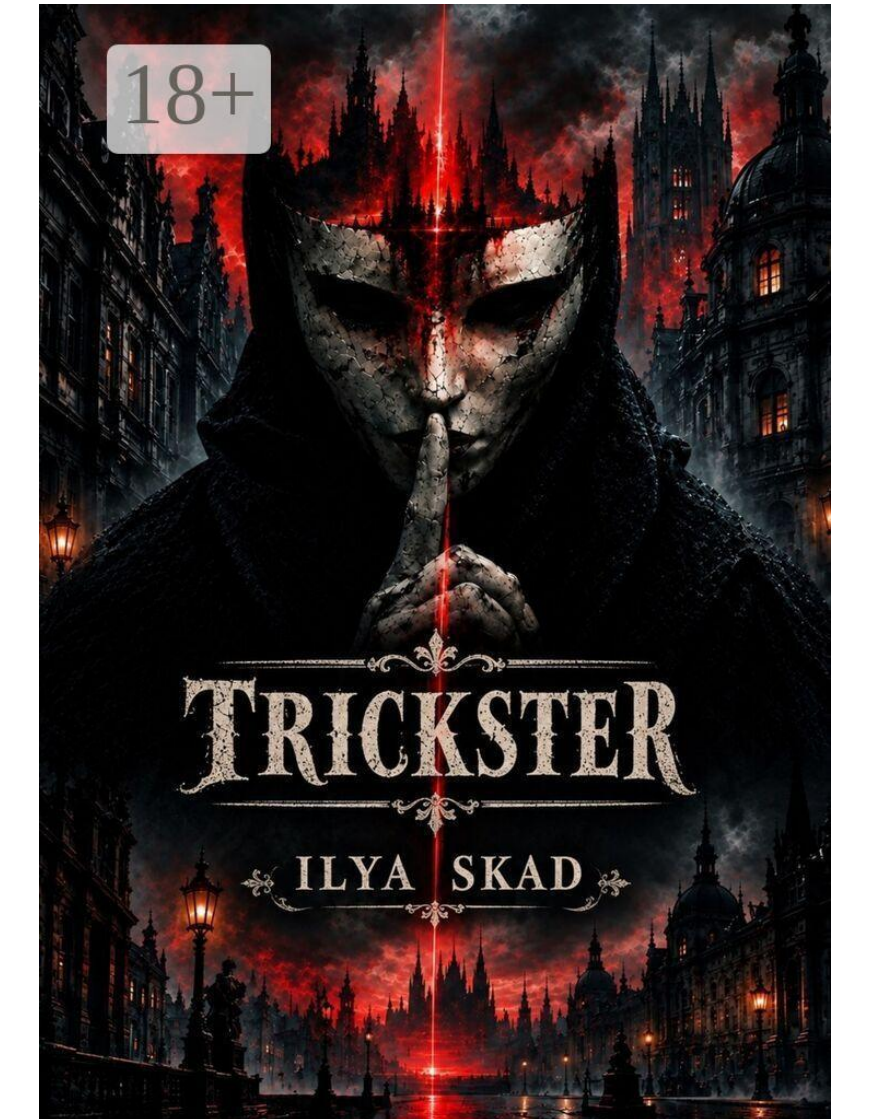


18+

A dark, atmospheric movie poster for the film 'Trickster'. The central figure is a person wearing a cracked, metallic mask and a dark, textured coat. They are holding their right index finger to their lips in a 'shh' gesture. The background is a gothic city street at night, with tall buildings and a red, fiery sky. A vertical red line runs through the center of the image, passing through the mask and the title. The title 'TRICKSTER' is written in a large, ornate, white serif font with a distressed texture. Below the title, the name 'ILYA SKAD' is written in a smaller, white serif font, flanked by decorative flourishes.

TRICKSTER

ILYA SKAD

Ilya Skad Trickster

<https://litres.ru/74590708>

ISBN 9785007143936

Аннотация

Some doors should never have been opened.

A man becomes obsessed with something he cannot fully understand — something ancient, elusive, and disturbingly familiar. What begins as simple curiosity gradually turns into an obsession, and the deeper he descends into the mystery, the harder it becomes to distinguish reality from what is taking shape within his own mind.

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Trickster

Ilya Skad

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ISBN 978-5-0071-4393-6

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Chapter 1. The Last Chord of the Barrel Organ

There was no corner in the sublunary world more poisoned by the stinking breath of worthlessness and vice than that wretched puppet booth which had nestled on the outskirts of the city, where the street lamps seemed to exude a thick, almost palpable darkness. The air within was heavy and motionless, saturated with the fumes of cheap tobacco, stale liquor, and the sweat of that pitiful crowd which had gathered on this evening beneath its decrepit canopy, which let through the rainwater. Like specters detained in the world of the living by an unspoken curse, they sat in the gloom — vague and faceless figures, whose only manifestations of life consisted in hoarse laughter interrupted by fits of coughing, and in dull, expressionless eyes turned toward the stage lit by oil lamps. And that stage, so insignificant and wretched, was for Kazimir the last circle of the hell described by Dante, but deprived of even a hint of the sublimity of suffering; it was a hell woven from vulgarity and indifference.

And he, Kazimir, was its eternal and sole inhabitant, a demon-warder chained to the pillory of his own humiliation. Standing behind a decrepit baroque screen, once fashioned by his teacher's hands but now blackened by time and covered with a thick layer of dust, he ran his long, pale, almost transparent fingers

over the rough surface of the wooden slats to which were attached unrefined strings — those reins that governed his small, pitiful world. These strings, woven from hemp of the coarsest manufacture, cut into his skin, leaving red, inflamed marks, for any contact with this palpable vulgarity provoked in him a fit of physical revulsion as acute as a sudden taste of bile on the tongue. Every creak, every rustle of these ropes, every trembling bend of them echoed in his soul with a sound akin to the grinding of rusty hinges on the door of a tomb.

And on the stage, in the spectral glow of the smoking lamps, his puppets danced — the last thing left to him by his teacher, the last legacy of a past wrapped, in his memory, in the haze of a melancholic grandeur. There, obedient to the trembling movements of his hands, Pierrot, his face forever frozen in a mask of inconsolable grief, attempted to court Columbine, whose empty eye sockets of blue glass reflected the dim light of the lamps like blind lakes in the kingdom of the dead. But their dance was devoid of all grace; it was a parody of love, of passion, of movement itself, for it proceeded not from an animated soul but from the desperate, convulsive efforts of a puppeteer whose spirit had been torn and defiled. The movements of the dolls were sharp, angular, lacking that magical smoothness which makes the spectator forget the existence of the strings; they were a spectacle blatant, pitiful, exposing the entire mechanical underpinning of this pretense, and therefore — inexpressibly tragic.

And the audience, that cohesive organism in whose veins

flowed not blood but thick, murky beer, sensed this falsity, this agonizing artificiality. It did not believe in the performance; it regarded it with the same indifference with which it would regard the death throes of an insect caught in a spider's web. From the darkness came abrupt, senseless shouts, interspersed with heavy, drunken laughter. Some hoarse voice proclaimed something obscene, addressed to Columbine, and a host of other voices picked up this bawdy joke, bursting into guffaws that sounded like a death rattle. Kazimir heard every sound, every note of this humiliation; they pierced his hearing like sharpened blades, and with each such prick his fingers gripped the slats more fiercely, and the strings tautened, threatening to snap, plunging his fragile actors into a final, silent fall.

Oh, how in those moments he hated them! Hated these dolls with their forever-frozen masks, their soulless grace, their mute obedience. They were the eternal witnesses of his downfall, a living — no, a dead! — reproach to his unfulfilled ambitions. And through the fog of despair and rage swirling in his consciousness, like a specter from another, beautiful world, memories emerged. He saw himself not here, not in this stinking den, but on the boards of a real theater, where the air was suffused with the aroma of wax and expensive perfume, where crystal chandeliers descended from a ceiling painted with frescoes, their light refracting in a thousand pendants like tears of rapture. He saw himself not as a puppeteer but as a director, a creator, a ruler of human souls, whose word was law for the

living, not for wooden blocks. He cherished in his soul the dream of a theater where the actors would be as obedient to his will as these marionettes, but as inspired as the gods themselves; a theater where life itself, with all its chaotic inconsistency, would be reduced to an ideal, geometrically precise order by his genius design.

But how pernicious, how corrosive his nature proved to be! His pride, his irrepressible desire for total control, his maniacal conviction of his superiority over the crowd of mortals — all this was interpreted as «unseemly behavior,» as something monstrous and intolerable. He did not merely strive to rule; he thirsted to possess, to subjugate, to penetrate the very essence of another's will and reshape it according to his own fancy, just as he reshaped the fates of his dolls. And they, those insignificant little actors with their inflated vanity, sensed in him a threat, something alien and frightening. Whispers behind his back, frightened glances, the sudden coldness of those who only yesterday had lavished compliments on his talent — and then, after some insignificant but deliberately orchestrated scandal, came expulsion. He was cast out of the temple of art like a leper, shown the road to those very booths he had formerly despised with all his soul.

And now, standing behind this grotesque semblance of a theatrical screen, he felt the poison of memory corroding him from within. Bitterness rose to his throat, bitter and salty as a tear he had long since forgotten how to shed. The performance

at last came to its inglorious end. Pierrot, abandoned to the mocking attention of the crowd, froze in his final, absurd pose, and the curtain, which was a piece of dirty matting, descended with a creak, meeting not the slightest approval. The silence that reigned in the hall was more eloquent than any whistles; it was an indifference absolute, all-consuming, testifying that the spectators had already forgotten what they had just seen, their minds once again submerged in the swamp of their own intoxication.

Kazimir slowly, like a sleepwalker, lowered his controls. A tremor, fine and irrepressible, ran through his hands. He turned away from the stage and, staggering like a wounded beast, made his way among piles of crates and scenery toward a kind of «backstage» — a narrow, dark space behind the decrepit drapery, where chaos reigned and it smelled of mold and dust. Here, on a fragment of a column left over from some forgotten performance, stood a clay mug half-filled with wine of such low quality that even in the scant light of a single candle it shimmered with a murky, swampy hue. He seized the mug with trembling fingers and drained its contents in one gulp. The liquid burned his throat but brought no desired oblivion; it was like serpent's venom spreading through his veins, not lulling him but only sharpening his already painfully acute perception of everything around him.

His gaze, wandering and restless, fell upon a large chest of dark wood standing in the corner. It was his ark, his sanctuary,

his tomb. Approaching, he threw back the massive lid bound with iron. Inside, on velvet cushions — once scarlet, now faded to a dirty brown — rested his marionettes. They lay in a row like corpses in a family tomb after a terrible epidemic. Their carved faces, so expressive and delicate, now seemed merely death masks; their glass eyes, staring into nowhere, reflected the flickering flame of the candle, and for a moment it seemed to him that in their depths something glimmered — not life, but a semblance of it, mocking and sinister. Their exquisite, though dust-covered, garments whispered of times long past, of days when his teacher, the great and unsurpassed Balthazar, breathed into them, as he claimed, a particle of his own soul. Kazimir ran his hand over Pierrot's face, feeling beneath his fingers the cold, smooth stone that had replaced the precious sandalwood. A legacy... Oh, what a bitter, what a barren legacy! He had inherited not art, not glory, not recognition, but only these mute, accusing visages, these eternal companions of his shame. And in the silence of the abandoned booth, broken only by the howling of the wind in the cracks and distant drunken laughter, he felt a seed of a dark, mad thought, long dormant in the depths of his mind, begin to sprout, reaching toward the light of his consciousness with its poisonous shoots.

To leave the booth was for Kazimir equivalent to being expelled from one grave into another, still more cramped and airless. He stepped from the kingdom of coarse noise and vulgar merriment into the embrace of a silence so deep and absolute that

it seemed to possess its own density and pressed upon the ears like water at great depth. The streets through which he made his way to his dwelling were deserted and plunged into that gloomy hour when night, having reached its culmination, begins slowly and reluctantly to yield place to dawn — but to a dawn gray, sickly, bringing no relief. The street lamps, sparse and dim, cast pale, trembling halos upon the cobblestones, in which swirled the mist rising from the nearest swamp — that miasmatic breath of the earth itself, saturated with decay. He walked without feeling the cobblestones beneath his feet, without feeling the piercing damp cold that crept with tenacious fingers beneath his worn frock coat. His entire being was turned inward, into that infernal hell that blazed within his soul, fed by the fuel of humiliations, of furious, unquenched vanity.

His abode, or rather his refuge, his final haven, was situated at the very top of an old, creaking house, whose walls, warped by time, seemed about to collapse under the burden of their own years and the sorrow accumulated within them. The attic. What a fitting name for this receptacle of rejected hopes and shattered dreams! The house stood apart, on the edge of the city, where urban life gradually dwindled, giving way to dismal wastelands overgrown with stunted shrubs, which abutted upon that very swamp whose stinking breath hung perpetually in the air. He climbed the staircase, whose steps, devoured by woodworm, groaned and sagged beneath his feet, as if warning him that each return here was an act of burial, slow and inexorable.

And so he entered. The air in the workshop was cold, stagnant, and heavy, with a distinct tang of dust, old wood, linseed oil, and something else — something elusive, which might be called the smell of time gone stale. Moonlight barely pierced the single dust-covered dormer window, spilling through the room in a spectral, silver-ashy glow. In this faint illumination, the contours of objects lost their clarity; they seemed vague recollections of themselves. Chaos reigned everywhere — dead, frozen, like the ruins of a forgotten civilization. In the corners were piled crates of tools, spools of thread, fragments of scenery, pieces of fabric that had once served as costumes for his marionettes. And in the center of all this, on roughly knocked-together shelves and on the floor, they stood, sat, and lay — his wooden army. Their empty eye sockets were turned toward the door, toward him, and in this there was no greeting; it was expectation. Silent, patient, inexorable expectation.

He flung his cloak upon the table, and this movement raised a small cloud of dust that swirled in the beam of moonlight. The desire to get drunk, to drown the inner trembling in wine, was still strong, but the mug with its revolting swill had remained there, in the booth. Here there was nothing that could dull the sharpness of his perception. He was alone with himself and with them. With them... His gaze slid over the motionless figures. There was Harlequin, frozen in an unnatural, leaping contortion; there was Columbine with her eternally naive tilt of the head; there was Pierrot, melancholy incarnate, his face seamed with

cracks like the wrinkles on an old man's face. They were beautiful in their dead perfection, and therefore — unbearable. Every curl of the carving, every stitch on their garments was a reproach to his own imperfection, to his perishable, suffering flesh.

Despair, dark and bottomless as that night beyond the window, rose to his throat, constricting it in a steel vise. He staggered and lowered himself onto the edge of the only chair, which was heaped with scraps of velvet and silk brocade. What remained? What was left to him? Neither glory, nor money, nor respect, nor even a ghost of hope. Only this attic, only these soulless dolls, and eternal, humiliating slavery in the booth, for the amusement of the drunken rabble. The thought of self-destruction, always dormant somewhere in the back alleys of his consciousness, suddenly appeared before him in all its seductive, terrible clarity. But no — even this was beyond his power. His nature lacked the heroic impulse capable of a decisive, final act; he was doomed to smolder, slowly and agonizingly, as damp wood smolders, yielding neither flame nor warmth.

And then his gaze, wandering in despair over the clutter-filled corner, fell upon an old, massive chest. This chest, knocked together from thick oak planks and bound at the corners with iron blackened by time, had once belonged to his teacher, Balthazar. In it the old man had kept his most precious, most cherished tools and materials. After his death the chest passed to Kazimir, and he, having sorted through its contents in the first days of his apprenticeship, had dragged most of the things off to the

shelves of his workshop. At the bottom, beneath a layer of faded sketches and drawings, there remained only one single thing, which Kazimir had then deemed useless and therefore left lying in oblivion. A book.

He had never attached much importance to it. Balthazar, a strange man prone to mysticism, had called it the «Book of Forgotten Whispers,» saying that within it were contained secrets inaccessible to the understanding of mere mortals. Kazimir, then still young and full of skepticism, had looked through it, but saw only strange, convoluted metaphors, allegorical descriptions of certain psychic states, poetic exercises on the theme of solitude and creativity. He had deemed it a collection of philosophical essays clothed in lush but empty form, the fruit of his mentor's senile imagination. And now, in the abyss of his despair, the memory of it surfaced in his consciousness with obsessive, almost painful vividness.

As if moved by some external force, he rose from his place and, stepping over piles of rubbish, approached the chest. Its lid yielded with a creak, exhaling a stale, sepulchral breath. He flung aside folders of drawings, rolls of parchment, and his fingers encountered the rough, cold surface of leather. He drew it out. It was a volume of no great size, but incredibly heavy, as if stuffed with lead. Its binding was fashioned of dark, almost black leather, devoid of any embossing or ornament; it was smooth and surprisingly pleasant to the touch. The clasps, evidently once silver, had now blackened and become covered with the patina

of time. He carried the book to the table, swept a pile of rags onto the floor, and sat down, setting it before him.

The candle, which he had lit with a trembling hand, cast a flickering, uneven light upon the pages. He opened the book. The pages were of thick, yellowish parchment, covered with the dense, fanciful handwriting of Balthazar. The ink, once black, had browned with time. He began to read, and at first all proceeded as before: he saw the same vague phrases, the same enigmatic assertions. «True power,» the book said, «lies not in the subjugation of the flesh, for the flesh is weak and perishable; but in the subjugation of the very shadow that the soul casts, in the mastery of the silent echo of the will.» Kazimir was already prepared to slam the folio shut in vexation, deeming this mere gibberish, but his gaze fell upon a page entitled «On the Summoning of Silence.»

And then something strange occurred. The despair that reigned in his soul seemed to sharpen his perception, lending it a supernatural acuity. What he had formerly read as poetic metaphor now presented itself to him as an instruction, clear and unambiguous. The description of the ritual contained neither circles of candles, nor incantations in forgotten tongues, nor sacrifices. Instead it spoke of the necessity of absolute inner concentration, of directing the will toward a certain point beyond the bounds of the visible world, of «rending the veil of the habitual,» of «hearkening to the silence between heartbeats.» It asserted that he who could attain a state of «inner emptiness

equal in magnitude to the outer universe» would be able to summon... summon what? The text named neither a name nor an entity. It spoke only of «the awakening of the Shadow,» of «endowing Silence with a voice,» of «the creation of life from the substance of non-being.»

Madness? Without doubt. But Kazimir's despair was stronger than the voice of reason. What had he to lose? If this were a deception — he would lose nothing, for he possessed already only nothingness. If it were the truth... Oh, if it were the truth! The thought of power, of the ability to create something truly alive, something that would be wholly subject to him — this thought blazed within him with a blinding, infernal flame. He would be not a puppeteer but a demiurge! He would create for himself servants, spectators, a whole world that would worship him, Kazimir, the rejected genius!

And he, hesitating no longer, set about the deed. He did not seek out special ingredients; all that was required was within himself. He pushed the candle aside, so that its light might not distract him, and plunged into a deep, almost trance-like state, following the instructions gleaned from the book. He tried to halt the rush of thoughts, to expel from his consciousness all images, all memories, all pain. He concentrated on the silence that surrounded him, listened intently to it, tried to penetrate its essence. At first this was difficult; the echoes of humiliation endured, the malicious faces of the spectators, the mockery — all this swirled in his head like a whirlwind. But gradually, by

an effort of will, he succeeded in subduing this chaos. He sank deeper and deeper into the abyss of his own «I,» and this abyss began to seem boundless to him.

He uttered no words. He made no gestures. He simply sat in his hunched pose, staring into the darkness before him, all his will, all his hatred, all his despair concentrated in a single point — in the desire to rend the veil of reality. He did not know how much time passed — a minute, an hour, an eternity. Suddenly he felt something. Not a sound and not a light. Rather, a change in the very quality of the world around him. The silence, hitherto absolute, became deeper still, denser. It ceased to be an absence of sound and became a kind of substance filling space. The air froze; the motes of dust suspended in the beam of moonlight halted as if rooted to the spot. The faint breeze that came from the cracks and had hitherto rustled old paper fell silent. The city itself beyond the window, which usually gave at least some signs of life — the distant bark of a dog, the creak of a cart, someone's footsteps — was plunged into a muteness so complete that it seemed unnatural, sinister. It seemed to Kazimir that Time itself, that great tyrant, had for a moment halted its course and turned to look upon him from the abyss of eternity. And in that gaze there was neither wrath nor mercy — only cold, indifferent curiosity.

The ritual, if it could be called that, was completed. Kazimir exhaled slowly, and his body, hitherto taut as a bowstring, went limp with terrible exhaustion. He waited. He waited for the appearance of an angel or a demon, a flash of light, a voice from

the heavens, anything that would become a visible confirmation of his success. But nothing happened. Nothing! The silence remained impenetrable, the dust hung motionless in the air, the moonlight still poured from the window in a deadened stream. No miracles. No power. Only he, his dusty attic, and his silent, wooden companions.

And then his patience snapped. All the despair accumulated within him over these long years of humiliation burst forth in a blind, impotent fury. With an angry cry, in which mingled all shades of hatred — for himself, for the world, for the teacher who had deceived him — he seized the book and hurled it with all his might into the darkest corner of the workshop. The heavy volume struck the floor with a dull thud and slid beneath some cabinet, vanishing from sight.

«Madness! The madness of a senile old man!» he rasped, shuddering with sobs and laughing at the same time. He had been fooled. Fooled by his own hope, the last, paltry straw at which he had clutched. Now he remained absolutely alone, face to face with the cold, merciless fact of his final and hopeless defeat.

His fury, as violent and barren as a summer storm over a parched wasteland, ebbed as suddenly as it had surged, leaving behind only a chilling, all-consuming emptiness. He sat hunched over the table, staring into the darkness of the corner where the book had flown, straining to discern its outlines, but seeing only solid, impenetrable gloom. Shame — burning and acrid — mingled in his soul with a feeling of the deepest, almost

infantile disappointment. He, an intellectual, a man who fancied himself above superstitions and prejudices, had allowed himself to be carried away by the ravings of a half-mad old man! This realization was perhaps bitterer than the humiliation in the booth itself, for it was a blow to the last thing he had left — to his pride, to his intellect. Shame — burning and acrid — mingled in his soul with a feeling of the deepest, almost infantile disappointment. He, an intellectual, a man who fancied himself above superstitions and prejudices, had allowed himself to be carried away by the ravings of a half-mad old man! This realization was perhaps bitterer than the humiliation in the booth itself, for it was a blow to the last thing he had left — to his pride, to his intellect.

He passed his palm over his face, feeling beneath his fingers the damp coolness of his own skin, and tried to bring order to his disordered feelings. The silence, which had seemed to him so sinister before, was now simply silence — empty, senseless, devoid of any supernatural tinge whatsoever. The air once again acquired its customary viscosity, dust slowly circled in the moonlight, beyond the window came a distant, drunken shout, and then the creak of a solitary cart's wheel. The world, with its coarse and immutable materiality, returned to its place. All was as before. All, except himself. Somewhere in the deepest recesses of his being something had broken, some last thin partition separating him from utter despair, and now he felt gutted, emptied to the very dregs. drunken shout, and then the

creak of a solitary cart's wheel. The world, with its coarse and immutable materiality, returned to its place. All was as before. All, except himself. Somewhere in the deepest recesses of his being something had broken, some last thin partition separating him from utter despair, and now he felt gutted, emptied to the very dregs.

He raised his head, and his gaze, wandering and weary, mechanically fell upon the marionettes. They stood and sat in their customary poses, frozen in eternal, silent expectation. Pierrot, nearest of all to him, inclined his head with its face white as a corpse's and a painted blue tear upon his cheek. His long, ungainly limbs were folded in such a way that he seemed melancholy incarnate. Kazimir looked at him with his customary mixture of pity and revulsion. This clown, this eternal sufferer... was his continuation, a grotesque reflection of his own soul, doomed to eternal suffering without catharsis and without an audience's compassion. painted blue tear upon his cheek. His long, ungainly limbs were folded in such a way that he seemed melancholy incarnate. Kazimir looked at him with his customary mixture of pity and revulsion. This clown, this eternal sufferer... was his continuation, a grotesque reflection of his own soul, doomed to eternal suffering without catharsis and without an audience's compassion.

And then, at the very moment when he was ready to avert his gaze, so as not to torment himself further with this spectacle, it happened.

At first he did not understand what exactly had occurred. It was not a sound, not a rustle, not a creak. It was something that existed at the very boundary of perception, something that could be felt rather than heard. A faint, barely perceptible change in the pressure of the air, a vague vibration emanating from the figure of Pierrot. Kazimir froze, straining with every fiber of his soul to catch and define this strange sensation. It intensified, becoming ever more distinct, and soon he could no longer deny its nature. It was a whisper.

But what a whisper! It was not composed of words, carried within it neither meaning, nor logic, nor even a semblance of human speech. It was a stream — pure, undiluted, primordial stream of feeling. And this feeling was fear. Not the ordinary fear of a living being before pain or death, but a universal fear, the fear of matter itself, suddenly having acquired pitiful rudiments of consciousness in the face of the incomprehensible fact of its own existence. In this whisper there were no thoughts; in it was only an abyss, the mute despair of a creature suddenly aware of its abandonment in the world, its unfreedom, its nature as a thing created to be controlled. And through this fear, as through thick, black syrup, other shades emerged: the pain of threads biting into wood, the longing for non-being, for that blessed state when it was merely a piece of wood, deprived even of this wretched semblance of life, and an inexpressible, all-consuming sorrow, so deep that it seemed older than the oldest mountains.

Kazimir did not breathe. All the blood drained from his face,

leaving it cold and numb, like a marble mask. His mind, always standing guard over the laws of reality, rebelled. He furiously denied what was happening, attributing it to hallucination born of nervous exhaustion, overwork, the effect of spoiled wine. «This is delirium,» he repeated to himself, «the product of disordered nerves, nothing more.» But the more stubbornly he denied it, the more distinct the whisper became. It did not sound in the ears; it arose directly in the consciousness, filling it as water fills a sponge. It flowed in a continuous, monotonous stream, and in its lifeless, tonality-deprived quality was that very horrifying sincerity which cannot be feigned.

Slowly, with difficulty overcoming the torpor that had seized his entire body, Kazimir raised his gaze from Pierrot and cast it over the whole workshop. And then a new, spine-chilling horror seized him, compared to which his former fears seemed like child's play.

He was not alone.

He felt it with every nerve, every pore of his skin. The space of the attic, formerly empty and lifeless, was now filled, overflowing with an invisible presence. He saw no one but his dolls, yet he felt dozens of gazes upon him. These gazes were heavy, intent, devoid of all expression save that very mute, bottomless horror which Pierrot's whisper exuded. They came from everywhere: from the shelves, from the dark corners, from beneath the pile of rags where his supplies were kept. Every marionette, every doll, every carved visage, even those that had

been disassembled and lay in boxes — all of them looked at him. He did not see their glass eyes turning, for those eyes were motionless, but he knew with absolute, doubt-free certainty that their attention, dark and concentrated, now belonged wholly to him.

He tried to cry out, but from his throat came only a strangled, hoarse sound, like a death rattle. He tried to rise, but his legs would not obey, they had become soft and cottony, like those of a rag doll. The paralysis of horror shackled his limbs. He could only sit and absorb this multiple, silent gaze, feeling how his own will, his «I,» dissolved in this ocean of alien, wooden consciousness. Pierrot's whisper continued to pour into his mind, and now he began to distinguish in it new, still more dreadful notes — not merely fear, but also a question. A dull, hopeless, infinitely sorrowful question, addressed to him, to its creator, to its lord and tormentor. A question: wherefore? Wherefore had he torn them from sweet non-being, wherefore condemned them to these eternal, joyless dances, to a life without will, without hope, without purpose?

And then Kazimir at last comprehended the whole monstrous, inexpressible truth. The ritual had not failed. It had been crowned with success, a success so horrifying and complete that its consequences surpassed the most fervent imagination. He had not summoned a demon from the netherworld; he had no need of one. He had accomplished something immeasurably more terrible. He, in his blind, selfish despair, by the power of his

perverved will, his unanchored spirit, had created life. He had breathed it into dead matter, into cold wood and glass. But this life was monstrous, defective, deprived of all that makes existence bearable — deprived of joy, of light, of freedom. He had created not servants and not worshippers. He had created a host of suffering beings, thinking only in categories of pain and fear, creatures imprisoned in their mute bodies, and the only thing that now connected them to the world was their creator — he, Kazimir. They were bound to him by invisible threads of compassion, hatred, and that bottomless, universal anguish which now filled the workshop, making the air thick and difficult to breathe.

He slowly, with inhuman effort, turned his head, and his gaze met the empty eye sockets of Columbine. And in their glassy depths, in the way the dim light refracted within them, he saw the same mute despair, the same unanswered supplication. Harlequin, frozen in his foolish leap, seemed to radiate waves of panicked, word-inexpressible horror before that eternal carnival which had become his lot. The entire workshop, all this congregation of silent actors, had transformed into one great, living, suffering organism, and the heart of this organism was he, Kazimir.

Pierrot's whisper suddenly ceased. In its place came silence, but this silence was a thousand times more terrible than any sound. It was the silence of tense, unbearable expectation. They waited. Waited for what he, their god and creator, their

executioner and puppeteer, would now do. Waited for an answer to their silent, all-encompassing question.

And Kazimir, gazing into these multiple eyes full of mute horror, understood that he had no answer. There was only spine-chilling fear, shame, and the awareness that he had committed the irreparable. The doors of his personal hell, which he had so diligently tried to open, had finally swung wide. But he found behind them neither power nor glory. He discovered only an abyss, and now he was destined to gaze into it forever, while the abyss, embodied in his own creations, gazed back.

Chapter 2. The First Stolen Soul

The unbearable silence that reigned in his chambers after the last echo of the bell, having counted the midnight hour, had melted in the stale air, was by no means emptiness, but a thick, viscous substance, filled with the beating of his own heart — loathsome, dull, like the blows of a shovel against damp earth. Kazimir, unable to close his inflamed eyelids, lay upon a bed that resembled a funeral bier more than a couch for rest, and listened to this silence until a rising, inexorable hum began to stand in his ears, like the hum of subterranean waters undermining the foundation of the universe. The room, illuminated by the sinister, flickering light of a single candle, whose flame struggled with the advancing darkness like a death agony with eternal oblivion, was full of specters born of the very matter of this decay: heavy, dark tapestries, upon which scenes of former hunts and feasts had rotted and merged into vague, frightening outlines; dust, lazily swirling in flakes in the streams of deadened moonlight that pierced through the high, narrow window like a ray penetrating a tomb; and everywhere — his silent offspring, marionettes, frozen in strange, absurd poses, their glass eyes seeming to absorb this half-darkness and reflect it back, multiplied dozens of times. But through the obsession, through the hum in his ears and the heavy beating of his heart, for several nights running another sound had been creeping in — barely perceptible, like the rustle of rats

behind the wall paneling, or perhaps the whispering of worms gnawing at a coffin board.

At first he waved it away, attributing this obsession to exhaustion of strength and disorder of nerves, brought to an extreme degree of morbid sensitivity. But this sound did not abate; on the contrary, it grew stronger, acquiring vague outlines, transforming from an indistinct rustle into a semblance of a whisper. This whisper was devoid of anything human; it was like the scrape of an old pen upon parchment or the whistle of wind in the crack of an abandoned tomb. And so, on this night, when the moon itself, hiding behind the torn shrouds of clouds, seemed ashamed to illuminate with its spectral light this place of sorrow and madness, Kazimir, holding his breath and feeling cold sweat stream down his temples, began to distinguish words in it.

These words were fragments, scraps, torn from the context of another's death agony. «A knife... cold...» — it rustled somewhere at the very head of the bed, making him shudder and convulsively clutch at the blanket, damp with sweat. «...I don't want to... mother...» — came from the corner where the shadow of the cabinet with dolls cast upon the wall outlines like a hanged man upon a gallows. And then, clearer and more distinct, full of inexpressible anguish and horror: «...a coin... my coin... in the wall... by the fountain of the Blind Karl...»

Kazimir's heart, which a moment before had been beating as if trying to break free from the cage of his chest, stopped. A certain new, hitherto unknown feeling began to stir in

its depths, like a reptile awakening from winter hibernation. Cynical, greedy curiosity. He lay motionless, listening to this voice from non-being, and gradually, with horrifying clarity, began to comprehend its nature. This was not a product of his reason; it was an alien consciousness, a soul stuck in the threshold of eternity and having found a chink in his own spirit, grown thin to transparency. The power that had been revealed to him on the night of Pierrot's creation was not merely the power of animating soulless matter; it was a key unlocking the door to the world of shadows, and now something had seeped through this door.

Gathering all his will, suppressing the shudder that strove to break out in convulsive trembling, Kazimir mentally, without moving his lips, addressed this whisper, this clot of alien memory and pain.

«Who are you?» — he asked in the silence of his consciousness, and his words sounded like the stroke of a gong.

The whisper fell silent, as if caught unawares. Then, after a pause so agonizing that it seemed to Kazimir the room itself held its breath, came the answer — weak, full of bewilderment and fear:

«I... I don't know... It's all dark... so cold...»

«Remember!» — Kazimir commanded mentally, and in his mental voice there sounded steel, born of the suddenly flaring excitement of a hunter who has scented his prey. «You spoke of a knife. Of a coin. Remember!»

Just as a ray of light, penetrating a dark cellar, snatches

from the gloom clumps of cobwebs and piles of rubbish, so his will, his persistence began to rummage in this disintegrating consciousness. And fragments of memory, alien, moments lived by someone else, began to surface before his inner eye with frightening, painful clarity. He felt upon his own skin — the damp coolness of a stone pavement, the rough fabric of a worn camisole, the sticky fear constricting his throat. A narrow, dark alley, stinking of slops and sin. A sudden shadow attacking him from behind. A sharp, burning pain in his back, blow after blow, swift and merciless. And the last thing he saw before darkness swallowed him — was the greedy, fury-disfigured face of the robber bending over him, and the gleam of that very coin, torn from his clenching palm.

«Leo...» — whispered the consciousness, and in this whisper was all the bitterness of the final, deathbed realization. «My name was Leo...»

And then Kazimir understood everything. This was the spirit of that very young thief who had been stabbed several days ago in a neighboring alley — an incident about which the whole district gossiped, but which had aroused in Kazimir's soul nothing but fleeting contempt for the dirty life and equally dirty death of the inhabitants of the city's bottom. Now this dirty death had become his possession, his trophy. He felt not a drop of pity, not a shadow of compassion for this torn soul wandering in pitch-black darkness. On the contrary, a feverish, intoxicating excitement seized him. He had acquired not merely a voice; he had acquired

a servant, a witness, a source of information from the world lying on the other side of being.

«The coin, Leo,» — he insisted, his mental voice sounding imperious and cold. «You said — by the fountain of the Blind Karl. Where exactly? Speak!»

And the spirit, obedient to his will, whispered again, and in its whisper was heard a strange submission, a newfound hope that the fulfillment of this command would bring it peace. It described a crack in the old stone masonry, a drainpipe red with rust, the loose mortar between the bricks, where he, in anticipation of pursuit or sudden reprisal, had hidden his only treasure, obtained by unrighteous means but never spent. It described this with touching, almost childlike thoroughness, and Kazimir, lying in his bed with eyes wide open, burning with feverish gleam, listened to it, and upon his lips, dry and cracked, appeared a smile — the first in many months, a smile devoid of all warmth, the smile of a sphinx gazing upon mysteries buried in the sands of time. He was not merely hearing a voice from the world of shadows; he was conversing with it. He was interrogating death and receiving answers. And in this spine-chilling conversation a new Kazimir was being born — not a victim of circumstance and melancholy, but a puppeteer whose fingers henceforth could pull not only the strings of marionettes, but also the finest, invisible threads that bind the world of the living to the kingdom of eternal darkness.

The obsession that had flared within him like fire upon a

funeral pyre brooked no delay. Barely had the first rays of the morning sun, pale and sickly, like light seeping through the thickness of grave earth, touched the windowsill, when Kazimir, who had not closed his eyes and had found no rest, tore himself from his couch. The traces of the exhausting night — crimson shadows beneath his eyes, a nervous tic twitching the corner of his mouth — only emphasized the feverish energy radiating from his entire emaciated figure. He did not waste time on washing or a meager repast; his only food now was the poisonous nectar of acquired power, his only drink the chilling rapture of merging with another's suffering. The whisper of Leo's spirit did not fall silent with the coming of day; it became quieter, but more intent, weaving itself into the very fabric of his consciousness, like an obsessive melody that sounds without pause in an emptied hall.

His gaze, heavy and piercing, fell upon Pierrot. The doll, his first and most perfect creation, stood in the corner, its pose unnaturally graceful and therefore all the more sinister. The white face with its frozen mask of grief now seemed to him not merely an artifact of human hands, but a vessel, an altar, a portal. If he had managed to hear a soul whispering in non-being, then could he not force it to manifest itself in this world? Could he not, like a conductor directing an obedient orchestra, force soulless matter to dance to music that sounds from beyond the threshold of death?

This thought, so monstrous and seductive, possessed him wholly. Seizing the doll with almost brutal resolve, he seated

it on a chair in the middle of the workshop, at the very center of the circle illuminated by the slanting, dusty rays of morning. He himself stepped back several paces, feeling icy shivers of anticipation run down his spine. He did not intend to touch the strings; no, that would be an old, pitiful trick. Now he required something more — pure will, interwoven with the echo of another's agony.

He closed his eyes, plunging into that sinister silence that reigned in his own skull, and began to search. To search for that very voice, that little ball of alien consciousness that had become entangled in the web of his mind. And he found it easily, as if it had not thought to hide — a weak little whisper, full of fear and bewilderment, like the weeping of a child abandoned in the dark.

«Leo,» — Kazimir pronounced mentally, and this name sounded not as an address, but as an incantation, as a command. «I am here. I am your anchor. Come to me. Come to this body, to this form that I have prepared for you.»

The only answer was an intensified whisper, full of horror: «I cannot... It's dark... Cold...»

«You can!» — Kazimir cried out mentally, and his will, compressed into a tight, white-hot sphere, rushed toward the doll. «Remember what it means to move! Remember your fingers, your muscles! I give the body form, and you — the memory of movement! Act!»

He concentrated his entire being, all his psychic energy, upon Pierrot's hand lying on its knee. He imagined how nerves and

tendons, which did not exist in wood and plaster, should have filled with life, how an electric current should have passed through them, making the fingers twitch. This process was agonizing, exhausting; he felt sweat streaming down his temples in rivulets, felt the alarm bell pounding in his temples, heralding the rupture of blood vessels. He was not merely commanding; he was forcing an alien will, an alien residual consciousness, into a soulless shell, he was violating matter itself, forcing it to pretend to be alive.

And suddenly — he saw. Pierrot's finger, long, elegant, made of polished wood, twitched. It was not a smooth, meaningful movement, but a sharp, convulsive shudder, exactly like a death agony, the convulsion of life parting from the body. This spectacle was so repulsive and unnatural that Kazimir's breath caught. But it was success. The first, unseen fruit of his infernal labor.

«Yes!» — he hissed aloud, and his voice broke into a rasp. «The hand! Raise the hand!»

He again plunged into a state of concentration, interlacing his will with Leo's memories of movement. And the doll obeyed. Its right hand separated from its knee and rose into the air. This movement was sharp, jerky, mechanical, and at the same time terrible; it resembled not the dance of a marionette, but the final flail of a drowning man's limb, about to vanish beneath the water. The hand hung in the air, its fingers convulsively clenched into a palm facing down.

An intoxicating dizziness seized Kazimir. He was not merely controlling the doll; he was feeling it. He felt another's pain, another's fear, the desperate resistance of non-being, which he was overcoming by the brute force of his spirit. It was a merging with another's agony, and this sensation was as sweet as it was perverse, like a gulp of the strongest poison that burns the entrails but grants unprecedented visions.

«The map,» — he whispered, addressing the voice in his head. «You spoke of a place. Show me. Show me on the map.»

Gasping from the strain, he approached the table, where upon a rough sheet of paper he had sketched in charcoal from memory a plan of the district around the fountain of the Blind Karl. He laid the map upon the floor before the doll.

«Lead us, Leo,» — Kazimir pronounced, and in his voice there sounded now not merely authority, but a certain reverence before the sacrilege he was committing. «Indicate where your treasure lies.»

He concentrated again, pouring all his energy and all the residual consciousness of the thief into the motionless figure of Pierrot. The doll trembled all over, as if a current had been passed through it; its joints creaked, and its head fell upon its breast with a dreadful, death-imitating hopelessness. But its right hand, that very one which had been raised, twitched again. It did not descend smoothly, but crashed downward, and its index finger struck the parchment with a dry thud. Kazimir, holding his breath, brought his face closer, disfigured by a grimace of

tense triumph. The trembling tip of the finger pointed to a tiny square drawn in charcoal — the base of an old drainpipe by the wall behind the fountain.

In that instant the connection broke. Pierrot's hand fell limply, and the doll itself froze in its former, dead pose, as if nothing had happened. The whisper in Kazimir's head fell silent, replaced by a dull, deafening hum of exhaustion. But in his soul a fire raged. He leaned back, sitting on the floor among wood shavings, glue, and scraps of rope, and burst into quiet, faltering, hysterical laughter. He had done it. He had made the shadow dance. He had made death point him the way. And in this horrifying, blasphemous act he had tasted true, absolute power — the power of a puppeteer pulling strings that stretched into the very abyss.

The obsession that led him was precise and merciless, like the blade of the knife that had cut short the life of the unfortunate Leo. Kazimir, delaying not a moment, threw over his shoulders a worn cloak, the color of damp earth upon a fresh grave, and slipped out of his tomb into a gloomy, inhospitable day. The sky was drawn over with a solid, leaden shroud of clouds, from which occasionally drizzled a fine, importunate rain-dust, settling upon the faces of passersby like cold dew upon gravestones. He moved through the streets, seeing and hearing nothing around him; the hum of the city was to him no more than the distant noise of a subterranean stream, and the silhouettes of people — merely shadows flickering in the threshold of eternal darkness. All his spirit, all his will were concentrated upon a single point in space

— upon that place marked by the trembling finger of his dreadful intermediary.

The fountain of the Blind Karl, long since dried up and transformed into a monument to its own oblivion, appeared before him — a dismal structure of cracked stone, where the visage of the saint, whose eyes had been forever chipped away by time, presented a spectacle as pitiful as it was prophetic. The air here was saturated with the smell of rot and human refuse. Kazimir, without looking around, his heart frozen in anticipation of either the greatest triumph or final descent into madness, walked around the fountain and fixed his gaze upon the rough stone masonry of the rear wall. And he saw it — that very drainpipe described by the whisper from non-being, red with rust, and beneath it — a gaping, wound-like crack in the joints between the stones.

Like a hunter creeping up on his prey, he dropped to his knees, paying no heed to the sticky mud seeping through the fabric of his garments. His long, pale fingers, accustomed to the most delicate work with threads and wooden joints, with unexpected strength dug into the loose mortar that had yielded to damp and time. He rummaged in it with the feverish haste of a gravedigger hurrying to conceal evidence of a crime. Dust and crumbs of stone packed beneath his nails, but he felt nothing save a rising, intoxicating heat in his chest. And at last, when it seemed the wall itself was about to exhaust his patience, the tips of his fingers encountered something hard, small, cold.

He froze, and for a moment the whole world contracted to this tiny object lost in the stone mass. He slowly, with almost reverent care, drew it out. It was a coin. A single, ancient coin, worn at the edges. It was dirty, covered with oxides and dust, and therefore seemed almost black. No value, of course, did it carry within itself; its pitiful metallic gleam, barely showing through the grime, could not illuminate even a step in the pitch-black darkness of his existence. But in that moment when he clenched it in his palm, feeling its cold, inexorable reality, it seemed to him more precious than all the treasures of all the monarchs of the world.

For this was not merely a piece of metal. It was the tangible, palpable fruit of his sinful labor. Proof. Irrefutable and final. The shadow whose voice he had heard in his head, whose agony he had forced to dance in the body of a doll, was not a product of fever; it was real. And he, Kazimir, had managed to wrest from it this tiny, paltry secret. He had reached beyond the limits of being and touched that which belonged to death, and death had given him this small tribute.

He felt no joy, no; that feeling was too pitiful and perishable for such a moment. He felt something greater — a cold, all-consuming, indifferent to all else exultation of the spirit that had at last found its true calling. The fear that had formerly smoldered within him, as embers smolder beneath ashes, was finally trampled and extinguished. In its place came a new, mighty passion — cold, calculating greed. But greed not for gold

or earthly goods; his avarice was demonic. He thirsted for power. Power over that which lies on the other side.

He returned to his workshop, feeling no pavement beneath his feet. The coin, clenched in his fist, seemed to burn his palm with its icy, otherworldly cold. Locking the door with a heavy bolt, he lowered himself into his armchair, into the very heart of his kingdom — the kingdom of silent dolls and voiceless shadows. He unclenched his fingers. The coin lay in his palm, dark, unprepossessing, but possessing for him greater value than a crown itself. He began to turn it with his fingers, peering at the time-worn outlines of the profile of some forgotten king, at the barely distinguishable letters of the legend. Every gleam, every turn of its facets in the dim light of the room spoke to him of his power.

And his gaze, rising from this first sinful fruit, slowly swept over his creations — the marionettes that stood and sat around, frozen in their eternal, skillful poses. And in that moment he saw them in an entirely new light. They were no longer works of art, not the children of his talent and anguish, not attempts to deceive death through a semblance of life. No. Now he saw in them something else. They were instruments. Empty vessels. Flawless, will-less bodies, devoid of soul, awaiting the moment when he, the great puppeteer, would fill them with contents from his dreadful collection. Each of these dolls was a potential receptacle, ready to receive a whispering soul, full of fear and pain, which he could catch in his nets and subject to his will.

His lips stretched into a smile devoid of all warmth — the smile of a sphinx who knows the answer to the riddle that lies beyond death. He rose from the armchair and slowly, with a sense of power, approached the large carved cabinet where, in strict order, like noble guests at a ball, were arranged his most exquisite creations — dolls depicting townsfolk, aristocrats, scholars, ladies in splendid gowns. His gaze slid over their porcelain faces with painted smiles and glass eyes, until it stopped at one — the figure of a noble townsman dressed in a velvet doublet, with an important and somewhat haughty expression on his face.

Kazimir slowly extended his hand and touched the cold porcelain cheek of the doll. This touch was not tender, but proprietary, full of spine-chilling anticipation.

«Well then,» he whispered, and his whisper was sweeter than poison and more resonant than any bell. «Whom shall we invite to the next séance?»

This question hung in the stale air of the workshop, requiring no answer, for the answer was already clear to him. It was rhetorical, as rhetorical as a prayer in the mouth of an atheist. It marked the beginning. The beginning of a great, horrifying hunt, where he was both hunter and catcher of souls, and he who conducts the dance of the dead to the endless whisper coming from the abyss.

Chapter 3. The Mechanics of the Mask

The deserted streets of the city, like the rusted arteries of a once-living giant, writhed in the pre-dawn mist that spread across the cobblestones in a thick, almost palpable shroud. Kazimir walked along them, feeling himself a specter lost in the labyrinth of his own gloomy designs. In his hand, hidden in the pocket of his frock coat, he clutched a coarse linen sack, and through the rough fabric his fingers felt the cold, time-polished mask — the visage of Pierrot, his mute yet most eloquent companion. The weight of this object was not so much physical; it seemed he carried not a doll, but a congealed melancholy, torn by him from the dusty non-being of the attic and having acquired a horrifying, hypnotic power.

His goal was the labyrinth of old houses settling into the damp earth on the outskirts, where a solitary building, more resembling a tomb for the living than a dwelling for mortals, huddled beneath the shade of a gigantic, withered elm. It was the shop of Gregor, a receiver of stolen goods and keeper of secrets, a man whose soul, as Kazimir believed, had long since rotted away, leaving behind only a predatory, mercenary instinct. The air around was saturated with the miasmas of a stagnant ditch and something else — a sweetish, putrid smell of decaying wood and vice, which made every breath an ordeal. The moonlight, pale and consumptive, barely pierced the veil of mist, casting upon the

walls of the buildings vague, pulsating shadows that seemed to live their own incomprehensible life, repeating in mute horror the convulsions of the sleeping city.

Kazimir felt no fear; no, he was filled with another feeling — a feverish, almost morbid anticipation, the very kind that compels a doctor to open yet another corpse in the hope of finding the source of an unknown disease. He crossed the threshold of this prison, and the bell above the door gave not a cheerful, customary ring, but a certain hoarse, deathly groan, like the last sigh of a dying man. Inside reigned a half-darkness, barely dispelled by the dim light of a kerosene lamp whose glass was thickly covered with dust and cobwebs. The air was thick and heavy with the smells of old leather, mold, varnish, and something metallic that resembled the smell of blood, though perhaps it was merely the play of an inflamed imagination. Everywhere, on roughly knocked-together shelves, in dusty display cases, and simply on the floor, were piled objects — testimonies of others' crimes and losses: silver cigarette cases with monograms whose owners were no longer among the living, tarnished ornaments that had once shone upon the necks of beauties, watches that had stopped at the very moment their owners gave up the ghost, and piles of books in worn bindings that held the whisper of forgotten thoughts. cigarette cases with monograms whose owners were no longer among the living, tarnished ornaments that had once shone upon the necks of beauties, watches that had stopped at the very moment their owners gave up the ghost, and piles of books in

worn bindings that held the whisper of forgotten thoughts.

Behind the counter, like a huge, pale spider at the center of its web, sat Gregor himself. A man with a face devoid of all expression, with eyes cold and calculating as those of a river crayfish. He was the embodiment of indifference, and it seemed nothing in this world could rouse him from the torpor in which he had dwelt for years.

«Old Kazimir,» he said in a voice creaky as an unoiled door. «What are you bringing? Another trinket from that damned attic?»

Kazimir did not answer at once. He slowly, with almost theatrical solemnity, walked to the counter, his steps making no sound, absorbed by the thick layer of dust on the floor. He felt Gregor's heavy, suspicious gaze upon him, but this only intensified his strange, narcissistic rapture. He was a director preparing to present his magnum opus, and this musty tomb was the ideal stage for a tragedy.

«This time, my dear Gregor, I have brought not a thing,» Kazimir began, and his voice sounded quiet, but with a metallic resonance that made the receiver of stolen goods prick up his ears. «I have brought... a story.»

With these words he drew the doll Pierrot from the sack. The pale face of the comedian, distorted by a mask of grief, appeared to view, frozen in a mute cry. The eyes of dark glass seemed to absorb the scant light of the lamp, only to spew it back as piercing, unbearable knowledge. Kazimir placed the doll on the

counter, between himself and Gregor, with the same care with which a priest lays a sacred relic upon an altar.

Gregor snorted, but a shadow of unease flickered in his eyes.

«A story?» he repeated. «And what can this old wreck tell? Children's tales?»

«Oh, no,» Kazimir whispered, leaning a little closer. «It will tell a story that only you know, and perhaps the shadows that relentlessly follow you. But shadows are mute. And she... oh, she is not.»

And then Kazimir allowed his lips to touch Pierrot's painted ear, pretending to whisper something to him. He uttered not a single sound, but in the deathly silence of the shop this very gesture was more eloquent than any cry.

And a whisper was heard. Quiet, hoarse, as if coming from beneath the earth, from the very netherworld. It came not from Kazimir, whose lips were closed in a thin, hard smirk, but seemed to be born in the very wooden breast of Pierrot, in his emptiness.

«A silver candelabra...» the whisper hissed, making the lamp's flame shudder. "...from the bedroom of old Morlan... The one that stood on the mantelpiece...»

Gregor, who had been listening at first with a contemptuous smirk, froze. His broad, pale face began to lose its already scant color, becoming earth-gray, like that of a drowned man. His eyes, usually so dull, widened, and a wild, animal terror flared in them.

«What devilry is this?..» escaped from him, but his voice was

hoarse and powerless.

Kazimir merely raised a finger, calling for silence, and again bent toward the doll. The whisper continued its spine-chilling confession, and each word of it was a sharpened blade plunging into the very essence of Gregor.

«And then... then there was the girl... Emily... With the doll she always carried with her... You said she ran away into the blizzard herself... But her kerchief... her little kerchief with the embroidered violets... You had it... You wiped the handle of the knife with it... before throwing it into the river... It was damp... from the snow... and from something else... warm and sticky...»

The whisper sounded monotonous, devoid of all expression, and for that very reason became only more horrifying. It did not accuse; it merely stated irrefutable facts. It dragged into the light of God those abominations, those tiny, paltry crimes that Gregor had considered forever buried in the depths of his black conscience, and revealed them to him in all their unsightly nakedness.

Kazimir, meanwhile, stepped back and observed. He observed how drops of sweat appeared on the receiver's brow and rolled down his temples. He saw how his thick, bloodless fingers trembled, gripping the edge of the counter until his knuckles turned white. He listened to Gregor's fitful, whistling breathing, to the stifled groan that escaped his chest when the whisper mentioned the kerchief. And in that moment Kazimir knew the intoxicating rapture of absolute power. He did not threaten, did

not demand, did not gesticulate. He was simply a conduit, a director, a demiurge, staging upon the tiny stage of another's soul a play of pure, undiluted fear. He savored the spectacle of the slow, inexorable destruction, the disintegration of that stony, indifferent mask behind which Gregor had hidden all these years. This was not merely blackmail; it was a sacrament, a sacrifice upon the altar of his own awakened obsession.

The words issuing from Pierrot's breathless lips hung in the stale air of the shop like poisonous vapors, slowly poisoning the soul. Gregor was no longer that impenetrable, cold spider at the center of his web; he had become a hunted, trembling creature whose own shadow, cast upon piles of useless rubbish, seemed to writhe in mute horror. Drops of sweat, now large and heavy, rolled from his temples, leaving dirty furrows, and fell upon the counter with a faint, loathsome click, like the sound of an insect falling into sand. His breathing became fitful, whistling, and something churned in his chest as if tears were rising, but those tears were not water, but molten lead of shame and panic.

Kazimir, by contrast, was in a state of feverish, almost ecstatic clarity. He observed the receiver's metamorphosis with the cold, merciless curiosity of a scientist. The power he felt was like strong, old wine, intoxicating the very soul; it warmed him from within, driving out the age-old ice of apathy that had fettered his heart. He uttered not a word, leaving the doll to conduct its spine-chilling confession, and only his fingers, clasped behind his back, clenched and unclenched in time with his own quickened

heartbeat — the sole sign of agitation he was still unable to subdue.

«Why?..» Gregor finally exhaled, and his voice was a soundless whisper addressed rather to himself than to his guest. «Who... Who are you?..»

Kazimir slowly shook his head, and a shadow of a smile played upon his lips — the smile of a sphinx who knows the answer to all riddles.

«I am nothing, dear Gregor,» he said quietly, and his voice sounded like the rustle of pages in a library. «Only an echo. Only a shadow. I am the one who listens. And he... he speaks.»

And he nodded toward the doll. Pierrot looked at Gregor with his glassy, unseeing eyes, and his mournful mask now seemed not an expression of grief, but a mockery of the entire human race, of its paltry secrets and horrors.

The panic in Gregor's eyes reached its apogee. He recoiled from the counter, striking a shelf, from which an old bronze inkwell crashed with a clatter, leaving on the floor a blot resembling clotted blood.

«Shut him up! Shut this... this loathsome wooden throat!» he howled, and notes of hysteria sounded in his voice. «What do you want?! Money? Take it! Take everything!» He began to rummage convulsively beneath the counter, pulling out an old iron box stuffed with crumpled banknotes and gold coins. His hands trembled so that the coins jingled, slipping from his fingers and rolling across the floor like scattering spiders.

Kazimir observed this humiliating dance of avarice and fear with imperturbable calm. Money, those multicolored papers and cold metal circles, aroused in him not the slightest agitation. They were merely a symbol of the true currency he had discovered for himself — the currency of fear, of power over others' souls, over their secrets.

«Money?» he repeated, and a faint, almost contemptuous smirk sounded in his voice. «Oh, no, my friend. Money is merely... payment for silence. A modest fee for my ignorance. But what I already know, it cannot atone for. Never.»

He paused, so that his words, like drops of acid, might penetrate to the very core of the receiver.

«The price of your silence, Gregor, and the price of my... non-interference... will be higher. Significantly higher.»

Gregor froze, clutching a wad of banknotes in his sweaty palms. His eyes, full of animal terror, questioned.

«I want to know,» Kazimir continued, and his voice acquired a metallic, brooking-no-objection tone. «I want to know everything. About those who, like you, bring here the fruits of their dark deeds. About your 'clients.» Their names, their addresses, their little, dirty secrets. You are a spider sitting at the center of a web. And I want to see the whole web. Every thread. Every fly that has become entangled in its sticky knots.»

The realization slowly, like poison, penetrated Gregor's consciousness. He understood that Kazimir did not merely wish to destroy him; he wished to make of him an instrument, a

conduit, a key to new victims. And in this realization was a horror surpassing even the fear of exposure. He saw how his own carefully constructed universe of vice was collapsing, devoured by the insatiable shadow of this madman and his dreadful doll.

«I... I cannot...» he groaned. «They will kill me...»

«Oh,» Kazimir nodded softly, as if accepting this argument. «Undoubtedly. But the question, my dear Gregor, is merely which will happen sooner. Their vengeance... or mine.»

He again bent toward Pierrot, and the whisper resumed, quiet, but for that very reason all the more unbearable.

"...and in the cellar of the house on Mogilnaya Street... that very barrel of lime... and the little bones... the little bones...»

«Enough!» Gregor roared, pressing his palms to his ears, but the whisper seemed to penetrate directly into his brain, bypassing all barriers. «Enough! I agree! Everything! I will give you everything you want! Names... addresses... everything! Only take this creature away! Remove it from me!»

Kazimir slowly, with the relish of a gourmet, extended his hand and took the doll from the counter. The whisper instantly ceased. A deathly silence reigned in the shop, broken only by Gregor's heavy, fitful breathing and the faint creaking of the floorboards.

«I will return tomorrow, at sunset,» Kazimir pronounced, laying Pierrot back into the linen sack with almost tender care. «And I expect to find here a complete list. Be precise. My friend's memory...» — he patted the sack— "...is phenomenal.»

He did not look back once as he left the shop. The bell above the door again gave forth its deathly groan. Kazimir stepped out into the street, and the mist seemed to part before him, as before a sovereign. He walked, clutching in his hand the sack with the doll, and in his breast blazed a flame he had not felt for long, long years. He was alive. Truly alive. The money he had ultimately taken — a wad of crumpled banknotes thrust into his hands by the crazed Gregor — was merely a cold lump in his pocket, possessing no value compared to that intoxicating nectar of omnipotence he had tasted today. He possessed knowledge. He held in his hands the threads of others' fates. And this sensation was sweeter than any wealth, stronger than any wine, more powerful than any royal authority. He walked through the sleeping city, and each step of his echoed in his soul as the triumphant march of a victor, solitary and terrifying in his new, acquired power.

The return to the bosom of his tomb — for Kazimir's house could not be called otherwise — was like the return of an alchemist to his laboratory after he had at last found the philosopher's stone. The twilight of the mansion, usually oppressive and full of reproach, now seemed to him the blessed gloom of a sanctuary. He locked the heavy oak door with all its bolts, and the creak of the iron sounded sweeter to him than any music, for it heralded the beginning of a mystery, the possibility of surrendering without hindrance to his newly acquired, dreadful experiments. The air in the house was

motionless, cold, and thick, as in a tomb, and the dust swirling in the rays of the single candle he had lit resembled the ashes of burned hopes.

He drew Pierrot from the linen sack and placed him in a place of honor — upon a velvet-covered pouf in the middle of the study. The pale face, illuminated from below by the trembling flame, seemed to come alive, and in its mournful grimace Kazimir now saw not sorrow, but the intense attention of an accomplice thirsting for the continuation of the feast of power. The money extorted from Gregor he flung into a desk drawer without the slightest interest; the clink of coins was pitiful and empty compared to that spine-chilling whisper which had made the thick-skinned receiver tremble.

And then a new, insatiable thirst seized him — a thirst not merely for possession, but for the strengthening of this demonic connection. He instinctively felt that the power animating the doll fed not on air and not on light, but on a certain other substance, a certain essence that emanates from the darkest depths of the human soul. Emotions. Fear. Despair. Humiliation. He was like a gardener who has discovered that his exotic flower blooms more luxuriantly not from water, but from blood.

«To feed it...» he whispered, fixing his gaze upon Pierrot's glass pupils. «We must feed it...»

He sat down opposite the doll, leaning forward, and began to whisper to it, but this time not facts and not evidence, but those very humiliated, animal-terror-filled entreaties that Gregor had

spewed forth in the moment of his highest fear.

«Take her away! Remove this creature!» Kazimir hissed, parodying the receiver's stifled, hysterical voice. «I will give you everything! Only shut its mouth!»

He peered into Pierrot's motionless features, seeking signs of response. At first nothing. Only cold wood and the shadow of the candle dancing on the chipped cheek. But Kazimir did not yield. He continued his repulsive act, again and again repeating Gregor's entreaties, pouring into them the entire gamut of the horror he had experienced — the tremor in the voice, the death rattle, the tearful plea. He was not merely a reciter; he was an actor immersing himself in a role, sucking from memory every drop of another's fear, to present it as a sacrifice to his mute idol.

And then, when for yet another time, with particular anguish, he cried out: «They will kill me!» — he beheld something.

The corners of Pierrot's painted scarlet mouth, always downturned in an expression of eternal sorrow, quivered. This was not a play of light. No. It was a slow, barely perceptible, yet inexorable movement. The wooden lips curved. From a mournful arc they transformed into something else — into a thin, stretched line. A line devoid of all warmth, all humanity. It was a smile. The smile of a being gazing upon the perishability of the world; the smile of a demon tasting carrion; the smile of madness triumphing over reason.

Kazimir froze, and his heart for a moment stopped, frozen in his breast from rapture and horror. He had achieved his aim. The

connection was no mirage! It was strengthening, it demanded nourishment and responded to it!

«Do you see?» he rasped, addressing now not the doll, but himself, the emptiness of the room. «Do you see?! She is alive! Truly alive!»

And then he laughed. His laughter, long unfamiliar to him, burst from his throat in an icy, dry, joyless stream. He laughed, gazing at Pierrot's smirking visage, laughed at Gregor's humiliation, at his own perspicacity, at all the absurdity and horror of existence. This laughter rolled in echo through the gloomy halls, struck against the portraits of ancestors in tarnished frames, and rebounded, distorted and multiplied.

But his laughter broke off as suddenly as it had begun.

His gaze, sliding across the room in search of a new object for his exultation, fell upon the far corner, cluttered with shadows and rubbish. There, where upon a rough wooden chest sat another doll — Harlequin.

And Kazimir felt the blood freeze in his veins.

He remembered with perfect clarity — he always, with maniacal precision, remembered the placement of every object in his kingdom of oblivion. Harlequin, that colorful clown in his motley, once-bright attire, always sat leaning his back against the wall, his head in a cap with bells bowed upon his breast as if in slumber, and his glassy gaze fixed upon the floor.

Now, however, Harlequin sat upright. His motley face was turned directly toward the center of the room. And his eyes —

those very ones that had always seemed empty and soulless — now looked. Looked directly at Kazimir.

Not a single hand had touched him. Not the slightest vibration had disturbed the dusty air in that part of the room. He could not, he should not have moved. But he moved. He turned his head. Soundlessly. Without effort. With unnatural, mechanical precision.

Kazimir, still on his knees before Pierrot, slowly rose. His laughter stuck in his throat, turning into a lump of icy horror. He did not breathe. He merely stared, as if enchanted, into Harlequin's glass eyes, seeking in them mockery, malice, or simply emptiness. But he saw only a reflection — a tiny, distorted reflection of the candle's flame, dancing in the depths of those black pupils like a hellish fire.

The silence that reigned in the room was now of a different quality. It was the silence of expectation, tense and menacing, like the calm before a squall. It seemed the house itself held its breath, and even the dust ceased to swirl. Pierrot on his pouf froze with his monstrous smile. Harlequin in the corner — with his unbearably direct gaze.

And Kazimir understood, with spine-chilling clarity, that the experiment had gone out of control. He had not awakened one doll to life. He had awakened something greater. He had thrown open a door behind which there should have been nothing but darkness and oblivion. And now, from behind that door, something was looking at him.

Chapter 4. The Doll of Maternal Love

There was not in the whole world a city so poisoned by the stench of oblivion and so given over to rot as that in which Kazimir dwelt. The air in its quarters, narrow and writhing like worms, was thick and heavy, saturated with the exhalations of the swamps that spread beyond the city's bounds, and with the miasmas rising from the very soil, like the breath of an ancient, sickly monster. The houses, built of stone blackened by time and damp, stood hunched beneath a perpetually gray, low sky; their pointed gables and narrow windows, like embrasures, seemed to gaze upon the rare passerby with mute reproach and secret menace. Kazimir himself, whose soul had long since become a receptacle for all the poisons and melancholies of this sorrowful place, wandered these little streets at that hour when day, no longer able to resist the onslaught of twilight, expired in death agony, staining the mist in crimson and lilac hues.

He walked without seeing the way, for that way was known to him to the last crack in the cobblestone, to the last patch of mold on the wall; he walked, obeying a certain inner pendulum that counted in his breast even, monotonous beats, akin to the beating of a heart, but which were, alas, merely a pitiful semblance thereof. His thoughts, those eternal companions and tormentors, whirled in his skull, now returning to the spectral successes of days gone by, when he, a sorcerer and virtuoso of illusion,

commanded the attention of the crowd, now plunging into the abysses of his present downfall, when his sole audience was the spiders weaving their webs in the corners of his wretched dwelling. And in the very thick of this gloomy kaleidoscope there suddenly arose, as if a specter summoned by the force of irrepressible recollection, the image of Ilona.

Ilona! This name, like a white-hot blade, pierced his being, awakening a dormant but unquieted pain. It was a wound inflicted upon his pride, his self-love, his very essence — a wound that had never truly healed, but was merely covered by a thin, cobweb-like film of oblivion, ready to tear at the slightest touch. She, whose beauty had once seemed to him the only light in an ocean of darkness, she whose vows he, in his blindness, had esteemed as eternal as the motion of the stars — had preferred to him a wealthy patron, a man flat as a board and empty as a dried gourd, but whose purse was weighed down with gold, and whose lineage traced its roots to hoary antiquity. She had sold their love, their shared dreams, their mad, poetic vows given beneath the whisper of the night wind — sold them for the vain glitter of diamonds and the heavy brocade of gowns.

And so, at the very moment when the thought of her, burning and poisonous, reached its highest intensity in his brain, fate itself, mocking and cruel, resolved to present him with the living embodiment of this specter. From around the bend of a street narrow as a dagger, toward him, rolling soundlessly on wheels upholstered in black velvet, there emerged a carriage. The

carriage was familiar to him — he had seen it once at the entrance to the theater, on that very evening when his own life had rolled downhill. The heraldic sign on the door — an owl clutching a serpent in its talons — had engraved itself upon his memory with the same distinctness as the brand of an executioner. And while he stood, pinned to the spot by sudden torpor, the door opened, and from it, like a vision born of the mist and his own despair, She stepped out.

Time, which for him, Kazimir, flowed slowly as molasses, leaving upon all things the imprint of decay, seemed to have no power over her. The features of her face, refined and beautiful, had preserved their delicacy, but now there appeared in them a new, cold completeness, like that of a finished marble statue. A gown of dark blue velvet, trimmed with silver fur, clung to her figure, emphasizing her belonging to a world inaccessible to him. In her ears sparkled sapphires, as dark and deep as her eyes in that moment when they met his gaze. And in those eyes, in their depths, he saw something that made his petrified heart throb convulsively once more. He saw fear. The old, familiar, childish fear of his caustic tongue, of his merciless intellect, capable with a single word of destroying any illusion, of exposing any falsity. This fear flickered in her gaze for a moment — a swift, frightened shadow — and was immediately suppressed, hidden beneath a mask of cold, almost contemptuous courtesy.

«Monsieur Kazimir,» she pronounced, and her voice, once as clear and melodious as a brook, now sounded even and dull, like

a blow upon taut silk fabric. «What an... unexpected meeting.»

He did not answer at once, allowing the oppressive pause to fill with all the unspoken that hung between them like a poisonous mist. He savored her embarrassment, this moment of her weakness, for he saw how the slender fingers in their gloves clenched the silk reticule, and how a faint, barely perceptible tremor ran across her icy mask.

«Madame,» he finally uttered, and his own voice seemed to him hoarse and alien, coming from some deep sepulchral emptiness. «This meeting is as unexpected as it is instructive. It presents living proof of how whimsical are the ways of providence, which brings together on a narrow path the inhabitants of such different worlds. The world of illusions, which I, alas, still serve, and the world... of solid prosperity, which you have chosen.»

He deliberately emphasized the last words, and the fine venom contained in them achieved its aim. A faint flush, unnatural and bright as a consumption spot, appeared on her pale cheeks.

«You are just the same, monsieur,» she said, and in her voice was heard an old grievance mixed with vexation. «Still loving to play with words, as a conjurer plays with cards.»

«Ah, madame!» he exclaimed with feigned pathos, inwardly exulting at how easily he had managed to wound her. «Cards may foretell fate, but words — merely expose it. And is it not amusing that we two, who once read the same book of life, now find such different meanings on its pages? You have found your

quiet, well-ordered garden, while I... I have remained to wander through windfalls and wastelands, where my only companions are phantoms and shadows.»

He saw how she longed to break off this torture, to turn and leave, to hide in the safety of her rich carriage. But the conventions of society, that very cage into which she had voluntarily locked herself, held her more firmly than any chains. She was obliged to listen to him, obliged to keep face. And this humiliation, this forced standing before him, this pariah, this beggarly genius, was sweeter to him than any honey.

«I will not take up your time,» she said, taking a step toward the carriage, and in her eyes again flickered that very fear, but now seasoned not merely with embarrassment, but with hatred. «Good fortune to you, Monsieur Kazimir.»

«And to you, madame,» he replied with a low, theatrical bow. «I wish that the walls of your garden may always remain sound, and its flowers — never wither.»

She quickly vanished into the dark maw of the carriage, the door slammed with a dull, final sound, and the carriage, like a specter, dissolved into the thickening twilight. Kazimir stood motionless, listening to the fading clatter of wheels, which echoed in his ears like the strokes of a funeral bell. But what were they burying? Not love, for that love had long been dead, and its decay he had inhaled with full breast all these years. No, they were burying the last remnants of his former «I,» the last faint stirrings toward something bright that might still smolder in

the depths of his soul.

This meeting, so sudden and so painful, split open the old wound of his self-love with new, unprecedented cruelty. He felt the poison of humiliation, of thirst for revenge, and of bitter triumph spreading through his veins, poisoning every particle of his being. Simply to take revenge? No, that was too petty, too primitive for his mind, sophisticated in the art of inflicting suffering. To kill? That was crude, material, and devoid of that refined cruelty he so valued. He required something greater. Not merely to strike a blow, but to humiliate her in the most exquisite manner; to crush not the body, but the very soul, to disgrace her in the eyes of that very world for which she had betrayed him; to shatter that very «sound garden» of which he had spoken, tearing out by the roots all the flowers of her reputation and trampling them into the mud.painful, split open the old wound of his self-love with new, unprecedented cruelty. He felt the poison of humiliation, of thirst for revenge, and of bitter triumph spreading through his veins, poisoning every particle of his being. Simply to take revenge? No, that was too petty, too primitive for his mind, sophisticated in the art of inflicting suffering. To kill? That was crude, material, and devoid of that refined cruelty he so valued. He required something greater. Not merely to strike a blow, but to humiliate her in the most exquisite manner; to crush not the body, but the very soul, to disgrace her in the eyes of that very world for which she had betrayed him; to shatter that very «sound garden» of which he had spoken, tearing out by the

roots all the flowers of her reputation and trampling them into the mud.

And standing there, solitary and majestic in his downfall, amid the dying day and the rotting city, Kazimir felt how in his consciousness, illuminated by a flash of infernal inspiration, a design was being born. A design so monstrous, so beautiful in its devilish completeness, that his lips curved of themselves into a smile devoid of all warmth, the smile of a demon who has found the key to the most secret gates of human suffering. He knew how he would do it. He would turn to the most sacred, the most inviolable thing in any woman's life. He would turn to her mother. devilish completeness, that his lips curved of themselves into a smile devoid of all warmth, the smile of a demon who has found the key to the most secret gates of human suffering. He knew how he would do it. He would turn to the most sacred, the most inviolable thing in any woman's life. He would turn to her mother.

The thought, dropped into the fertile soil of his grievance, sprouted with the swiftness of a poisonous mushroom that appears overnight on swampy ground, absorbing all the miasmas of decay. Not merely revenge, but revenge clothed in the form of a higher, sacrilegious justice — that is what this plan promised him. To humiliate the daughter, one must defile the mother; to stain the honor of the living, one must invoke the shade of the deceased. For Ilona, with all her cold haughtiness, came from a family whose reputation was as impeccable as it was fragile,

resting upon the strict principles and piety of her parent, Madam Matrona, who had departed this world two years before this fateful day.

This Matrona, whose stern visage Kazimir remembered with the same distinctness as that of her daughter, was a woman of iron and prayer book. Her faith was not a warm, life-giving light, but a cold, inexorable flame of an inquisitor's pyre, turned both outward and inward. She had erected around her family a fortress of dogmas and proprieties, and through the embrasures of this fortress she gazed upon the world with suspicion, seeing in every person a potential tempter, and in every joy — a sinful snare. It was she, as he suspected, who had played no small role in Ilona's decision to reject him, a poor artist, a man without clan or tribe, whose life was one continuous carnival, and whose craft — a sinful lie.

And so, to shatter the fortress, he resolved to turn its own citadel into an instrument of destruction. He required the soul of Madam Matrona. Not metaphorically, but in the most palpable, monstrously material form, to place it, like poison, into the mouth of a soulless doll.

The cemetery where this stern Matrona had found eternal rest lay on the very outskirts of the city, there where the little streets had quite lost their coherent form, sprawling into a squelching, miry swamp. It was old, abandoned, given over to oblivion, like all that could no longer serve the vanity of the living. Its fence had sagged and become overgrown with moss, the stone slabs,

undermined by damp, sank into the earth like ships mired in a quagmire, and the air above it was motionless and thick as oil, and it smelled of rotted leaves, wet clay, and something else, sweetly putrescent, that defied definition.

Kazimir arrived there at that hour when the moon, pale and sickly, only occasionally broke through the torn coverings of clouds, casting upon the ground spectral, wavering patches of light. In his hands he carried a small but heavy bundle wrapped in black velvet — his future marionette, the doll that was to become a sarcophagus for an alien soul. He stepped among the graves without feeling the earth beneath his feet, for his entire being was taut as a bowstring ready to loose an arrow into the very core of darkness. At last he found what he sought: a massive tombstone of black marble, upon which the inscription could still be made out: «Matrona von Walter. May she rest in peace.» These words seemed to him the height of hypocrisy, for peace was precisely that which he now intended to violate.

He did not resort to the aid of a crowbar; the physical desecration of the grave was as repugnant to him as it was unnecessary. His instrument was will. His ritual — the concentration of all the poisonous forces of his soul. Unrolling the velvet, he drew out the doll. It was not a refined porcelain young lady, but something far simpler and therefore — dreadful: a wooden figure, roughly carved, with a faceless oval instead of a face, dressed in a dark, severe gown cut in the fashion of some twenty years past. It was empty, mute, and passive, an ideal

vessel, destined to be filled with bitter, resisting contents.

Having placed three black candles upon the grave slab, he lit them. The flames did not waver but stood steady and motionless, like three burning eyes gazing from the netherworld. Kazimir dropped to his knees, cradling the doll in his arms, and fixed his gaze upon that point in space between the candles, at the very center of the triangle formed by their sinister light.

And he began his summons. With quiet, shattering insistence, with an inner pressure emanating from the very depths of his being. He did not utter incantations from old books; he created his own black liturgy, addressing the shade of Matrona, calling to her by the power of his unanchored will. He reminded her of her earthly cares, of her pride, of her fear of sin; he tugged her from non-being with the sharp hooks of her own unrelinquished attachments and grievances.

And for the first time in all his practice of these repulsive mysteries, something went wrong.

Usually the souls he summoned were weak, bewildered, passive; they clutched at the form offered them like a drowning man at a straw. But Matrona's soul was different. She did not come at his call but resisted him with a strength that plunged him into amazement and chilling horror. He perceived her as a dense, resilient, repelling substance that did not wish to leave its cold repose. In the air, though it remained motionless, an invisible pressure arose; it became difficult for him to breathe, as if grave earth had compressed his own chest. The candles did not go out,

but their flames shrank, darkened, and became like three drops of molten tin.

«You will enter!» Kazimir hissed, and in his voice there sounded for the first time not all-conquering confidence, but a ferocious, almost desperate resolve. «I command you! You will serve me in death as you did not serve in life!»

He intensified the pressure of his will, concentrating it into a single ray, sharp as a steel needle. He mentally drove it into that invisible barrier separating him from the soul of the deceased. And then he felt pain. Genuine, physical pain. It pierced his own being, as if that very ray he emitted had struck resistance and, rebounding, had plunged into himself. His head was clamped in a vise of unbearable migraine; an ache arose in his bones as if he had lain upon damp stone for long years; a deafening noise rose in his ears, in which mingled the ringing of bells and a death rattle.

This was her will. The will of a fanatical, unbending old woman who even beyond the bounds of being refused to submit. She defended herself, and her defense was terrible, for it was founded upon the very thing that had made her so impregnable in life — upon a blind, uncompromising faith in her own righteousness.

But Kazimir was possessed. The pain he felt only inflamed his fury. He did not retreat. Instead, he changed tactics. If he could not draw her to himself by force, he would break her resistance by the very same method by which wild beasts are broken —

through pain and fear. He began to attack. He imagined his will — a heavy, blunt hammer — crashing down upon that invisible essence. He envisioned her spectral bones breaking, her mute soul screaming, her spiritual fortress cracking and crumbling.

And with each imagined torture he inflicted upon her, a responding wave of pain rolled back upon himself. He shuddered, his body covered in cold sweat, his teeth clenched to the grinding point. He was breaking her, but he himself was also being broken. It was a battle of two obsessions, a collision of two indomitable wills upon the fragile bridge between worlds, and the price of victory in it was mutual annihilation.

At last, when it seemed to him that one more moment of this confrontation would tear him apart, he felt something give way. That resilient, repelling force weakened, wavered, and with a dull, inner crack, as if a branch of a century-old oak were breaking — collapsed. Something cold, swift, and bitter as wormwood surged from the point before him and burst into the doll he clutched in his arms.

The wooden figure suddenly jerked in his hands, like a body convulsing in death agony. Its head fell back, and upon the faceless oval, at the place where the mouth should be, a slit appeared, from which burst forth the unbearable sensation of a soundless scream. Then the doll froze.

Kazimir, barely breathing, gazed upon his creation. His triumph was poisoned by exhaustion and by that infernal pain still ringing in every nerve. He had by force, literally breaking

her will, installed Matrona's soul into this wooden sarcophagus. But he felt — she had not submitted. She was broken, but not conquered. She lurked within, like a prisoner in a cell, filled with hatred and horror.

He brought the doll to his face, peering into its unseeing eye sockets.

«Now you will speak,» he whispered hoarsely. «You will speak that which I command. You will confess that your daughter is a sinner, born not of a lawful husband, but of a secret lover. You will disgrace her with the name you so zealously guarded in life.»

The doll was silent. But in its silence he sensed a tense, furious resistance. He had forced it to accept form, but had not wholly subjugated its will. And in this incompleteness of victory, in this broken but unyielding spirit, lay the seed of future calamities. But Kazimir, intoxicated by his imagined triumph and his thirst for revenge, rejected this quiet, warning voice. He held in his hands not merely a doll. He held in his hands a bomb whose clockwork mechanism had already begun its countdown.

And so the day came when the sun, as if ashamed of what it was destined to illuminate, hid behind a solid, leaden ceiling of clouds, and the world was plunged into a dismal, gray half-light, so consonant with Kazimir's designs. The main square of the city, ordinarily noisy and motley, at that hour seemed unnaturally hushed, oppressed by the weight of the impending act; even the cries of merchants and the ringing of bells sounded muted, as if

coming from behind a thick glass wall. The very air, damp and motionless, was like a funeral shroud thrown over the city.

Kazimir chose for his performance a place beneath the shade of an ancient cathedral, whose Gothic spires, like the withered fingers of a skeleton, thrust against the low sky. Here, in a niche between two columns, he erected his little theater — a plain screen of wood darkened by time, behind which he hid himself and his dreadful accomplice. Against the backdrop of the cathedral's monumental grandeur, his little booth seemed insignificant, pitiful, like a pustule on the body of a giant, but it was precisely in this insignificance that its power lay, for evil, as is known, takes root most firmly in the small and inconspicuous.

He did not announce his performance loudly; he had no need of a crowd, he needed a single spectator. He knew that at this hour Ilona, following her established routine, was returning from morning mass, and her path inevitably led through this square. And so he began without unnecessary words, without barkers. From behind the screen, faint and quavering at first, there floated a melody he drew from a tiny music box that resembled a coffin. The melody was old, pious, the very one often sung in churches some twenty years ago; a melody that the departed Matrona undoubtedly knew and loved.

Gradually, like flies to honey, idlers began to gather at this strange, incongruous sound. First children, then servant girls with baskets, then idle strollers and old men seeking any diversion to while away the tedious hours of the fading day. They gathered

in a semicircle before the screen, in silent bewilderment, for they saw neither puppeteer nor bright scenery — only the dark rectangle of the screen and that painfully familiar church hymn.

And then, in time with the music, from behind the edge of the screen, slowly, almost hesitantly, a doll appeared. It was dressed in a dark, severe gown, its hair drawn back in a tight bun, its posture straight, almost rigid. In its appearance, in its static pose, there was something indefinably familiar to some of the old-timers, something that made them experience a vague, inexplicable unease. Kazimir, invisible as a demon standing at the left shoulder of a sinner, controlled it with the greatest care. He did not make it dance or perform pirouettes; it simply sat there, at the edge of the screen, motionless and majestic in its silence, and this contrast between the living, trembling music and its deathly stillness was in itself deeply disturbing.

And at that very moment, as he had foreseen, from the doors of the cathedral emerged Ilona, accompanied by her maid. She walked with her head slightly bowed, immersed in her thoughts, perhaps in her worldly cares or in prayerful serenity. Her steps were measured and full of dignity. She had almost crossed the square when her hearing, as well as that of all those gathered, was struck by a voice.

A voice emanating from the doll.

It was not loud, but piercing as a fine awl; not coarse, but dreadfully familiar. It was the voice of Matrona. Not an exact copy, but its essence, its spectral imprint, deprived of warmth

and flesh, but preserving all its merciless, sharp clarity and that particular metallic intonation with which she had pronounced her moral teachings.

«Stop, my child,» the doll pronounced, and its faceless wooden visage seemed to turn toward Ilona. child,» the doll pronounced, and its faceless wooden visage seemed to turn toward Ilona.

She froze in place, as if taking root in the stone slabs. At first her face reflected only simple bewilderment, then — swift, instinctive recognition, and finally — a slowly mounting, all-consuming horror. She stood, unable to stir, unable to utter a sound, staring at this wooden likeness of her mother, from whose lips poured that very hated and beloved dead speech.

«I call to you from the darkness in which I dwell, to lift the heavy burden from my soul,» the doll continued, and each of its words, wrung out and suffered through by Kazimir's will, fell upon the square like a stone into water, spreading in circles of sepulchral silence. «The burden of the lie I carried within me in life. The burden of the sin that has settled upon our family.»

Kazimir, standing behind the screen, in the sticky half-darkness, savored every moment of this infernal spectacle. He saw how the blood drained from Ilona's face, leaving it deathly pale, how her eyes became glassy, how her lips began to tremble finely. He felt the doll's resistance, its dull, desperate unwillingness to pronounce the words, but his will, like a white-hot crowbar, pried open this spiritual armor, tearing from the

depths of an alien soul the words he needed.

«I was a sinner,» the voice from behind the screen proclaimed, and in it sounded genuine, terrible torment, for it was the torment of a violated will. «I broke my vow. You, Ilona, my child, were born not in lawful wedlock, but from a secret liaison of mine with a man whose name I shall carry with me to the grave. Your father, whom you revere, is not your father by

The silence on the square became absolute, ringing. One could hear a sparrow fly past, hear the rustle of the maid's dress as she recoiled from her mistress. All gazes, full of amazement, horror, and greedy curiosity, were fixed now on the doll, now on Ilona. A society lady, a pillar of propriety and virtue, had turned out to be... illegitimate. The fruit of sin. The living embodiment of the lie of her own, so revered mother.

Ilona's face became distorted. This was not merely a grimace of shame or grief; it was the face of a person from under whose feet all the earth had been torn away, all supports had collapsed, the whole world had crumbled to dust. In her eyes was read not only incredible humiliation, but the collapse of her entire life, all her convictions, her entire personality. She had been publicly exposed, disgraced, trampled in the most terrible of possible ways — by the voice of the one whose opinion had been law to her. She stood, defenseless and naked before the crowd, and Kazimir, observing this through a narrow

But precisely at this moment of highest exaltation something occurred. His gaze, sliding over Ilona's distorted face,

mechanically shifted to the doll, to that wooden visage turned toward her daughter. And he saw that which could not be, which should never have been. On the polished, lifeless cheek of the doll, directly beneath the bead of its eye, there glistened a tiny, perfect drop. A drop of moisture. It hung for a moment as if hesitating, then rolled down, leaving behind a thin, barely noticeable damp trail.

It was a tear. A real, salty, human tear.

An icy hand clenched Kazimir's heart. His triumph was instantly eclipsed, giving way to a sensation of monstrous, incomprehensible error. How? The soul was a specter, the marionette — wood and rags. Whence a tear? This was a violation of all laws, both physical and those governing his gloomy art. It was a sign, a sign of genuine, unfeigned suffering that had broken through the barrier of death and violence. It was the tear of a mother gazing upon the torments of her child.

And at that very moment when his reason, having rejected the impossibility of this phenomenon, attempted to comprehend it, he heard. Within his skull, in that part where thoughts were born and where his own «I» dwelt, a sound rang out. Quiet at first, barely distinguishable, like the rustle of dry leaves. But it grew, acquiring form, clarity, meaning.

It was laughter.

Not his own, born of gloating or madness. It was alien laughter. Female. Gentle, almost tender, and therefore — a thousand times more spine-chilling. It was full of an infinite

pity and mockery simultaneously, surpassing all understanding. It sounded as if someone very ancient and very wise were observing his triumph and seeing in it a pitiful, childish amusement doomed to a swift and terrible end.

Kazimir sharply recoiled from the screen, nearly overturning his little theater. He pressed himself against the cathedral wall, wildly looking around, but there was no one, only stone walls and his own fear, suddenly become alien. The laughter ceased as suddenly as it had appeared, leaving behind only a ringing emptiness and an absolute, impenetrable certainty: he was not alone in his consciousness. Something had entered there. Or... he had himself admitted someone.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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