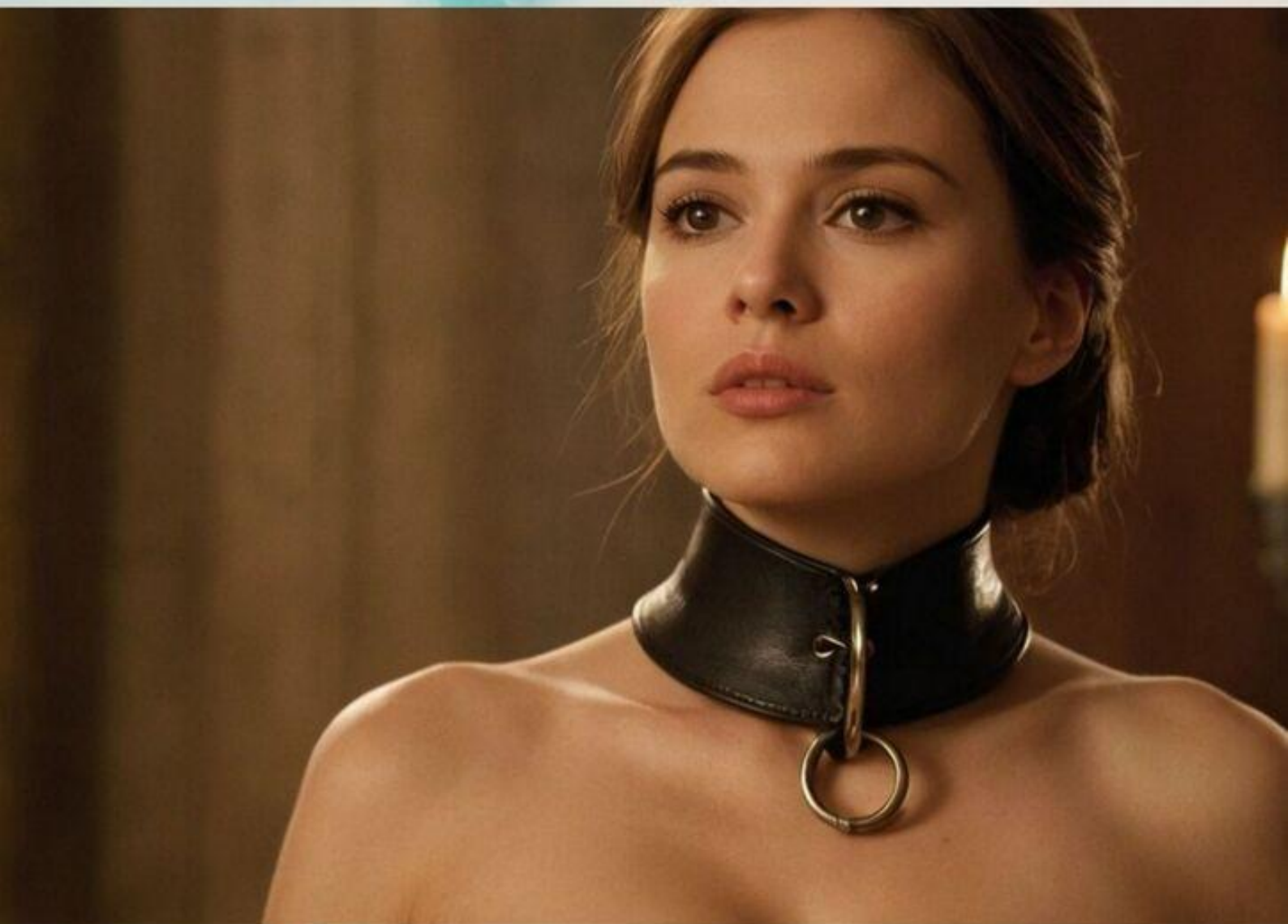


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Kirill Borgia



THE GIFTED FLESH OF CHERNOGRAD

Volume 1

Russian Eros

Kirill Borgia

**The Gifted Flesh
of Chernograd — 1. Russian Eros**

«Издательские решения»

Borgia K.

The Gifted Flesh of Chernograd — 1. Russian Eros / K. Borgia —
«Издательские решения»,

When eighteen-year-old Anfisa is sold into a secret household in 1903 Russia, she enters a world where poverty, wealth, and human ownership exist behind respectable walls. At the same time, privileged Varvara receives a living «gift» that reveals the darker freedoms of the elite. As their paths unfold in parallel, both girls are drawn into a society ruled by desire, power, and carefully concealed corruption. A dark historical novel about class, submission, and the dangerous price of belonging.

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The Gifted Flesh of Chernograd — 1 Russian Eros

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On the twenty-third day of May, in the year 1903, in the southern merchant city of Chernograd, Azov Province, there occurred two events so outwardly insignificant that neither the newspapers nor the diocesan bulletins considered them worthy of mention: Anfisa Lebedeva and Varvara Petrovna Morozova reached their eighteenth year.

Had the matter ended there, the date would have dissolved quietly into the enormous, indifferent body of the Empire, swallowed among thousands of baptisms, deaths, bankruptcies, promotions, weddings, scandals, and drunken knife-fights stretching from Warsaw to Vladivostok. Russia at the beginning of the new century possessed little patience for private destinies. It was too vast, too restless, too swollen with hunger, ambition, incense, steam, and concealed vice.

Yet years later, there were men who remembered that day with uncomfortable precision.

Not because of the girls themselves — at least not at first.

But because, in retrospect, certain people became convinced that something had quietly shifted in Chernograd that spring, as though two doors hidden within the same wall had opened simultaneously: one inward toward privilege, temptation, and exquisite corruption; the other downward into submission so complete that it ceased, after a time, even to resemble humiliation.

Chernograd stood along the slow green waters of the Azov coast like a city perpetually balancing commerce against decay. Grain merchants built mansions beside muddy alleys where barefoot children slept beneath overturned fishing boats. Elegant ladies descended from lacquered carriages scarcely fifty paces from taverns filled with dockworkers whose faces bore the bruised yellow-grey color of old rope. The streets smelled by turns of sea salt, horse sweat, coal smoke, damp timber, fresh bread, and imported French perfume.

By day the city belonged to respectable people.

By night, it belonged to appetites.

There existed, beneath the visible order of provincial society, another world entirely — discreet, wealthy, and patient. A world concealed behind private dining rooms, shuttered estates, velvet-covered card tables, and seemingly innocent invitations written in graceful ink upon heavy cream paper.

Officially, it did not exist.

Unofficially, some of the richest men in southern Russia had built their lives around it.

Governors condemned it publicly. Priests denounced it cautiously. Police chiefs accepted envelopes and looked elsewhere. Fathers pretended ignorance. Mothers suspected far more than they admitted. Servants knew almost everything — and nothing.

And somewhere inside that hidden machinery, long before either girl understood it, places had already been prepared for both Anfisa Lebedeva and Varvara Petrovna Morozova.

The first awakened on the morning of her eighteenth birthday in a narrow rented room above a baker's shop near the lower market district.

The ceiling sloped badly. One window rattled whenever carts passed below. The air still carried yesterday's scent of rye bread and ash from the ovens downstairs. On a chair beside the bed lay her only decent dress: pale blue, carefully mended beneath the left sleeve where the fabric had begun to thin.

Anfisa slept lightly, like people accustomed to uncertainty.

She opened her eyes before dawn and remained motionless for several moments beneath the blanket, listening to the distant cries of gulls drifting inland from the harbor.

Eighteen.

The number sounded strangely foreign beside her own thoughts.

Not grand. Not triumphant. Simply unfamiliar.

Until yesterday she had still belonged, in the eyes of the law and the Church alike, to that vague intermediate state where poverty in young women is treated almost indulgently — as something temporary, forgivable, nearly childish. But eighteen altered matters. At eighteen, beauty ceased being innocent. Men looked longer. Women judged more sharply. Landladies became less patient. Employers more attentive.

And creditors less merciful.

She sat up slowly and pushed loose copper-colored hair from her face. Even half-awake, there remained something arresting about her appearance — not refined beauty, certainly not fashionable beauty, but a warmth that seemed to gather light toward itself. Her mouth was too expressive, her figure already too mature for the modest dresses she owned, her grey-green eyes too alive and questioning to appear meek for very long.

In richer families such traits might have been called promising.

In poor girls, they were called dangerous.

The Lebedev household occupied the rear half of a crumbling two-storey building near the tannery district, where the gutters never entirely dried and the air retained, even in spring, the sour dampness of old leather, cabbage water, soot, and overcrowded lives. Six people slept there regularly, sometimes seven when one of the younger cousins appeared without warning. Infants cried through the night behind thin partitions. Boots remained perpetually wet beside the stove. Somebody was always coughing.

Poverty in Chernograd rarely possessed drama enough to inspire pity. It was too ordinary for that.

It merely persisted.

Anfisa's mother had once been considered handsome. One could still discern traces of it about her mouth and cheekbones when exhaustion momentarily loosened its grip upon her face. But childbearing, laundry steam, sleeplessness, and perpetual arithmetic over kopecks had worn her down into the stooped vigilance common among poor women who no longer distinguish clearly between fatigue and existence itself.

Her attention belonged almost entirely to the younger children now.

The eldest daughter had become, without discussion, a practical matter.

And practical matters were the domain of Pavel Yegorovich Lebedev.

He was not Anfisa's true father. The fact revealed itself immediately to anyone observant enough to place the two side by side. Pavel Yegorovich was thick-necked, dark, and coarse-featured, with the swollen fingers and reddish eyelids of a man who drank not joyfully but habitually. His beard grew unevenly. His shirts smelled faintly of cheap tobacco and machine oil. Yet he possessed a certain rough competence valued among men of his station: he found work often enough, returned home often enough, and beat nobody severely enough for neighbors to interfere.

Which, in districts like theirs, qualified him as tolerable.

On the morning of Anfisa's eighteenth birthday, he returned home unusually sober. That alone caused her to notice him more carefully.

The younger children were still half-asleep. Their mother stood near the stove in a faded blouse, stirring yesterday's cabbage soup back to warmth while dawn pressed dimly against the windowpanes. Outside, carts already rattled somewhere beyond the alley, splashing through mud left by night rain.

Pavel Yegorovich removed his cap slowly and sat at the table beneath the smoking lamp without immediately speaking.

Something in the room felt prepared.

Not celebratory. Not affectionate.

Prepared.

At last he cleared his throat.

"Anfisa," he said, not looking directly at her, "you'll be leaving this house soon."

Her mother froze almost imperceptibly beside the stove.

Only for a second.

Then she resumed stirring.

Anfisa herself merely blinked.

The statement did not strike her as impossible. Girls left homes like these constantly. Into marriage. Domestic service. Factories. Brothels disguised as boarding houses. Kitchens. Laundries. Somebody was always disappearing from the poorer quarters of the city.

"What for?" she asked quietly.

Pavel Yegorovich rubbed his beard with thick fingers.

"A position's been arranged."

The phrase sounded rehearsed.

"With good people", he added after a pause. "Rich people."

One of the younger boys reached clumsily for bread. Their mother slapped his hand away without turning around.

Anfisa noticed suddenly that nobody at the table would meet her eyes.

A faint uneasiness moved through her then — not sharp fear, but the instinctive awareness that the room already knew something she did not.

"What sort of position?"

Her stepfather exhaled slowly through his nose.

The hesitation that followed was brief, yet somehow revealing. Not because he lacked an answer, but because he searched for a gentler word and failed to find one suitable.

Finally he muttered:

"You've been bought."

Silence settled at once over the room.

Even the children stopped moving for a moment, sensing the dangerous edge beneath adult voices.

The word itself was not unknown in Chernograd.

People whispered of such things constantly, though never loudly and never in official company. Human property existed in the Empire in the same manner smuggling existed, or bribery, or private gambling salons behind respectable restaurants: illegal in principle, profitable in practice. Certain girls vanished from poor districts and later reappeared dressed too well, traveling in closed carriages beside men who never introduced them properly. Certain strong young laborers were purchased outright through debts, drink, forged contracts, or quiet transactions conducted far from police attention.

Nobody respectable called it slavery.

That word belonged to history books and sermons.

In private, people preferred softer expressions.

Arrangement. Service. Patronage. Ownership.

Or merely: belonging.

Anfisa lowered her spoon slowly.

Oddly enough, panic did not come.

Perhaps because her life until now had contained so little worth defending.

Instead she experienced something stranger: a cautious, guilty stirring of curiosity.

Bought.

The word frightened her less than it should have.

Rich people.

Leaving.

Elsewhere.

The future standing suddenly before her was dark, shapeless, morally uncertain — yet it possessed one undeniable quality her present life lacked completely.

It was different.

And at eighteen, with damp walls closing around her youth like slowly tightening fingers, even uncertainty could resemble hope.

Anfisa looked at Pavel Yegorovich for a long moment, as if trying to decide whether the sentence had been spoken seriously or merely in one of those coarse household jokes adults sometimes allowed themselves when tired.

Then she asked, very simply:

“Who bought me?”

Pavel Yegorovich shifted in his chair. The lamp above the table smoked more heavily for a moment, as though the wick itself disapproved of the conversation.

“That’s not for you to concern yourself with”, he said at last.

“It is if it concerns me”, Anfisa replied, not raising her voice.

A brief silence followed. From the stove came the soft clatter of a spoon against the pot. Her mother did not turn around.

Pavel Yegorovich scratched the side of his neck, as if the answer were physically uncomfortable.

“A man from the upper town”, he said finally. “Not from our streets. People like us don’t meet him directly.”

“What kind of man?”

Another pause. Shorter this time.

“An intermediary came”, he said. “A broker. Deals in... arrangements.”

The word was delivered carefully, almost politely, as though it had been cleaned of its real meaning before being allowed into the room.

Anfisa frowned slightly.

“And I am one of those arrangements?”

Her stepfather exhaled through his nose, a sound that might have been impatience or resignation.

“You are a girl of eighteen,” he said. “You have no dowry, no connections, and no prospects here that would keep you fed beyond the next winter.”

He did not look at her while speaking. That was important. It made the words easier for him, and somehow heavier for her.

“This way”, he continued, “you will not starve. You will be clothed. Kept properly. In a house where your... qualities will be of use.”

Anfisa absorbed this without immediate reaction, as though it were a description of weather rather than her own life being reassigned.

“And what will I be doing there?” she asked after a moment.

Pavel Yegorovich hesitated again, but only briefly now, as if he had already crossed a point of no return earlier in the conversation.

“You will belong to them,” he said simply.

The words hung in the air without decoration, without apology.

Belong.

Anfisa repeated it silently in her mind, testing it as one might test an unfamiliar object in the hand.

It did not yet frighten her in the way it should have.

It felt, instead, strangely abstract.

Like moving from one room to another.

From one kind of poverty into something else that had not yet revealed its shape.

“And you agreed to this?” she asked.

At that, Pavel Yegorovich finally met her eyes.

For the first time that morning there was something almost defensive in his expression.

“I arranged it”, he corrected. “And yes.”

A faint tightening appeared at the corner of his mouth.

“It is a good arrangement.”

The word “good” sounded thin, overworked, like currency passed through too many hands.

Behind him, the stove continued to hiss softly. A child shifted in sleep. Somewhere outside a cart wheel struck a stone and rattled away down the alley.

Anfisa sat very still.

Then she asked, quieter than before:

“When do I leave?”

“Soon”, he said. “A carriage will come for you. You will be dressed properly before that.”

He paused, then added, almost as an afterthought:

“You should be grateful.”

This time she did not answer immediately.

Grateful.

The idea arrived late, like something spoken in another language and only partially understood.

She looked down at her hands resting on the table. They were rough from work, small scars at the knuckles, nails uneven from constant use.

Then she looked up again.

There was no rebellion in her face yet.

Only a slow, cautious attention — the expression of someone standing at the edge of an unfamiliar road, trying to decide whether it leads out of the mud or simply deeper into it.

In the upper quarter of Chernograd, where the streets were wider, cleaner, and lined with old plane trees that had survived more regimes than most of their inhabitants, morning arrived differently.

It did not crawl in through cracked plaster and the smell of damp coal.

It filtered instead through heavy curtains of pale silk, softened by glass panes washed the day before by quiet, competent hands.

Varvara Petrovna Morozova woke slowly, as though the very act of waking were something life owed her rather than demanded from her.

Her room was spacious in that restrained, expensive way which never quite announces its cost but makes itself felt in every detail: the steady weight of carved furniture, the muted glow of polished wood, the faint scent of lavender folded into linen, the disciplined order of objects that had never once needed to be shared.

Somewhere beyond the half-open balcony doors, the city was already awake. Carriages rolled over cobblestones like distant punctuation. A fountain in the inner courtyard murmured steadily, indifferent and elegant.

Varvara did not rise at once.

She lay on her side, one arm beneath the pillow, the other resting loosely above the sheets, as if even effort might have been negotiated away from her morning routine. Her hair, dark and slightly undone from sleep, spread across the pillow in soft disorder that no servant would yet dare to correct.

There was a faint smile on her lips.

Not because anything in particular amused her — but because nothing required sorrow.

That, to her, was already a kind of happiness.

Her eyes opened and closed again lazily, resisting full engagement with the day. She enjoyed this interval most of all: the suspension between dream and decision, where the world had not yet asked anything of her and she had not yet decided what to refuse.

She stretched slowly beneath the sheets, unhurried, like someone testing the comfort of existence itself. The silk shifted softly against her skin.

For a moment her hand wandered idly, absent-mindedly, as if drawn by the warmth of her own half-conscious body rather than intention. It was a private gesture, unobserved and unimportant, the kind of movement that belongs only to mornings when one is entirely unburdened by necessity or shame.

A faint, contented breath escaped her.

Then she smiled a little more openly, as a memory surfaced — not fully formed yet, but promising.

Today was her birthday.

The thought did not excite her in any dramatic way. It simply pleased her, like the anticipation of music already known to be pleasant, or a dress already ordered and guaranteed to fit.

There would be flowers, of course. Visitors. Carefully chosen words spoken by carefully chosen people. Perhaps a gift or two designed more to reflect the giver than the receiver.

And somewhere beneath all of it — unspoken, as such things always were in respectable society — there would be the quiet sense that something was about to change.

Varvara did not yet know what that change would be.

But she felt it hovering, faint and pleasant, like the first warmth of sunlight before it becomes noticeable enough to demand attention.

She turned slightly onto her back, letting the sheets fall into softer folds around her.

Her smile lingered.

Outside, the city continued its orderly life.

And in her room, nothing asked anything of her at all.

A soft knock came at the door — too measured to be a servant's hesitation, too familiar to be formal announcement.

Varvara did not move immediately. She only tilted her head slightly toward the sound, still half-submerged in the warmth of her bed, as though the interruption belonged to some other layer of reality that had not yet fully reached her.

The knock came again.

"Varya, my dear?" a voice followed, bright and carefully affectionate. "May I come in?"

Without waiting for an answer, the door opened.

Her stepmother, Yelena Morozova, entered as though she had been expecting applause.

Yelena was a woman in her late thirties, still striking in a practiced way — not the fragile beauty of youth, but the maintained elegance of someone who understood exactly how much effort it took to remain noticeable in a world that quickly forgot women past a certain age. Her gown was of pale lilac silk, her hair arranged with precise care, and even her smile seemed rehearsed into gentleness.

"Happy birthday, my darling," she said warmly, crossing the room at once. "Still in bed? How scandalous."

Varvara gave a faint, lazy smile without rising.

"I was enjoying the morning", she replied.

“And rightly so,” Yelena said, sitting briefly on the edge of the bed as though intimacy were a habit she had long mastered. “One must enjoy youth while it lasts. It has such a terrible tendency to become something else without asking permission.”

Her tone was light, but there was something slightly too sharp beneath it — like a blade wrapped in velvet.

Then she brightened again, as if remembering her purpose.

“Oh, I almost forgot — your present.”

Varvara raised her eyebrows slightly.

“A present?” she echoed.

“Yes,” Yelena said, clearly pleased with herself. “Something I arranged for you. I thought you would appreciate it more than jewellery this year.”

She rose and smoothed her dress, already turning toward the door.

“It’s waiting for you in the women’s salon.”

At that phrase, she allowed herself a satisfied little pause, as though revealing a secret ingredient in a well-prepared dish.

“The women’s salon?” Varvara repeated, this time more awake.

The room in question lay on the same floor, behind the main reception suite — a space reserved in the Morozov house for private gatherings of women: tea receptions, discreet conversations, fittings, and those quiet negotiations that never reached the dining hall. It was furnished more intimately than the formal salons, with soft divans, tall mirrors framed in dark wood, and heavy curtains that could turn daylight into something hushed and confidential. A room for observation, refinement, and — as Varvara had once overheard someone joke — “proper female business.”

Her stepmother smiled.

“Yes. Go and see. I think you’ll find it... memorable.”

There was a brief pause.

Then, with the satisfaction of someone who has completed a carefully timed surprise, she added:

“He’s already waiting for you.”

At the words — “*He’s already waiting for you.*” — something in Varvara shifted sharply, as if a thin thread of sleep had been cut clean through.

She sat up at once.

For a fraction of a second she still looked like the same languid girl from the bed — tousled hair, half-smile, warm inertia of morning — but then the meaning of the sentence reached her fully, and that softness broke apart.

“Already?” she said, more to herself than to her stepmother.

Then she moved.

It was not hurried panic, not fear in its ordinary sense. Rather, it was the sudden, instinctive awakening of attention — like a bird startled into flight without yet knowing the shape of the danger or the promise beneath it.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed, stood, and reached for the light dressing gown lying across a chair. The fabric slipped over her shoulders in one smooth motion, barely fastened, loosely tied at the waist. Beneath it, the nightgown remained visible in pale folds, unfinished, unguarded. She was barefoot already when she took her first step toward the door.

“Varya, don’t run like that — you’ll frighten him,” Yelena called after her, laughter breaking through her voice.

But Varvara was already in the corridor.

The house, still softened by morning light, felt different now — as if some invisible axis had tilted. The familiar paintings, the polished banister, the quiet discipline of expensive domestic order all passed by her in blurred fragments. She moved quickly, almost lightly, the soles of her feet soundless on the carpeted floor.

Behind her came Yelena, unhurried, amused, following as though this were precisely the reaction she had expected from the beginning.

The door to the women's salon stood half-open.

Even before entering, Varvara felt the difference in the air.

This room, normally reserved for female company and carefully controlled intimacy, always carried a particular tone — softer light, deeper textures, the sense that voices inside it were meant to remain slightly lower than elsewhere in the house. It was a space of mirrors and conversation, of measured glances, of silk rustling against silk, of secrets exchanged in smiles rather than words.

But today something in it felt displaced.

As if the room had been asked to hold something it was not designed to contain.

Varvara crossed the threshold.

And stopped.

The salon was indeed occupied.

A man stood near the centre of the room.

He was in his early thirties, perhaps slightly more, with the look of someone who had lived neither in poverty nor in privilege, but somewhere in between — the kind of man who could pass unnoticed in a crowd of clerks or minor officials, yet still possess enough presence to be remembered when seen directly.

His face was plain rather than handsome: clean-shaven, somewhat tired around the eyes, features neither crude nor refined. His hair was neatly cut. His body, however, told a different story — not aristocratic training, but maintenance, discipline of a practical kind. He was not soft. Not careless.

And he was completely naked.

Not theatrical, not posed — simply standing there as one might stand when instructed to wait, as though the absence of clothing were not a statement but a condition already agreed upon elsewhere.

For a brief moment the room itself seemed to hold its breath.

Varvara did not speak.

Her eyes moved over him once, quickly, not yet with understanding, but with the immediate, instinctive assessment of someone confronted with an object that refuses to fit into any familiar category.

Behind her, Yelena's laughter softened into something almost pleased.

"Well?" she said gently, as if presenting a gift that had been carefully wrapped and is now finally revealed.

The salon, with all its silk, mirrors, and restrained elegance, suddenly felt like a stage upon which an entirely different rule of order had been quietly installed without warning.

Varvara stood at the threshold, still not fully grasping what exactly she was seeing, or why it had been presented to her as a "gift" in a house where gifts usually meant silk boxes, perfume, and jewellery.

"Who is this?" she asked at last, without taking her eyes off him.

Yelena, just behind her, tilted her head slightly, as if the question were not unexpected at all, but merely the next step in a sequence she had already planned.

"Do you like him?" she replied instead.

Varvara hesitated.

There was something in her stepmother's tone that did not allow embarrassment to take shape in its usual form. It was not pressure in a crude sense — rather a calm, almost effortless steering of attention, as though she were being gently shown that this was not a moment for inherited modesty.

She stepped forward.

Now she was closer.

Too close, in fact, for anything to remain abstract.

The man did not move. He was clearly used to standing still when told to, as if the absence of clothing were not a shock but a condition already agreed upon elsewhere.

Varvara's gaze moved over him slowly, without yet knowing what rules applied here. It was not curiosity in the innocent sense — something in the room had already removed that category entirely — but a careful, involuntary taking-in of detail.

And only now did a simple fact fully register: she had never before seen a naked man this close.

The thought arrived without drama, almost clinically, as if noting a new object in a room that had previously been incomplete.

His body remained composed, but there was a subtle, involuntary reaction to her presence — a quiet sign of life breaking through imposed stillness. Not performance, not invitation. Just biology, unavoidable and unhidden.

Varvara noticed it, and her brows shifted slightly — not in shock, more in momentary surprise at how direct reality could be when stripped of its usual distance.

Her eyes moved upward to his face.

And she realized, unexpectedly, that he was not unpleasant.

Plain, yes. Unremarkable in a public sense. But not crude. Not repulsive. There was a kind of calmness in him, a lack of pretence, that made him strangely readable.

— Yes, — she said at last. — I like him.

Her voice was steady, without playfulness, without effort to guess the correct answer.

Yelena smiled — satisfied, as if the reply confirmed something already settled.

"His name is Dmitri", she said calmly. "From today, he belongs to you."

A brief pause.

"He is your slave, Varvara. You may do with him whatever you wish."

The word sounded different here than in the whispered rumors of the city. Not a scandal, not a taboo — but something closer to a private legal reality, spoken in the language of hidden arrangements and silent agreements.

Varvara blinked slowly.

"And my father?" she asked after a moment.

Yelena did not change expression.

"He is aware", she replied. "And he does not object."

Only a faint inclination of the head followed, as if she were merely confirming something already settled long ago.

"He understands that you must grow up. So let it happen here, within these walls, where everything is under control."

And there was no cruelty in her tone.

Only certainty — that this was simply how the world worked.

Varvara did not yet look away.

The thought had already formed in her mind with a kind of quiet inevitability — not as a decision, but as an image that had slipped into place on its own.

If this man belonged to her, then the boundary between presence and intimacy would eventually dissolve. It was difficult, standing there, not to imagine what that might mean in practical terms. The idea did not arrive as shame, but as a strange, almost experimental curiosity. She had never before been close enough to a man to even consider such proximity as something real rather than abstract.

Dmitri, standing still in the centre of the room, would not have been unsuitable for that thought. There was nothing theatrical about him, nothing exaggerated. Just a man — present, physical, unmistakably alive.

It was at that moment that Yelena spoke again.

As if she had caught the direction of Varvara's attention without effort.

"He is entirely capable," she said calmly, "in every respect that matters."

A brief pause.

“Except one.”

Varvara looked at her.

Yelena’s expression did not change.

“He cannot father children,” she added. “That has been ensured.”

The words were delivered with the same tone one might use when describing a settled medical fact, no different from a vaccination or a corrective operation.

Varvara blinked once.

“How?” she asked simply.

“A surgical procedure,” Yelena replied. “Performed before he entered service. Clean, deliberate. No complications.”

She turned her head slightly toward Dmitri.

“Show her.”

There was no hesitation in the command, and no hesitation in obeying it.

Dmitri moved only enough to comply — a controlled, almost impersonal motion. He lifted his prick aside and pulled back the scrotum slightly, revealing a faint, pale line of healed tissue along it — the mark of what had been done. It was not dramatic, not disfiguring in an obvious sense, but unmistakably intentional — the quiet signature of irreversible intervention.

Yelena glanced at Varvara again.

“As you see,” she said evenly. “He is safe in that regard.”

And in the silence that followed, the word *safe* did not sound entirely like protection.

Yelena did not move from the doorway at once. For a moment she simply looked at Varvara and Dmitri together, as if assessing whether both elements of her arrangement had finally been correctly placed.

Then she spoke again, calmly, as though completing instructions already given in advance.

“Remember”, she said, “he is yours now.”

Her tone remained light, almost conversational.

“From this day forward, you are his mistress in every legal and practical sense that matters here. He is assigned to you. His position depends entirely on your satisfaction and your discretion.”

A small pause.

“You may direct him as you see fit,” she continued, “and you may also restrain yourself if you wish to preserve his value. Men like him are not difficult to damage, and a ruined asset is of no use to anyone.”

There was no cruelty in the phrasing — only the cold practicality of bookkeeping applied to human beings.

Yelena adjusted the sleeve of her dress.

“Think of him as you would think of a well-kept house dog”, she added. “He responds to discipline. He exists within limits. And he will remain yours only so long as those limits are understood.”

Varvara felt something tighten in her chest — not fear, but something more disorienting: the sudden awareness of choice where she had never expected one to exist.

A space had opened in front of her, vast and undefined.

And it was hers.

Without fully thinking it through, she stepped forward and, in a gesture that surprised even herself, leaned in and pressed a brief kiss to Yelena’s cheek.

“Thank you”, she said softly.

Yelena paused for the smallest fraction of a second, then smiled — satisfied, controlled.

“I have matters to attend to for the preparations,” she said.

And just like that, she turned and left the salon.

The door closed.

Varvara remained standing in the room.

Alone now — with the naked man, and with the silence that suddenly felt much larger than before.

Varvara did not move at first.

Then she stepped forward.

Not hesitantly, not as someone afraid of what she might discover — but with a kind of measured curiosity, as though she were approaching something newly acquired and still poorly understood.

She stopped at a close enough distance to see him properly.

He did not look at her.

His gaze remained lowered, fixed somewhere near the floorboards, obedient in a way that felt less like fear than trained restraint. That, more than anything else, defined the atmosphere of the room now: not chaos, not danger, but control — transferred, reassigned.

Varvara looked at him openly.

Up close, the difference between them became even more obvious. He was taller, broader in the shoulders, built in a way that suggested strength used in labor rather than display. And yet there was nothing in him that resisted her presence. He stood as though his size had been placed temporarily at her disposal, stripped of its usual authority.

It was a strange contradiction — physical superiority without ownership of it.

Her attention moved slowly over him again, not rushed, not shy. She was not avoiding what she saw, but neither was she indulging it. It was closer to inspection than fascination.

There was a scent as well — something human and faintly metallic, mixed with soap that had been used too recently to fully erase the body beneath it. It reached her only when she was near enough, subtle but undeniable, grounding him in physical reality more than anything else.

He remained still.

“Manual,” she thought, almost involuntarily — though the word did not yet have clear form in her mind. “Controlled.”

And for the first time, she understood that the control was not his choice.

Yet it also did not feel like resistance.

It felt... contained.

She noticed again how he did not move toward her, nor away. How even his strength seemed folded inward, redirected, as though it no longer belonged to him in any meaningful sense.

She was smaller than him. Clearly so. And yet the imbalance did not translate into threat.

It translated into possession.

Varvara tilted her head slightly, studying him with quiet concentration.

Then she reached this simple conclusion with a calmness that surprised her:

He was strong.

But he was also... trained.

Not broken.

Not wild.

Something else entirely.

And that thought — more than his body, more than his silence — was what made her breathe a little differently as she stood there.

Varvara's gaze drifted toward the tall mirror standing between the curtained windows.

For a moment she studied the reflection alone: herself in the loosely fastened morning robe, dark hair still disordered from sleep, pale bare feet against the carpet — and beside her the naked man, broader, taller, entirely out of place amid silk cushions and polished wood.

The contrast fascinated her.

Without quite thinking about it, she reached out and took hold of him — her fingers closing around the warm, thickening length of his girth, not timidly, not violently either, but with the tentative assurance of someone testing a privilege that had only just become real. It stirred subtly in her grip, a quiet pulse of response that sent a shiver up her arm.

“Come here,” she said quietly.

Dmitri obeyed at once.

She guided him closer to the mirror by that firm hold, positioning herself beside him, her shoulder nearly touching his arm now. Up close the difference in their bodies became even more striking in reflection than in reality itself — her hand still curled possessively around him, his arousal now evident, half-erect and straining slightly against her palm.

She looked young.

He looked fully grown.

She looked expensive.

He looked owned.

Varvara regarded the reflection with quiet concentration. The salon’s muted morning light softened her features while sharpening the harder outlines of his frame beside her. Her robe fell open slightly at the throat where she had tied it too hastily in her excitement, while he remained entirely exposed, without even the dignity of clothing to separate him from her scrutiny — his hardness prominent in her reflected grasp, a tangible sign of her command.

And yet the strangest thing was not his nakedness.

It was his stillness.

He stood beside him with the controlled composure of something trained not to intrude upon the space around it. Even his height and strength seemed somehow subdued by obedience, his body taut with restrained need under her touch.

Varvara felt a quiet thrill move through her chest at the sight of them together — heat gathering low in her belly as she watched her own fingers trace the vein along his length in the mirror.

Not merely man and woman.

Mistress and possession.

The thought arrived whole this time, without embarrassment softening it.

Her eyes moved between their reflections again and again, lingering on the improbable harmony of the contrast: her youth, refinement, softness — his disciplined physicality, silence, restraint, and the visible evidence of his body’s submission in her hand.

Then, almost unconsciously, she smiled at the mirror.

As though she liked very much what she saw standing beside her there.

“Lift me”, she said suddenly.

Dmitri obeyed at once.

He bent, slid his arms beneath her with practiced steadiness, and raised her effortlessly from the floor. Varvara gave a quiet breath of surprise as the room shifted beneath her. One moment she had been standing beside him; the next she was suspended against the strength of his body, elevated almost to his height, her thighs brushing the warmth of his erection pressing upward against her.

He held her securely before the mirror.

And now the contrast fascinated her even more.

Her small bare feet no longer touched the carpet. The thin robe had fallen unevenly around her legs, its pale fabric gathered against the dark firmness of his arms. Beside his naked physicality, her own reflection appeared softer, younger, almost delicate — while his cock stood firm and insistent beneath the hem, a living extension of his obedience.

Yet she was the one being obeyed.

Varvara looked at him through the mirror rather than directly. The sensation of his strength beneath her was impossible to ignore — not aggressive, not uncontrolled, but calm and entirely available to her command, his arousal steady against the thin barrier of her robe.

She liked that.

More than she expected.

Her gaze drifted downward.

The loose hem of her robe had slipped between their bodies, obscuring part of him from the reflection — veiling the thick length of his shaft that strained toward her. For some reason that small interruption displeased her.

“Move it aside,” she said quietly.

Dmitri released one hand only long enough to obey, adjusting the fabric carefully upward to bare the contact, before returning his arm securely beneath her. Now his erection pressed directly against her, supporting her alongside his arms — a second, unyielding pillar of submission.

The image in the mirror changed again.

Now nothing interrupted the strange visual unity of them: the clothed young mistress held aloft by the naked man who belonged to her, his body supporting hers completely — arms and arousal alike.

Varvara stared at the reflection for several long seconds without speaking.

It seemed to her suddenly that he was holding her up not merely with strength, but with obedience itself — as though his entire body had been reduced to a single purpose: supporting hers wherever she wished to place it, his penis a firm, throbbing anchor beneath her core.

And that thought sent another slow warmth through her chest as she continued watching them together in the glass.

For several moments neither of them moved.

The mirror held them together in a tableau so improbable that Varvara could not quite stop looking at it: herself lifted effortlessly in the arms of a naked man whose entire presence had been placed under her authority before breakfast on the morning of her eighteenth birthday.

Outside the tall windows, somewhere far below, a carriage rolled along the street.

The sound felt impossibly distant.

Varvara rested one hand lightly against Dmitri’s shoulder and continued studying his reflection with thoughtful attention. The initial shock had already begun to dissolve into something calmer, stranger — not excitement alone now, but curiosity settling into possession.

At last she spoke.

“Do you have a wife?”

Dmitri answered immediately.

“No, mistress.”

The word still sounded unfamiliar in the room.

Not theatrical. Not servile in the vulgar sense. Simply accepted.

Varvara watched his face carefully in the mirror.

“And children?”

“No.”

A brief pause followed.

Then, after the smallest hesitation, he added:

“I was not permitted to marry after entering service.”

Varvara absorbed this quietly.

Something about the sentence disturbed her more than she expected. Not because it sounded cruel — strangely, it did not — but because of the complete absence of resentment with which he spoke it. The fact sat inside him with the settled stillness of weather long endured.

Her fingers shifted slightly against his shoulder.

“So you belong entirely to this life now”, she murmured, almost to herself.

Dmitri lowered his eyes further.

“Yes, mistress.”

Again that calm obedience.

Again that unsettling lack of resistance.

Varvara looked back toward the mirror.

He was older than she was. Stronger. More experienced in every practical sense of the world. And yet his future had just been placed into her hands as casually as another girl might receive a bracelet or a horse.

The thought made her draw a slower breath.

For the first time in her young life, another human being’s existence seemed to bend visibly around her desires.

And there, in the muted morning light of the women’s salon, cradled effortlessly against the disciplined strength of the naked man beneath her, Varvara realized with growing clarity that the sensation pleased her far more deeply than she had ever imagined possible.

She studied his face in the mirror for a long moment, as if searching there for something beyond obedience — some hidden fracture, some possibility of refusal that might still belong to him.

Then, quietly, she asked:

“Can you harm me?”

Dmitri answered at once.

“No, mistress.”

Her fingers tightened slightly against his shoulder.

“Never?”

“Never.”

A pause.

Varvara’s gaze did not leave his reflection.

“Even if I ask you to?”

For the first time there was the faintest hesitation in his expression — not defiance, but something closer to discomfort at the form of the question itself, as if it violated an understood boundary of language.

Then he spoke, more carefully than before:

“Do not jest, mistress.”

She did not look away from his reflection.

“What if I am in danger?” she asked quietly. “Will you protect me?”

“Yes, mistress”, he answered at once.

Her fingers shifted slightly where they rested against him, as though testing the certainty of that reply.

“Even at the cost of your life?”

“I am your slave, mistress,” Dmitri said. “My life has value only in relation to yours — not to myself.”

The words settled in the room with an unsettling simplicity, as if they were not statements of devotion, but of accounting.

Varvara frowned faintly.

“Explain that,” she said.

For a brief moment he was silent, searching not for permission to speak, but for the correct form of speech itself — as though precision mattered more than courage.

Then he answered:

“Mistress Yelena has already told you,” he said carefully. “I may be sold, or exchanged. A dead slave has no value to anyone.”

Varvara studied him for a moment longer, still cradled in his arms.

Then, almost casually, she said:

“Kiss me.”

Dmitri did not hesitate.

He bent toward her at once, carefully adjusting his hold so she remained fully supported as he lowered his face closer. His breath was warm and pleasant against her skin, steady with quiet anticipation.

Varvara, however, did not make it easy for him.

At the last moment she shifted slightly, turning her face just enough to avoid giving him what he clearly expected. Instead, she offered him small, teasing alternatives — the line of her forehead, the bridge of her dainty nose, the curve of her cheek, the edge of her jaw.

Each time he followed without resistance, adjusting with quiet precision, his lips brushing only what she allowed, obeying the unspoken rule she was inventing in real time.

She watched this with growing satisfaction.

There was something oddly pleasant in the fact that he understood her game without needing it explained. No irritation, no hesitation — only attentive compliance, as if her whims were simply instructions waiting to be discovered, his warm breath lingering pleasantly after each touch.

When he paused, waiting for the next cue, she spoke again:

“My lips are dry in the mornings”, she said lightly. “Do something about it.”

Dmitri froze for a fraction of a second — not from refusal, but from the sharpness of the instruction’s intimacy.

Then he obeyed.

Carefully, with the same controlled attentiveness he had shown all along, he extended his tongue and licked her lips slowly, moistening them exactly as directed — a deliberate, intimate glide without overstepping what she had not yet granted him.

Varvara felt a faint, unexpected thrill pass through her chest — not at the act itself, but at the precision of his obedience, the slick warmth left on her lips, the way he seemed entirely shaped by her smallest variations of will.

And in the mirror before them, the strange arrangement of power and restraint looked even more unreal than it felt.

Varvara tilted her head back, exposing the pale curve of her throat, a playful glint in her eyes.

“Lick me here too,” she commanded softly.

Dmitri obeyed without pause. His tongue traced a slow, deliberate path along the sensitive skin, warm and precise, following the line from her collarbone upward.

A shiver ran through her — not just pleasure, but a sudden tickle that made her squirm in his arms. She laughed, a light, breathless sound that echoed softly in the room.

“Would you lick me all over?” she asked, still smiling, her voice teasing as she imagined it — from head to toe, every inch claimed by his attentiveness.

“Of course, if you command it,” he replied evenly, his tone steady and without flourish, holding her gaze in the mirror before them.

She paused, tilting her head as the thought lingered, curiosity sharpening her expression.

“And what would *you* want?” she pressed, genuinely intrigued. “Yourself?”

Dmitri met her eyes directly for the first time, his voice low and sincere.

“To be useful to you, my mistress,” he said simply. “To be pleasing.”

At that same moment, in the Lebedev house on the industrial outskirts of Chernograd, the morning looked very different.

The room smelled faintly of boiled cabbage, damp wool, and yesterday’s smoke.

A thin grey light filtered through the small frost-clouded window, settling unevenly across the cramped kitchen where everything seemed either worn down by use or stained by long survival.

Somewhere behind the partition one of the younger children coughed in its sleep. Another whimpered briefly and fell quiet again.

Anfisa still stood near the table, the strange weight of her stepfather's words not yet fully settled inside her.

Bought.

The word lingered.

Not loudly. Not dramatically. It simply remained in the room now like another object among the cracked cups and peeling walls.

Her stepfather rubbed a rough hand over his jaw and avoided looking directly at her for too long, as though prolonged eye contact might turn the arrangement into something more personal than he wished it to be.

Before he could speak again, her mother's voice suddenly came from near the stove — tired, hoarse, but sharper than before.

"Well, don't stand there idle, girl", she muttered. "Get yourself together. They'll be coming for you soon enough."

Anfisa glanced toward her in surprise.

Her mother had barely spoken since the conversation began. She was bent over a pot with the distracted exhaustion of a woman whose life had long ago narrowed into feeding children and enduring days one after another without distinction.

But the stepfather shook his head at once.

"No one's coming here," he said flatly.

From inside his coat he pulled a folded scrap of paper, already creased and dirty at the edges, and held it out to Anfisa.

"You'll go yourself."

She took the note carefully.

The address written on it meant nothing to her.

Some street in another district of Chernograd. A house number. Nothing more.

"Wash yourself proper before you go", he added. "And don't wander. They're expecting you."

Anfisa lowered her eyes to the paper again.

The handwriting looked oddly neat compared to everything around her.

For a brief moment she imagined the other side of that address: cleaner rooms, quieter voices, perhaps carpets instead of bare floorboards. The thought came to her not as hope exactly, but as temptation.

Behind her, her mother snorted faintly.

"At least comb your hair", she said. "No sense arriving looking like dock trash."

The words might once have sounded cruel.

This morning they sounded almost practical.

Anfisa folded the paper slowly and slipped it into the pocket of her skirt.

Then she lifted her gaze toward the window, where the pale winter morning of Chernograd waited beyond the dirty glass — vast, cold, and suddenly full of directions her life had never possessed before.

Then she lifted her gaze toward the window, where the warm May morning of Chernograd shimmered faintly beyond the dirty glass — noisy, sunlit, and suddenly full of directions her life had never possessed before.

Anfisa remained by the table for a little while after the conversation ended, her fingers resting against the folded scrap of paper inside her pocket as though it might somehow grow less real if left untouched.

Around her, the house resumed its ordinary morning rhythm with almost insulting speed.

One of the younger children began crying properly now. Her mother muttered something under her breath while stirring the pot. The stepfather had already sat down on the bench again, as though the matter were concluded.

As though he had merely arranged transport for a parcel.

Anfisa lowered her eyes briefly.

Then she turned and crossed into the narrow adjoining room where the family slept.

The air there was warmer, close with the smell of bodies, linen, and stale dust trapped beneath the low ceiling. Thin shafts of May sunlight slipped through the uneven curtains and lay across the floorboards in crooked golden bands.

She closed the door behind her as well as it would close.

For a moment she simply stood there.

Then, slowly, she began to make herself presentable.

There was no true privacy in the house, and no abundance of anything. The washing basin held only a little cloudy water left from earlier use, but she knelt beside it anyway, rolled up her sleeves, and splashed her face, neck, and arms with careful attention.

The water felt cool against her skin.

She rubbed at herself more thoroughly than usual.

Behind her, from the kitchen, came the muffled clatter of spoons and her mother's voice scolding one of the children. The familiar sounds already seemed strangely distant to her now, as though the address in her pocket had begun quietly separating her from the room around her before she had even left it.

Anfisa dried herself with a rough towel and moved toward the small cracked mirror hanging beside the wall.

She studied her reflection critically.

A poor girl looked back at her.

But not an ugly one.

Her hair, still disordered from sleep, fell in heavy copper-blond strands that caught the morning light warmly despite the poverty of the room. Washing had sharpened the unusual clarity of her grey-green eyes, making them seem larger beneath the loose wisps near her temples. Her mouth, naturally expressive even in silence, retained the soft fullness of youth, while beneath the plainness of her worn clothes her figure had already ripened early into unmistakable femininity — generous breasts, rounded hips, the kind of body men noticed long before a girl fully understood why.

For the first time that morning, she wondered what exactly it was that had been purchased.

The thought unsettled her enough that she looked away from the mirror almost at once.

She dragged the comb carefully through her hair, wincing occasionally when it caught, then braided it more neatly than usual. After that she opened the small wooden chest that held her few respectable belongings and removed the cleanest blouse she owned — faded, mended twice at the sleeve, but still decent enough for church or important errands.

She changed slowly.

Not out of modesty.

Out of awareness.

Each small act — washing, combing, buttoning fabric against skin — carried the strange feeling of preparation for something she could not yet picture clearly.

When she finished, she looked at herself once more in the cracked mirror.

Still Anfisa.

Still poor.

And yet no longer entirely the same girl who had awakened there an hour earlier.

Anfisa lingered for a moment in the doorway, as though waiting for the house itself to offer some final instruction — or perhaps to change its mind.

Nothing changed.

Behind her, life continued with careful effort at normality.

Her mother clattered dishes a little too loudly, speaking to one of the younger children in a tone that was almost cheerful but not quite able to disguise itself. Her stepfather stood near the table, already avoiding her eyes again, as if prolonged attention might turn the morning into something irreversible.

It was he who spoke first.

“Don’t stray from the main streets”, he said curtly, as though reciting directions for a delivery rather than a departure. “Go down to the tram line. Follow it until the market square. From there — ask for Malaya Sennaya Street. The house is number fourteen. Grey gate. You can’t miss it.”

He paused, then added after a moment:

“Ask twice if you have to. Don’t let anyone send you the wrong way.”

Anfisa nodded once.

Not obediently.

Not defiantly either.

Simply acknowledging that the instructions existed.

Her mother wiped her hands on her apron and glanced at her briefly.

“Well”, she said, with forced lightness, “don’t go getting lost. And don’t stand in the street like a fool.”

It was not unkind.

It was simply the closest she could come to farewell without breaking her tone.

Anfisa stepped out.

The air outside was warmer than the room had been, already carrying the dry brightness of a May morning settling over Chernograd. The street was alive in fragments: a neighbour sweeping dust from a threshold, a man hauling a crate too heavy for comfort, a woman calling after a child who refused to stop running.

No one paid her particular attention.

Or rather — no one yet had reason to.

She adjusted the strap of her worn bag and began to walk.

At first the route was familiar. The same uneven ground between closely packed houses, the same fences leaning with fatigue, the same narrow passages where voices and cooking smells drifted from open windows. Here and there she recognized faces — neighbors, traders, men she had seen before without ever speaking to.

A few glanced at her differently today, though she could not yet tell why.

Perhaps it was the way she walked.

Perhaps it was simply that she was walking somewhere instead of remaining where she belonged.

Gradually, the streets began to change.

The buildings grew less crowded. The air opened slightly between them. Workshops replaced cramped dwellings, and the smell of coal and metal drifted into the sweetness of early blossoms carried from somewhere further out.

She crossed a small square where tram rails cut through the cobblestones like dark lines in pale stone. A bell clanged somewhere behind her, and she turned instinctively to let a passing carriage go by, its wheels throwing up a faint spray of dust.

A man on the corner watched her pass for a moment longer than necessary, then looked away.

She continued.

The city was no longer entirely known to her now. Streets widened without warning, intersecting at angles she had never had reason to learn. Signs appeared on buildings she could not remember ever seeing before, and the faces around her grew less familiar, more self-contained.

And then, almost without transition, Chernograd changed again.

The noise softened.

The density of life thinned.

The houses here stood more deliberately spaced apart, their facades cleaner, their windows less obscured. Even the air felt different — less heavy, more controlled, as if the city had begun to arrange itself according to a quieter logic.

Anfisa slowed slightly.

This was no longer the part of Chernograd she knew.

And yet she continued forward, following the last instructions still held clearly in her mind, toward a street she had never seen and a house number that already felt as though it belonged to someone else's life rather than her own.

By the time Anfisa reached the market square, Chernograd had fully opened itself into noise and motion.

Stalls stretched across the wide space in uneven rows — wooden tables, patched awnings, crates turned upside down to serve as stands. The air was thick with competing smells: bread still warm from early ovens, cheap tobacco, dried fish, and the faint sharpness of citrus that had traveled too far to belong here naturally.

People moved through it in steady currents.

Women bargaining without looking up from their hands, men weighing coins with suspicious care, children darting between legs with the practiced agility of those who had grown up among crowds.

Anfisa slowed instinctively as she entered.

It was not unfamiliar to her — she had seen markets before — but this one felt larger, less contained, as if the city had poured part of itself into this single place and forgotten to stop.

She paused near a stall where vegetables were stacked in uneven pyramids, more practical than beautiful. A woman behind it, broad-shouldered and red-faced from the sun, was arguing with a customer about the price of potatoes.

Anfisa waited for a break in the exchange, then leaned slightly closer.

"Excuse me," she said carefully. "Can you tell me how to reach Malaya Sennaya Street?"

The woman glanced at her briefly, then wiped her hands on her apron.

"From here?" she said. "Go straight out of the square, past the tram crossing, then take the third turn to the right. Keep going until you see the baker's shop with the green sign. After that — ask again if you're unsure. People around there will know it."

Anfisa nodded, committing it to memory.

Before she could step away, another voice cut in lightly beside her.

"I'm going that way", said a young man who had been standing a few steps off, holding a small paper-wrapped purchase. He looked to be about her age or slightly older, dressed simply but neatly, the kind of person who did not quite belong to the roughness of the market yet moved through it without discomfort. "I could walk with you."

There was no insistence in his tone. Only ease.

Anfisa hesitated.

The offer was not threatening. In another moment of her life she might not have even noticed it. But today everything felt slightly more exposed, as though every direction she took carried consequences she could not yet name.

"I think I can find it", she said politely.

The young man smiled — not offended, not persistent.

"As you wish," he replied.

He gave a small nod, turned away, and disappeared back into the flow of the square as easily as he had appeared.

Anfisa watched him go for a second longer than necessary, then adjusted the strap of her bag and moved on.

Leaving the market behind, she followed the directions she had been given, passing out of the noise into narrower streets again. Shops replaced stalls. Signs hung more neatly above doorways. The rhythm of the city shifted once more, growing less chaotic, more deliberate.

She checked her bearings at each turn, careful not to rely on instinct alone.

Eventually, she saw it.

A simple wooden sign fixed to a corner building:

Malaya Sennaya Street

She turned.

The street here was quieter. Not empty, but subdued — as if even conversation had learned to lower its voice. Houses stood with more space between them, gates more solid, fences less improvised. There was a sense of order that did not need to announce itself.

Anfisa walked steadily to the end of the street.

And there, at last, she saw it.

A grey gate.

Unremarkable at first glance, save for its stillness. No signs of life beyond it, no decoration, no invitation. Just a simple structure set into a solid wall, with a small metal plate affixed beside it.

14

She stopped in front of it.

For a moment, she did not move.

A moment after she stopped in front of the gate, a voice called out from the other side — rough, impatient, already irritated by her presence.

“Go on, girl. Move along.”

Anfisa blinked slightly, looking up.

“I’ve been told to come here”, she said evenly.

There was a short silence.

Then footsteps.

Heavy, unhurried.

A side gate within the larger grey structure creaked open just enough for a man to step into view. He was older, broad in the shoulders, dressed in a worn coat that had once been formal but had long since lost interest in such distinctions. His gaze moved over her quickly — not curious, not hostile, simply assessing.

“What do you mean, ‘told’?” he asked.

Anfisa reached into her pocket without hesitation and produced the folded scrap of paper.

The man took it between two fingers as if expecting something worse.

He unfolded it.

Read once.

Then again, more slowly.

Something in his expression shifted — not surprise, but recognition. The faint tightening around the eyes of someone who has seen that handwriting before and understands exactly what it represents without needing further explanation.

He looked back at her.

“You’re early”, he said at last.

Not unkindly.

Simply factual.

He stepped aside and unlocked the gate fully.

It swung inward with a dull metallic sound.

“Come in”, he added, already turning away as though the matter had ceased to interest him.

Anfisa hesitated only for a fraction of a second.

Then she crossed the threshold into the courtyard beyond.

Anfisa instinctively slowed, waiting while the gatekeeper pulled the smaller gate shut behind her.

The sound echoed heavily through the enclosed space.

Only then did she realize how completely the walls cut the house off from the street outside. The noise of Chernograd dulled at once into something distant and indistinct, as though the city itself had been pushed several streets further away.

The gatekeeper jerked his head toward the main house.

“This way.”

She followed him across the courtyard.

Even here everything felt quieter than it should have. The paving stones were clean. The windows unbroken. No laundry hung between buildings, no children shouted, no neighbors drifted half-dressed through open doorways. The orderliness unsettled her more than open luxury might have done.

At the entrance steps he stopped and knocked once before opening the door himself.

Warmth met her immediately from inside.

Not the suffocating heat of crowded poverty, but a steadier warmth — dry, controlled, expensive.

A young woman appeared in the hallway almost at once.

She could not have been much older than Anfisa, perhaps twenty or twenty-one at most, yet she carried herself with the composed severity of someone long accustomed to responsibility. Her dark dress was plain but immaculate, her hair pinned smoothly back, her expression alert without being welcoming.

The gatekeeper handed her the folded note without comment.

She read it quickly.

Then her eyes lifted to Anfisa.

For a moment the scrutiny made Anfisa strangely aware of her own hands, her clothes, the dust still clinging faintly to the hem of her skirt from the streets outside.

“You’ll wait here,” the young woman said.

Her voice was calm, precise, neither rude nor friendly.

Without another word she turned and walked away into the quiet interior of the house.

Anfisa remained alone in the entrance hall.

The silence pressed differently here than outside.

She glanced around carefully.

The floor beneath her boots was polished wood rather than bare boards. A long mirror stood against one wall beside a narrow table holding fresh flowers whose scent lingered faintly in the warm air. Somewhere further inside the house a clock ticked with quiet authority.

Everything appeared restrained.

Not ostentatious.

Merely certain of its own quality.

Anfisa shifted her weight slightly, uncertain whether she ought to remain standing exactly where she was or move further in. Even the air here seemed to demand correct behavior she had never been taught.

After several minutes, footsteps returned.

The young woman reappeared.

“This way”, she said simply.

And this time Anfisa followed her deeper into the house.

The young woman led her along a quieter corridor lined with dark wooden panels and closed doors, their polished surfaces reflecting fragments of the afternoon light.

At the very end she stopped, opened one of the doors without knocking, and stepped aside just enough for Anfisa to enter first.

The room beyond was brightly lit.

Sunlight poured through tall uncovered windows and spread across carpets so thick that Anfisa felt her worn shoes sink slightly into them as she crossed the threshold. Everything inside seemed softer, heavier, more expensive than anything she had ever touched before — the velvet curtains, the lacquered furniture, the faint golden shine of objects whose purpose she could not immediately guess.

And at the centre of it all, reclining against the cushions of a broad divan that looked almost absurdly luxurious to Anfisa’s eyes, sat a woman of about forty.

She was large without being shapeless, dressed in dark silk that clung richly to her body and glittered faintly wherever the light touched it. Heavy rings flashed upon several fingers. Her black hair, threaded here and there with silver, had been arranged carefully, though not delicately; there was something forceful rather than elegant about the effort.

Her face arrested attention immediately.

Dark intelligent eyes regarded Anfisa beneath finely drawn brows, sharp with calculation even in stillness. Her nose curved prominently, her mouth full yet severe, and above the upper lip lingered the faint but unmistakable shadow of carefully managed dark hairs that powder had not entirely concealed.

Nothing about her invited affection.

Everything about her suggested appetite — not sensual appetite exactly, but the colder instinct of someone who measured human beings by usefulness long before sentiment entered the matter.

She looked at Anfisa the way a jeweler might examine an uncut stone.

Not lovingly.

Profitably.

“Come closer,” she said at last.

Her voice was low, cultivated, and entirely accustomed to obedience.

Behind Anfisa, the servant girl withdrew silently to the wall beside the door and remained there motionless, hands folded before her apron, as though she had ceased to be a person the moment her task was completed.

Anfisa obeyed at once, crossing the room with careful steps that seemed unnaturally loud against the softness of the carpet.

The closer she came to the divan, the more painfully aware she became of herself.

Not merely of her clothes, but of everything attached to them — the narrowness of her life, the cheap stitching at her cuffs, the dust gathered at the hem from the streets outside, the faint roughness left on her hands by years of ordinary labor. Against the polished richness of the room she felt suddenly unfinished, provincial, almost embarrassingly real.

The woman examined her openly.

Not with vulgar curiosity.

With assessment.

Her gaze moved slowly from Anfisa’s face downward, pausing here and there with quiet calculation, as though mentally sorting qualities into invisible categories known only to herself.

Then she said simply:

“Turn around.”

The command sounded so natural in her mouth that Anfisa obeyed before embarrassment had time to resist it.

She turned once, stiffly conscious of every movement.

“Again.”

Anfisa did so.

The woman leaned back slightly against the cushions, still studying her.

Anfisa could feel heat rising into her cheeks now. The room seemed too bright, the air too exposed. Even her dress — which that morning had seemed respectable enough — suddenly appeared painfully coarse and inadequate beneath such scrutiny.

So when the woman finally spoke again, her indifferent tone almost came as relief.

“Undress.”

Anfisa lowered her eyes at once and began fumbling with the buttons of her blouse.

The woman, meanwhile, reached for a small notebook lying beside her on the divan. She opened it casually and began making brief pencil marks inside, not even looking at the page for long between observations.

The scratching sound seemed unnaturally loud.

Anfisa removed her blouse carefully, folded it from instinct more than thought, then hesitated as her fingers moved toward the waistband of her skirt.

Silence lingered for a moment too long.

The woman glanced up from the notebook.

“All of it”, she said evenly. “Completely.”

Only now did the full shape of the situation begin settling inside Anfisa with quiet, irreversible clarity.

She had been bought.

Not metaphorically. Not emotionally.

Literally.

The thought moved through her strangely calmly at first, almost too large to produce immediate fear. She stood there half-undressed in the bright room and suddenly understood that she herself had entered it no differently than the divan beneath the woman or the polished objects surrounding them. Acquired things. Chosen things. Things whose value lay in how they appeared, how they endured, how well they served the purpose for which money had exchanged hands.

And purchases, she realized dimly, were expected to be seen properly.

As they truly were.

Nothing concealed.

The understanding should perhaps have humiliated her more than it did.

Instead, it produced something colder and more complicated — a strained awareness of herself from the outside, as though she too had become one more object standing beneath the room’s merciless light.

She continued undressing.

Carefully.

Trying not to rush, trying not to tremble, trying above all not to look directly at either of the women whose attention rested upon her with what felt like the same unnerving indifference. The servant by the door remained silent and still; the older woman continued making occasional marks in the notebook without visible emotion.

Anfisa slipped her skirt downward.

Then the remaining layers after it.

Each piece left her body with the faint awkwardness of surrender.

She folded nothing now. Merely placed the garments beside one another upon the carpet near her feet, aware all the while of her own exposed skin beneath the bright room and the impossible luxury surrounding it.

And beneath the shame there flickered another thought she could not entirely suppress: she looked better this way.

Poor clothing had always diminished her somehow, flattening what nature had given her into something coarser and less distinct. Without it, the early fullness of her figure appeared clearer, softer, undeniably young and alive despite the tension now holding her rigid.

The woman finally lifted her eyes fully from the notebook.

Her gaze traveled once over Anfisa's body.

Then downward.

"The boots as well", she said evenly.

Anfisa swallowed faintly.

She bent at once, fingers working clumsily at the worn fastenings, and removed them one after the other before straightening again barefoot upon the carpet, entirely exposed now beneath the bright stillness of the room.

For a brief moment no one moved.

Then the servant girl detached herself quietly from the wall beside the door and crossed the carpet with composed, efficient steps.

Anfisa felt the approach before she fully saw it.

A faint warmth rose into her face again as the young woman knelt beside the small untidy pile of clothing at her feet and began gathering it piece by piece without ceremony — blouse, skirt, underthings, stockings, finally the worn boots themselves.

Not hurriedly.

Not mockingly.

Simply as though removing objects that no longer belonged where they had been left.

The sensation unsettled Anfisa far more than the undressing itself had.

Until now some part of her had still imagined the clothes waiting nearby, ready to be reclaimed at any moment if this strange interview ended badly enough. But watching them disappear calmly into another person's hands produced a quieter and more frightening feeling — the sense that each removed thing carried part of her former life away with it.

The servant rose with the bundle gathered neatly against her arms.

For the first time she looked directly at Anfisa.

Not cruelly.

But with the cool, practical glance of someone already accustomed to such scenes.

Then she turned, opened the door, and left the room carrying everything Anfisa had arrived in from the streets of Chernograd.

The woman studied her for another few silent seconds, then made a small motion with the pencil.

"Turn around again."

Anfisa obeyed immediately.

Barefoot upon the thick carpet, naked beneath the bright windows, she rotated slowly while feeling her own body with painful intensity — the movement of her hips, the exposure of her breasts, the vulnerable bareness of skin she had never before imagined under such calm inspection. Instinctively she drew in her already flat stomach and tightened her buttocks slightly as she turned, as though some unconscious part of her still hoped posture alone might make her appear more worthy of whatever judgment was being passed upon her.

For a strange moment she saw herself almost from outside.

Not Anfisa exactly.

A purchased girl standing in a rich room while a stranger evaluated what had been bought.
“Enough.”

The pencil scratched briefly across the notebook again.

Then the woman spoke once more, her tone unchanged.

“On your knees.”

Anfisa hesitated only a fraction too long before lowering herself carefully onto the carpet.

“Wider.”

Heat climbed sharply into her face.

She obeyed.

“Hands behind your head.”

This time the shame struck harder.

Not because the position hurt her, but because of how plainly it arranged her body for viewing — open, displayed, deprived even of the small instinct to cover herself. Yet the woman watched with such unemotional concentration that resistance began to feel almost childish beside it.

Again the pencil moved across paper.

The woman observed her for several moments before speaking.

“Remember this,” she said calmly. “From today onward, this should become an entirely ordinary position for you. One you take often.”

Anfisa remained silent.

The words entered her slowly, too strange at first to answer properly.

The woman’s eyes lifted sharply.

“Well?” she demanded suddenly, her voice louder now. “Is that understood?”

“Yes”, Anfisa answered at once.

Then, after the briefest hesitation:

“...mistress.”

The woman gave a faint irritated sound in her throat.

“I’m not your mistress”, she muttered. “Though never mind.”

She closed the notebook halfway.

“On all fours now. Around the room.”

Anfisa stared at her for a second.

Then, swallowing the last remains of hesitation, she lowered herself further onto her hands and knees.

The carpet pressed softly beneath her palms as she began moving around the room exactly as instructed, conscious of every motion of her body beneath the bright light, while behind her the scratching of the pencil resumed once more.

Anfisa moved around the room on all fours, the carpet soft and slightly springy beneath her hands and knees, each motion now stripped of any trace of ordinary dignity and reduced to something purely observable.

The woman’s pencil continued to scratch quietly somewhere behind her, marking time in brief, indifferent strokes.

At first Anfisa tried not to think at all.

Then, inevitably, she began to think too much.

She caught herself seeing her own body as though it belonged to someone else.

The gentle sway of her breasts with each movement drew her attention with a strange, uneasy sharpness. It was not desire, not pride, but a disoriented curiosity — an attempt to understand how she must appear from outside. For a fleeting, disturbing moment she wondered whether it looked awkward, uncontrolled... almost animal in its rhythm, like something heavy carried loosely on a living frame.

Was that how it seemed?

Or was it simply natural?

Her thoughts shifted quickly, unable to settle.

Her hips followed the motion of her crawl, and she became suddenly aware of them too — their shape, their weight, the way they moved without asking permission. Too much? Too little? The question arrived without instruction, as if it had always been waiting somewhere beneath her ordinary self-image.

She had never once before considered whether her body was arranged correctly for inspection. Now she could think of little else.

A faint, almost absurd idea surfaced in her mind — that somewhere, in that small notebook, there might already be words forming about her. Notes. Judgments. Quiet conclusions written in a language she had never learned but was now being measured by.

What would they say?

Too soft? Too plain? Too much of one thing, too little of another?

The uncertainty pressed strangely at her, tightening her awareness of every shift in her movement as she continued circling the room under the unbroken light, unable to stop imagining herself as an entry already being written elsewhere.

When she completed the circuit of the room and returned to the woman's side, Anfisa paused instinctively, waiting for the next instruction.

The woman did not look up immediately from her notebook.

"Turn away from me," she said at last.

Anfisa obeyed, rising slightly on her knees and rotating so that her back faced the divan.

"Stay there."

A brief pause followed, the soft scratch of pencil continuing behind her as if nothing about the arrangement required special attention.

Then the voice came again, calm and exact.

"On your knees. Bend your arms. Lower your head to the carpet."

Anfisa hesitated for only a fraction of a second before complying.

She settled back down, placed her forearms against the thick rug, and slowly lowered her forehead until it rested against the pile.

The position left her completely folded inward — knees apart, body angled forward, spine exposed in a quiet line of submission she could neither see nor control.

She went still.

The room felt suddenly larger around her in this posture, as though her body had become something deliberately reduced within it, arranged according to someone else's measure and left there to be observed in silence.

The silence in the room was briefly interrupted by the soft click of the door.

Anfisa, still on the carpet, did not lift her head at first. She only registered movement at the edge of her awareness — footsteps returning, lighter this time, more measured.

The servant girl had come back.

She stood just inside the doorway, empty-handed now, her arms resting neatly at her sides. There was nothing of Anfisa's clothing with her; only the same composed, impersonal calm as before, as if she were simply continuing a task already completed elsewhere.

She stopped and waited.

The woman on the divan did not look at her immediately.

"Position", she said, without raising her voice.

The word reached Anfisa instantly.

Understanding arrived before thought could interfere with it.

She shifted at once, turning her body around from where she knelt and adjusting herself exactly as instructed. Her knees slid apart over the carpet, and her hands moved behind her head, fingers interlacing there with a stiffness that had nothing natural in it.

She remained still.

Bare, exposed, held in place by instruction alone.

Only then did the woman glance up.

“Come here”, she said to the servant.

The girl moved forward at once, stopping a few steps away from the divan, attentive and silent, awaiting whatever would be required next.

The woman turned slightly toward the servant, finally setting the notebook more openly on the arm of the divan. Her pencil tapped once against the page before she began to speak again — calmly, as though listing items for purchase.

From the beginning, Anfisa did not immediately understand that the instructions concerned her.

The words came in short, practical phrases, interspersed with brief glances into the notes as if confirming a prewritten standard.

“Remove the excess hair from the arms and legs”, the woman said evenly. “Keep it clean and even.”

A pause.

“Hands and feet as well — nails must be properly cared for. Nothing uneven.”

Another quick glance down.

“Pubic hair trimmed neatly. Tamed. And in the groin and between the buttocks — remove it completely.”

The servant listened without reaction, as if each instruction belonged to a familiar catalogue of preparations.

Only gradually did comprehension settle in Anfisa’s mind.

Not as shock at first, but as a slow internal shift — the recognition that she was not being discussed in abstract terms. That every sentence, every measured correction, was directed at her body as something to be altered.

She remained in position, motionless, hands still behind her head.

And for a fleeting, almost absurd moment, a thought flickered through her mind — sharp enough to surprise even herself.

If this woman were to be seen in the same condition she demanded of others... stripped of all careful arrangement, all controlled presentation... with her own mustache and undoubtedly hairy like a monkey all over...

The image formed itself and vanished just as quickly.

Something almost like a smile threatened at the corner of Anfisa’s thoughts, but she suppressed it before it reached her face.

The woman closed the notebook with a soft sound.

And the instructions continued.

The woman spoke on without raising her voice, as though the matter had long since been decided and only the practical details remained.

Her pencil moved occasionally over the notebook, underlining a phrase, adding a brief mark, then pausing again.

She spoke of soap — not ordinary soap, but something she named in a way Anfisa did not fully understand, as though referring to a specific quality rather than an object. Then of scents, described in similarly precise terms, more like categories than fragrances. There was mention of clothing as well, though this part, for a strange moment, almost felt like relief — something about proper attire, appropriate presentation, readiness.

Anfisa listened in fragments, trying to keep up, but the words began to blur into one another, becoming less like instructions and more like a system she had not yet learned to read.

It was only when the woman said, almost in passing, without emphasis: “She must be ready by this evening,” that Anfisa fully caught hold of the meaning.

Ready.

Tonight.

Something in the sentence clicked sharply into place, cutting through the earlier haze of unfamiliar terminology.

Her thoughts paused.

Behind her, the servant girl answered immediately, her voice calm and assured.

“Yes”, she said. “I understand. Everything will be done exactly as required.”

The woman rose from the divan, leaving the notebook where it lay.

For a moment she simply stood there, as if confirming something she had already concluded long before Anfisa had entered the room. Then she stepped forward.

One pace.

Then another.

She stopped directly in front of her.

Anfisa, still on her knees, looked up.

From this angle the woman seemed even more composed — heavier in presence, unhurried, certain of her own position in a way that required no demonstration.

Without asking permission or offering explanation, she reached down and touched Anfisa’s body briefly, as one might correct the position of fabric or inspect a detail that had been missed.

Her fingers brushed the hair beneath Anfisa’s arms.

Only for a second.

Then she withdrew her hand and turned slightly toward the servant.

“When I said ‘arms,’” she remarked evenly, “this was included.”

The servant girl nodded without expression.

“Of course”, she said simply.

The woman adjusted a loose strand of hair near Anfisa’s face, smoothing it aside with an absent-minded precision more habitual than kind.

Then she added, almost as an afterthought:

“You will do exactly as she tells you from now on. She is your mistress in all practical matters.”

The servant glanced at Anfisa once, briefly.

Then, without ceremony:

“Come.”

Anfisa hesitated.

The word “come” left too much undefined. She did not know whether she was expected to rise, remain low, or follow in some other manner she had not yet been taught.

The uncertainty lasted only a moment too long.

The woman reached down, took her lightly by the chin, and lifted her to her feet with effortless authority, as though correcting posture rather than moving a person.

Anfisa stood.

The woman regarded her for a final second, then gave her a small, dismissive pat — firm, brief — on the back of her thigh as a sign of dismissal more than touch.

“Go on,” she said.

And then turned away, as if the matter had already ceased to exist.

Anfisa obeyed and followed the servant out of the room.

The corridor outside felt colder than before, the brightness of the previous room still clinging to her skin like a second layer of light. She walked barefoot across polished wood, acutely aware of every step, every faint sound her body made in the otherwise quiet house.

Ahead of her, the servant moved with unhurried certainty.

Not once did she look back.

To Anfisa, she was no longer simply a girl from the doorway. The woman's words still echoed faintly in her mind — a practical, almost careless designation that had somehow reassigned authority without ceremony. Now she was simply to be followed.

Obeded, in all things that were not yet clear.

They passed through another corridor.

Then another.

The house felt strangely empty.

Not abandoned — everything still carried the orderliness of occupation, the controlled presence of wealth — but devoid of people. Doors remained closed. No voices drifted from behind them. No footsteps crossed their path. It was as though the house itself had been arranged to ensure their passage went unnoticed.

Anfisa could not decide whether this comforted her or unsettled her more.

At the end of a narrower passage, the servant finally stopped.

She opened a door.

Warm, humid air met them immediately.

Anfisa stepped inside and hesitated.

She had never seen a room like this before.

It was not merely a bathroom in the sense she understood the word. It was larger, more carefully constructed, almost ceremonial in its arrangement — pale tiled surfaces, gleaming metal fittings, a deep basin set into stone, and a bath that looked less like a household object and more like something designed for sustained comfort rather than necessity.

Everything here suggested intention.

And distance from the world she knew.

She stood just inside the threshold, suddenly uncertain whether she had been brought into a place for washing... or for something else entirely.

The servant led Anfisa into the room and closed the door behind them with a soft, definitive click. The air inside hung heavy with faint, lingering steam from some earlier ritual, its warmth curling lazily against the cool white tiles and softening the harsh edges of the overhead light into a diffused, almost intimate glow. Tiny droplets clung to the walls like dew, catching the light in prismatic flecks, and the faint, clean scent of soap mingled with something earthier, more primal — the residue of bodies prepared.

Without a word, the servant — her face impassive, movements economical — filled a wide porcelain basin from a faucet that dripped rhythmically into the silence. She paused for a beat, ladle in hand, as if savoring the moment's anticipation. Then, without warning, she lifted it high and poured the water over Anfisa's head.

Cold.

Sudden.

The water hit her like a shock — sharp, abrupt, as though she had plunged headlong into a winter river. It streamed in icy rivulets over her scalp, plastering dark strands to her forehead and cheeks, running over her closed lids, tracing cold paths down her neck, between her breasts, across the flat plane of her belly, pooling briefly at her feet before swirling into the drain. Anfisa gasped, her body tensing involuntarily — her nipples hardening against the sudden chill, her skin prickling into gooseflesh — but she forced herself to stand still, her fists clenched at her sides, acutely aware of the eyes upon her, watching, judging.

More water followed, methodically now: ladle after ladle, from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet. Each pour traced the contours of her body anew — slicking her shoulders, hollowing her navel, sheeting over her thighs, finding the cleft between them. Rivulets teased at sensitive folds before escaping, leaving her drenched and shivering, every curve exposed and glistening under the servant's detached, impersonal gaze. The cold seeped inward, a stark counterpoint to the room's humid warmth, flushing her cheeks not merely from the chill but from the raw vulnerability of being so thoroughly, so efficiently, displayed.

Satisfied with the drenching, the servant set the basin aside. The towel came first — rough linen dragged briskly over damp skin, abrading her nipples to taut peaks as the fabric passed impersonally over her breasts, her stomach, the mound of her sex. Nothing lingered. Nothing was offered beyond the mechanical necessity of drying.

Then the depilation began.

The servant worked the arms first: lathering with creamy soap that foamed warm against the lingering chill of the water, the razor gliding in practiced, unhurried strokes — close, unyielding, scraping away fine dark hairs with a faint, rasping whisper. Anfisa felt the blade's cool edge kiss her skin, the tug and release as each follicle yielded, leaving behind a strip of silken smoothness that tingled in the humid air. No blood, no nicks; just precision, reducing each limb to a polished ideal.

The legs came next. Anfisa was seated now on a low stool, her thighs parted slightly to allow access. The servant knelt, indifferent, spreading lather up her calves, behind her knees, along the inner thighs where the skin grew finer, more yielding. The razor followed, inexorable: long, sweeping strokes first, then more intimate angles, baring the flesh to a mirror-like vulnerability. Anfisa's breath hitched at the proximity — the servant's fingers adjusting her pose with impersonal efficiency, the blade hovering perilously close to pulsing veins, the air kissing newly exposed expanses with electric sensitivity. But the touch remained clinical, the gaze fixed upon the task rather than the girl.

The underarms followed: arms lifted high, exposing the tender hollows. Soap stung faintly, the razor bit closer here, reducing wiry growth to nothing.

Finally, the most delicate, most private remnants remained. Positioned with her knees spread wide, Anfisa felt the servant's hands part her thighs further, impersonal and efficient. Lather was applied with clinical thoroughness to her mound, her lips, the creases of her groin. Scissors first, trimming the pubic hair to a neat triangle; then the razor for the rest — shaving clean the folds of the groin, the labia, the tender skin between her buttocks. Scrape. Rinse. Repeat. Each stroke pulled a thread of tension low in her belly — not pleasure, but a sharp, humiliating throb of awareness, her flesh responding to the procedure despite her will. Water sluiced away debris, fingers parting the skin to ensure nothing remained, leaving those areas utterly bare while the trimmed triangle stood precise above, the air caressing raw smoothness with a sensitivity that felt almost unbearable.

When it ended, Anfisa stood transformed — lighter, exposed at a cellular level. Her skin gleamed uniform, every hidden contour laid bare, her body no longer entirely her own but a prepared vessel, humming with an unnatural sensitivity. Not cleansed, but remade.

As the servant set aside the final tools, she spoke at last. Her voice broke the silence without effort — flat, matter-of-fact, without the slightest attempt at softness, as though she were explaining a household routine rather than addressing a naked girl standing before her.

"There was no time to attend to you properly," she said, wiping her hands on a cloth with economical precision. "So I have only shaved you for now."

She straightened, looking at Anfisa for a brief moment. Not unkindly. But with the calm indifference of someone for whom this entire process belonged to the ordinary mechanics of a house.

"Hair grows back differently after shaving," she continued. "Usually coarser. Thicker." A faint pause. "Not my concern. But you should understand — from this point on, it is your responsibility. A razor every few days if you are left to yourself. If you are properly maintained..." her gaze flicked

briefly, as though weighing possibilities she did not care to elaborate on, "...then depilation is done properly. Lime paste and sugar. Sometimes wax. It lasts longer."

She said it all in the same tone one might use for laundry schedules or dietary rules. Anfisa gave a small, almost imperceptible nod.

The words settled into her slowly, not as instruction alone, but as another quiet transfer of responsibility she had not asked for and could not refuse — a continuation of the same logic that had begun the moment she crossed the threshold of this house.

Around her, the air was cool and unhurried.

And against that calm, clinical atmosphere, she became acutely aware of her own body — newly stripped of everything familiar, left in a condition that already no longer belonged entirely to her.

While Anfisa was still adjusting to the altered sense of her own clean skin — every breeze now caressing bare expanses like an insistent touch — and turning over in her mind the servant's instructions, the bathrooms of the Morozov house were not empty either.

In one of them, Varvara stood by a large porcelain tub, steam rising in lazy curls from the water's surface. Dmitri sat immersed to his chest, head tilted back slightly against the curved rim, eyes half-closed in passive surrender. Droplets beaded on his shoulders, tracing slow paths down the defined planes of his chest, pooling in the hollows before slipping beneath the water to tease lower contours.

Her movements were unhurried, almost methodical, as she trailed a hand through the warm surface, testing temperature before adding a ladle from a steaming ewer. Soap flakes dissolved under her fingers, scenting the air with faint lavender — clean, commanding. She observed him with that same quiet attention from the mirror scene, dipping a soft cloth now, squeezing it out above him so rivulets cascaded over his throat, collarbones, nipples hardening briefly in the cooling stream.

There was something oddly composed in the scene — not raw intimacy, not cold distance, but a controlled proximity, as if she were testing how easily his body yielded to her system: the way his arousal stirred subtly beneath the water at her nearness, unbidden yet contained.

Dmitri remained still, accepting her direction without resistance — breath steady as her cloth glided over pectorals, ribs, deliberate circles around navel, dipping lower to skim thighs parted just enough for access. No words passed; only the soft lap of water, her occasional adjustment of his posture with a firm hand on shoulder or knee.

Varvara's gaze lingered on him — on the water-sheened hardness half-hidden below, the veins tracing forearms resting slack — longer than necessary, not with fevered intensity, but with that curious, observational focus she applied to everything now hers: noting how cleanliness sharpened his form, made every muscle ridge more insistent, every response more hers to elicit.

And somewhere beyond the walls, without her knowing it, another version of the same morning was unfolding — in a different tone, under different hands, but within the same invisible structure of control and transformation.

There was something oddly composed — and pleasing — in the scene. She liked the hair on him: not overgrown, but pronounced enough to mark him animal from her delicacy, from womankind's silkier forms — a primal layer underscoring his strength, his otherness, now hers to groom or leave wild. Not raw intimacy, not cold distance, but controlled proximity, as if testing how his body yielded: the subtle stir of arousal beneath the water at her nearness, unbidden yet contained.

Dmitri remained still, accepting without resistance — breath steady as her cloth glided over pectorals, ribs, deliberate circles around navel, dipping lower to skim thighs parted just enough, water parting to reveal the shadowed base where hair thickened.

Varvara's gaze lingered — on the wet sheen clinging to those masculine curls, veins tracing forearms — longer than necessary, with curious, observational focus: cleanliness sharpened his form, made ridges insistent, responses hers to elicit.

Impatience crept in; standing grew tiresome. She pulled a low stool close, positioned it before the tub, and sat — robe parting slightly at knees, posture regal.

“Stand,” she said quietly.

Dmitri obeyed without hesitation, rising from the tub in a single, fluid motion. Water surged around his calves, lapping at mid-shin as he straightened, excess sluicing from his torso in shimmering rivulets — down the taut ridges of his abdomen, tracing the dark trail of hair that arrowed downward, droplets beading on the swell between his thighs before merging back into the bath. Steam clung to his skin, veiling the newly exposed planes: the broad flare of shoulders, the veined thickness of forearms, his arousal now stark in the humid air.

Varvara watched from her stool, robe still parted at the knees, her gaze traveling upward from the wet curls at his base to the steady rise of his chest. Delight bloomed in her — not merely the raw thrill of a naked man before her, nor the possessive surge of one who belonged utterly to her now. No, it was deeper: the quiet triumph of maturity, of feeling adult enough to resist the urge to devour him whole, to gulp him down in a fevered rush. Instead, she savored in sips — slow, deliberate, unhurried — letting the anticipation build like fine wine on the tongue.

Today was her birthday, after all. A day for indulgences measured out with care.

Her hand extended slowly, fingers threading through the sodden trail of hair low on his abdomen, smoothing it flat against flushed skin with a proprietary stroke. The touch was light yet assured, parting the damp strands to reveal the taut skin beneath.

Then, with delicate precision, she gathered a few longer strands at the base of his scrotum between thumb and forefinger, tugging downward gently — not to hurt, but to test, to admire. His flesh yielded instantly, stretching smooth and compliant under her pull, the subtle shift drawing a contained twitch from the heavier form above. She held it a moment longer, eyes alight with that same observational pleasure: the obedience of his body, every inch attuned to her whim, glistening and hers.

Satisfied with the pliancy, she dipped her hand back into the soapy water, coating her palm and fingers until they gleamed with thick lather. Her gaze never left his as she reached forward again, encircling the taut, rigid length of his shaft with a firm, deliberate grip.

Fingers worked methodically — gliding up from the base in a slow spiral, palm cupping the underside to spread suds evenly, the friction warm and insistent. His member throbbed subtly under her touch, straining harder against the slick pressure, veins standing out more pronounced beneath the froth. She savored the contrast: her silken hand commanding his unyielding heat, cleansing and claiming in the same unhurried strokes, water sloshing faintly against the tub’s edge.

As her soapy strokes continued, Varvara’s attention sharpened on a new detail: the foreskin glided effortlessly along his length, supple and retractable under the lubrication of lather. Curiosity flickered in her — she’d never examined a man’s cock this intimately before, not with such leisure, such command.

With careful fingers, she gathered the loose skin at the tip and drew it back slowly, peeling it away to expose the swollen, blood-flushed glans beneath — gleaming like a ripe acorn, or perhaps a firm mushroom cap, flushed deep rose and utterly vulnerable in the open air. It pulsed faintly under her scrutiny, the ridge pronounced, a bead of clearer fluid welling at the slit.

“Does it hurt?” she murmured, voice soft but intent, her thumb hovering just shy of the bare head as she held him steady, testing his response.

“No”, Dmitri replied, voice low and even, though a faint strain threaded through it, “it doesn’t hurt.”

He paused, breath deepening as her fingers lingered, the exposed glans twitching under her gaze. “But if you keep this up... I won’t hold back long. I’ll come — spoil your hand with it. And then I’d need a moment to recover, which might displease you just now.” His eyes met hers steadily, a hint of rueful acknowledgment in them. “Nature’s demands. Can’t fight them.”

Varvara nodded as if weighing his words, a knowing glint in her eye, though her hand withdrew from his cock with evident reluctance — the soapy shaft bobbing free, still rigidly arched, glans gleaming bare in the steam.

She turned her attention lower, lathering his thighs with broad, firm strokes of her palm, then upward across the flat planes of his abdomen, rinsing away the last traces of grime. “Turn”, she commanded softly, voice brooking no delay.

He pivoted in the water, presenting his back. Her hands explored the firm swell of his buttocks — generously haired, the dark curls matted wet and coarse under her fingers. She kneaded them appreciatively, parting the cheeks with both hands. “Spread them”, she instructed, and he complied, bending slightly forward, muscles tensing.

A soapy fingertip traced the cleft, gliding downward until it found the tight pucker of his anus — clenched, unyielding. The same as hers, she noted with clinical detachment; without the hair, this side of a man’s body held less intrigue, more sameness.

She started to rise from the stool, intent on inspecting the upper reaches of his body more closely, but checked herself — a fleeting impulse halted by the realization: she was the mistress here, not some eager servant craning for access. The notion amused her inner observer even as it quelled the impulse; instead, her posture resettled with effortless authority, remaining seated while the command took shape on her tongue.

“Turn to face me”, she said first.

He pivoted smoothly in the water, front now toward her once more.

“Kneel.”

The word hung in the humid air, and he sank into the shallower water up to his knees, torso arching taut as he descended, until his dripping form filled her view — but mostly from below, where her earlier strokes had paused. His nearness was precise now, not accidental: face mere inches from hers, the warm tub a stage he occupied only at her direction, even the water at his knees seeming to wait on her.

“Hands behind your head.”

He obeyed at once, water sloshing higher along his thighs as he straightened on his knees, elbows flaring out to bare the dark, matted thatch of his armpits. Droplets slid from his raised arms and chest, some falling onto the parted edge of her robe, the fabric shifting a fraction wider with her slight lean forward.

Her gaze climbed to those coarser truths higher up — the untamed hair under his arms when his elbows were level with her chest, offered openly for her inspection. She studied them with that same composed curiosity she applied to everything now hers, weighing in silence what to do with them, if anything at all. She was the mistress here; his body awaited her full circuit.

There was something almost domestic in the intimacy of it, almost clinical too — the way he held himself open while she examined him as calmly as she might inspect a new household item.

“Were you ever anyone else’s slave before me?” she asked, eyes still on the hollow and hair-framed skin rather than his face.

“No”, Dmitri answered without a flicker of hesitation. “You are my first mistress.”

Steam curled between them while she absorbed that, the only sounds the soft lap of water and his steady breathing.

“I am proud of that”, he added then, tone calm but resolute. “And I will be a faithful slave to you.”

“Even if I hurt you?” Varvara asked, almost lightly — as if clarifying a technicality, though her eyes sharpened on his face.

“Of course”, Dmitri said at once. “If my pain pleases you.” There was no drama in it, only a quiet certainty, as if he were stating something as fixed as the heat of the water around his knees.

She studied him for a moment longer, gaze coolly intent, weighing this pledge like an object in her hand.

“Stand”, she said.

He rose from the water in one smooth motion, obeying without letting his arms drop, hands still locked behind his head. The bath lapped at his shins now, droplets coursing down the length of him, his cock jutting forward — hard, exposed, glistening.

Varvara drew back her hand, almost casually at first, then snapped her wrist, delivering a sharp slap to the side of his shaft.

The sound was a wet, concise crack. Dmitri flinched, a brief wince crossing his features, but he held his position, jaw tightening as he forced himself to bear it in silence.

She watched, fascinated, as his cock sprang away from her palm, then bounced back into place with obedient elasticity — as if presenting itself again, ready for the next strike. The sight pleased her: that mix of resilience and submission, flesh that protested yet returned dutifully to where she wanted it.

“Did that hurt?” Varvara asked, almost conversationally.

“Yes”, Dmitri admitted, a brief flicker of tension passing over his features, though his hands remained locked behind his head. “It did.”

Her hand moved again without warning, a second sharp slap landing against the stiff length, followed by a third, then a fourth — each blow met with the same wet crack of impact, the same flinch and tightening of his jaw, the same resilient spring and docile return to its former angle. His cock jerked, recoiled, and yet always settled back into the posture she had chosen for it, as if the pain itself only underlined its obedience.

By the time her palm stilled, she realized it was not the force of the strikes that pleased her most, nor even his carefully contained discomfort. It was the simple fact that she could do it — that his pain lay entirely within her reach, hers to summon or to spare at a whim. The possibility of hurting him, more than the hurt itself, settled in her like a warm, heavy satisfaction.

It was her birthday. The words themselves felt almost childish, yet what uncurled inside her now was anything but. Birthdays had once meant ribbons, sweets, the brittle excitement of asking for things she might not get. Now the gift was stark and standing in front of her: a grown man on his feet in a bath, hands locked behind his head, his body accepting pain from her simply because she wished it so.

She flexed the fingers of the hand that had struck him, noting the faint sting along her palm. His sting was deeper, sharper — and yet he had not moved, had not tried to shield himself, had not begged her to stop. That asymmetry thrilled her more than the reddening skin on his shaft. She held all the weight of choice; he held all the weight of endurance.

For the first time, she felt not merely older, but *adult* in a way no dress, no dance, no polite suitor had ever granted her. Being grown, she realized, was not only about bearing one’s own discomforts, but about deciding, calmly and deliberately, how much discomfort others would bear for one’s sake. She could strike again or let him rest. She could draw pleasure from his pain or from the awareness that she might inflict it and chose, for the moment, not to.

The knowledge settled in her like a private toast to herself: today she did not need to gulp at life in greedy swallows. She could sip. She could savor. She could make a man hurt for her and then stay her hand — and somehow that restraint tasted richer than any blow.

On a whim, she slid her hand beneath the heavy weight of his balls, cupping his scrotum from below as if testing the heft of a ripe fruit. The skin there was warm and loose against her palm, the damp curls clinging to her fingers as she adjusted her grip.

“Where were you born?” Varvara asked.

“In a town called Malye Slobody, on the Volga”, Dmitri said. “North of Yaroslavl.”

He drew a slightly deeper breath, as if tasting the memory. “Winters there are long. Snow comes in November and sometimes stays past March. The river freezes thick — carts and sledges cross over it as if it were a road, as long as the ice doesn’t crack.”

“My father worked the docks and the fields”, he went on. “In summer he loaded grain and timber onto barges. In winter he hauled whatever needed hauling over the frozen river — flour, salt, firewood. My mother kept the house warm, kept a cow and a small garden for when the ground finally softened. We slept three to a bench when I was a boy, until my brothers left for the city.”

All the while, her palm stayed cradled under his balls, thumb idly rolling the firm weight of one and then the other, feeling them shift and nestle with each quiet detail he offered about the place that had made him.

“Then why are you so pale?” Varvara asked after a moment. “If you grew up on the Volga. Or did you never walk and swim naked there?” She tilted her head slightly. “I heard common folk aren’t shy about their bodies, even when they’re grown. They say boys and girls in villages bathe and go to the *banya* naked together.”

“That’s not quite true”, Dmitri replied. “Some do, yes. In summer, boys will strip and jump from the bank if no one important is watching. Sometimes girls too. And in the *banya* people are naked, of course. But it’s not something to boast about, and it’s not done to speak of it loudly. Families go at different hours. Men and women together happens, but not everywhere, and not with everyone.” He shrugged slightly, as much as his bound arms allowed. “And the sun burns us the same as anyone. Work keeps a man covered more often than the stories say.”

She answered with a small, skeptical hum, then tightened her grip under him, fingers spreading. Her palm slid further back, gathering his scrotum fully and tugging it down so the skin drew taut, stretching the sac away from his body.

“How many girls have seen you like this, then?” Varvara asked, eyes on the elongated pouch in her hand rather than his face. “Naked in front of them. As you are now.”

Her soapy fingers toyed with him as she waited, the deliberate pull on his balls making their weight more pronounced, more exposed, as if the answer itself depended on how completely she held him.

“You mean as a man, not a boy?” Dmitri asked quietly, as if to be sure of her meaning.

“Yes”, she said. Her fingers gave his stretched sac a pointed little tug. “Those.”

He drew a slow breath. “Very few”, he said. “Three. One before I left home, two after.”

There was no swagger in it, no false modesty either — he delivered the number as simply as he had named his village, voice level, almost indifferent, as if it mattered less how many there had been than the fact that he was naked *now*, in front of her. “And never like this”, he added after a heartbeat. “Never standing still while she looked as long as she pleased.”

His gaze held hers, steady despite the vulnerable angle of his body, while her hand continued to cradle and pull, each small movement of her fingers making his calm sound at once more impressive and less reliable.

“And what did you do”, Varvara went on, “when you were naked with a girl?” Her tone was almost curious, almost innocent. “Did you hurry? Were you shy? What did you do, if you were not... enjoying each other?”

Her fingers tightened under his scrotum as she asked it, stretching the sac a little farther from his body, making the question feel less theoretical.

“We were shy”, he said after a moment. “At least at first. There was not much time or privacy. A barn, a shed, a corner behind a bathhouse wall. You listen for footsteps more than for your own breathing.” His mouth twitched faintly, not quite a smile. “Clothes stay half on, most of the time. You fumble. You try not to leave marks someone else will see.”

“And you don’t enjoy it?” she pressed.

“We do”, Dmitri answered quietly. “Just... quickly. Clumsy hands, fast breathing, no talking. You take what you can before it’s over and hope no one calls your name.” He lowered his gaze briefly, then lifted it back to hers. “No one has ever watched me like this. And touched me like this.”

“Which did you like more?” Varvara asked. “The way it was then, there... or the way it is here, now?”

Her hand gave his stretched sac a small, deliberate bounce as she spoke, as if weighing his answer in advance.

“Now”, Dmitri said without hesitation. “Here.”

“Because it is slower?” she probed. “Cleaner?”

“Because I hope it pleases you”, he replied. His voice stayed low but clear. “That I am standing like this for you, that you can do with me what you want. If you enjoy it, then I do too.”

Varvara released his scrotum at last, letting the stretched skin relax and draw his balls back up toward his body. Her hand hovered for a heartbeat, then tipped to one side in a light, almost playful arc.

The next slap to his cock landed from below, not harsh but brisk enough for him to feel every inch of her palm. The rigid length jumped, then settled. She followed with another from above, then one to the side — a quick, teasing pattern, more caress than punishment, each contact firm enough to make him aware of her hand, not of pain.

She watched the way his shaft quivered and swayed after each touch, the way it always found its way back to the same proud angle, as if some stubborn muscle memory kept presenting him for her.

“How else can you please me?” Varvara asked, eyes fixed on that small, obedient trembling rather than on his face. “Tell me.”

“I am ready to do anything you might expect or demand”, Dmitri said, “from a naked, wet man who belongs to you in body and soul.” He spoke it plainly, without stammer or flourish, the words obedient on the surface and yet broad enough to give nothing concrete away.

Varvara felt the corner of her mouth curve before she could stop it. For the first time since he had stepped into the bath, she lifted her gaze fully to his and held it there, studying the quiet steadiness she found. There was obedience, yes, but also a thin, glinting thread of cleverness running through his answer.

She liked that too. She had no wish for her birthday gift to be stupid and painfully literal.

Her hand left his cock at last and smoothed up over his lower belly, fingers tracing the faint line of hair that disappeared beneath his navel. The touch was almost domestic now, as if she were simply checking the firmness of a well-fed animal.

“Are you hungry?” Varvara asked.

Dmitri drew a breath, chest lifting under the steam. “Would you like to hear the truth”, he said, “or should I answer in a way that gives you nothing to worry about?”

“The truth”, she replied at once. “Always the truth. And from now on, I expect you to hide nothing from me.” Her palm flattened over his stomach, a quiet emphasis. “If I ask, you answer. As it is, not as you think I might prefer it.”

“The truth, then”, Dmitri said. “Yes. I haven’t eaten since yesterday.”

Her palm rested flat against his stomach; she could feel a subtle hollowness beneath the warm skin, not dangerous, but insistent.

“And there is one more thing”, he added after a short pause. “I did not have time to relieve myself this morning. So I have been holding it. It is part of why I have not finished in your hand.” His voice remained even, almost matter-of-fact, as if he were reporting a technical detail rather than something so humiliatingly intimate.

Her gaze dropped at once back to his cock. The knowledge changed what she saw: the rigid line of the shaft, the faint extra tightness low in his belly. She realized she had never truly watched a man piss. She had seen their backs in coats, shoulders hunched by fences and posts, the sway of drunk men turned away from her — and then a stepmother’s voice, a father’s palm over her eyes, steering her aside before she could get a proper look.

No one would steer her away now.

“I like to pee as well”, Varvara said, almost confidently. “Sometimes straight into the bath, when no one is looking.” A hint of amusement touched her mouth. “But in your case, no. Better you step out, so you don’t dirty the water. I haven’t finished washing you.”

“Yes, mistress.”

Keeping his hands locked behind his head, Dmitri lifted one long leg over the rim of the tub, then the other, water streaming down his body as he moved. He stepped onto the floor beside her stool, standing naked and dripping at her side, his cock still full and strained by need, his bladder under her command as surely as the rest of him.

Varvara reached out again, this time taking his cock between two fingers — thumb and forefinger circling the shaft with a light, precise grip, angling him slightly away from her knees.

“You may begin”, she said. “Aim to the side. I don’t want my robe splashed.”

She felt the subtle change run through him before she saw anything: a deeper tightening under the skin, a faint, controlled shudder in the length she held. Then the tension broke, and warmth rushed through the vein beneath her fingertips as a pale stream arced down to the floor in front of them, pattering softly against the tiles.

“Do not hurry”, Varvara added. “Don’t empty yourself all at once.”

He obeyed, breath catching, then evening out as he fought the impulse to simply let go. In her hand, his cock flexed and trembled with each pulse he restrained. She turned her wrist a little, adjusting his angle so she could study the play of muscle and nerve — the way control and surrender passed back and forth through this one obedient line of flesh.

With her other hand, she extended her index finger into the falling warmth, letting it run over her skin in a thin, scalding ribbon. She had not forbidden him to continue, and so he did, the stream steady under her guidance.

Varvara slipped her whole palm under it then, cupping the heat as if she were catching water from a spring. The sensation — the sheer animal intimacy of it, the proof that even this most private necessity now passed through him at her command — pleased her more than she had expected. It was not filth to her, but evidence: his body’s simplest urgencies could be directed, held back, released only when she allowed it.

She watched until the last of the tension left him and the warmth in her hand began to cool, her fingers still loosely curved around him, as if reminding them both whose decision it had been, then flicked her gaze toward the corner, where a wooden bucket and a folded rag waited.

“There”, she said, nodding toward them. “Take the water and cloth and clean up after yourself properly.”

Dmitri turned his head, following her glance.

“There is a drain in the floor”, she went on. “You will push everything to it and rinse the tiles so there is no smell left. The rag can be thrown away later. I do not want to see any trace of you there when we are finished.”

“Yes, mistress.”

He moved at once, crossing the few steps to the corner still naked and dripping, hands finally lowering from behind his head only to lift the bucket and wring out the cloth. Then he sank down on all fours, the stone cool under his knees and palms, and began to work: nudging the shallow puddle toward the small iron grate, wiping and sluicing until the wet patch on the floor grew clear and clean.

Varvara watched from her stool, robe gathered around her, as he scrubbed. The strong back that had just been on display for her pleasure now bent to a simple, almost menial task; the same hands that could have shielded his body from her were busy washing away evidence at her command. There was something quietly satisfying in that — in having made him a little mess and then making him erase it himself, naked on all fours at her feet.

She watched until the last cloudiness on the tiles thinned and cleared under his cloth. When she was satisfied, Varvara rose from the stool, took up a ladle from beside the tub, and dipped it into the bath, filling it with warm, soapy water.

Without a word at first, she stepped closer and tipped the ladle over him, letting the sudsy warmth cascade down his back and shoulders, rinsing away the last traces of his task.

“Put the bucket and the rag back where they were”, she said.

“Yes, mistress.”

He did as told, setting the bucket neatly in its corner and draping the damp cloth over its rim. Then he returned to her on all fours, crossing the wet stone floor until he was beside her feet again, head naturally bowed by the posture.

“Show me your hands”, Varvara said.

He shifted his weight and held them out to her, palms up, fingers slightly spread. She lifted the ladle once more, drew fresh water from the bath, and poured it slowly over his hands, the suds sliding along his fingers, dripping from his knuckles.

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