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THE
**GREEN
GRAVE**

MADINA WESTCHESTER

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«Издательские решения»

Westchester M.

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Based on true events. In the early 20th century, one of the most horrific catastrophes in human history unfolded in the depths of the Amazon — the construction of the «Devil's Railroad,» which claimed thirty thousand lives. A young engineer and his wife, a Boston aristocrat, follow the magnate Blackwood into this equatorial hell. But at the 31st Mile, the train grinds to a halt. What do these jungles really conceal, and what sinister secret lies buried beneath the rusted rails?

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Содержание

PART ONE	6
CHAPTER 1	6
CHAPTER 2	12
CHAPTER 3	19
CHAPTER 4	24
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	29

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Madina Westchester

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This novel is based on real historical events surrounding the construction of the Madeira — Mamoré Railroad in the Amazon jungle in the early 20th century. All characters, their fates, and dialogue are the product of the author's imagination

PART ONE

ANATOMY OF A COLLAPSE

CHAPTER 1

EMERALD IN THE BLACK SELVA

"...Last night, at a private dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria, Mr. Arthur Blackwood presented investors with the syndicate's final plan for the development of the Amazon Basin. The Madeira — Mamoré Railroad project is designed to connect the rubber plantations with world ports. State-of-the-art American locomotives, advanced engineering methods, and the finest specialists from Boston guarantee the triumph of civilization over savagery. Mr. Blackwood personally assured the press that steel rails would pass through the selva with mathematical precision, ushering in a new era of progress..."

— From the financial chronicle of the New York Telegraph, June.

The plank barracks stood on stilts, driven deep into the red clay at the edge of the camp. Here, the mainline rails ran flush against the wall of century-old selva. The builders called this place "Thirteenth Mile" — thirteen miles from the river port, though the exact count had long been lost to the damp. A year ago, a lopsided wooden sign had been hammered into the ground at the entrance. One of the engineers had painted on it in oil: "13th Mile. Hope Dies Here." The rains had nearly washed the letters away. Black paint had run, mingled with mildew, until only a sticky, truncated remnant remained: "es."

Outside, through the thin cracks in the walls, the jungle breathed. The forest advanced by the hour, reclaiming the embankment. Hairy lianas as thick as a man's wrist had wound around the lower logs of the buildings, clinging with small, slick roots. Beneath the bark, the wood of the stilts had rotted into a sodden, damp pulp. From deep within the thicket, howler monkeys shrieked. Their voices broke into dry, human-like laughter — grotesque and monotonous. Above the canopy hung a leaden sky. Heavy, without a single break, it resembled a cloudy cataract. The sun could not pierce that dome, but the tropical heat melted the air, turning it into a warm, thick suspension. Breathing was possible only in shallow gasps, through clenched teeth — a deep inhalation would seize the throat with a dry spasm at once.

Catarina Clayton sat at a heavy oak table that had been shipped from Boston three years earlier. Carved legs, marquetry along the edges — the furniture looked absurd amid the damp, unplanned walls. On the table lay an open architectural catalogue of New England mansions. The pages had swollen from perpetual condensation, the heavy paper had warped, and the printer's ink stuck to her fingers. Cat stared at an illustration of a drawing room with a fireplace. Directly across the image of the white façade, a large tropical cockroach with oily antennae crawled lazily. Cat did not move. With indifference, without disgust, she lowered her hand and pressed the heavy edge of the catalogue down on the insect. A dry crunch of chitin. On the glossy picture of the house, a damp brown smear remained.

The corset beneath her emerald silk dress pressed against her ribs, making even a short exhalation difficult. The metal hooks on her back had grown hot in the suffocating steam and burned the skin between her shoulder blades. Her shoulders had darkened with sweat, and the long formal hem was thickly caked with dried clay. Cat let her gaze drift over her plate. Beside a piece of coarse gray bread stood a tin of anchovies. Cat had opened it herself, mercilessly breaking a nail on her thumb against the jagged edge of the metal. Fish oil mingled with the smell of dripping wax, sour sweat, and rotting river silt.

Cat looked at her palms. The skin on her fingers was dotted with purple bites from gnats and small dry sores from the sun. The local moisture seeped deep into her pores, like lye. Her hand trembled faintly. Cat raised a crystal glass to her lips. The champagne was warm, flat. Large, sluggish bubbles burst on her tongue without a sound, leaving the taste of sour grapes. This was the last bottle from the trunks they had carried across the ocean. The last trace of Boston, where mornings smelled of hot bread and colonial tea — not of the rotting decay of fallen leaves.

“Did you seriously put that dress on?” Rick did not look up from his chair.

He was squatting in front of an old fan. The gray paint had long since peeled from the blades, and the rusty safety cage creaked at the slightest touch. Rick was fruitlessly trying to turn a stripped screw with a screwdriver.

“You know this isn’t Massachusetts.”

Cat drew the air in noisily, through her nostrils, exhaling through her mouth. The corset was too tight, constricting her ribs.

“I know where I am, Rick. The monkeys outside remind me at five in the morning instead of a maid’s bell. And instead of croissants on my table, I have these tins. But today is our fourth anniversary. I want to feel like a human being. Just one day.”

Rick set the screwdriver down on the greasy floor. The metal clinked against the planks. The engineer rose, wiping his palms on his thighs. His gray eyes, with red veins burst from sleeplessness, settled on his wife. He looked at her for a long time, catching the changes with his gaze. The soft Boston roundness of her cheeks had vanished. Her cheekbones were drawn tight over dry skin; dark, bluish shadows lay beneath her eyes. Cat’s fingers clenched the stem of her glass convulsively, and her broken nail oozed watery blood.

Rick averted his eyes to the corner of the barracks, thrust his hand into his trouser pocket, and began mechanically rolling a greasy nut between his fingers.

“Forgive me,” his voice came out hollow. “I don’t know how to stay human in this steam bath. I’ve been fiddling with this tin can for three hours. With no luck. The rubber gaskets turned to sticky mush in a week, and the bearings were eaten by rust. In Boston, I assembled bridge spans. Here, I’m helpless against a room fan.”

He clenched his right fist with effort. His knuckles responded with a dry, bony crack. Cat knew that sound. Over two years of marriage, she had learned that this crack replaced cursing for Rick — it meant the highest degree of helplessness, when blueprints and formulas ceased to work.

“You’ll fix it,” Cat ran her finger along the moist stem of the crystal glass. “You always find a solution.”

“Iron is helpless, Catarina. Here, metal gives out faster than we can notice. People give out the same way.”

Rick lowered the fan to the greasy floor. The blades jerked with a strained, rusty squeak, wobbled, and stopped. The immobile, gray air settled back into the barracks.

Hoarse voices drifted from the embankment. Portuguese curses from the firemen mixed with the talk of local day laborers. A couple of hundred yards from the barracks, lumberjacks were methodically felling deadwood — the dull, heavy thuds of axes reverberated through the floorboards beneath Cat’s feet. Through the gaps in the planks came the smell of smoke. Rotten sleepers and trash were burning in bonfires. This smoke mixed with the odor of stagnant swamp water, iron heated all day, and the sweet, suffocating fragrance of wild orchids. The flowers sent thin, slick tendrils straight through the gaps in the walls, turning the damp wood of the barracks into nutritious rot for their roots.

“Do you remember our first anniversary?” Cat took a sip. The champagne had finally warmed, hinting at acetic acid. “In Boston, at Parker’s. We ordered oysters, and outside the windows, clean, dry snow was falling. Rick, you promised then...”

“I promised to travel the world,” Rick interrupted her thoughtfully, staring into the dark corner. “I called the Amazon the greatest adventure of our lives.”

“You said these rivers and forests would keep us young,” Cat corrected.

Rick gave a bitter laugh. The corner of his mouth twitched convulsively.

“I was a fool. We’re just pieces of meat in the giant warm stomach of this earth.”

He shoved his hand into his trouser pocket, produced a rusty nut with stripped threads, and began rolling it monotonously between his calloused fingers. The metal slid habitually from his thumb to his forefinger, then to his middle finger. Rick got stuck in this rhythm, staring at the floorboards.

“I don’t want to die here, Rick,” Cat’s voice dropped to a venomous, cutting whisper. “I don’t want my body to rot on this mainline, where even the rails glow green at night, like rotting bones.”

“Steel doesn’t glow on its own, Catarina. It’s static electricity before a storm front. Ordinary physics.”

“Physics,” Cat gave a short, bitter laugh. Her nostrils flared convulsively as they caught the suffocating scent of orchids. “You cling to your formulas every time you’re afraid to admit the obvious. You can’t measure this wilderness with a ruler.”

The door bolt slid back with a strained creak. Through the gap, a broad forehead with heavy cheekbones appeared. The Indian Manolo, hired by the Claytons three months earlier at the lower dock, froze on the threshold. He wore a dirty gray canvas shirt, soaked through on the shoulders to dark patches. His bare, wide feet were covered with a crust of dried red clay and deep, weeping cracks from walking constantly on the gravel embankment. Manolo left damp, muddy prints on the clean boards of the floor. In his hands, he held a rough wooden tray.

“Señor, señora,” his guttural voice was more like a ragged rasp. “Time to clear. Night has come.”

Cat tried to nod, but her facial muscles cramped from feverish heat. The throbbing vein at her left temple beat faster.

“Take it, Manolo.”

The Indian began collecting the plates, clumsily gripping the thin edges of the Boston china with his fingers. His wide, calloused palms clutched the silver forks with evident apprehension, as if the metal might bite. He glanced askance at the Claytons’ crystal glasses with a savage, superstitious fear. The servant reeked of sour sweat, boiled maize, and raw river silt.

While gathering the dishes, Manolo carefully, trying to be unobtrusive, pressed an empty anchovy tin with jagged edges against his side with his elbow. For him, that discarded metal was worth more than all the Boston silver.

Manolo turned and left. His bare feet left wet clay prints on the clean boards — dark, damp imprints of toes that instantly dried, turning into brown flakes. Cat stared at those spots. Civilization in these parts sloughed off a person like scales, and the habit of sweeping floors in the morning was the first to disappear.

“He looks at us like we’re gods,” Rick jerked his head toward the threshold. “Fool.”

“Manolo is at home here,” Cat did not turn her head. “We are strangers. We are nothing here.”

A dense silence settled in the barracks. The candle wicks smoked, the flames stretched upward into thin blue needles — static tension in the air building before a storm front. Cat felt the fine hairs on her forearms lift and stand on end from the electrical discharges in the atmosphere. She walked over to the fogged mirror in the corner. The glass was covered with a layer of gray, damp dust.

The reflection was frighteningly false. Her hair, tangled from the damp, smelled of river silt and stuck out like harsh tow. On her pale neck, large red welts from insect bites burned. Cat noticed that her pupils had dilated, almost filling the iris, and her mouth held the persistent taste of dry chalk. She licked her cracked, salty lips. The dull vein in her left temple beat harder, marking the first hours of malarial fever.

At that moment, the candle flames flared abruptly blue, hissed, and died. The barracks plunged into an oily darkness. Cat cried out, clutching the edge of the table.

“Rick!”

The engineer stepped silently to the window and with a strained screech wrenched the heavy wooden shutters open. Outside, directly in front of their doorstep, two perfectly straight lines receded into the darkness. The rails of the unfinished mainline glowed in the dark with a ghostly, dense phosphorescent green light. Two luminous neon lines cut through the Black Selva and vanished into the mist.

Someone pounded on the door. Heavy, panicked blows shook the flimsy planks. Rick jerked the bolt, and Doctor Hale stumbled into the room, almost falling onto Cat's back. His eyes glittered wildly in the greenish half-light from the window, his shirt collar was torn, and a bottle neck protruded from his coat pocket. The doctor breathed heavily, whistling, smearing the doorframe with oily fingers.

"Blackwood is bankrupt, Clayton," Hale spat a brown wad of tobacco saliva on the floor and gave a hoarse laugh. "His financial syndicate burst this morning in New York. The stationmaster put a bullet in his mouth half an hour ago — I personally wiped his brains off his desk. The safe is empty! The telegraph wire in the jungle was cut by marauders! No supply ships! We are officially dead to the world!"

The doctor fell silent, pressing the bottle to his lips. Rick slowly shifted his gaze from the glowing green rails to his wife's pale face.

"We'll rot here, Rick."

Cat said this into the cloudy gray glass of the mirror, barely moving her dry, salty lips.

"Don't say that."

Rick stepped out of the dark corner and placed his hands on her shoulders. The engineer's heavy, rough fingers, covered with dry calluses from wrenches, dug into the emerald silk of her dress. Through the fabric, Cat felt their familiar, oppressive warmth.

"We'll get out. I'll get that little train running, Catarina. I'll take us out along the embankment. Formulas don't lie — I'll find some solution."

She turned. Rick's gray eyes were fixed. Cat searched them for the old Boston light — the one that had ignited three years ago at the ball celebrating the opening of New England's new rail line. He had stood by the marble column then, stooped, awkward, with a drawing tube under his arm, enthusiastically talking about material strength and bridge spans.

"You always find a solution," Cat covered the spasm in her throat with an angry, haughty smirk. "But what if Blackwood's blueprints are a dead end? What if this lowland is a vast trap of mud, and there's no way out?"

Rick did not answer. From the embankment, cutting through the dense hum of the Amazon, came the first guttural shouts. Someone was running heavily through the liquid slop of the road, splashing through puddles. Spanish curses from the firemen broke into shrill falsetto — the words were indistinguishable. Cat flinched, her shoulder blades pressing against the cloudy mirror.

Rick had already slipped to the door. He pushed it open. There, beyond the awnings of the coal sheds, in the crimson twilight of the dawning day, dirty human shadows darted about. "Thirteenth Mile," consisting of two dozen plank barracks, repair shops, and dynamite depots, had turned into a stirred-up anthill. The cries multiplied, taking on a steady, animal tone of panic.

"Stay inside," Rick said shortly, without turning around. "Bolt the door."

The door slammed shut. Cat was left alone amid the smoking blue wicks and the cloying smell of spilled anchovy oil. She stepped to the window and tore back the cloth curtain. On the muddy road, lit by sparse kerosene lamps, people raged. Laborers, lumberjacks, firemen — Cat saw their angry, frightened faces, their brows gleaming with sticky sweat. From all sides, canvas sacks were dragged from the supply depot. Two Portuguese carpenters methodically, without haste, smashed a barrel of industrial alcohol with the heavy head of an axe. The wood cracked with a splintering sound. A dark, pungent puddle spread over the red clay, and the air was instantly saturated with the fusel, acrid smell of alcohol.

Through the window opening, Cat caught sight of the tracks. The steel threads of the rails stretched into the thicket, toward an abandoned bridge span. They glowed with an even, phosphorescent green light. The violet belly of storm clouds rolled over the treetops. The wind hurled a dense wave of ozone into the barracks.

Cat wrapped her arms around her shoulders. Her skin was instantly covered with a fine cold chill, though the air under the ceiling was like a hot bath.

“Steel doesn’t burn with phosphorus,” Cat squeezed her eyes shut, trying to burn the glow from her memory. “Scientists in Boston would call this static discharge before a storm or the glow of putrefactive mold. But scientists sit in dry offices. Here, in the stuffy darkness, this green fire seems like a neon line drawn by nature between us and the rest of the world. The mainline itself lights the way for its new passengers.”

“We were promised the greatest triumph of progress,” Hale interrupted, resting his chin on his torn collar. Cheap alcohol wafted from his mouth. “I remember that New York drive. A bridge to the future. But the bridge collapsed into the swamp, Catarina. Blackwood bought these lands at auction, locking property rights in leather folders. Fool. You can’t buy this thicket — you can only borrow it from death itself, paying with the lives of firemen. Every mile of track is laid on the bones of laborers whose names Blackwood didn’t even record in his ledgers. His bank burst. No supply ships. We’ve been crossed off the list of the living.”

“What do we do?” Cat asked quietly, her voice breaking into shortness of breath from the oppressive corset. “Rick, what now?”

Hale turned the glass over, wiping his lips with the back of his hand, stained with carbolic acid. The crystal clinked as he set it down on the oak marquetry of the table. The doctor fixed his gaze on the emerald silk of Cat’s dress, registering the dark bluish circles under her eyes. His yellowed whites were motionless.

“We need a plan,” Rick spun around abruptly, pulling his hand from his pocket. “In the western dead end, on the abandoned track, stands the Black Maria. A small switching engine. The metal there is sound. If we restore the boiler and weld the car with steel plates, we can break through back to the port.”

From deep within the overgrown clearing, miles from the camp, a new sound came. A heavy, metallic blow on a rail. Single, clear, it rolled along the steel track, vibrating through the floorboards. As if someone in the impenetrable night thicket was testing the gauge with a track hammer. There could be no construction workers in the forest. The mainline had stalled in the dead end of bankruptcy, but the metal hummed. The vibration reached the barracks, and the skin on Cat’s neck instantly prickled with fine cold goosebumps. In the phosphorescent green half-light of the window, the faces of Rick and Hale looked gray, carved from limestone. The green corridor of track waited for its passengers.

Outside, the first tropical downpour struck in heavy, large drops. From below, straight out from under the glowing embankment, came a dense, dry rustling. An enormous scaly body of a black anaconda slithered onto the green rails. Its coils caught the phosphorescent light of the track dully. The snake slowly crossed the steel, breaking orchid stems with its weight, and slid under the wooden flooring of the barracks. Cat froze, feeling through the chair legs the heavy coils of the creature rubbing against the floorboards directly beneath her feet. The creature was retreating into the crawlspace, leaving a damp, slimy trail behind.

The earth was claiming its rights to the abandoned station. Cat lowered her gaze to her hands, smeared with the swollen oil paint of the armrests. The emerald silk of the dress, Parker’s porcelain, crystal, and Boston — all had become an illusion, washed away by the tropical rain in one morning. The party was over. Only the damp barracks remained, a rusty nut in Rick’s fist, and the green phosphorescent track to nowhere.

Cat stepped from the murky mirror to her husband, fighting the feverish chill in her temples.

“I will not stay in this earth, Rick,” her voice dropped to an even, angry whisper, and for the first time a hard metallic edge appeared in it. “We will not rot here. Start welding the steel.”

Cat stared at her husband’s sullen face, smeared with oily stains. The dryness in her mouth and the taste of chalk sharpened her perception: this shared doom bound them tighter than Boston vows at the altar. Cat stepped forward, caught his hand, and squeezed his fingers until they cramped. The engineer’s knuckles responded with a short bony crack. Rick did not pull away — his fingers dug into her palm in return, breaking the skin with his calluses.

“We will get this train moving,” Rick said this into the dark window, barely moving his lips. “We’ll weld a steel box. Break through the blockages. We’ll have to smash the furniture, throw Blackwood’s blueprints and our trunks into the firebox — I’ll do it. We’ll get out of here.”

“Do we have a choice?” Cat’s breath caught, the corset constricting her ribs.

“We have the rails and the Black Selva,” Rick shrugged. “And this green glowing strip.”

Outside, the downpour poured in a solid wall. A lightning flash split the inky sky above the canopy. White electric light for a second illuminated the distant stretch of the mainline. There, amid the overgrown clearing, silent tattooed figures of savages stood motionless. They were frozen on the sleepers like stone statues, staring straight at the Claytons’ barracks. Cat stifled a cry, digging her fingers into Rick’s arm. She said nothing — Hale would have blamed it all on malarial delirium.

The phosphorescent mist of the Amazon rose from the swamps, enveloping the steel rails, drawing people into its eternal rotten bosom.

“Tomorrow,” Rick unclenched his fist — the nut in his pocket clinked dully. “At first light, we’ll start work on the boiler.”

Cat nodded silently, gasping for the sticky air. The vein at her left temple continued methodically counting the seconds until morning.

The anaconda had slithered into the darkness of the crawlspace. On the green phosphorescent rail, a wide wet trail remained, evaporating instantly from the tropical heat rising from the earth. But the distant single blow on the metal still rang in their ears. The metallic vibration faded into the planks of the walls. That sound seemed like the ghostly whistle of a locomotive not yet assembled.

They stood in the pitch darkness of the barracks, pressed against each other, listening to the whistling breath of the Black Selva. The wicks had gone out. Through the narrow gaps in the wooden shutters, pale neon bands seeped in. This green swamp light fell on the porcelain and silver of the table, like the dead, motionless gaze from beneath the damp earth. The mainline silently claimed its rights to their lives.

Cat squeezed her eyes shut tight. Her eyelids were scorched by dry feverish heat. She wanted to cry, but the muscles of her face were numb from the suffocation. There were no tears. In the Amazon, human tears evaporate from the skin faster than a dollar disappears from the pocket of a bankrupt Blackwood.

CHAPTER 2

ABANDONED STATION SYNDROME

“Newspaper, November 14, 1906. Section “Exchange & Investments”:

‘...The syndicate of Mr. Arthur Blackwood guarantees full return of funds to shareholders of the Madeira — Mamoré Railroad, secured by the rubber plantations of the state of Amazonas. Progress cannot be stopped. The jungle retreats before American capital. Christian civilization enters the wild selva to the rhythm of track hammers. The engineering corps confirms: less than a year remains before the final link-up of the tracks. Tickets for the first transcontinental express are already on sale...’

Pencil note in the margin of the archival copy:

“Supplies terminated. Cashbox empty. Forget.”

Cat woke because she could not breathe.

The air in the barracks had become as thick as cotton wool. It settled on her tongue like a heavy, damp lump, smelling of rotting leaves and stagnant river water. The ceiling had disappeared — the rafters were swallowed by gray, sticky mist. The sheets she had wrapped herself in during the night felt wet, as if they had just been pulled from the river. The skin beneath them itched with a fine, irritating rash. Cat ran her hand over the bed. The fabric breathed the cold, corrosive mold of the Amazon, which turns cotton into dust in a single night and wool into rotting felt.

She sat up, touched her face with her palm. Her fingers caught a sticky gray coating — a mixture of sweat and coal dust that had seeped through the gaps in the walls. Her dark tangled hair stuck to her temples in wet strands. Cat pushed it back with effort. The moisture penetrated her pores, filled every cell, turning her body into a sponge. On her neck and collarbones, her fingers left dark smears. They did not dry — they only grew greasier, as if she had slept at the bottom of a muddy swamp.

Rick sat on the edge of the bed with his back to her, staring at the wall. He had not slept all night. Cat could tell by his shoulders, locked in a dry muscular cramp, by his fingers rolling the rusty greasy nut in his trouser pocket. His unbuttoned collar revealed shoulder blades with purple stripes from the hard back of a chair. The man turned his head. His bloodshot eyes were laced with a web of red veins; the dark hollows beneath them looked like the imprints of someone else’s fingers pressed into his face. His cheeks were overgrown with stiff gray stubble. Droplets of mist gleamed on the hairs like dew on dead grass.

“You didn’t sleep,” she said. Her voice was hoarse, cracked.

“Couldn’t,” Rick forced the words out with a metallic note of exhaustion. “Noise all around. Every minute I heard knocking. Thought they were breaking into the depots, stealing tools. Lay there and counted axe blows. Thirty-seven. Counted thirty-seven while telling myself it was just the wind snapping dry branches. And then another thirty-eight when I realized the truth. I just listened to this forest swallowing the camp piece by piece.”

Cat sat down beside him, pressing her forehead to his shoulder. Under the engineer’s skin, tight knots of muscle rolled. His heavy, ragged breathing mingled with her inhalations. Rick smelled of iron, soot, and sour sweat. A familiar smell of home. But now a new scent was mixed in — pungent, raw, the smell of fear. It could not be mistaken for anything else.

“What are we going to do, Rick?” Cat’s voice broke into a whisper, exposing a crack in her voice. “What now?”

“We leave,” he rose, his tone hardening into steel. “Right now. Before they get to the depot. Before the Black Maria is stripped for scrap for the copper. We have a few hours left. Maybe an hour. Maybe thirty minutes. We have to make it.”

He yanked his jacket from the hook, pulled on his shirt. His fingers trembled, missing the buttonholes. The engineer growled deep in his throat, clenching his fists. His knuckles responded with a dry, bony crack. At that sound, Cat felt a dull ache in her temples.

“Let me,” she said softly.

Cat took his hands and moved them aside. She began to button his shirt — slowly, carefully, as she had done hundreds of times in Boston before the theater or formal evenings. Her fingers slid over his chest, wet with sweat. His heart beat fast, unevenly, like a hunted animal.

“Remember the shirt before the governor’s ball? You insisted that only I could manage those damned buttons.”

“Yes,” a faint shadow of a smile flickered in Rick’s voice. “I added that you would have made a fine maid, had your father not been a banker.”

“And you replied that I was too proud to be a maid.”

“You’re too proud for anything, Cat. That’s why I love you.”

She finished with the collar, looked into his eyes. Deep within them, a spark from the first night they met still lingered. At that Boston ball, he had approached her by the column and said: “You look bored. I could offer you a conversation about structural mechanics to save you from tedium.” She had laughed then. No one had ever spoken to her about structural mechanics before. But he had spoken, his eyes blazing, and Cat had fallen in love with that inner fire.

“We’ll do this,” she said firmly, squeezing his hands. “You and me. As always.”

“As always,” he repeated. The familiar steel had returned to his voice.

Rick released her and began gathering their belongings. Tools, a map, a compass, matches, candle stubs flew into an old rucksack. Cat watched his sharp, hurried movements. The old world had ceased to exist. Only the mist remained, alien sounds, and this man trying to save them both.

She turned to the table with the remains of last night’s dinner. The glazed cups were covered with millions of tiny reddish ants. The insects moved in a solid rustling crust, devouring the remains of Boston syrup — the last particle of civilization. Cat stared at this living mass. A suffocating nausea rose in her throat. The ants had occupied the chairs, the floor, crawled over the curved legs of the table, covering the silver cutlery. Their rhythmic, relentless motion seemed like the selva itself, digesting their past life, turning it into brown biomass.

Cat lowered her feet to the floor, found her shoes. Expensive Boston leather pumps, with elegant buckles and thin soles, in which she had walked no more than a mile in her former life. She picked them up and froze in horror. In a single night, the leather had become covered with a dense layer of gray, damp fuzz. The mold had eaten into the seams, turned the delicate backs into dust that crumbled between her fingers.

“Take work boots,” Rick tossed over his shoulder without turning around. “Quick. We leave in five minutes. No excess baggage. Only what fits in the rucksack. And forget about the dress, Cat. It’s useless here.”

She pulled on the heavy, rough footwear, reeking of someone else’s mud. Her feet immediately grew heavy, as if rooted to the earth. Cat caught her reflection in the murky mirror: a pale face, tangled strands, deep shadows under her eyes. The emerald dress looked like rags on the ghost of a woman who had begun dying long before her heart stopped.

“Ready,” she said. Her voice was surprisingly steady.

They pushed the door open, and the mist descended upon them with all its damp weight. Moisture instantly soaked their clothes, made their hair wet and greasy. The air in the clearing was thick as jelly. The smell of spilled kerosene, wet wool from workers’ shirts, and the cloying, nauseating stench of rotting orchids hit their nostrils. Cat coughed, pressing her palm to her lips, and at that moment froze.

From the open window of the office, twenty paces from their barracks, a hoarse, crackling gramophone sound tore through. The record was spewing a jaunty, wild melody. Over the orchestral crackle, an unnaturally cheerful voice with a pure Boston accent extolled a hygienic product:

"...Gentlemen and ladies, try the new "Dr. Parker's Tooth Elixir"! Your teeth will be whiter than the snow on the Alps, your breath fresher than the morning breeze in Boston Harbor! Only three dollars a jar. Three dollars, and you will forget about cavities, bad breath, and all those minor inconveniences that plague the modern man! Dr. Parker guarantees..."

The mechanism jammed. The needle began to repeat the same phrase with an unpleasant dull hiss and a regular click:

"...freshness of Boston... click... freshness of Boston... click..."

To this mechanical, mocking rhythm, a crowd of workers stormed the food depots. People smashed doors with axes, dragged crates through the mud, overturned barrels of corned beef.

Cat froze. The earth was slipping from under her heavy boots. A suffocating haze came over her, like a nightmare where her legs refuse to obey and a strange mechanical voice sounds directly in her ears. The people she had politely greeted in the square yesterday were losing their human form. They did without furious cries or brandished weapons. The crowd moved fast, greedily, with the feverish ferocity of a frightened pack of dogs at the sight of meat.

"My God," Cat whispered. A nauseating spasm rose to her throat. "What are they doing?"

"Surviving," Rick said dryly, as if exhaling ash. "Doing what we would do without a plan or hope. Grabbing loot before someone else takes it. Tomorrow the camp will be empty. Remember this moment, Cat. Fear turns people into voracious insects."

Cat watched a man in a torn shirt. He was dragging a canvas sack, but the fabric split. Gray beans poured into the red mire, mixing with clay and manure. The heavy boots of the marauders instantly trampled the grains into mush. No one slowed to pick up a handful. A little further on, a woman tried to move a box of salt pork. The load was too heavy, she fell in the mud, and those following stepped over her head with cold indifference. A small child nearby was choking on tears, but that thin cry was completely drowned by the cheerful wheeze of the gramophone and the dense tramp of hundreds of feet.

"They only see food," Cat's voice was laced with bitter salt. "They've forgotten everything else. Without fuel, tools, and coal, they'll rot here in a week. Beans won't save them."

"They're not thinking about a week," Rick pulled her along, drawing her away from the crowd. "Their horizon is one minute. They're fighting over boxes of sugar as if they're going to live here forever. Fools. In this selva, gold weighs less than a pound of dry coal for the boiler. But they're blind."

They moved along the wall of the barracks, hidden in the gray haze. The mist wrapped around their shoulders like a cold shroud. Its damp fingers settled on their faces, necks, and arms. Cat glanced sideways at her husband. The engineer scanned the space, calculating safe zones to the nearest buildings, assessing obstacles. His fingers squeezed her palm painfully. Rick remained a mathematician even at the epicenter of a collapsing world.

They slipped past a broken warehouse. A burly man with a purple face and wet, sweaty hair was dragging a heavy chest of tools from the doorway. Nearby, a skinny worker with a sparse beard and darting rat-like eyes fussed. The men argued fiercely. Their words were swallowed by the strained mechanical howl of the gramophone grinding its damned Boston record.

"...click... freshness of Boston... click... freshness of Boston..."

At that moment, Cat saw him.

A man sat on an overturned wooden crate by the entrance to the main warehouse. Large, broad-shouldered, with a heavy bull-like nape. His dirty canvas shirt was open on his chest; his greasy trousers were patched with gray at the knees. With a broad hunting knife, he lazily picked at his own fingernail. His right thumb was swollen, reddened, and oozing yellowish pus at the base. The marauder moved slowly, with the complete, monotonous indifference of a man engaged in his habitual routine.

“MacGregor,” Rick breathed out. His tone mixed exhaustion with contemptuous disgust.

“You know him?” Cat pressed harder against the planks of the barracks.

“Everyone knows him. He ran the loading. Now he’s in charge of the looting.”

MacGregor scraped off a crust of pus, wiped the blade on his trouser leg. From the warehouse door, an old storekeeper stumbled out — gray-haired, hunched, with trembling hands. The old man clung desperately to the padlock that a tall worker was already smashing with a crowbar. The gray-haired man wheezed in broken Spanish, but that feeble squeak was drowned in the noise of the square.

MacGregor raised his head. He looked at the storekeeper — without rage or malice, with the same bored thoughtfulness with which he had examined his own finger a moment earlier. He spat a brown tobacco saliva through his teeth and turned to the man with the crowbar.

“The porridge was undersalted today,” the marauder’s voice hissed with a guttural rasp. “Yesterday I told the cook to add more, and the idiot skimped again. As if salt came out of his own pocket. And you talk about provisions. What provisions? Porridge without salt is pig feed.”

He pinched his left nostril with his finger and noisily blew his nose right at his feet. The mucus fell into the liquid red clay, mixing with the trampled beans. No one turned their head — the crowd was gutting the sacks.

The storekeeper broke into a hoarse, barking cough. He begged, grabbed the workers’ sleeves, babbled that without tools the camp would die, that the coal in the depot was their only chance of salvation. MacGregor was not listening. He was squeezing the last pus from the wound. The old man’s screams occupied him less than his own flesh.

“Can you hear me, old man?” MacGregor said without raising his eyes. “I’m telling you about the undersalted porridge, and you’re talking about iron. Tools won’t feed people. My men need meat. And salt. And you’re offering them a fast because you’re shaking over your lousy wrenches?”

The storekeeper tried to speak — his jaw trembled, spitting out incoherent Spanish sounds. MacGregor rose from the crate. Slowly, heavily, bear-like. He towered over the old man by a full head, covering him with his shadow. He looked down. In his eyes — not a trace of anger, only an empty, oily indifference. The way you look at a fly before clapping your hands.

“Get out of here,” he said, not even raising his voice. “I said so. Move.”

“But, señor... p-please listen...” the old man held out his dry palms. “The coal... the coal in the depot... Without it, the trains... the locomotives won’t move! We’ll all... we’ll all rot here, señor!”

MacGregor breathed out noisily, with a whistle. The way you sigh when you’re sick to death of listening to someone’s whining chatter. He raised the knife, spun the blade lazily in his dirty fingers, and then — without a wind-up, without changing his sleepy face — swung the heavy bone handle squarely into the old man’s temple.

A dull, bony crunch. “Hek!” — the storekeeper gasped and collapsed into the red mire without a sound, like a half-empty sack of potatoes.

“I keep telling him to back off, and he...” MacGregor muttered, not even looking down. He turned to the man with the crowbar, jerked his chin: “What are you standing there for? Well? Break the damned thing. Don’t spare the iron, we’ve got plenty of time.”

Cat watched from the gray haze, biting her own fist. Her fingers cramped. It seemed to her that these were not people but ugly puppets. MacGregor had already sat back down on the crate and was picking at his inflamed nail with his knife. A cold fury boiled in Cat’s chest. She wanted to leap out, to scream, to dig her nails into that complacent, indifferent face, but Rick yanked her elbow, pressing her hard against his shoulder.

“Shhh... Back!” he exhaled directly into her ear, his hot rasp scorching her skin. “Are you insane?! He’s not worth your bullet! Quiet. Follow me. To the depot. Run!”

Cat obeyed, but inside a tight, cold knot formed. Fear and hatred. This lump would swell with every hour, with every mile of the road.

“Did you... did you see that?” she forced out when they burst into a narrow alley between the barracks. Her heart pounded against her ribs. “Rick... He just... hit him and... and went on sitting there! As if... as if there was nothing at his feet!”

“Forget it,” Rick did not slow down, dragging her over the slick planks. “Forget him. Our task is... we must not become like them. Hear me? If we become like that scum — that’s it. We won’t even need the jungle to die. We’ll devour ourselves.”

They rushed onward, weaving between smoking barrels of tar and splintered crates. The mist tore into shreds, revealing the morning. The selva was crawling onto the station from all sides: lianas as thick as arms were pulling down the warehouse roofs, roots were splitting the decking, and gray mold was swallowing the wet wood, turning timber into rotting pulp. The jungle was hurriedly, greedily reclaiming its own.

“We... we won’t make it,” she forced out through her teeth, clutching his wet sleeve. “Do you hear me, Rick? This... this damned forest will swallow us first! Before we even reach the depot!”

“It can’t,” Rick spun around sharply, his face twitching, soot creeping through the folds of his skin. “The selva swallows only those who... who get on their knees and whine. Those who stop. But we... we’ll keep running. Move, Cat! Quick!”

They dashed past a split barrel of kerosene. The stench of fuel hit their nostrils, and Cat was seized by a dry, barking cough. The fuel had flooded the mud, mixing with slime, trampled beans, and rotting straw. In the puddle, right in the rainbow slick, fat gray rats scurried feverishly. Their long, bald tails left trails in the oil. The world around was warping, turning into an alien, predatory place. Cat looked at her husband and understood: Rick was the only piece of Boston, the only stronghold she had left on the entire earth.

“Rick!” she yanked him toward her, forcing him to stop right by the rusty water tower. Her boots squelched in the clay. “Stop... Wait... What if this is it? What if... we die here? In this red mire, like... like that old man by the warehouse?!”

The engineer froze. He turned to her. In his bloodshot eyes, a wild, blind expression appeared — a mixture of hunted fear and obstinacy. He stepped close, with a jerky motion cupped her face in his calloused, soot-stained palms. His fingers pressed painfully into Cat’s cheeks.

“Listen to me!” his voice cracked into a hoarse, furious half-whisper. “No ‘die.’ Understood? I... I gave your father my word at the wedding. I said I’d drag you out of any hell. And I will! We’ll get that damned engine running. We’ll break through the thicket. To hell with Blackwood’s blueprints — I’ll throw your Boston trunks into the firebox if we run out of wood! We just... we just have to get to the depot.”

“But if the boiler...”

“Quiet!” he cut her off, shaking her shoulders. The rusty nut in his trouser pocket clinked dully. “No ‘ifs.’ Forget them. There’s you, me, a piece of steel, and the rails. That green glowing strip in the mist. That’s our road. Straight into the inferno if we have to. Standing still is certain death. And we... we’re not ready for the graveyard yet.”

Cat searched his face, etched with wrinkles and grime. The fire in his pupils burned exactly as it had in Boston. Rick was right. They would survive. They would be saved by that blind, almost ugly stubbornness that makes you move forward when the entire world around you is crumbling into brown dust.

“Alright,” Cat drew in the sticky air noisily through her nostrils, her jaw clenching with grim determination. “Let’s go. But if... if we do rot here, Rick... I’ll find a way to curse you in the afterlife. Forever.”

“Deal,” Rick gave a short, crooked smirk. “Let’s go. The Black Maria is waiting. And the boiler won’t stoke itself.”

They broke into a run again. The camp had ceased to be human habitation altogether — it had become a smoking dump. A worker was hauling a sack of sugar on his back, tearing the canvas on

sharp corners of rafters. An empty-eyed woman sat on a split crate with an infant, staring blankly ahead. Someone had lit a fire from office chairs in the middle of the passage. Bitter clerical smoke mingled with the swamp mist, creating a suffocating, acrid smog that Cat would remember to her dying day.

"Listen," Rick broke the run with a hoarse exhalation as they pressed against the rotting planks of the rusty water tower at the camp's edge. "Yesterday... yesterday at the ball we drank to progress from crystal. Remember? And today this... this damned progress is trampling mud under the windows of our barracks. Some kind of wild... wild mockery."

"No, Rick," Cat shook her head, gasping for air, the corset preventing her from breathing. "This... this isn't mockery. This is the truth. The real truth. We thought... we were building a road to the future, right? But we cut a clearing to nowhere."

She stopped, digging her fingers into his shoulder. Her pale face, etched with dirty streaks, was lit by feverish eyes.

"Do you know... do you know what I realized just now? Right now, Rick?"

"What?" he turned warily toward the roar of the crowd behind them.

"Civilization... all our great culture... it's just a habit of brushing your teeth in the morning. That's all. There in Boston, I thought it was laws, some kind of ethics, morality... Nonsense! Rubbish. It's just a habit of order. Cleanliness. Of knowing that tomorrow... tomorrow will be exactly the same as yesterday. But when that order breaks — everything crumbles. To dust. Only the red mire remains. Mire and animal fear."

Rick turned abruptly, a heavy astonishment appearing in his inflamed gaze.

"Perhaps," he forced out, his jaw muscles tensing tightly. "But we still have the track. Our train. The depot. Even if this road leads straight to hell — we'll follow it. We have nothing else."

He firmly grabbed her hand, dragging her into the sticky gray haze that hid the mainline. In the square, mired in the mist, the gramophone still convulsed on one mechanical phrase: "...freshness of Boston... click... freshness of Boston... click..."

But they ran. To stop was to surrender. And ahead, in the rotting haze of the swamps, the Black Maria awaited them. The switching engine. Their only refuge. This train was supposed to carry them into the very heart of darkness — into the green grave from which no one returned alive.

"Rick!" Cat breathed out, as the heavy work boots clattered on the station platform planks. "What... what are we burying at this station?"

The engineer paused for a second, turning around.

"Everything," he cut off, and the rusty nut clinked dully in his pocket. "The past. Foolish illusions. Faith in the justice of this world. Boston is back there, Catarina. Our civilization is dead."

"And what... what do we take with us?"

"Only steel," Rick pulled her toward the tracks. "Steel and each other. That will be enough to survive."

He squeezed her fingers with his calloused, machine-oil-scented palm with such fierce force that Cat momentarily lost feeling in her hand. But she did not whimper, did not try to free herself. On the contrary, she clung to his hand in return — with a dead, convulsive grip, as if clutching the very last, ghostly chance of salvation.

"Let's go," she breathed out through her shortness of breath. "Run, Rick. Faster to the train."

They lunged forward.

Behind them, mired in the gray shroud, the gramophone continued to spew its damned advertisement. The crowd ransacked the warehouses. MacGregor lazily squeezed pus from his inflamed finger. The marauders had no idea that in a couple of hours the Claytons would weld the doors of their steel bunker, and the Black Maria would drag them into the epicenter of hell. Toward the green grave on the rails, pulsing with phosphorescent fire.

The fugitives did not know the ending either. It was just as well. Sometimes knowledge wounds more deeply than ignorance. Especially when it foretells imminent death.

The jungle made a deep, wet exhalation. The mist thickened to white, turning the world around them into a predatory, hostile morass. But they ran. They pushed through the green corridor to nowhere.

“Man is stronger than death,” Cat thought, her eyes fixed on her husband’s soot-grimed shirt, his tense shoulder blades, his confident, heavy stride. “He knows the ending, but he keeps stubbornly putting one foot in front of the other. The meaning is in the movement itself. You just have to keep going. Even when the rails end at the edge of a grave. Even when that grave is green, and flowers will never grow on it.”

They pushed through the mist.

That was all that mattered.

CHAPTER 3

LOGICAL INVISIBILITY

From the confidential report of an inspector of the Atlantic-Mutual Insurance Company, Boston. Appraisal Sheet No. 412-B, dated August 18, 1905:

“...I hereby confirm: heavy equipment purchased by Mr. Blackwood’s syndicate, including depot drive belts, pressure gauges, and brass valves of switching engines, is insured against damage and sabotage for the sum of forty thousand dollars in gold. Loss of these components renders movement along the mainline impossible, turning locomotives into dead metal. Risks are assessed as minimal. American engineers exercise full control over the warehouses, and the local climate is incapable of affecting the durability of steel structures...”

Pencil note in the lower margin:

“Syndicate liquidated due to bankruptcy. Payments annulled. File closed.”

The mist at the depot gates was so dense that it seemed as if someone had thrown a wet blanket of gray cotton over the entire station, saturated to the edges with swamp water and rotting leaves. It settled on the skin like a sticky film, seeped deep into the lungs, and lodged in the throat, turning every breath into a painful, exhausting effort — as if breathing through damp, thick rags. Large droplets of condensation slowly ran down the log walls, leaving dark damp streaks on the blackened wood, like the tracks of giant tears.

Cat ran after Rick, feeling each step echo with sharp, unbearable pain in her chafed heels. The heavy work boots she had hastily pulled on at dawn were a size too large, and the rough leather seams cut mercilessly into her ankles, leaving bloody blisters. The sticky moisture quickly soaked through the thick leather, mingling with the serous fluid, and the wet fabric of her socks wore the inflamed spots to the raw flesh, turning every movement into agony. But stopping was impossible. Rick stubbornly dragged her forward, his hand clenching hers with such fierce force that her fingers had long since gone numb, and Cat understood clearly: if she allowed herself to fall now, she would never get back up.

“Rick... stop... for God’s sake...” she breathed out when they finally reached the corner of the depot.

Her voice had completely cracked into a hoarse, barking cough that shook her entire body, and Cat felt the bone plates of her corset dig painfully into her ribs with each new spasm, cutting off her air.

“I... I can’t run in these clodhoppers anymore... Wait... give me a minute... just one minute... I’m suffocating...”

Cat tore her hand from her husband’s grip and collapsed back against the wooden wall of the depot, her strength gone. The logs were slick with moisture. Her fingers immediately sank into the soft, damp mold that had turned the sturdy timber into a kind of breathing sponge overnight.

She tried to take a deep breath, but the air, thick and smelling of rotting leaves, stuck in her throat. From the rapid walking, the whalebone of her corset dug mercilessly under her ribs, forcing only a dry, whistling sob from her chest. The metal fastenings on her back were red-hot from the suffocation and burned the skin between her shoulder blades, echoing with a throbbing pain in time with her racing heart. Cat frantically tore at her collar, smearing her fingers in the hot sweat that streamed down her neck, washing away the old coal grime.

The gray mist of the swamps swirled around them, and Rick appeared in it as a blurred, unreal silhouette. In this suffocating murk, Cat suddenly fancied a ghost — the white, majestic columns of her father’s mansion in Boston. The mirage stood so close that she blindly reached out, hoping to touch the cool stone, but her fingers caught only emptiness and sticky mist.

“Rick... stop...” she broke into a barking cough, clinging to his wet sleeve. “Back... let’s go back to the barracks and lock ourselves in. This is a mistake, don’t you understand? Someone confused the telegrams at the port. My father has connections in Boston, senators, the law... The government will send cavalry or a ship for us. We just need to wait it out, close the doors and wait! The ships are already coming, Rick, I know it... If we abandon the station now — we’ll lose our last chance of rescue!”

She was choking on her words, and this panicked flood poured out of her like water from a burst dam. In her dilated, dark pupils was frozen a blind, childlike hope — the kind that appears only in people on the very edge of despair, when they are ready to grasp at any illusion rather than face the approaching nightmare.

Rick spun around sharply, grabbed her shoulders, and shook her with such force that her teeth clattered. His fingers dug deep into the wet emerald silk, crumpling the expensive fabric at its roots. Cat felt his hands trembling violently with tension. The engineer’s pale, soot-creased face breathed close to hers. In his inflamed gaze burned a feverish, almost insane resolve — the same that had appeared to her before only in the most desperate moments of their lives.

“Catarina, wake up!” his voice cracked into a hoarse, furious whisper. “What mistake?! Look at that square! Look at those people! Do you see a consular ship here? Do you hear the whistles of rescue steamers? There is no syndicate, Cat. The paper burst. The Boston notes on which we built our illusions have turned to ash. We’re alone here. Do you understand? Completely alone! Only Hale and his damned flask are with us. No father, no senators, no government. There’s only us, the depot’s metal, and that glowing green strip cut through nowhere.”

He stopped, clenching his fingers until they were white. His knuckles answered with a dry, bony crack. Before, Cat would have recognized that sound among a thousand others, but now it was not the familiar gesture of irritation. It clicked like a gunshot — a warning that Rick’s patience was at an end. The engineer was on the edge, ready to scream, to smash his fists against the slimy logs, just to release the rage that had been building in him for months.

“We can’t go back, Cat,” he said, quieter now, his tone softening though steel still rang in it. “Back there, in the barracks, only death is waiting for us. Slow, rotting death in the dark. We’ll fade from fever or starvation, our bodies will dissolve in this mire, and no one in the world will ever know we were here. Is that what you want? Do you dream of your flesh becoming food for the red ants? Of MacGregor lazily picking at his festering nail over your grave?”

Cat looked at her husband, and a shadow of doubt flickered in her eyes. She wanted to object, to cry out that he was wrong, that a rescue expedition was being prepared in Boston, but the words stuck in her throat. Rick was right. She had known it from the first second Hale crossed their threshold. She had simply refused to believe it. She was clinging to illusion like a drowning man to a splinter — too afraid to face the truth. The truth meant absolute solitude. Boston had crossed them off the list. The senators she had relied on were now peacefully drinking tea in their parlors, unaware that in the Amazon, in this rotting haze, people were dying. Her loved ones. Her husband. Herself.

“Your esteemed papa is drinking sherry in Boston, my lady,” a hoarse, sarcastic voice came from the mist.

Hale emerged from the gray shroud like a ghost from an opened grave. Cat flinched — in her panic, she had completely forgotten about the doctor. The old man stood a few paces away, leaning back against the slimy logs of the depot. He lazily struck a match against the sole of his holey left boot. The sulfur head hissed, threw out a yellow flame, and was instantly drowned by the humidity. Hale swore under his breath, spat brown tobacco juice into the mud, and shoved the stub into his pocket.

“Senators are far away, Catarina. Too far. The Amazon... this damned puddle has already digested our names. It dissolved them in the swamp rot, mixed them with rotting leaves and orchid roots. No one in New England will notice our absence. We’ve vanished. Become shadows, my lady.”

The doctor produced a silver flask, unscrewed the cap with a screech, and took a long, greedy gulp. The liquid gurgled. Cat saw his thin Adam's apple jerk convulsively. The doctor swallowed the rum with blind, feverish pleasure. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, stained with carbolic acid, and fixed Cat with his usual sardonic smirk.

"Our cavalry is a rusty boiler in the depot, my dear," the doctor continued with a viscous, clinging irony. "The only senators capable of getting us out of here are the pistons and valves of the Black Maria. Keep moving, my lady, if you don't fancy rotting on this platform. I've grown accustomed to your company. Losing such refined company in the swamp mire would be an unforgivable luxury."

He struck another match against his sole. This time, the sulfur head flared. In the yellow, flickering glow, Hale's face looked to Cat like a skull stretched with skin. His cheekbones were sharp, his eyes sunken, and his yellowish whites glittered with the feverish gleam of chronic hangover and insomnia. The doctor took a drag. Bitter smoke rose toward the rafters, mingling with the mist and creating an acrid, suffocating stench.

"Hale is right," Rick stepped toward her, his tone hardening definitively. "We can't wait. The time for illusions is over. Move, Cat. We have to reach the tracks before the switching engine is scrapped."

But Cat was frozen. She still stood with her shoulder blades pressed against the wet logs, her gaze shifting from Rick, radiating feverish muscular tension, to Hale and his eternal silver flask. The mist settled on her lips; large droplets of condensation crawled down her cheeks, mingling with dirty sweat and sparse tears. She lowered her eyes to her palms. Her fingers, stained with coal dust, broken nails, purple welts from insect bites, and sunburn, seemed alien to her. A haze came over her. She imagined she was still sitting in Boston, in the bright drawing room by the fireplace, sipping tea from Parker's fine porcelain, watching the clean white snow fall outside.

From above, from the spreading mango tree by the depot wall, came a dull, wet crack. Cat did not have time to look up. A heavy, half-rotten fruit fell from the branch and landed on her shoulder with a squelch. Overripe, blackened inside, it exuded a suffocating smell of fermented sugar and rot. Sticky, greasy pulp immediately smeared across the emerald silk. A dark, stinking patch instantly soaked into the fabric, saturating the threads with sweetish, putrid juice. Cat felt the warm mass crawl down her collarbone, leaving a damp, cold trail. The cloying smell of fermentation filled her nostrils, mixing with smoke, sweat, and kerosene.

She recoiled convulsively, but a hanging, wet liana swung from the canopy and slapped her across the cheek with a wet snap. Raw moisture soaked her face; drops ran down her neck, washing away the dirt. Nature was bluntly answering her illusions. The forest beyond the depot planks was palpably declaring: "Forget Boston. Forget senators and consular ships. There are only these thickets. And I will dissolve you into myself."

"Come on," Rick said quietly. His rage had faded, replaced by weary, infinite devotion. "We have to cross the square. Get to the tracks. Without you, I'll break, Cat."

She nodded silently. They moved on. Rick cautiously peered around the corner of the depot, his face instantly paling, his eyelids narrowing. Cat pushed through after him, glanced over his shoulder, and the blood froze in her veins.

Before them opened a horrifying spectacle. The square in front of the main warehouse had become an inferno. A huge oak barrel, dragged from the cellar, lay on its side, and from its shattered bottom, a dark, oily liquid gushed. It poured into the red mud, mixing with swamp water, filth, broken glass, and splinters, forming a thick, sinister sludge. Industrial alcohol smelled sharp, chemical. The stench hit their nostrils with such force that Cat was seized by a dry cough, pressing her palm to her lips.

Workers — hundreds of men in dirty canvas shirts, their faces twisted with thirst and desperation — crowded around the cistern. They scooped up the rotgut with tin cups, bowls, and

their bare hands. The men drank greedily, making hoarse, guttural sounds, spilling the liquid on their clothes, on the ground, on each other's faces. Their eyes were glassy, vacant. The crazed mass saw only the coveted ladle, noticing nothing around them. The crush was so dense that bodies pressed into each other, ribs cracked under the pressure, and faces twisted in the spasm of pain and wild pleasure. Someone fell into a pool of spilled surrogate and choked on a wheeze, drowning in the mud, but no one turned. The faceless mob was too consumed by its own madness.

"We have to get through," Rick whispered, and steel rang in his tone. "Keep to the wall, pressed flat. If we don't draw attention — they won't see us. They're blind. Their whole life now is this alcohol."

He pulled her after him. They crept along the edge of the square, literally pressing themselves into the wet logs of the depot. Cat felt the slimy wood with her palms; damp mold clung to her fingers, leaving a cold residue. She forced herself to look only ahead, but her gaze kept returning to the chaos on the ground. Two workers were fiercely wrestling over a tin dipper. They rolled in the red clay, covered in sharp splinters. Their faces were smeared with blood and slime. One had an arm hanging at an unnatural angle, but he still wheezed, blindly rolled forward, and bared his teeth, trying to reach the barrel. The other, stronger, piled on top, squeezed the wounded man's throat, and tore the prize away. He had already raised the edge to his lips, but at that moment someone behind him brought an empty bottle down on his skull. The man fell face-first, choking on his own blood.

Under Cat's feet, glass crunched continuously. Shards of apothecary vials, crushed in the stampede, pierced the thick boot soles, making a dry crack under her weight. Sharp edges cut through the coarse leather. Cat felt the swamp water seep through the soles, burning her feet. Every step echoed with a dull pain, pulling her back to reality, reminding her she was still alive.

Beside her, pressing his shoulder against the depot wall, Hale moved. His face was a stone mask, but Cat could see his long fingers trembling as they gripped the flask, and his pupils scanning the square with predatory intensity. The doctor was in that peculiar, terrifyingly sober intoxication — the kind found only in those accustomed to balancing on the edge of an abyss.

"You know, my lady," he whispered, leaning to her ear, "this rotgut dissolves the varnish on crates in seconds. Eats metal. And the poor devils gulp it down like spring water. Their stomachs will burn out faster than a locomotive boiler. They don't care. No one wants to think. Everyone needs to go blind. To bury the thought of Blackwood's bankruptcy. To forget they'll never get out. To forget their time is up."

Cat said nothing. The mist clung to her face; the sticky mango pulp oozed over her shoulder; the chemical stench of alcohol choked her lungs, mingling with sour human sweat. Hale wasn't lying. There were no living people left in this square. The dead just kept moving their legs.

Suddenly, she stumbled.

Her left boot caught firmly on a rotten sleeper hidden in the mire. Cat swayed; the heavy shoe slid on the clay, and she fell to her knee, hitting something sharp with a dull thud. A cry escaped her. Rick caught her by the elbow, preventing her from falling flat.

"Cat!" fear rang in his hoarse voice. "What is it?! Come on!"

She looked down. The wet, swamp-soaked emerald silk had wound around the massive heel in a dead loop. The fabric had stuck fast in the mud, caught on the sharp edges of broken glass, holding her in place like a steel trap. Cat yanked her leg, but the heavy hem did not give.

"Damn!" she spat through her teeth. "It's this dress... It's holding me! Like a trap!"

She jerked again. The silk cord tightened further, and a shard of a broken bottle neck cut deeply into her ankle. Swamp water burned the wound. Dark blood poured onto the fabric, mingling with the emerald threads, turning a brown, putrid color. Cat would remember that filthy color for the rest of her life.

"Cut it," Rick breathed out with the same dull fury. "Cut it, Cat. It's dragging you down!"

She did not hesitate. Her hand slid into the deep pocket of her skirt; her fingers found the kitchen knife — the one she had used to cut bread at breakfast and had shoved into her pocket for no particular reason. The blade was sharp; cold steel instantly burned her fingertips.

She gripped the handle and, without a second thought, with a furious, dry tear, slashed at the hem. The blade entered the wet silk with a characteristic dense screech. Threads tore; the fabric parted obediently under the steel's force. Cat cut quickly, fiercely, leaving ragged strips.

She shortened the dress to her knees, abandoning the luxurious Boston silk to the red mire. The fabric hit the ground with a dull, wet slap. Her legs were instantly freed; cool air touched her skin; the suffocating weight of the hem was gone. Cat stood, breathing heavily. The emerald silk lay in the mud, in pools of industrial alcohol and broken glass, as dead as her past life.

She looked down at the knife. The steel had darkened from clay and her own blood. Warm moisture trickled down her ankle, mixing with cold mud into a sticky, corrosive mass.

"This dress cost more than a year's payroll for the workers," her voice quivered, but the fear had vanished, replaced by pure rage. "Three hundred and twenty dollars. Boston silk. Handmade. Now it weighs less than red clay. I'm cutting away my past just to take the next step."

She threw the kitchen knife at her feet and looked at Rick. In her pupils kindled the same fire as his — blind will to survive. She was ready to leave everything behind.

"Come on," her tone hardened definitively, turning to steel. "Faster to the train."

Rick looked at her with astonishment, through the grime, pride showing through. He gripped her hand firmly. They ran on. Hale followed silently, his trembling pianist's fingers clutching his flask. Cat felt his gaze on her skin — heavy, sticky, like the swamp mist. The doctor had been reborn too. Quieter, more serious; the caustic, sardonic mask had slipped from his face entirely. Primordial fear had emerged. Exhaustion. The feverish gleam of a man who had realized the end was near.

They flew past the raging square. The workers did not notice them. The crazed mob was too absorbed in its alcoholic trance. Cat glimpsed dirty, wet faces and glassy eyes fixed on the coveted ladle of rotgut. The men lapped up the surrogate, fought, and collapsed face-down. She understood clearly: these men would never see Boston. Never return to their families. Their fate was to remain in this mire, in this green grave.

They burst through the depot gates. Beyond the open doors, in the depths of the misty half-darkness, Cat made out the outline of the locomotive. The Black Maria stood on the tracks — rusty, filthy, coated with a layer of soot and gray fungus. But the metal held. The machine was waiting for them.

"We'll get this train running," Rick turned, his tone ringing with familiar, hard steel. "We'll break through the blockages. We'll burn memories for fuel, throw Boston trunks into the firebox if we have to. We'll get out of here, Cat."

She nodded silently. She stared at the rusty, greasy hulk that had become their only ticket to survival.

CHAPTER 4

GRAVEYARD OF MACHINES

From the confidential report of track inspector G. Walters to the board of the Trans-Amazonia Limited syndicate, Boston, March 14, 1904:

'...Calculations of track bed strength at the third station's dead end completely rule out ground subsidence. The thirty-ton Class "E" switching locomotive (series "Maria-04") is equipped with reinforced steel wheel sets capable of holding the train on the sand embankment under any weather conditions. The local workers' theories about the selva's "shifting swamps" are scientifically unfounded and stem from superstition...'

Ink note scrawled diagonally across the page:

"Depots abandoned. Personnel evacuation complete. Locomotive left on the tracks.""

The rain struck the tin roof of the depot with a dry, deafening crack, like a machine-gun burst. Catarina flinched, stepping back under the awning. One step — and her heel sank into the red mire with a squelch. Above, directly behind a giant fern frond, a frightened marmoset shrieked piercingly — chee-chee-chee! — and a branch swayed noisily, shedding a cascade of muddy water. The air instantly smelled of ozone and scorched copper. A bitter, metallic taste remained on her tongue.

Somewhere in the darkness by the tracks, iron clanged deafeningly — Rick had hurled a heavy wrench straight into a puddle. From the darkness came his hoarse, broken cough, mingled with the screech of a straining steel cable.

"Cat!" Her husband's cry barely pierced the roar of water. "Get over here! The embankment is washing away!"

Catarina lunged forward, wrenching her stuck boot from the mud as she went. The wet, faded silk of her dress wrapped around her legs, hindering movement. A lightning flash flooded the dead end with a cadaverous light for a second, revealing the huge black silhouette of the Black Maria. The thirty-ton locomotive was already noticeably listing to the left; its wheels sank into the sodden earth with a terrible, living groan.

"A shovel!" Rick emerged from the wall of water. His soot-gray face was washed with streams of muddy water; his right fist clenched convulsively, emitting a dry bony crack. "What are you standing there for? We need to throw gravel under the wheels, or she'll fall on her side!"

From the depths of the dark car came Doctor Hale's lazy, drawling chuckle and the distinct, monotonous tap of his fingers on the empty silver flask. Tap-tap-tap. A funeral march.

"...to the ocean? With your Boston diploma?"

"Rick..." Cat tore at her collar, drawing the air in convulsively through her nostrils. "It doesn't smell like water, Rick. It smells like death. Wet earth and rot. As if everything that has died in this selva for a thousand years is now rising to the surface. To take us. Listen to me! The air... it's become dead!"

Rick did not look up. His right hand mechanically clenched the rusty wrench until his knuckles turned white. Black grease squeezed out from under his nails.

"I know," he cut off. His hoarse voice cracked into a whistling whisper. "Quiet, Cat. Hand me the bolts. Faster."

He knelt in the red mire before the Black Maria's flywheel. Raindrops pounded the back of his head, mingled with the coal dust on his face, and ran in muddy streams down the collar of his soaked shirt. The veins in his neck bulged, turning into taut strings. In Rick's eyes was that same forlornness of reason that comes over a scientist when ordinary Amazonian mud has refuted his precise strength-of-materials calculations.

“If I don’t tighten the cable, the boiler will sink into the bog,” he spat out along with rainwater, furiously turning a greasy nut. His fingers slipped on the rusty iron, scraping the skin off his knuckles. “The locals said the river rises three feet an hour in a downpour. The water tears out century-old trees by the roots. Washes away embankments. Sweeps people away. The Portuguese drowned in this mire by the dozen, Cat! Hand me the wrench, damn it!”

Drops of his sweat fell on the still-warm locomotive frame, vanishing into the oily film with a barely audible hiss.

“You can’t stop this downpour, Rick,” Catarina spoke more quietly, her intonations cracking to let the encroaching fear through. The veneer of sophistication had been completely washed away by the water. “You can only try not to drown. And we’re already sinking, Rick. The earth is flowing. What held our steps yesterday is now pulling us down.”

Rick jerked his head up sharply. The whites of his bloodshot eyes had turned crimson from burst vessels. In that look, Cat caught what she feared most: his fanatical faith in blueprints, I-beam strength, and steam power had just cracked in the face of the sucking bog. He looked at his wife — at the wet rags of faded silk, at the gray streaks of grease on her pale cheeks.

“I know,” his rasp turned into an angry, clipped whisper. “I know, Cat! But I won’t sit and watch the bog swallow... take the boiler. It’s our only ticket out of here. The only one. Lose the Black Maria — we rot in this dead end like the Portuguese day laborers. I won’t leave you to die... to die in this mud. Not in the hell Blackwood built on his burst notes.”

He bent over the frame again, frantically, blindly turning the wrench.

Catarina sank into the red mire beside him, completely forgetting her squeamishness. In her chest, her heart pounded heavily, in jolts — a fierce, selfish closeness to this man mixed with panic. Cat laid her hand on his shoulder blade. Through the soaked fabric clinging to his back, she felt his muscles trembling violently, convulsively from the cold and the extreme, animal tension.

“Hold the cable,” Catarina breathed out, her voice cracking into a hoarse, choked whisper. “Pull, Rick.”

The engineer raised his head. Through the coal grime on his face, a dull despair showed through. He caught her fingers, yanking them toward him with such force that Cat’s joints cracked with a dry, bony sound.

“Pulling,” he cut off. Steel had returned to his rasp.

The wall of rain closed in completely. Drops fell in a solid, heavy torrent, pounding out a deafening, staccato roar from the depot’s rusty roof. The solid ground under Catarina’s boots had finally turned into a shifting bog. The mire released her footwear reluctantly, with a sucking sound, pulling her feet deeper with every movement. The rails they had just walked on were slowly disappearing under the murky brown water. It seemed as if the railway ended in nothingness, and the way back no longer physically existed. The muddy flood was already creeping up to the tires of the Black Maria’s wheel sets, lazily licking the grease-coated metal. Iron seems eternal only where its rusted flanks are protected by the laws and walls of cities. Here, under the heavy drops of the Amazon, thirty tons of steel vanished into the brown mire as easily as a drop of wax on a hot plate.

“The brace to the post!” Rick shouted over the roar of the water wall. His voice cracked into a barking, hoarse falsetto. “Cat, keep the tension! Hale, where the hell is the winch?! She’ll sink like a stone!”

Doctor Hale emerged from the hangar’s darkness, dragging an oily loop of steel cable through the mud. Fever had stained his whites a dirty yellow; his pianist’s fingers trembled finely from the cold and lack of rum. The old man stopped under the very edge of the sagging awning, where water gushed in streams. Completely ignoring the engineer’s shout, he struck a match against the sole of his holey left boot with a habitual motion. The sulfur head hissed, threw out a sickly yellow flame, and was instantly drowned by the damp steam.

Hale swore under his breath, spat a brown tobacco wad at his feet, and tossed the wet splinter into the puddle.

“Over here, quick!” Rick caught the greasy cable, his fingers digging into the rusty steel strands. Under his grip, red scale crumbled with a dry crack. “Around the post! Three turns! If that post is rotten — we’re done.”

In the pitch darkness, under the vertical wall of the downpour, the three survivors blindly tore at their own sinews against thirty tons of dead iron. Hot water flooded their nostrils, making it hard to breathe; it washed sweat and grease into their eyes. The wet rags of clothing clung to Catarina’s body, turning into a heavy shell. Her boots sank into the bog up to her shins; the clay sucked her footwear down with a whistle, robbing her of any foothold.

“Heave!” Rick’s barking roar cracked into a hoarse falsetto. “Cat, hold! She’s going over!”

Catarina caught the steel cable. The wet metal instantly slid through her palms, stripping the delicate skin to the raw flesh and leaving deep, bleeding grooves on her fingers. The muscles of her forearms cramped. Cat tore at her collar, drawing in the dense, muddy-smelling steam deeply and convulsively through her nostrils, and pulled with all her strength, throwing her whole thin body’s weight into it.

The steel cable rang, stretching taut like a string, water dripping from it in drops. The Black Maria shuddered. Its left axle boxes gave way with a screech, and at that same moment, the embankment subsided under the right wheels with a dull, guttural sound. Brown mire gushed from under the sleepers of the rusty track with a squelch. The rails had finally disappeared under the murky water of Porto Velho, severing the only road back. A lightning flash briefly illuminated the top of the swaying locomotive: dozens of large, acid-green tree frogs, fleeing the flood, darted madly across the red-hot casing of the steam dome.

“She’s going down!” Cat’s voice broke into an angry, biting whisper, her breath giving out. “Rick! The wheels are sinking! The bog is swallowing her!”

From exhaustion, Rick’s fingers slipped off the manual winch lever. The stop mechanism spun back with a screech, knocking the steel handle right out of his hands.

The winch handle struck Rick’s wrist with a dull crack. The cable tore from his bloody fingers, sliding along the metal frame like a slick, living snake.

The engineer lunged after it, blindly grabbing at the torn steel strands. His palms slipped on the thick grease; his fingers cramped, refusing to bend. He wheezed, spitting out rainwater mixed with curses at Blackwood, the Amazon, and his own worthless hands. Rick crashed to his knees in the red mire, and his right fist clenched convulsively, until his knuckles went white with a bony crack. But the greasy nut was no longer in his pocket — the talisman had sunk to the bottom of the puddle a second earlier. The calculator in his head had finally stalled.

“Can’t tighten...” Rick’s hoarse falsetto cracked into a whistling, broken whisper. “Cat, my fingers... I can’t feel my fingers. The metal is slipping. Strength of materials doesn’t hold water. Everything’s flowing. Everything’s flowing, Cat...”

Catarina fell into the mud beside him. Losing her aristocratic composure, she unconsciously jerked her hand, trying to adjust the non-existent collar of her luxurious silk dress, but her fingers caught only wet, grease-smeared rags. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her wet cheek to his ice-cold forehead. Cat drew in the dense air — smelling of ozone and dead river silt — convulsively and deeply through her nostrils, exhaling noisily through her mouth directly into his lips:

“Breathe, Rick. Breathe. I’m here. Do you hear me? Look at me. Give me the shovel... I’ll throw that damn gravel myself.”

From the darkness of the depot came a lazy, drawn-out scrape. Doctor Hale, swaying with feverish chills, monotonously tapped a funeral march on the side of his empty silver flask with his fingers. Tap-tap-tap.

“End your Boston drama, my children,” his lazy, chilling sarcasm drifted through the wall of rain. “You’re not on the stage of the Kitredge Theater. Better look at your feet.”

They grabbed the cable again. Catarina yanked the metal toward her, feeling the muscles in her forearms tear, every cell in her body responding with a dull, aching pain. From the other end, Hale seized the cable strands. The ship’s surgeon worked in silence, his teeth clenched; his thin, wiry face had become an immobile gray mask. The caustic metaphors were gone, the sarcasm vanished — the old man only wheezed, spitting out rainwater and sinking his boots deeper into the mire.

But the flood was faster. Brown foam had completely covered the rails, risen above the hubs, and poured into the Black Maria, turning thirty tons of hardened steel into a dead, immobile anchor. The locomotive lurched noticeably to the left. From the half-open dampers of the flooded firebox, dense white steam burst forth with a furious, whistling roar, enveloping the hangar in a suffocating cloud.

“That’s it,” Hale released the cable. His long pianist’s fingers trembled finely, convulsively from exhaustion. He spat brown tobacco tar directly into the onrushing wave. “Fall back, Rick. The embankment has burst. The bog is taking her.”

Rick slowly rose to his knees. His face, covered with gray coal dust, had turned pale as ash. His bloodshot eyes were fixed on the tilting boiler. In that emptiness, there was no longer any fear — only a dull, chilling indifference of a man who knew he had lost.

“She’s going to the bottom,” his voice was flat, lifeless, stripped of all human inflection. “Drown. And we’ll stay in this dead end.”

The pressure gauges, the levers, the blueprints, the precise laws of mechanics — all were crumbling into nothing under the heavy blows of the Amazon. Water was flooding over the cylinders, steam hissing from the cracked pipes. The locomotive, which in Boston had seemed a tamed titan, now looked like nothing but a ridiculous toy, forgotten by a capricious child in the middle of a bog.

“Funny,” Rick let out a dry, barking laugh that made Catarina flinch. The engineer didn’t even notice the blood dripping from the scraped knuckles of his right fist onto his dirty shirt. “I designed bridge spans in Massachusetts. Calculated material strength under tons of load. Down to the last bolt, Cat. Down to the last seam... And now I stand in the mud and watch iron sink in a puddle. And the math says nothing.”

The right sleeper support split into splinters with a guttural crack. The thirty-ton hull of the Black Maria tilted sharply to the left with a terrible metallic screech. The steel cable snapped with a cannon-like sound, lashing the water an inch from Hale’s boots. The locomotive slowly, like a whale struck in the belly, sank its wheel sets into the shifting mire, bending the rusty rails with a screech. The metal groaned and cracked under its own weight as the swamp mud filled its cooling steel innards.

And at that moment, amid the squelching chaos, Catarina caught an alien gaze.

Directly above them, on a thick branch of the old mango tree at the edge of the awning, a tiny marmoset monkey froze. In its huge, dark, river-water eyes was only a serene, chilling observation. The living creature of the selva watched the grease-stained humans with the same indifference with which it watched a falling dry leaf. Almost at the little creature’s muzzle, on the damp bark, the neon-blue wing of a Morpho butterfly opened for an instant — a flawless, pure azure amid the brown morass and human impotence. The selva had existed long before Boston bank accounts, and would remain just as perfect when the last word of the engineers drowned in the cry of wild birds.

Catarina drew in the damp air convulsively through her nostrils. Civilization, factory gauges, oysters in Massachusetts restaurants — all of it had been a backdrop. Only this branch was real, the lashing water, and the indifferent eyes of a wild creature.

“Rick,” Catarina spoke in an angry, biting whisper, her intonations breaking sharply. “Look up. She’s not afraid. She doesn’t care that we’re dying... that we’re staying here.”

The engineer slowly raised his head. His palms, cut by the steel cable, hung limp at his sides.

“She’s home, Cat,” Rick’s hoarse voice lost its former firmness; an ancient, deep longing appeared in it. “We brought our pride here. The scariest thing in these jungles is their absolute indifference. The train may fall apart, our bones may rot in the mud, but that creature on the branch won’t even interrupt its breakfast.”

He turned back to the tracks. The Black Maria had finally fallen on its side, resembling a harpooned whale. The murky brown current had completely covered the axle boxes and the left side of the cab. The last jet of steam dissolved in the wall of rain with a hiss.

“It’s over,” Rick spat flatly, lifelessly. “The Black Maria is in the swamp. Blackwood has locked us in this grave.”

Catarina stepped toward him, knee-deep in the red mire. She dug her fingers into his wet shoulder with a death grip, her nails boring into his tensed muscles. This man was her cage, her suffocating dependence, but also her only ticket back to the crystal and silk sheets of Boston.

“Don’t you dare, Rick,” her whisper was sharp, haughty, with a slight crack from the encroaching fear. “The train is down, but the boiler is intact. Do you hear me? We won’t stay in this grave. The brilliant mind of Boston cannot be broken by a swamp puddle. You will make this machine breathe, even if we have to scoop the mud out of the firebox with our bare hands. We’ll get out of here. You and me. Get up and gather the tools.”

They stood under the vertical wall of rain at the edge of the washed-out track bed. The murky brown current of Porto Velho was already lapping over the tops of their boots, reluctantly and heavily pulling their legs down into the insatiable red mire. “Man is stronger than death,” Catarina thought, looking at her husband’s stooped, coal-grimed back. “The madness is to keep fighting when the ground under your feet is flowing. But that is our curse. We will breathe and cling to rusty wrenches even when the emerald selva closes over our heads, leaving not a single flower on the grave.”

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