold from curiosity into something far older, far deeper.

Her fingers moved with a newfound confidence, though still tender and unpractised, tracing the thick length with gentle, almost reverent strokes. Each subtle movement sent a faint shiver through him, the heat beneath his skin rising in quiet waves. He could feel the soft tremble in her hand, the delicate uncertainty wrapped in curiosity and desire.

“You hold more than flesh,” he whispered, voice low and velvety, “you cradle something ancient... a fire waiting to be kindled.”

She glanced up, eyes shimmering with a mix of awe and hesitation, lips parting slightly as if to speak, then closing again. The air between them was charged — dense with the unspoken promises and delicate fears that lay just beneath the surface.

Her touch lingered, slow and deliberate, as if memorising the curve and weight, the pulse that thrummed like a secret drumbeat beneath her palm. He felt the blood stir, swelling and pressing against the gentle confines of her hands, rising with a patient insistence.

“Is it... too much?” she asked softly, voice barely more than a breath.

“Never too much,” he answered with a tender smile, “only just enough.”

His gaze never wavered, steady and deep, as he let himself sink into the sensation of her innocence meeting his experience — a fragile dance of trust and awakening.

She shivered again, this time with a flush of warmth that crept to her cheeks, and her hands faltered just for a moment before she steadied them, resolute now, willing to explore what lay beyond the familiar.

In that stillness, surrounded by the quiet murmurs of the room, two worlds seemed to converge — her youthful wonder and his seasoned calm — woven together by the soft, electric touch of skin on skin.

She ceased to move.

Her fingers, still cupped lightly at the base of him, loosened. Her gaze, which had drifted in reverent fascination over his form, now pulled upward — first slowly, then all at once, like a thought catching flame. Her lips parted, but not in astonishment this time. Something behind her eyes had shifted — softened, deepened, sharpened. A memory, perhaps. Or the ghost of one.

Her hand withdrew — reluctantly, reverently — as if she feared to break some fragile link that now hummed between them.

Then, her chin lifted, and she looked up at him fully.

“Why...” she began, her voice low and strange with something half-remembered. “Why don’t you want to see me?”

The question was not accusing. There was no wounded pride in it. It came wrapped instead in a quiet ache, like a note from

a forgotten melody — something ancient, like longing passed down through blood.

He tilted his head, a half-smile ghosting his lips, amused and touched in equal measure.

“Who says I don’t?” he murmured, and the sound of his voice seemed to curl warmly through the space between them. “I’ve been seeing you since before you were born, little flame.”

She blinked at that — startled, perhaps, by the tenderness, or by the strange gravity beneath the words. A flush rose in her cheeks again, not of embarrassment this time, but of something like being known.

She stood then — slowly, carefully, as though not to disturb the air too much. And when she did, her robe fluttered with her, the sheer fabric of it brushing, without malice, across the tip of him.

A faint, involuntary wince passed his face.

She froze.

“Oh —! Forgive me,” she gasped, a hand flying to her chest. “I didn’t mean — was it... was that too rough?”

Her voice had dropped into that hushed, distinctly feminine timbre — a softness edged with panic, the sound of a woman who fears she’s bruised something precious.

He laughed, gently, the sound dry and rich as old silk.

“It’s a wicked wound,” he said with a mock solemnity, “but I daresay I’ll survive it.”

Her shoulders relaxed, her lips curling with a sheepish smile

that turned her momentary panic into something sweeter.

Now she stood before him, the lamp behind her setting her in faint silhouette, its honeyed glow outlining the soft inward curve of her waist, the taper of her thighs, the quiet valley between her collarbones. The robe still clung to her, but just barely — one strap had long since fallen, and the other now slid lower, slow as dusk.

Her hands rose slightly, fingers curling at the edge of the gauze, the way one might prepare to unwrap a gift not yet offered.

But before she could move, he did.

His hands came to her hips — firm but unhurried. He guided her gently, not backward but sideways, with the casual confidence of a man who did not ask permission, but still listened to her body.

He turned her.

With a single smooth motion, he guided her to face away from him, and then, without ceremony, he sat — settling himself onto the stool where she had just been.

Now she stood before him.

He looked up at her — not as a suppliant, nor as a worshipper, but as something quieter, deeper. A man who waited not for permission, but for the world to unfold in its time.

She felt his gaze — warm, steady, unabashed. Not the frantic hunger of a youth who stares only at what he wants to possess, but the slow, molten appraisal of one who *remembers* what beauty is, and honours it without haste.

And she—

She stood there, still wrapped in gauze and lamplight, her hands at her sides, suddenly aware of how little she could hide from him, even fully clothed.

Her breath shallowed.

She could feel the heat of his skin lingering on the stool beneath her, the scent of him in the air — clean, human, male.

He said nothing.

Only watched her.

Waited.

Not for her to perform, but to choose.

To move.

To be.

And in that silence, something rose in her spine — not shame, not nervousness, but a quiet power. She had never been seen like this before. Never been looked at from *below* — not with worship, but with *trust*. As if her body were a truth he had always known, and was now only waiting for her to name aloud.

The robe slipped a fraction lower on her shoulders.

And his hands did not move.

But his breath did.

Her fingers, delicate and uncertain, slipped beneath the straps of her robe. The fabric, already loosened, gave way with a whisper, gliding off her shoulders in two pale ribbons. It hesitated a moment at the swell of her hips — then fell in a soft, weightless spiral to the floor, pooling around her feet like something

surrendered.

He watched it fall.

And because he watched its descent, it was her legs he saw first.

They were long — not sculpted into perfection, but shaped by something finer: the quiet architecture of truth. Perhaps too slender by some measure, her knees a touch sharp, her calves lean and trembling faintly with the tension of stillness. Yet they held a grace that no artist could plan — a wild, almost adolescent beauty that seemed to speak not of refinement, but of raw honesty. He found them exquisite.

He reached out — not to claim, but to learn — and let his palms brush slowly up her calves. The skin was warm, faintly shivering. His hands rose, gliding over the hollows of her knees, the taut lines of her thighs, and higher still — toward the narrow, jutting bones of her hips.

She did not move.

Perhaps she couldn't.

In her silks and shawls, he had imagined a different woman — a softer one, rounder in all the usual places. But this girl, stripped of artifice and linen, struck him more keenly. She stood before him like something unfinished and utterly irreplaceable. The awkward grace of her youth, the subtle misfit of proportion — it charmed him in a way perfection never could. She had not yet learned her beauty. And that, more than anything, was what made her radiant.

Her pubis stood level with his face — framed in a crown of soft, curling hair the colour of dark chestnut tinged with bronze, catching the lamplight like threads of copper. Above it, her stomach tensed beneath his gaze; he saw the muscles draw inward, shyly, as though trying to hide themselves in the cage of her own skin.

He touched her belly with a single finger, and she gasped — softly, not in fright, but in a breath held too long. Her navel was deep, shadowed, a small and perfect hollow. At his touch, her ribs rose into view, delicate as latticework beneath flesh.

And then—

Above—

The weight of her breasts.

They startled him, not because they were out of place, but because they were so *present*. Heavy, full, high on her slender chest, they gave her figure a balance it had lacked in dress — like punctuation at the end of a long, breathless sentence. The contrast was startling: the long, thin line of her frame met by the ripe curve of flesh that spoke of something older, something womanly, grounded and bold.

Her nipples were long and dark, the areolae wide, like soft dusk-coloured moons against pale skin. He lifted a hand, reverent, and brushed the pad of his thumb over one.

It puckered at once — tightly, sharply — as though recoiling from cold or shame.

She winced.

Just barely.

Her knees drew inward, almost imperceptibly, as if she feared he had hurt her.

His hand stilled.

He looked up at her face, and in his gaze there was both apology and mischief.

“Forgive me,” he said, voice low and wry, “if I wounded you. Shall I offer a bandage for the crime?”

His smile curved, not wide, but warm — and gently mocking, the way one might tease a creature too lovely to scold.

She exhaled, eyes flickering with both amusement and a strange, sharp tenderness. Her posture softened, though the flush across her chest remained — spreading slowly, like the bloom of light through stained glass.

And still he sat — gazing upward at her bare body as though it were both scripture and secret.

Waiting.

She arched a brow.

“Oh, you’re dangerous,” she said, softly, more to herself than to him. “That mouth of yours.”

He tilted his head.

“That’s not the first time I’ve heard that, I confess,” he murmured. “Though seldom from someone so... impeccably armed.”

She laughed — quiet, breathy, surprised by it — and the sound drew a new kind of colour to her face, not the blush of shame,

but something warmer. Her body was still trembling slightly; not from cold, but from standing this long in exposure. She was tall enough that he did not need to crane his neck — her skin was right there, just above the level of his eyes, humming with proximity.

“Well, then,” she said, hands hovering awkwardly near her sides, as if unsure what to do with them. “If I’ve wounded you... do I not owe a form of penance?”

“You do,” he said, without hesitation.

She tilted her head, mimicking his earlier gesture.

“And?”

“I propose,” he replied, “that you let me forget the pain entirely — by inflicting a greater one in its place.”

There was no menace in his voice, only something richly playful. But she caught her breath anyway, and he saw it — the way her sternum rose sharply, the muscles tightening beneath the softness. Not fear. Readiness. The way prey sometimes leans toward the hunter, not away.

Her fingers fluttered again at her sides.

Then she did something curious.

She stepped forward, so that the inner curve of her thighs grazed his knees, and stood so close now that he could see the fine hairs on her belly quiver in the lamplight. Her scent reached him — not perfume, not anything deliberate. Just her. Skin warmed by nerves. A trace of something bitter, something sweet. Life, unembellished.

She was, in that moment, too close to be merely seen. She had become a terrain — one he might traverse.

He leaned forward slowly and placed his mouth against her hip bone — just there, where the flesh thins to ivory, and heat pools near the joint. He did not kiss. Only rested his lips, letting the silence speak between them.

She inhaled sharply.

He felt her hands settle — hesitantly — on his shoulders. Her fingertips pressed into his bare skin, not to restrain him, but to anchor herself. Her knees gave a small, invisible sigh.

“You’re not in a hurry,” she whispered.

“No,” he said against her skin. “And neither are you.”

She didn’t answer. She didn’t need to.

Instead, she adjusted her stance — wider, steadier. A silent offering.

He turned his head and kissed the other hip.

Then, slowly, he let his palms glide once more along the line of her thighs, from behind her knees up to the curve where leg became haunch. Her skin there was impossibly soft, like the inside of a wrist. It gave slightly under his touch, warm and faintly trembling.

He looked up at her again.

Her eyes were half-lidded now, but not closed. She was watching him as one watches fire — entranced, wary, knowing it can both warm and scar.

With one hand, he traced the crease where her thigh met her

belly. Not lewdly. Not yet. Just a study, a question made of touch. She shivered.

He smiled — not cruelly, but with the quiet confidence of one who understands the architecture of pleasure. Not just the mechanics, but the rhythm. The poetry. The intervals between.

“I must admit,” he said gently, his voice low and unhurried, “you are a more difficult text than I expected. But infinitely more rewarding.”

She looked down at him with a mixture of exasperation and delight.

“I swear,” she muttered, “you’re doing this just to torture me.”

“Only a little,” he said. “But in fairness — you started it.”

She laughed again, but it broke in her throat, because in that same moment, he leaned in and placed a kiss just beneath her navel — where the skin was smoothest, tight from the way she still held herself in. It was a soft, reverent kiss, like a seal being set to parchment.

Her breath left her in a slow, uneven wave.

One of her hands slid upward, into his hair.

He looked up again.

“What is it?” she asked, voice trembling slightly, as though sensing he was about to speak not with words but with action.

“I want,” he said, very quietly, “to see what happens to your voice when you forget it’s yours.”

She froze. Then laughed — but softer this time. Less out of irony, more from disbelief. And then she nodded, once. Barely.

He rose. Not abruptly, but like a tide — not so much standing as unfolding to his full height. Now they were face to face. Her breath reached his mouth. Her nipples, still hardened from the air and from earlier touch, brushed his chest. She made a small sound, almost involuntary.

He reached behind her — no ceremony, no comment — and pulled the coverlet from the divan. With one hand, he guided her back — back until the backs of her knees touched the edge. She did not resist. Her body followed his, fluid, willing. She sat.

He followed, kneeling once more — not before her, but with her legs now parted, his body fitted between them. His hands cupped the underside of her thighs, and with infinite care, he laid her back upon the cushions.

She let him.

Let him arrange her as one arranges something cherished, not owned. She was all angles and softness now — breasts rising and falling, her stomach still trying to hide itself, though less stubbornly now. Her legs trembled, but did not close.

He brushed a kiss to the inside of her knee. Then he looked up at her again — still waiting. Still asking. And she gave the smallest nod. As if to say: *Yes. I remember. Take me where memory ends.*

He did not rush. He had no reason to. Pleasure, after all, was not a pursuit — it was a *dwelling*.

So he lingered, kissed the place just above her knee once more, then a little higher. Not in haste, not in hunger, but in *ritual*.

He was charting her, like a man might chart a coastline long thought mythical — knowing full well it existed only because he had dreamed it so.

Her thighs tensed, but not in denial. They trembled as if remembering something ancient, inherited — some reflex from a time when touch was invocation, not negotiation.

She looked down at him again, and he caught her gaze — held it, as if to say: *Yes. I see you watching. Let yourself be watched.*

Then he bent again, and this time his lips found the inside of her other thigh, warm and smooth and taut with waiting. He breathed her in — not just her scent, though that too, rich and clean and private — but the warmth of her, the *offering* of her.

One of her hands gripped the cushion beside her; the other still lay in his hair, not directing but *anchoring*, as if to remind herself that he was real.

She made a small sound — softer than a word, louder than a sigh.

And then he moved lower. Not urgently. But inevitably.

The first contact was not even a kiss, not truly — just the warmth of his breath, so close it became indistinguishable from touch. Her hips shifted, but not to escape. Her breath caught, and he felt it rather than heard it.

He tasted her. Once. Lightly. Like a reader brushing a thumb over the first page of a forbidden text.

She gasped — not from shock, but from recognition. This, then, was the sentence they had been writing together all evening.

And now it was being read aloud.

He exhaled, slow and warm, and kissed her again — properly now. And again. Then let his tongue trace a patient arc, as if he had all the time in the world to learn this single word: *her*.

She writhed — not wildly, not theatrically, but like something molten shifting in a crucible, not to escape heat but to *become* it. Her fingers tightened in his hair.

He paused only to glance up, to see her face again. She was not composed. She was not arranged.

She was *unmade* — and she let herself be. Eyes wide, mouth parted, chest rising as if she were being kissed not in one place, but everywhere at once.

He returned to her, with more purpose now. Not force — never force. But rhythm. Cadence. Devotion. His hands held her open — not to expose, but to cradle.

And the sounds she made now were no longer filtered through thought. They came raw, rising from her like steam, like incense, like truth.

One of her legs curled around his shoulder. The other trembled, half-raised, unsure whether to flee or press closer.

He didn't speak. There was nothing left to say. But every motion of his mouth said it for him: *I know you. I honour you. I will not rush this. Not even at the edge.*

And when she shattered — because of course she did — it was not a scream but a *release*, like something unlocked after too many years of silence.

Her voice cracked open, not as a word, but as sound unchained. Her body arched, hips lifting as if to meet the stars, and her fingers clenched once, then stilled — flooded, not just with sensation, but with *permission*.

When she collapsed back, it was not into exhaustion. It was into peace.

She lay there, eyes dazed, lips parted, limbs adrift like a boat just after the storm has passed but before the silence has found its name.

He rose slowly, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand — not to erase, but to taste once more the echo of her. Then he leaned forward and kissed the centre of her chest, between her breasts, as if sealing something there.

Her hand found his again. And this time, *she pulled him* upward. Without words. Without question.

But with all the certainty in the world.

He let her guide him. There was a softness in it, yes, but no hesitation. She had yielded earlier — tentatively, with the caution of one who offers a secret. But now, her fingers curled around his, and it was not yielding. It was *claiming*.

Their bodies moved together not with the clean precision of choreography, but with that sacred clumsiness that can only belong to first entries — when instinct overtakes memory, and skin becomes wiser than thought.

She shifted, hips parting, thighs inviting — not open like a door, but like a book finally trusted into another's hands. Her legs

drew him in, and his body answered not with thrust, but *arrival*.

He paused. Not out of doubt. But reverence.

The moment poised on the edge — so close, and yet not yet. He hovered just above her, their skin brushing at every inch, his length resting along her inner thigh, hot and pulsing. Her breath was shallow now, not from fear, but anticipation so rich it threatened to devour stillness itself.

She looked up at him. No words. Only eyes, impossibly wide, impossibly *there*. No shield. No irony.

He leaned down and kissed her again — not mouth, this time, but temple. The place where thought begins. The place where no lover had kissed her before.

Then lower — cheekbone, jaw, the hollow beneath her ear, the tender line of her throat. His mouth moved downwards like water finding every slope of stone.

Her fingers clutched at his shoulders. There was nowhere left to hide — no clothing, no pretext, no illusion of distance. Only the thrum of two hearts beating not in unison, but in *counterpoint*.

She shifted again, ever so slightly, and he adjusted — guided not by logic, but by feel. The head of him brushed against her, slick now with want, and her whole body tensed — not in fear, but in awe.

And then — finally — he entered her.

Not sharply. Not suddenly. But with unbearable slowness.

As if being drawn into her was not an act of possession, but of *translation* — as though his body were learning a language he

had only ever heard in dreams.

She gasped. He felt it in her thighs, in her belly, in her chest, in her hands.

He pressed deeper. Her legs wrapped tighter.

Their eyes met, and neither looked away. There was nothing performative in it. No theatre.

Only truth.

The joining was not smooth. There was tension. There was ache. There was the too-human resistance of muscles unused to being this vulnerable. But none of it frightened him. He stilled — not to retreat, but to *listen*.

She adjusted, hips rolling, hands guiding. Their breath found a rhythm. And slowly — *slowly* — he began to move.

It was not friction. It was not thrust. It was *worship*.

Their bodies spoke now in a dialect older than language. Every motion was a call and answer: the press of his hips, the lift of hers, the soft mewl she tried to swallow, the growl he didn't.

Her skin gleamed, salt-kissed, moon-lit. Her hair fanned across the cushion in wild disarray, a crown of surrender. One arm reached back behind her head, the other clung to his back — not clawing, but *clinging*, as one clings to something sacred in the dark.

He was inside her now not just in flesh, but in presence. Their bellies met. Their chests grazed. Their mouths found one another not in hunger but in *recognition*.

He moved deeper. She arched. Their rhythm grew. Not faster

— but truer.

And as he felt her begin to climb again — this time not from the mouth of pleasure but from its very *throat* — he whispered something into her neck. Not a word. A sound. A vow made of breath.

She cried out — not in pain, not in climax, not even in pleasure. But in *release*.

It was a sound that broke open the night. A sound only made when one soul finds itself echoed perfectly in another.

And still he moved. Not to finish. But to *complete*.

He was still within her — firm, warm, entire — but now moving not as a man seeking release, but as one prolonging a prayer. The rhythm he chose was not that of hunger but of study. Long, slow thrusts, not shallow, not perfunctory, but careful, sculptural. Each motion a chisel stroke against the stone of silence that had, until now, separated them.

She felt it. Not only in the drag of his hips, not just in the pressure he claimed with each return, but in the intervals between. Those intervals maddened. They weren't absences — they were *promises*. Her thighs tightened around him instinctively, not out of fear he would fall away, but out of awe that he *didn't*.

“Yarovet,” she breathed, but it came out as a question and a benediction all at once. He answered it not with speech but by shifting deeper, finding that angle which turned breath into sound, and sound into confession.

Her head fell back. A sharp gasp fled her lips — startled, almost offended by how completely he'd stolen her breath. Her hands, earlier clasping at the upholstery, now moved to his back, fingers spreading, then clawing — not in pain, but in disbelief. She was no longer simply being entered. She was being *read*. And the worst of it — no, the most terrible ecstasy of it — was that he seemed to *understand what he was reading*.

He kept his forehead close to hers, their sweat mingling, his lips brushing over her cheekbone with every measured thrust. She could feel the control in him — not icy, not withholding, but masterful. He moved as though he carried not only his own urgency, but hers as well — held it, weighted it, governed it, until she no longer remembered how to bear it alone.

“You’re not... finished,” she whispered, more accusation than observation.

He didn’t stop. But he smiled. Slightly. Unfairly.

“No,” he murmured. “And you are not yet undone.”

Her laugh this time was almost a sob. A tight, small sound born not of sadness but of *pressure*. Of being filled too fully — by him, by sensation, by the unbearable knowledge that he knew her more completely now than anyone ever had. Not from talk. Not from time. But from this.

When he bent to kiss her again, it wasn’t her mouth he found. It was the hollow of her neck, the delicate line between collarbone and pulse. And there he paused — not just to taste, but to listen. Her blood beneath his tongue. Her breath scattering

like dry leaves underfoot. Her entire body wrapped around his in that surrender that has nothing to do with submission.

One of his hands reached up — traced the slope of her ribs, found her breast again, now heavier with need, her nipple darkened, elongated. He rolled it slowly between his fingers, and her hips arched against him in helpless response.

“Stop teasing,” she managed, though her voice was anything but commanding.

“I’m not teasing,” he said, very softly. “I’m... aligning.”

“With what?”

“With the memory of you.”

And then he thrust — not harder, not faster, but *truer*. As if to say: here. *This* is your centre. *This* is where no name can follow, where even thought must kneel.

She cried out — finally unguarded — and he answered not with speech, but with stillness, buried deep inside her, letting her tremble around him.

He did not come. Not yet. His body trembled at the edge, but he pulled back just slightly, watching her eyes — still half-open, still disbelieving.

“You think that was it?” he said.

She blinked, still gasping, a fine sheen of sweat across her chest. She couldn’t answer.

He moved again. Slower still. And this time she whimpered — not from pain, not even from pleasure — but from the *excess* of it. From the unendurable patience of a man who intended not

just to take her once, but to *unravel her by degrees*.

And somewhere deep within her, a thought passed — not fully formed, but dreadful in its clarity:

He's going to find all of me.

And she didn't know if she was ready. But she no longer wanted to be anywhere else.

She clenched around him. A slow, trembling effort — not the involuntary spasm of climax, but a conscious contraction, as though she were trying to *hold* him, *trap* him, *keep* him. Her hips shifted slightly, seeking just the right pressure, the right angle, the place where he would lose whatever remained of his composure.

And he felt it.

Not only the muscular grip of her, but the *intent* behind it. That silent, fevered plea for culmination. For fulfilment. For the moment she would no longer need to *ask* with her body.

His breath caught.

She felt that too.

“You want me to finish in you?” he whispered, his voice ragged, torn between reverence and peril.

Her eyes flared, mouth parted — but no words came at first. Only a shudder. Only a nod.

Then, desperate:

“Yes. Yes — *please* — inside — *in me* — I want it — I need —”

He didn't move. Not yet.

Her arms tightened around his neck, as though she feared

he might withdraw entirely. Her thighs, already curled around his waist, clenched tighter still, locking him in place, urging his surrender, his loss, his breaking.

“Don’t — don’t hold back,” she whispered, eyes gleaming. “Don’t punish me — don’t *torture* me like this — ”

A pause.

A sob.

Then, catching herself, she gasped:

“No — *do* torture me. If you must. Just don’t stop. Don’t *stop*.”

He laughed. Low. Close to her lips. And not with cruelty — but with wonder.

“You poor thing,” he murmured. “You can’t even decide whether you want mercy or torment.”

“I want *you*,” she said, too quickly. “However you come. However long it takes.”

“Longer,” he said into her mouth, and kissed her — not hungrily, not roughly, but with the same tormenting patience he had shown all along. His lips were warm and slow and full of promise. He tasted her pleading, swallowed it, savoured it like a man who had no intention of finishing his meal quickly.

But even as he kissed her, his hips began to move again. Slow. Insistent. That maddening rhythm returned — just enough to kindle, never to consume. She moaned into his mouth, her whole body arching up as if to capture him more completely, to pull him further into the centre of her own undoing.

Each thrust now landed heavier, as though something

inevitable had entered the room — a tidal weight, a final hour. She felt him thickening inside her, that telltale swell, the shiver in his abdomen against hers.

Her hands trembled on his back.

“I’m ready,” she gasped. “I’m ready, Yarosvet — *please* — ”

He buried his face in her throat again, not to hide, but to listen — to smell the skin that clung to him, to feel the throb of her pulse under his lips.

He wanted to last.

He wanted to remember.

But her voice — broken, hoarse, tearful with longing — was more than he’d prepared for.

She kissed him again, greedily now, her teeth brushing his lip, her breath shattering in pieces between words.

“Don’t leave me like this — don’t — don’t be cruel — don’t *save* yourself — *give it to me*, I can take it, I *want* it — ”

And he did.

But not like a man losing control.

Like a man *offering* it.

His hips drew back — once, slowly, deliberately — and then pushed home, deep and final, until there was no distance between them at all. He held there. Buried. Shaking.

And when he came — it was not a shudder, but a slow, terrible *sinking*. A falling inward. As though something sacred in him, long protected, was finally, *finally* being poured into her.

She felt it. Not just the warmth, not just the pulsing. But the

meaning behind it.

Her fingers clutched at his back, her legs locked tighter, not out of instinct, but in reverence. She kissed him hard, wildly, as though by kissing him she might pull even more of him inside.

And he let her.

Let her drink the moment with her mouth, her breath, her body.

They lay like that, not collapsing, not panting, but *bound*. Not two halves — one whole. Slick with sweat. Quiet but not silent.

The world outside no longer mattered.

Only the weight of his body. The fullness in her womb. The way his heart stammered against hers in the dark.

And how, in that stammer, something ancient had just begun.

Her hands still trembled faintly where they rested on his back. His weight, though not crushing, pressed her into the cushions with an intimacy no touch could equal. She lay open beneath him — not just in body, but in that softer, more vulnerable architecture where thought became emotion, and emotion no longer knew shame.

“I like this,” she murmured, her voice muffled by his shoulder. “Lying like this. Under you. Feeling you move... still... inside me. Like a creature with its own breath.”

He exhaled slowly, his cheek against hers, his breath warming the shell of her ear. Then, in a voice as low as a buried ember, he said:

“If I don’t withdraw, I’ll be ready again soon.”

She blinked, a ripple of pleasure passing through her hips, not from movement but from the thought itself.

“Will you?” she whispered, smiling faintly, as if surprised by her own delight. “Already?”

“Not already,” he said. “Still.”

A silence hung between them. Not cold. Not hesitant. But heavy with something that hadn’t been invited into the room, yet had entered nonetheless — like dusk, or regret.

Her breath grew shallower. Her smile faded, though her arms did not release him.

“How am I supposed to go back to him after this?” she said suddenly. Not bitterly. Not even angrily. Almost wonderingly, as if asking a question no one could answer. “To sit at supper, to speak of weather, to let him... lie beside me... after this?”

His body was still joined to hers, but his mind stirred. He pulled back just far enough to look at her — only a little, his brow lifting from hers. She wasn’t crying. That would’ve been simpler. There were no tears. Only the terrible clarity of a woman who has crossed a threshold she hadn’t known existed until her foot had already touched the other side.

He didn’t rush to soothe her. Didn’t offer platitudes or promises. He merely stayed — warm, still, embedded in her, as if by not moving he could shield her from the future rushing toward her.

“Then don’t go back to him,” he said eventually, not as advice, but as observation. As if it had already been decided somewhere

beyond both of them.

She closed her eyes, not in shame, but in something darker, deeper — an awareness of consequence.

“But what else is there?” she whispered.

He didn’t answer.

Because he didn’t know yet. Because the answer might not be for either of them to give.

But he felt her tighten around him again — an involuntary echo of the moment before — and knew the body, at least, was not finished speaking.

And perhaps, in this, there was still room for grace.

He shifted slightly, not enough to break the seal between their bodies, only to ease the breath that had grown tight in his chest.

“Do you love him?” he asked — not sharply, not even inquisitively. The question lay between them like a glass of water placed on a nightstand: quiet, necessary.

She didn’t answer at once. Her hands, which had clutched at his waist, relaxed. Her gaze moved past him, toward the ceiling, as if the answer might be written in the peeling cornice.

“I... respect him,” she said finally. Her voice had no tremor. “He’s kind. He’s honest. He works hard. He wanted children more than I did, once.”

“But love?”

Samira hesitated. A faint contraction passed through her inner muscles — not arousal this time, but something else, perhaps shame, or the ghost of loyalty. It passed, and she exhaled through

her nose.

“Perhaps once I thought I did,” she said. “Or I tried to. As one learns to like boiled oats, or church incense, or the sound of rain in the attic. You think: this must be comfort. It must be enough.”

He watched her. Something behind his eyes shifted. A soft realization — not of her, but of another’s hand in the arrangement.

“Your mother... chose him?”

She nodded, and this time her eyes did flicker with something like a smile — rueful, dry.

“It was convenient. His family had no old blood, no ambitions. Simple people. No whispers. No secrets. She said he would be... safe.”

“And yet,” he murmured, brushing her hair back from her cheek, “for a woman with her instincts, she overlooked quite a bit.”

Samira looked up at him. Her lips parted, but no sound came. Then, after a long pause, she spoke — slowly, as if discovering the words as she said them.

“He never looks at me when we do it. Never truly. His eyes are always just... closed. Like he’s waiting. Or pretending.”

He stayed still.

“How long?” he asked.

“Since the wedding,” she replied. “At first, he was gentle. Timid, even. Then he became very... methodical. A kind of rhythmic correctness. Every few days. Always at night. Always

under covers. Never from behind. Never with hands. And when I try to speak, he shushes me — kindly. Like I'm a child who shouldn't ruin the quiet."

"And you?" he asked. "What do you do?"

She flushed, but she didn't look away.

"I try to help. I touch him. I kiss him. Sometimes I pretend I want more than I do. Sometimes I pretend I want less than I do. But it's like lighting matches in a wet room. Nothing catches. Nothing burns."

He didn't answer, only breathed — still inside her, as if her truth deepened the connection rather than strained it.

"I'm sorry," she added quickly, almost guiltily. "That you have to hear all this."

"Don't be," he said. "I asked. And I think... you needed to say it."

She bit her lip. "It's strange. I never told anyone. Not even myself. Not really. But now — "

"Now?"

"Now you're in me," she said simply, quietly, without a trace of drama. "And somehow, that makes everything else... fall away."

He shifted slightly again — not out of necessity, but as a kind of punctuation. His hands were warm where they rested: one beneath her neck, the other along her hip, cupping it absently, like one holds something too precious to grip tightly.

"Have there been others?" he asked, voice low, not accusing,

not even curious in the common sense — simply seeking to know.

She blinked, slowly. A pause. Then, calmly, she shook her head.

“No. Never. Only my husband. And now you.”

He nodded, as if to acknowledge, not to judge. A breath passed between them.

“Then,” he said, and the barest trace of a smile touched his lips, “how do you — ”

“ — how do I manage?” she finished for him, without flinching.

He met her gaze. She was blushing, yes, but she held his eyes.

“By hand,” she said softly. “Sometimes with... objects. Brushes. Bottles. The handle of a hair comb once. Things that seemed clean enough, and...” A tiny laugh escaped her lips. “And shaped kindly.”

He exhaled, not with surprise, but a kind of quiet delight.

“How often?”

“Almost every day,” she admitted, turning her face a little to the side, not from shame, but modesty born of the truth’s rawness. “Even when I don’t... want to. Sometimes it’s just to sleep easier. Sometimes to stop thinking.”

He tilted his head. “You poor thing,” he murmured — not in pity, but in a strange, amused tenderness. “And all this time you feared... what? That your womb mistook your fingers for a child?”

Samira gave a small sound — somewhere between a snort and a gasp.

“I *have* wondered,” she confessed. “If I’ve done something wrong. If the body learns bad habits, forgets real ones...”

Now he did laugh — not unkindly, but richly, warmly, from deep in his chest. It rumbled against her skin, and she felt the vibrations through her ribs, through her hips, through the stillness where their bodies joined.

“Listen to me,” he said, and bent to kiss the hollow beneath her jaw. “If you scratch your leg, it doesn’t fall off. If you comb your hair, it doesn’t stop growing. Pleasure is not a punishment. Your body hasn’t betrayed you — it’s been waiting for something it could finally answer.”

She closed her eyes. Her legs, which had relaxed slightly, curled again around his hips. He hadn’t moved yet, not truly — but now, as though the laughter had unlocked something, he began. Slowly. Intentionally. No urgency, just the most delicate reminder of presence.

“Like that,” she whispered. “Exactly like that.”

He kissed her again — her cheek, her temple, her earlobe — as he moved within her, a rhythm no longer seeking climax but communion. Something that said *I hear you. I’m still here. You’re not alone.*

He kept moving inside her — slowly, almost reverently, as though there were no goal to reach, only presence to prolong. And something about that made her whisper things she hadn’t

known she could say aloud.

His breath warmed the curve of her neck. She wrapped herself tighter around his hips, and he felt it — the way her muscles trembled slightly, as if on the edge of another craving.

She pressed her lips to his ear.

“Please,” she whispered. “Just once. From behind. I just want to feel you... there.”

He paused — not in hesitation, but in sudden stillness, as if her words had turned to silk around his spine.

“Not to finish,” she added quickly, breath catching. “Just to enter me. Just once. I want to know what it’s like. I need to feel it... just a little. Please.”

The way she said it — not coquettishly, not demanding — but with that pleading softness, like someone asking to be allowed back into a dream they’d only just woken from too soon.

He withdrew, slowly, with a kind of silent promise. Bracing himself above her, he waited. She was already moving, urgent in her grace, turning beneath him like a tide shifting — her back arching as she slid onto her stomach, arms curling inward, legs parting instinctively.

Her hair spilled across the pillow in a fan of tangled dusk. The smooth plane of her back rose and fell with shallow breaths. Her hips lifted slightly — just enough to offer, not to ask. She didn’t turn her head; she only whispered again:

“I want you to feel me... from there. Just be inside. Just for a moment.”

He let his hands glide down her sides, mapping her anew. One palm settled on the small of her back, the other guided her gently — and then he pressed forward.

The heat between them had never ceased, only changed shape. Now it flared again as he slid into her, slower than before, deeper in a way that felt ceremonial. She inhaled sharply through her teeth, a sound almost like relief.

Her body welcomed him differently now — not with the urgency of climax, but the aching fullness of surrender.

She let out a long, slow breath.

“Oh... god... That’s...”

She didn’t finish. She didn’t need to. He felt it in the way her body quivered beneath him, in how she shifted her weight just so, to draw him an inch deeper, a fraction tighter.

He stayed still inside her, as she’d asked. Not moving — only existing. Breathing. Letting her take him in.

And in that pause, heavy and golden and utterly still, something passed between them that neither of them could name.

He bent forward, kissed the back of her neck, and she turned her face into the mattress, murmuring something he couldn’t quite hear — something like thank you.

He felt it before he fully registered it — the quiet tightening of her body beneath him. Not sudden, not forceful, but purposeful, unmistakable: the slow flex of her glutes, drawing him closer without a word. Not an accident. A signal. A request.

She was speaking to him in a language older than speech — in the clenching rhythm of her muscles, in the minute lift of her hips, in the way her thighs braced and then softened again, giving space, inviting depth.

He smiled. Not out of mockery, but out of understanding — as one might smile upon recognising a song once half-forgotten. Her signal was clear. Move.

And so he did.

A slow thrust — deliberate, smooth, letting the full length of him glide inside her again. And again. She exhaled like something sacred had returned to her. Her fingers clenched the sheets. Her back arched more boldly this time.

He placed a hand on her hip, firm but unhurried, grounding her. His other hand slid along her spine, as though tracing a path he might later retrace in memory.

Each stroke was a response — to her breath, her muscle, her heat. She pressed back into him now, meeting him halfway, urging more with each shift of her body.

Still, he kept the pace unhurried — not out of cruelty, but devotion. As if he were determined to memorise her inch by inch, to give her time not just to feel him but to inhabit it fully.

Beneath him, she began to murmur — breathy, half-formed things, her lips moving against the pillow. Perhaps his name. Perhaps a prayer. He couldn't tell, and didn't need to.

He leaned forward, letting his weight settle more fully against her, his chest brushing the plane of her back. Her skin was damp

with sweat, warm and living. She turned her head just enough for him to kiss the side of her face, and whispered — almost soundlessly:

“Don’t stop...”

But he hadn’t the slightest intention.

She turned her head slightly, as much as she could beneath the weight of him, and whispered — not in a rush, not gasping, but with a kind of quiet desperation that startled even herself:

“You feel... more mine than anyone ever has.”

He paused — not in his movement, but in thought. That sentence landed not between their bodies, but somewhere deeper, threading itself into the moment like a sudden change in light. Her voice was not trembling from the rhythm — it trembled from truth.

“I don’t know why I said that,” she added quickly, face turning into the pillow. But her body told no such lie. She lifted her hips again, as if to hold him in place, to anchor the connection before it drifted into uncertainty.

He stayed silent for a heartbeat. Then leaned down, his mouth near her ear — his voice lower now, touched with something he hadn’t meant to share either.

“Because it’s true. Even if it shouldn’t be.”

She let out a soft sound — something between a sigh and a sob. The kind of sound a woman makes not from pleasure alone, but from the ache of realization.

“It frightens me,” she admitted, teeth grazing the edge of the

sheet beneath her. “That something like this can exist. That I can want you... like this... after everything.”

He rested his forehead against the nape of her neck, the heat of her skin mixing with his breath. Then slowly resumed the movement of his hips — unhurried, as if saying: *we don't have to name it yet. We can just feel.*

And she did. Her hand slid back along the mattress until she found his thigh — gripped it, held it. Her way of answering without ruining it with more words. But still, another one slipped out — small, hoarse, honest:

“I’ve never wanted to be owned by anyone... Until now.”

He didn’t speak.

Not because he had nothing to say, but because her words had rearranged something in him — subtly, decisively, like wind shifting the weight of an orchard. Beneath him, she was breathing unevenly now, not from effort, but from the rawness of what she’d just said. And yet she did not take it back. Did not twist it into something light or dismissive.

Her body — still parted for him, still pulsing around him — was the proof.

He slid his hands along her sides, the long sweep of her ribs to the taper of her waist, not thrusting yet, only pressing himself deeper inside, as though to answer her with presence alone. She made a sound — that sound again — the one that had less to do with sex and more with surrender. With being seen.

And he moved. Gently, at first — almost imperceptibly, a bare

tide within her — but then deeper, more deliberately, as if testing how far truth could be carried inside flesh before it broke.

She gripped the sheets beneath her, her arms now bent tight under her chest. Her hair, dark and thick and wild with sweat, clung to the hollow of her back. Every time he pushed in, her spine seemed to arch a little higher, not from pain, but as if her body wanted to swallow all of him, not just the flesh but the memory, the weight, the man.

“Yes...” she whispered into the pillow. “Yes, like that... I can feel — ”

But the rest broke off in a moan that was half prayer, half confession.

He leaned over her again, his chest pressed to her back, and reached for her hand — curled cold and alone against the mattress. Their fingers laced together. She gripped him so tightly it hurt, and he welcomed the pain like proof of her fear, her want, her need.

“I won’t break you,” he murmured, his lips at the shell of her ear.

“Then don’t stop.”

That voice — now hoarse and wet with desperation — caught him by the throat. His rhythm deepened, slower, thicker, more demanding. She pushed her hips back to meet him, matching his weight, matching his intent, as though she too needed this to mean more than friction. Needed it to rewrite something in her that her husband never managed to reach.

He could feel her changing under him — not in body, but in tension, in charge, in temperature. Her thighs trembled now, not from effort but from how much she was holding in. How much she was giving over.

He pressed deeper — one hard, full thrust that made her gasp sharply — and stayed there.

“Do you want to come?”

She didn’t answer at once. Then, shakily, voice thick with something far older than lust:

“Only if you do. In me. Please... I want it to be yours.”

He closed his eyes.

Not to block anything out — but because the weight of that sentence felt like something sacred. Like standing at the edge of something too vast to see.

Then he moved again — not urgently, but with slow, circling gravity — each stroke deliberate, each pause a caress. She moaned, long and low, her voice cracking at the edges, her body braced for more.

And then — “Say it again.”

She turned her head, cheek pressed to the pillow, lips trembling.

“I want it to be yours.”

She shouldn’t have said that. Not if she wanted mercy. Not if she wanted anything soft or gentle or kind.

Because something snapped in him — not rage, not even lust, but that ancient spark that saw in her not just a woman, but a

womb, a vessel, a living invitation. She had called him in, and now he came.

The change was immediate. No more restraint. No more careful measuring of her sighs. He gripped her hips like a beast who'd found its mate after too long alone. His thrusts grew sharp, punishing, their rhythm no longer seeking her approval — only her surrender.

She cried out — not in protest, never in protest — but in a voice scraped raw by pleasure too fast, too thick, too deep. She reached back blindly, trying to hold him, push him, slow him — gods, she didn't even know — but he caught her wrists and pinned them to the mattress.

“Don't move.” His voice — low, primal, hoarse with possession.

And she didn't. She let him take her. Let him mark her from the inside.

Each thrust now was a growl without sound, a claim made not with words but with flesh. Her body clenched around him, dragged him deeper, called to the most ancient part of him — the part that did not know speech or guilt or law. Only seed. Only heat. Only the need to bury himself so deep she'd never forget who had been there.

When she moaned his name, he bit her shoulder — not hard, not to wound — just enough to seal it. His. For now. For that one terrible, perfect second where nothing else existed but this rhythm of ruin...

...He never moved. Only breathed — rough, shallow, burning. The vision had passed, like a hallucination conjured by heat and scent and her trembling thighs. In truth, he hadn't ravaged her. Not yet. The brutality had lived only in his mind — a silent detour down some ancestral corridor — and now it faded, leaving behind the man he had taught himself to be: articulate, amused, irritatingly in control.

"You want it to be mine?" he murmured, not moving — just resting inside her, all warmth and weight and barely-concealed smugness. "You say that like it's a gift, darling. Should I thank you with flowers? A letter? A commemorative plaque for your womb?"

She tried to twist under him, laugh, maybe protest — but she was too full, too stretched, too goddamn close.

"Y-you're unbearable."

"That's not a no."

He drew back just enough to tease — and she whimpered, hips chasing his — then plunged in again, slow and deliberate. Her whole body jerked.

"Still unbearable?"

"M-more."

"Excellent." He nuzzled the nape of her neck, sweat-damp hair clinging to his lips. "I've always dreamed of being someone's favourite torture."

She moaned something incoherent — probably blasphemous — and he kept going, every thrust now a commentary, every

pause a smirk made flesh.

“There. There again. Yes, just there — the spot your poor husband never even mapped.”

“Shut up — ”

“Can’t. I’m brilliant. And hard. And inside you.” He grinned into her skin. “Frankly, I’m doing God’s work.”

She shrieked and tried to twist again, but he caught her wrists and pinned them. Not rough, just firm. Final.

“Stay still, sweetheart.” His breath was a laugh. “You asked for it.”

She laughed. Not the polite kind, not the careful, feminine trill she had practised in drawing rooms and under chandeliers — no. This was guttural and messy, half a sob and half a bark of disbelief, because how could something so utterly obscene, so tenderly debauched, feel like *home*?

“God, yes,” she gasped, her cheek pressed against the pillow, arms twisted up to grip the headboard as if she could anchor herself to the world. She arched her hips back into him, trying to pull him deeper, harder — as though sheer will could fuse them.

“Yes, thank me. Thank me for letting you live this long without me.”

He leaned over her, chest grazing the curve of her spine, his voice a low, amused rumble against her ear. “That’s generous of you.”

“You have *no* idea,” she panted, twisting her head slightly so she could half-see him in the dim light behind her. Her

fingers flexed against the wood. “I thought I wanted solemn. A husband. Respectability. I thought sex should be... gentle. Careful. Dimmed. *Clean*.”

He paused in his rhythm, just enough to raise an eyebrow she couldn't see, his hips still nestled between hers. “*Should be?*”

“Fuck *should be*,” she hissed, her voice muffled by the pillow, but fierce. “This. *This* is what I didn't know I needed. I want to laugh when it hurts and cry when it's perfect. I want to be teased and ruined and worshipped and teased again. I want to be *ridiculous*, not reverent.”

Her thighs shifted restlessly beneath him, and she rolled her hips upward — just a little, just enough to press her backside more firmly into his abdomen, as if she could make a point with muscle memory alone.

“And you — you bastard — you *get* that.”

He dipped his head until his mouth brushed the nape of her neck, mock-serious. “It's a rare gift. Not everyone can make a woman feel holy and idiotic in the same thrust.”

A choked laugh escaped her lips, half-moan, half-howl, and she kicked back lightly at his calf. He didn't budge. Instead, he kissed her shoulder blade, slowly, reverently.

“You're so *awful*,” she groaned into the pillow. “*So* awful.”

“Thank you, love,” he murmured, beginning to move again — just enough for her to feel him reclaim her from the inside out, as if their shared pulse was the only tempo that mattered. “And you're welcome.”

She whimpered his name, muffled and broken. This time not a request — a revelation. A fact.

“Tell me what you want,” he said, bending close until his lips brushed the shell of her ear.

“You. Just you. As long as you don’t stop being — *this*.”

His smile she couldn’t see, but she felt it — in the way he shifted, adjusted, drove into her just so, drawing another gasp from her lungs.

“Cruel?”

“No. *Fun*.”

A beat. Then, softened, raw: “And yes. Maybe a bit cruel.”

He laughed against her skin — not mockery, but delight — and his hands slid down her sides to grip her hips. With a new angle and a sharper thrust, he pinned her flat against the bed.

“You know,” he whispered, “I think we might make an absolutely disastrous pair.”

“Ruin me,” she whispered back into the pillow. “And never take it back.”

He didn’t answer with words. He let his body speak for him.

He slowed his movements just enough for his voice to slip through the heavy air between them, low and teasing, threading desire with mischief. “Tell me, did you prepare yourself... properly?” His fingers wandered over the gentle swell of her hip, tracing lazy, deliberate circles as his gaze locked with hers, sharp and knowing. “Did you cleanse yourself back there, where now I dwell?”

Her breath caught — half shock, half laughter — bubbling up like a soft spring breaking through winter's crust. "What do you mean? Do you find me... repulsive?"

He shook his head, voice warm and steady as a quiet flame. "No, not in the least. I care for you too much for that. But now it's my turn to want — every inch, every secret corner of you."

A flicker of heat and curiosity danced across her eyes. "And what exactly do you want?"

His lips brushed behind her ear, a whisper folded with promise and playful daring. "There's a tale, old and whispered in shadows — that for a child to truly root in the flesh, a woman must take a man's seed not just here, inside, but also in her mouth."

Her laugh was light, a sudden release like spring rain. "You needn't fret for me. I've always been a girl who tends to her purity. And if there's a desire you hold... I'm yours to explore."

His smile deepened, the fire in his eyes matching hers in that sacred, mischievous dance. "Then let's see how far these whispers carry us."

He slipped from her slowly, each inch reluctant to leave the heat that clung to him like a second skin. Rising beside the bed, bare feet whispering against the worn floorboards, he stood tall — every muscle taut, every breath measured yet heavy with want.

She shifted on all fours, the soft press of her palms and knees grounding her, hips swaying with a languid grace. Her skin gleamed in the dim light, a subtle sheen of sweat mixing with the faint scent of jasmine and musk that clung to her like

a secret spell. She turned, eyes dark pools catching his hunger, lips parting wetly, glistening with anticipation.

Slowly, she drew closer, her warm breath stirring the fine hairs at the base of him, where flesh met root — intimate, vulnerable. Her lips parted just so, moist and trembling, like the first tremor of dawn light brushing against fragile petals. The scent of her breath — a mix of wild herbs and something faintly sweet, something entirely hers — hovered just before him, an unspoken promise.

Her hands gripped his hips with a soft insistence, nails barely grazing the taut skin beneath, leaving whispering trails of sensation. The subtle sounds she made — the shallow intake of breath, the faint sighs — threaded through the charged air, weaving a quiet music to which their bodies began to answer.

She took him slowly, lips barely brushing at first, a teasing, tentative exploration. The warm breath from her mouth stirred the bare skin there, intimate and raw. Her tongue flicked out lightly, tasting the salt of him, coaxing him deeper, but not yet taking him fully. It was a slow unveiling, a promise wrapped in sensation.

His fingers found her hair, fingers threading through the soft strands, gentle but insistent. Each tiny movement of her mouth sent a shiver coursing up his spine, awakening every nerve beneath his skin. It was not mere touch; it was claiming, a possession as subtle as the brush of a whisper.

The heat between them thickened, a quiet crescendo building,

breaths coming faster, mingling and stolen in the dim light. He held her close to him, anchored by the pull of her hunger and the delicate power in the way she took him.

Her lips deepened their exploration, no longer tentative but deliberate, pressing against him with a tender insistence that teased and ignited. The wet heat of her mouth enveloped him, a slow, consuming fire that both grounded and unmoored him. He could feel the subtle shift in her rhythm — the way her tongue danced along his length, tracing secrets only they could understand.

His hands, no longer idle, roamed her back, sliding beneath the curve of her ribs to cradle the hollow of her waist. Skin met skin with a friction both soft and demanding, the mingling of their warmth painting invisible trails along bare flesh. Each pulse, each subtle contraction beneath him, echoed in the quiet chamber of their shared breath.

Her eyes lifted, gleaming with a wild, fierce light, locking with his in a gaze that spoke of surrender and challenge all at once. The delicate arch of her neck, the sharp line of her jaw, all vulnerable and alive under his touch — it was a map he wanted to memorize, one kiss, one touch at a time.

Between them, the air pulsed — charged with the rhythm of hearts pounding like tribal drums in the quiet room. She trembled slightly, not from hesitation but from the raw, naked honesty of their connection. There was no pretense here, no artifice, only the unvarnished truth of flesh seeking flesh.

He exhaled slowly, the sound low and ragged, a mix of command and invitation. The moment stretched taut, balanced on the fragile edge between restraint and release. Every movement was a question, every sigh an answer. And in that charged silence, they both understood — this was no mere act, but a ritual, an unfolding of something ancient and profound.

She took him deeper now — slowly, luxuriously — her lips parting wider as the thick weight of him slid further past the warm seal of her mouth. No gagging, no rushing — only control, devotion, and a strange, exquisite pride. Her hands braced against his hips, thumbs drawing idle, reverent circles into his skin as she let her throat open, muscle by muscle, like a learned offering.

He watched her through heavy-lidded eyes, the cords of his neck tight, jaw clenched not with discomfort but with a deep, blooming astonishment. She wasn't just accommodating him — she was savouring him. Receiving him. Her every motion bespoke a knowledge of power, and a delight in surrendering it.

Her hair clung to her temples in soft, sweat-damp strands, and he brushed it back absently with one hand, fingers threading through the silk of it as if touching the dark river of some sacred text. A drop of saliva shimmered on the corner of her mouth, gliding down her chin and disappearing somewhere between her breasts. She didn't pause. She didn't care. Or if she did, it was only because she knew the effect it had on him.

The slick sounds of her devotion filled the quiet of the room like a melody — obscene, intimate, hypnotic. He rocked forward

just slightly, letting himself rest deeper into her mouth, and her throat answered with a flexing ripple, accepting him fully. Her eyes fluttered shut, and her moan — muffled, vibrating — sent a shiver up the length of him that felt perilously close to unbearable.

“God,” he whispered, half to himself. “You were made for this.”

Her eyes opened, smiling without parting from him, and she answered with another long, slow suck — deliberate, defiant.

He swayed forward again, not thrusting, just sinking, deeper still, and she welcomed him as if she had no gag reflex at all, as if her body had been created for this purpose alone — to pleasure, to receive, to hold. Her fingers dug lightly into his thighs now, not to stop him, but to anchor herself as she took him with renewed hunger.

And then he saw it — not just lust, not even just joy — but something more terrifying, more luminous, blooming behind her gaze. Worship. Not for him as a man, not for his mind, not even for his power — but for the moment, for the sacred rawness of what passed between them, unspeakable, unrepeatable.

She was letting him go deeper than he’d ever dared believe someone would. And he... he was already lost.

His fingers curled into her hair — finally — gathering it in one firm, reverent fist as he drew his hips back, inch by inch, until only the tip remained against the soft swell of her lips. He held there, trembling, the muscles of his thighs taut with restraint.

Then, with a low breath — half groan, half invocation — he pressed forward again, and she took him once more, whole and unflinching.

She moaned around him, not from pain or even hunger now, but from some deeper place — some sweet, shattering surrender that could not be mimicked or faked. It sounded like homecoming. Like absolution.

And he felt it then: not release, not climax — but the onset of something far more total. That pull behind the base of the spine, that unbearable swell. His hand tightened in her hair. His other came down to her cheek, stroking her jaw, guiding her rhythm — not commanding, but aligning, like a prayer finding its rhythm.

Her eyes flicked up to him, wet and shining, and she gave the faintest nod as if to say: *yes. now. like this.*

And so it came.

With a groan like a man being undone by holy fire, he spilled into her, deep and hot, as her mouth sealed around him like the womb of some ancient rite. She didn't flinch. Didn't falter. She *held him*, lips forming a sanctuary, a silent vow, even as her throat worked to swallow him down in long, gentle pulses.

Time collapsed. The world narrowed to the heat of her mouth, the velvet pressure of her lips, the unbearable tenderness of her hands still resting against his hips like anchors.

When it was done — when the tremors in his thighs faded and the last drop of him was claimed — he let her go. Carefully. With reverence. As though she were made of some rarer substance

now, no longer merely woman but vessel, oracle, flame.

She pulled back slowly, mouth slipping free of him with a soft, wet sound that rang louder in the quiet than any shout. She licked her lips, once, instinctively, and smiled — not coyly, not triumphantly, but with the soft serenity of a woman who knows she's just rewritten something sacred.

He knelt before her without a word, resting his forehead against her bare belly, hands clasped at her hips like at an altar.

For a long moment, neither spoke. Only their breath moved. Only the silence bore witness.

Then, finally, he murmured — voice hoarse, rough, barely a thread:

“Let it be done.”

And her fingers found his hair again, threading through it gently, her voice a whisper of wind through cypress leaves:

“It already is.”

* * *

The knock was soft — almost deferential, as if the one behind the door sensed the weight of reverie within. Yarosvet stirred slightly, his gaze still half-anchored in the blurred contours of memory, where Samira's breath had yet to fade from his collarbone. He murmured a wordless assent, and the door parted with a slow hiss of brass and felt.

The conductor stepped in, tall and discreet, balancing a

wooden tray with the ceremonious air of a sacristan bearing relics. He wore the dark uniform of the Imperial Railways, the brass buttons glinting like distant planets. A hint of frost clung to his collar; outside, the Volga steppe stretched into a blue, mute vastness, interrupted only by the low murmur of iron wheels.

“Your dinner, Your Honour,” the man said, bowing slightly.

Yarosvet nodded, his voice still somewhere in Samira’s perfumed hair. “You are most kind.”

The tray was set down upon the fold-out table by the window, and with a polite click of heels, the conductor withdrew, leaving behind a faint aroma of coal soot, starched linen, and that particular scent only found in railway corridors — waxed wood, grease, and time.

The dinner was modest by the standards of a grand hôtel, yet unmistakably of the first class, and deeply faithful to the Empire’s culinary dignity.

A porcelain plate, bordered in faded cobalt, bore slices of cold roast veal, pale and tender, garnished with a fan of pickled cucumber and a dollop of horseradish so sharp it might rouse even the most melancholic civil servant. A small lidded tureen cradled shchi made with duck broth, its surface glistening with specks of dill and the golden eye of rendered fat. The sour tang rose in gentle spirals of steam.

There was a soft rye roll, still warm from the samovar-coal oven somewhere in the belly of the train, wrapped in a stiff linen napkin. Beside it, a porcelain ramekin offered a serving of sterlet

in aspic, the silver slivers of fish trembling faintly as the train curved eastward.

And, naturally, a glass of Georgian red, decanted in advance and brought to room temperature — a subtle nod to those who travelled not merely in space, but in rank.

Yarosvet unfolded the napkin slowly, methodically. The silver fork felt cold in his fingers. As he lifted the first spoonful of shchi to his lips, he realised: no more than a minute had passed since the scent of Samira's skin had faded into the fabric of his coat. And yet it felt as though an era had closed, soft as a door latched on memory.

He dined in silence, chewing slowly, as though each bite might delay the inevitability of arrival.

And so he ate without haste, staring past the rimed windowpane, where the fading fields rolled into patches of coniferous dusk. The land outside grew darker with every verst, and the trees — tall and sparse at first — now thickened into silhouettes like monks huddled in cloaks. The train whispered to itself in iron tongues, singing of rivers crossed and provinces forgotten.

With each spoonful of shchi, memories slid quietly back into place. He had not summoned them — they arrived as certain things do in age: uninvited but undeniable.

He saw again the flickering lamplight on the pale ceiling of Samira's room. The faint floral pattern on the wallpaper. Her breath, still uneven, still warm against his throat. And then —

that soft, hesitant knock. Not at the main door, but at the side — the one meant for servants. A brief pause. Then a girl's voice, brittle and apologetic:

“Excuse me... Barin... Olga Vladimirovna asks if she may speak with you. Alone.”

Samira had stiffened at once. She looked at him, then at the door, the sorrow already blooming behind her irises. Something in her — bright, unguarded — had cracked. He had kissed her hand, said nothing, and watched as she slipped into her robe, her bare feet soundless against the Turkish carpet.

The parlour had smelled of dried lavender and something older — polish, perhaps, or memory. Olga Vladimirovna awaited him by the samovar, a figure cut from more precise cloth than her daughter. Regal without ornaments, like a statue left unpainted. Her gaze was calm, almost kind, but there was an unmistakable resolve behind the way she folded her hands.

“You must forgive me,” she began, as he took the chair opposite, “for intruding so... impolitely. But it would not be right to let the night pass as it was beginning.”

He gave a small nod, his fingers tightening on the cup of tea she poured for him.

“She is not ready,” Olga Vladimirovna continued. “And perhaps never will be. She has a life, however ill-fitting, and a husband. You are... a man with shadows behind your eyes. I know what that means. You would not ask her to follow you — but she might. And I will not allow that.”

He said nothing. There was no need. The tea tasted faintly of bergamot and restraint.

She paused, then added, in a softer tone, “I asked this of you... but I did not expect such grace. You honoured her. For that — I am truly grateful.”

From a lacquered chest at her side she drew a small velvet-wrapped case, and offered it with both hands, not quite meeting his gaze.

“This belonged to my late husband. He was not a man to speak much, but he had excellent taste. Ottoman by birth, you see — from one of the old families of Istanbul, a line that collected strange and beautiful things. He kept this close until the very end. I do not know what it is worth. But perhaps... you will find a use for it.”

Inside the case, nestled in wine-coloured silk, lay an intricately inlaid astrolabe — not European, but Eastern, with inscriptions in Kufic script and a pattern of mother-of-pearl and brass that shimmered like the night sky over Aleppo. The instrument was ancient, yet flawless, as if time had only caressed it.

She had not offered him money. She had offered him memory dressed in metal.

The train hummed beneath him. The veal had gone cold on the plate, but he did not notice. He traced the rim of his wineglass absently, watching the trees flee westward. And in that moment, he realised he had never once seen Olga Vladimirovna cry.

Not even when she gave away her daughter's heart to silence.

He looked down at the velvet case again, the silk like aged wine, the brass gleaming faintly even in lamplight. The weight of it was not only in metal.

"I cannot accept this," he said at last, gently closing the lid. "It is too valuable a gift."

Olga Vladimirovna raised an eyebrow — not disapprovingly, but with something like curious surprise. "You recognise it?"

He inclined his head. "To some extent. Enough to know it is not something one gives lightly."

There was a silence between them — not awkward, but measured. She did not withdraw the case.

He continued, as if speaking to the room: "There are simple astrolabes, of course. The Academy in St. Petersburg orders such for thirty or forty roubles — plain, functional, brass only. But this one... this is different. Eastern. Kufic script. Inlaid. Age alone gives it value, but the craftsmanship... If one were inclined to sell it — say, to a collector in Moscow or Vienna — it would fetch no less than two hundred roubles. Perhaps five. Perhaps more."

Olga Vladimirovna lowered her gaze, the corners of her mouth tightening ever so slightly. She had not expected him to name a price.

He added, still calm, without the faintest edge: "A priest I know in Ardatov lives on one hundred and ten roubles a year. And he is, by all accounts, perfectly content."

She let out a quiet breath, something between a chuckle and a sigh. Then, without a word, she stood and gestured for him to

follow.

They crossed the parlour and passed into the next room — a taller, darker chamber, immediately recognisable as a library. Bookcases loomed to the ceiling, their spines aged, clustered, many in languages that had not been spoken aloud in that house for decades. The air smelled of paper, varnish, and a faint trace of camphor.

She led him to a tall glass-fronted cabinet. Within, on two shelves, stood a dozen astrolabes — some bronze, some silvered, some impossibly delicate. A few were no larger than a saucer, others the size of a man's palm outstretched. All bore the same crescent of age and intricacy.

She touched the glass lightly with her fingertips.

"My husband," she said, "was not a sentimental man. But had he lived to see what you have done for our daughter, I believe — without the slightest doubt — he would have given you all of them."

She turned to him now, her voice firm, but not unkind.

"And besides, you clearly know their worth. Which is more than I can say for myself. They are wasted on an old woman who only dusts them now and then."

She paused, then smiled faintly. "You will use it. Or at least understand it. That's more than I ever did."

And with that, she once again placed the velvet case in his hands — this time with finality.

He took the case now without further protest, his fingers

brushing the soft velvet as if it held something far more volatile than brass and mother-of-pearl.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “It’s a gift I shall not forget. But... you understand, nothing is certain yet. Whether your remarkable daughter and I have truly succeeded in welcoming a new soul into her — that remains to be seen. These things — » he hesitated briefly, choosing the less presumptuous phrasing, — take time to settle. It will not show for another fortnight.”

Olga Vladimirovna smiled — not with amusement, but with that slow, knowing curve of the lips particular to women who have crossed many thresholds and returned.

“My dear sir,” she said, smoothing the pleats of her dress, “there are matters in which I place far more trust than in the appraisal of Ottoman antiques.”

She took a step closer, lowered her voice just enough that it became silk rather than sound.

“I tasted your urine.”

He blinked, not in offence, but in the startled stillness of a man unused to being outflanked in his own calm.

She went on, as if discussing a tincture or a laboratory sample:

“I’ve known since I was a girl how to read such signs — colour, clarity, the warmth of the body that made it. And I know the taste of virile seed when it rises through the blood.”

She looked him full in the face now — neither ashamed nor boastful, but like a priestess calmly citing an omen.

“You did what I asked of you. And you did it well. Whether

she carries now or not, her body has been opened to it. And yours — your essence — has not forgotten its ancient work.”

He gave a faint smile then, slow, shadowed, and quietly impressed.

“Then let us both wait,” he said, “but with unequal confidence.”

She inclined her head. “As is the fate of mothers.”

It unfolded precisely as Olga Vladimirovna had foreseen.

By the fourteenth day, there was no more room for doubt. Samira — never prone to faintness or idle nerves — began to tire after the smallest household errands. Her appetite shifted; her skin, always golden, now took on that particular glow that does not come from sunlight or sleep. She withdrew from her music lessons, refused the company of neighbours, and kept her eyes lowered even when her mother entered the room.

The morning sickness was quiet but unmistakable. She blamed the pastries at first, the strong tea, the spring dampness. But her mother said nothing, only handed her a folded cloth scented with peppermint and asked no questions.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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