

KSENIA VOROBAY

And **WHO** will you be?



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Ксения Воробей

And Who Will You Be?

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In a city where you can wear someone else's face, identity is no longer fixed. A few small changes—and you are someone different: more beautiful, more confident, freer. Interpreters have made changing your appearance a part of everyday life. Some use it for work, others for pleasure. But every choice comes at a price. Bonnie never meant to get involved. Yet a chance encounter and other people's stories draw her into events that will change both her and the entire city. What remains when anyone can be anyone? Where is the line between freedom and deception? And can you hold on to who you are as the world learns to change faces? An intimate fantasy about people, choices, and the faces we wear.

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Ксения Воробей And Who Will You Be?

Now You Can. But What Do You Want?

The Valmont Herald

It is becoming difficult to walk through our city without being offered something else to buy or invest in. Yesterday there was a button shop here; today they are offering you a new face. A monster floats above the entrance to the cinematograph. The man who was asking you to lend him something until payday only the other day now explains that you are simply afraid of anything new, and invites you to invest in his enterprise.

I should still ask for my money back first.

But on the whole, I understand them. For the first time in their lives, people can try their hand at magic without first spending years studying runes and seals. Buy an Interpreter, and set about something that used to mean finding a magician, explaining your idea, and hoping that afterwards he would at least name a price rather than show you to the door.

Now you can try it yourself. This is usually where things become interesting.

Suppose you want to show your friends a sea. Not one you have visited, but a sea of your own: pink water, dark rocks, fish glowing beneath the waves. The image need take up no more than half the table. You can already imagine your guests leaning closer, and somebody calling the others in from the next room.

Telling an Interpreter "I want a sea" is easy. But as you touch the wand and direct what it is to do, you have to hold in your mind exactly what you want to see: how the light falls on the water, where the shore ends, how a wave moves. And then you discover that you remember the sea perfectly well, but not the wave nearly so well. It is moving all the time, after all. You never meant to make it. You were looking at it.

You do not like your first attempt. The pink is too bright; the water looks like jelly. On the second, the colour is right, but you want to get rid of the rocks. On the third, you finally understand why you needed them.

By now you are hungry and feel as though you have spent the evening unloading a cart, although you have done nothing but sit at the table. Your own strength runs out after the Interpreter's energy. You could eat, rest and come back tomorrow. That would be sensible. But you have just worked out what is wrong with the wave.

An accumulator will come in handy. Then, perhaps, another. Best put the receipt away for now: it looks particularly out of place beside the pink sea.

And suddenly it works.

Light passes through the wave; the water darkens beside the rock. One of the fish turns, and for an instant you can see the whole of its slender, luminous back. You call the family. They do not come at once, and you are already shouting for them to hurry, growing cross: can they really not put their own business aside for a minute?

Someone is bound to say that fish do not come in those colours.

But someone else will sit down beside you. And you will both watch the water moving slowly above the familiar tabletop.

The evening may cost more than you intended. And afterwards the sea will vanish: temporary spells need energy, and you cannot keep them going for ever. The accumulators and that same receipt will be left on the table. And you had wanted to invite the woman next door.

I should be upset. Particularly if that were the moment someone chose to ask how much it had all cost. And yet, if I were one of the guests, I should want to see the sea before it vanished.

A beginner with an Interpreter can now manage a miracle for an evening. Creating spells that will serve reliably for years is another kind of work, and it still has to be learnt. Only the audience is already applauding the first miracle, while the person who spent half a lifetime studying stands beside it, listening to questions about why he bothered to study so much.

I dislike how easily “there is an easier way now” turns into “all your earlier efforts were a waste of time”.

Still, some of the masters have already taken up Interpreters themselves. A master would probably get the wave right sooner. And would probably spot another dozen mistakes in someone else’s work that you and I would never notice.

Behind all these changes lies the joint work of Quentin Doromio and his wife Eliana: he created the first wand, she the runic workings of the device. Now their invention is being used to open workshops, stage performances and try on other people’s appearances. The ventures grow ever bolder. Not all of them succeed. Some you very much want to catch before the accumulators run out.

If you decide to try the pink sea, invite me while the fish are still swimming. I shall sit beside you. I will not argue about their colour.

And what would you like to try yourselves?

Madeleine Renard

Chapter 1. The Golden Crabapple

Quentin Doromio was drinking wine on the roof of his house and had absolutely no intention of coming down while there were still people below.

It was a warm evening. The sunset was fading over the river, and lamps were being lit along the embankment. A queue was gathering outside the new cinematograph; above the entrance, a sea monster kept leaping from a painted wave, to the unfailing delight of passers-by.

The wand lay beside him on his folded coat. Quentin had arranged it so that the handle did not touch the roof tiles, and now kept adjusting the coat, although there was nothing there to slip out of place.

“That creature’s tail doesn’t work,” he said. “Look. The water parts, but the tail sticks straight out. How do they think it moves?”

“That’s the third time you’ve watched.”

The voice was hers: a little languid, with that breath before a laugh which he had once heard through the clatter of the workshop.

“Because it’s the third time they’ve made the same mistake.”

Below, the monster dived, dousing a painted ship with painted water. The people in the queue clapped. Quentin turned away. A good show used to need so many people: actors, artists, mechanics, at least someone who understood movement. Now they dreamed up some absurdity, showed it through an Interpreter and took people’s money.

“They’re enjoying themselves,” said the wand. “It was quieter at your lecture on bearings.”

“Forty-two people came to my lecture.”

“Thirty-nine were ordered to attend as part of their duties. I counted.”

Quentin was about to object that she should have counted those who stayed after the interval, and faltered. He had already made that qualification. To her. Many years ago.

He had built her voice into the Interpreter himself. He knew which conversations, habits and arguments remained in its accumulated context; he knew his wife was not in there. Yet whenever he was about to answer, he turned his head.

“We filmed horses to understand how they fly,” he said after a pause. “Real ones. Here you can invent anything at all, even a ship with legs.”

“I wanted to show our recording to people too. And you explained that they wouldn’t understand the movement of the wing.”

Quentin remembered. He also remembered how she would stand by the window, trying to demonstrate that wingbeat with her arms while he searched for the right page of calculations. She would laugh when he finally turned round.

“At least the horse flew,” he muttered.

“It did.”

He reached out as though he could touch her fingers, found the cool handle and drew it closer. The wine had grown warm. Quentin drank some anyway.

A damp breeze came off the river.

“Aren’t you cold?”

He did not wait for an answer. He tucked the edge of the coat around the wand and looked back at the lights by the water.

Leaves rustled in the garden below the roof. The paths had long since grown over with grass, the lilac was edging towards the windows, and the fountain belonged to the frogs. Only the apple tree in the middle looked as though someone tended it: silvery bark, spreading branches, small golden fruit glowing in the dusk.

His wife had brought home the sapling many years ago. Then she had wanted the tree to blossom twice a year, its flowers to smell of snow, and its apples to bring wonderfully vivid, pleasant dreams. Next she had decided to protect the harvest from thieves. Ever since, the apple tree had devised a fresh mischief for everyone: it had made one boy sneeze green sparks and given another a magnificent moustache.

He started to turn towards the tree, then looked back at the river. He could still remember his wife searching the branches for new buds in the mornings, lifting her skirt clear of the wet grass. He did not want to remember now.

“Quentin, there’s someone at the gate.”

He reluctantly looked down.

“She’s pretty,” the voice added. “At least hear what she’s come for.”

Quentin covered the wand with the flap of his coat. A woman in an elaborate hat stood at the gate. She read the PRIVATE PROPERTY sign carefully, opened the gate, knocked at the house and, receiving no answer, set off to inspect the garden.

The stranger stopped beneath the apple tree and picked a fruit. Quentin bellowed at her not to touch it. She did not respond; perhaps she thought someone was shouting in the next street. A second apple went into her basket. She had to stand on tiptoe for the third.

The third apple vanished into the basket. Green smoke began to creep out from under the roots.



* * *

Madeleine Renard had no intention of stealing. That morning she had completed the formalities of her third divorce and promised herself to spend the rest of the day sensibly: buy some pastries, go home and get on with her own life, without trying to work out why it had turned out so stupidly again.

Three boys outside the pastry shop had spoiled her plans. With the air of experts, they were assuring one another that a Golden Crabapple grew in the mad scientist's garden: eat one and it was as though you had rested for a week, and afterwards you went about happy even if someone gave you a beating. One reported that his uncle had tried one and had not sworn for two days. Madeleine found this especially intriguing.

The boys themselves had not eaten any apples. According to them, the tree could not only give joy but punish thieves, and differently every time. Madeleine decided that two samples would be quite enough to test. But when she saw the small, translucent fruit, she could not resist picking a third.

Then smoke came billowing out of the ground.

Madeleine recoiled. The smoke was climbing the trunk, and there was a smell of hot resin. She had not the slightest desire to stand beneath a burning tree. She gripped her Interpreter, pictured herself putting out the fire, and shouted:

"Water! Quickly, lots of it!"

The crystal's glow dimmed. A cloud the size of a dining table appeared above the apple tree and emptied its entire contents at once. The smoke vanished, the garden turned into a bog, and Madeleine was soaked down to her petticoat. The pastries in her basket ceased to be pastries. The flowers on her hat drooped disconsolately.

"Who the fuck makes wishes like that?!"

"I was putting out your tree," Madeleine replied with as much dignity as she could muster.

"Putting out what?! It sent up smoke to make you return the apples! And you've flooded my garden. And yourself into the bargain. Dry your dress, now you've got your wand out!"

Madeleine wanted to say something exceptionally rude, but instead took her wand, touched the crystal and dried her clothes. Her hair remained wet, but she decided to deal with that particular nuisance later.

A woman's muffled laughter came from above.

"Quentin, I think she was worried about the tree. That's rather touching, if you forget she'd just robbed it."

Madeleine looked up at the roof, but could see no second speaker. The scientist was speaking somewhere in the direction of his own feet, then adjusted a coat lying beside him. Deciding that his family affairs were no concern of hers, she turned towards the gate.

"The boys said these apples give you energy," she threw back as she left. "And supposedly make life more cheerful."

Quentin suddenly roared with laughter, so loudly that he nearly spilled his wine.

"Energy?! After those you'll..."

Madeleine noticed the bottle beside him rock and roll across the tiles.

"The bottle!"

Quentin was still laughing, and only her expression told him she was not joking. He lunged backwards, missed, and nearly slid off the roof himself. The bottle fell from the eaves. Madeleine stepped back, then thrust out her basket. It jerked her arm downwards; a paper bag crunched inside. The glass survived. The pastries did not.

"Excellent," said Quentin. "Now leave the wine by the door and clear off."

Madeleine peered into her basket, where the bottle lay among the ruined pastries.

"You've crushed my dinner. I think I'll keep the bottle as compensation."

“That’s my wine! And you drowned the pastries yourself!”

“But they had at least kept their shape.”

He was left spluttering with indignation. It gave her enough time to reach the gate.

“Wait!” Quentin roared. “I haven’t finished telling you what the apples will do!”

“And I haven’t finished telling you what I think of your hospitality!” Madeleine called over her shoulder, and disappeared through the gate.

“She’s taken my wine,” he said at last.

“You still haven’t explained about the apples.”

“I tried!”

The smell of wet earth rose from the garden. Quentin looked at the empty place where the bottle had stood and, for the first time that evening, gave serious thought to putting a lock on the gate.

* * *

By the time Madeleine reached the bridge, the town festival was drawing to a close. The musicians were packing away their instruments, the workmen were taking down garlands, and beneath the bridge lay a barge piled with soft bundles of scenery. A broad awning hid it from the street.

A fair-haired woman could be seen on the outer side of the parapet. She was holding on to the railings with one hand and trying with the other to reach a rope caught on a wrought-iron curlicue.

“Brook, let go! Let me jump down!”

Madeleine saw the narrow stone ledge beneath her feet and the dark water below. She did not know about the barge. The basket of wine was left on the pavement, and Madeleine was already running towards the parapet.

“Don’t!” she cried, catching the woman round the waist and pulling her backwards.



The woman gave a cry, the rope slipped from her fingers, and a hook flew out of its loop with a metallic clang. An enormous paper sun, which the workmen were trying to take down, swung open to its full width and fell onto the bridge, covering both rescuers.

The woman emerged first. Her dyed blonde hair was dishevelled, a white streak of paint marked her cheek, and her blue eyes shone with indignation.

“Whatever are you doing!” Madeleine was still holding her sleeve. “So young, so beautiful... You’ve your whole life ahead of you. Live a little for yourself, at least, if you’ve had enough of everyone else!”

“I was going onto the barge,” said the woman. She stopped tugging at her sleeve and looked down, then at Madeleine. “There are bundles right below the ledge. I was going to jump down, untie the lower guy rope and pass it up. And they’ve pulled the wrong end three times now!”

Her indignation did not last long, however. Imagining how it must all have looked, she put a hand over her mouth and suddenly burst out laughing: loudly, infectiously, with entirely unfeigned pleasure. Madeleine tried to remain serious, but the head of a workman protruding from beneath the overturned sun defeated her. They both laughed.

“Miss Bonnie, what are we to do with the frame?” came a voice above them.

Bonnie wiped her eyes and turned to the workmen.

“Don’t fold the rays. The canvas separately, the frame edgeways towards the stairs. Brook, leave the winch for now.”

“It won’t go through edgeways, Miss Bonnie. It’s narrow by the railings.”

She looked at the stairs.

“You’re right. Take off the bottom two rays. Just mark which one goes where.”

She almost added that she would put everything away herself, then suddenly felt the ache in her shoulders. She still had to wash the paint off her hands; she had gone to bed with it yesterday because she had fallen asleep over a list, and in the morning her hands had stuck to the sheet. Bonnie opened her fingers, checking for splinters. The workmen were already removing the rays. This time she let them finish.

A workman crouched beside the fastenings. Bonnie began to bend down to help, then noticed Madeleine, still holding her hat by its broken brim.

“Are you hurt?” Bonnie asked. “I know a good doctor, and a milliner can mend your hat. You were trying to save me, after all, and it would be quite disgraceful to let you leave in this state.”

Madeleine opened her mouth to decline the doctor. Bonnie was already asking how far she had to go and whether she had dry shoes at home.

Someone moved the abandoned basket. A small golden apple rolled out and came to rest beside Bonnie’s shoe.

“Oh, look at that!” She picked up the fruit and turned it in the light. “Is it real? It looks like a little lantern.”

“It’s real. Magical, they say. The owner’s dreadful, but I don’t suppose the apples are to blame.”

Bonnie peered into the basket with interest. She saw two more apples, a bottle, and some cream which had once been pastries.

“I think,” she decided, “we ought to discuss this over tea. Surely you won’t pretend you don’t need tea after today? Oh, and your hair’s still wet! You definitely need tea!”

* * *

Bonnie’s flat smelled of flowers and glue. There was a bouquet by the window, and another lay on the sill in wet paper: its owner had not yet found a vase. Thank-you notes showed white between the stems. Gifts of little figurines crowded the shelves, and the table was covered with letters which had to be moved to make room for the cups.

One remained beneath a saucer. Bonnie pulled it out, read the first few lines and laid it aside.

“That’s for tomorrow. To help with the lists. I only promised to have a look; it won’t take long.”

She said this before Madeleine had had a chance to ask anything. The tray was weighing down two more envelopes. Bonnie moved it so that their corners would not be creased, and finally sat down.

Madeleine cupped her hands round her cup. After the cold water in the garden and the run across the bridge, the hot tea made her drowsy; she wanted to sit in silence, but Bonnie was already looking at the basket.

Madeleine told her about the boys, the tree and the bottle. When she came to the pastries, Bonnie cautiously peered into the basket.

“What were they before the garden?”

“Two almond. One cherry.”

“Now they’re one big one.”

Madeleine sighed and reached for a teaspoon.

“Are you really going to eat that?”

“I paid for them.”

Bonnie laughed, but did not try to take the basket away. She only moved the plate of biscuits a little closer.

When Madeleine bent down for her handkerchief, a chain with a ring on it slipped out from beneath her collar. Bonnie noticed, but did not immediately dare to ask. Her guest caught her looking.

“I got divorced today,” she said. “For the third time. The same husband every time; you may laugh.”

Bonnie did laugh, before she had had time to decide whether it was proper. Madeleine smiled, a little surprised herself at how easily the words had come. That morning, at the office, she had spoken them in quite a different voice.

“And what is it about him?” Bonnie asked.

“He’s handsome. Very intelligent. Sometimes he’s so good at what matters most that you forget everything else. Felix Renard, psychiatrist and psychotherapist. A splendid doctor. Just never ask him to choose you a present.”

Bonnie knew the surname. She had heard little about Renard himself, but was already picturing a dinner: a small table, music, nobody else. She began explaining how it could be arranged, took out a pencil and turned over the nearest envelope. “Musicians—ask Madeleine” appeared on the paper before Madeleine had a chance to object.

“Don’t arrange my fourth wedding for me.”

“I only meant dinner. We could leave out the musicians.”

Madeleine laid her hand over the envelope.

“Bonnie, I got divorced today. For the moment, pastries are quite enough.”

Bonnie still held the pencil. She looked at what she had just written, drew a line beneath the word “musicians” and stopped: it was not the musicians Madeleine had refused.

“Forgive me. The way you talk about him, I thought...”

“You can speak well of someone without wanting to have dinner with him today.” Madeleine lifted her hand. “Shall we open some wine?”

The neck of the rescued bottle protruded from the basket. The wine, she said, would now be awkward to return: the scientist would think she had not liked it. Bonnie managed to bring two wine glasses and some cheese, but was not allowed to change the tablecloth. Madeleine put her glass beside a little tea stain and asked her to sit down at last.

The tea grew cold. The lamps outside had long been lit, and only rinds remained of the cheese. Bonnie took off her shoes, tucked one leg under her and listened to the story of a brooch which an acquaintance of Madeleine’s had mistaken for a military campaign medal.

“I wore it,” said Madeleine, answering the unspoken question. “He chose it. Took his time over it. That was especially hurtful.”

They laughed again. Bonnie poured the last of the wine into their glasses; the empty bottle struck the table with a dull thud.

“And what happened this time?”

Madeleine was still smiling. The brooch was easy to talk about; what had happened was harder. She wanted neither to complain to a woman she barely knew nor to make the divorce sound like a bit of fun she would be sure to change her mind about tomorrow.

"We decided to spend an evening together," she said. "We decided in advance. I even put something else aside."

She had been sorting through old letters: for forty years, a woman had been receiving money from a man whom, by all indications, she had never known. There might have been no particular mystery to it, but Madeleine had already found two dates that did not agree, and had spent the whole day looking forward to telling Felix. He loved inconsistencies like that; sometimes he noticed things she missed.

"He came in with a parcel. An enormous one. I thought it was for me and was already frightened, but it turned out to be a painting. He'd bought it for both of us."

Bonnie waited for a description. Madeleine paused, remembering.

"A stag. A woman with a harp on its antlers. At first I thought she was stuck, but it turned out she personified the music of the forest."

Bonnie put down her glass. Madeleine waited for her to finish laughing.

"I started telling him about the letters. He asked me to clear away the papers, because the painting's beauty could only be appreciated by candlelight. I cleared them away. He lit the candles. I said, 'Intriguing.' And waited until I could go on."

But Felix wanted to tell her how he had found the painting, how he had haggled, why the artist had chosen that particular light. He kept addressing her, waiting for an answer, while Madeleine had just remembered where she had seen the date she needed, and reached into her bag for her notes. Something in his voice made her look up.

"He said he might as well have had dinner with the frame. At least it wasn't rummaging about. I told him the frame would suit him perfectly: it was gilded too, and just as incapable of listening."

"But he wanted to..."

"I know. I know now. At the time I thought he was deliberately stopping me from speaking."

Madeleine could hear that this was not quite fair. She still thought so now, in part. Felix could take up an entire evening and then be sincerely bewildered by her displeasure. Yet she was remembering something else: the way he had held the painting to keep it from sliding off the armchair, still waiting for Madeleine to look up from her bag.

"I could have listened too," she said. "I just wanted so badly to be listened to that evening."

Bonnie suggested an agreement: one evening for her letters, another for his interests. She began confidently, but fell silent herself when she met Madeleine's eyes.

"I don't want a timetable," Madeleine said. "Sometimes I want to get carried away and forget the time. And for him to come and see what I've found. He can do it. He brings food because I've forgotten about it, sits down beside me..."

She did not finish. A little wine remained at the bottom of her glass; she did not want any more.

"He probably wants that too," said Bonnie.

"Probably. But why do I always have to remember it?"

A late carriage rumbled past outside. Madeleine waited for the wheels to fall silent, but when she continued, her voice was quieter:

"I want to be looked after too. Without having to do everything right first. Just because. And I want to go somewhere on my own if it interests me. You do have to live your own life, don't you? You can't keep running round looking after another person."

Bonnie looked at the tray, with the letters peeping out from beneath it.

"But what if they're counting on you?"

"Sometimes he can spend an evening without me. And I can spend one without him. We probably ought to have learnt that by now."

Madeleine was talking about her marriage; Bonnie imagined an evening when she had warned no one, made no list of tasks, given no explanation of where to find her. At first it felt pleasant. Then she began remembering whom she still had to give things to, and what they were.

Noticing that Bonnie was looking at the letters again, Madeleine regretted the long conversation. The girl had invited her to tea and been treated to the story of three failed marriages to the same man. Madeleine finished her wine and asked whether, in the garden, she might have washed all the goodness out of the apples along with the smoke. Bonnie laughed and began asking how long the water had stood between the trees.

At the door, Bonnie gave her guest a spare handkerchief and a slip of paper with the milliner's address. Madeleine put them in her handbag, then asked for a pencil and another slip of paper.

"I'll leave you Felix's address," she said, writing down the name. "You promised me a good doctor on the bridge, so I'll leave you one too. You can talk to him when you're feeling bad. Don't wait until it gets unbearable. Just don't tell him I praised him so much."

Bonnie wanted to assure her that she had no need of a doctor, but Madeleine was already taking out a golden apple.

"Here. The boys promised energy and happiness. I can't guarantee anything, especially after meeting the owner of the garden, but it is so beautiful. I still have two."

"Then come again," said Bonnie. "Without any adventures."

"I won't promise."

Madeleine put on her broken hat, adjusted it in the mirror and left. Bonnie laid the slip with the doctor's address beside the teapot. The flat still held the pleasant sense of someone else's presence: an armchair pushed back, a teaspoon left on a saucer, a scent of perfume. She decided not to tidy anything away just yet.

* * *

That night, Bonnie took the letters out from under the tray. She answered the first request at once. For the second, she had to consult a list. She had already read the third over tea, but now could not remember what it asked.

This was happening more and more often. Over the last few weeks she had been leaving for the evening whatever she had not managed during the day, then waking before the alarm and beginning with the unfinished work. Even a successful festival meant more bills, returning fabrics, thank-you letters, a promise to meet and discuss the next one. During the festival itself, she felt happy. Afterwards, she had to muster her strength for the simplest things: taking off her shoes, eating, getting to bed.

Today she had managed to eat and to laugh her fill. Why did she still have no strength left for the third letter?

"You can't keep running round looking after another person."

She wrote, "Tomorrow, unfortunately..." and stopped. A blot remained on the sheet: the pen had touched the paper for too long. If she could not come, they would ask someone else. Or manage on their own.

That morning, Bonnie had left her Interpreter on the long table and asked it to save the discussion of the final preparations for the festival: she had needed to go and sort out the delivery of the flowers. Afterwards, there had been no time all day to watch it.

She picked up the wand. Now she would see. Perhaps Madeleine was right and nothing terrible happened when she was away.

An image appeared above the table: a window on the left, the edge of a board, three people, one half-hidden behind someone else's shoulder. The person behind the shoulder remained out of sight even when he spoke.

“Let’s divide everything up while Bonnie’s away,” one of the assistants was saying. “Or she’ll come back and decide we’re lost without her again. She’s wonderful, but she does need to be allowed a rest sometimes.”

“The tables would be better by the water,” said Brook.

“What about the wind? All the tablecloths will end up in the river.”

“Against the wall, then. Just leave a way through.”

The assistant drew the list towards her.

“I’ll take the tables. Who’s meeting the musicians?”

Bonnie sat with her cheek propped on her hand. The apple lay on a saucer beside her elbow. She picked it up without taking her eyes off the image, and bit into it.

They had settled it without her. No one had even suggested waiting for her to return. Bonnie went back to the point in the recording where they called her “wonderful”. Then back again, to the tables. They had left plenty of room to get through.

The apple was sweet, with a taste of cold air. She took another bite and tried to remember what she had been going to advise them. The tables really had been conveniently placed; she had seen that for herself today.

The image was blurring. Bonnie blinked and put the wand in its stand. It was good that they had managed. Now she could...

She just had time to lay the fruit on the saucer. Her cheek came to rest on her bent arm.

Chapter 2. A Peacock in a Storm

In her dream, Bonnie was in a garden where a long table had already been laid for lunch.

Familiar people had gathered there, although on waking she would not have been able to name them all. Cherry twigs lay between the cups; someone had brought warm bread, and the crust crunched so distinctly that Bonnie felt it against her own teeth. She stood to one side and saw herself at the table, wearing an old dress she had loved and had given away long ago. That other Bonnie was laughing at something, her head thrown back.

More plates were needed. Bonnie thought of this, but the plates were already being brought. A child dropped a spoon; the man beside the child picked it up. The wind tugged at the tablecloth, and someone held down the edge with a hand.

The other Bonnie saw all this. She sat there, breaking off pieces of bread.

They had not forgotten her: they pushed a dish towards her, asked her to tell a funny story, then interrupted because they knew a different version. An argument began at the table. Bonnie, standing to one side, wanted to object too, but the woman in the old dress was already saying exactly what she had been about to say. They laughed together.

The garden changed imperceptibly. Berries appeared on the branches, then the leaves turned yellow; a cup broke and was replaced by another. A strand of grey flashed in the hair of the woman at the table. The child who had dropped the spoon was now sitting in a different place, cutting a large pie. Bonnie felt no surprise and did not try to count the years. Everything was familiar, even what she had never seen.

An empty chair was pushed towards her. She sat down, no longer watching herself from outside, and stretched her legs out beneath the table. Warmth rose from the ground. She could listen to the end of the story: no one expected her to get up before the others.

Somewhere in the distance came a knocking. Bonnie decided someone else would answer.

Bonnie woke to a knock at the door.

The light was falling on the table from an unfamiliar direction. The creases of her sleeve had left her cheek feeling tight, and her numb arm would not straighten. Bonnie moved her fingers and watched them bend. Then she ran a hand over her cheek. The room smelled of yesterday's tea, not the garden.

The knock came again. It was almost eleven by the clock.

She stood too quickly and caught hold of the edge of the table. She waited until everything stopped swaying, then went to answer the door. On the other side stood a boy from the festival team.

"Miss Bonnie, Brook said to tell you: the scenery's been put away, we've had the bill from the town council, and the materials are locked up. And no one's to bother you today. He particularly asked me to say that."

"What about the lists?"

"Which lists?"

"For today. I promised to have a look."

The boy thought for a moment.

"I don't know. Brook said everything was done."

Bonnie thanked him. He lingered, waiting for an errand, then ran down the stairs. She closed the door.

Someone laughed in the street. Bonnie went back to the window. The boy was already running across the road, jumping over puddles, and did not look back once. In the dream it had all happened so easily: she sat while the others managed. Now she wanted to stop him and ask him to check the lists again.

No one was angry. No one was asking where she had been. Perhaps even the letters she had meant to answer were no longer needed. At the table in the garden they had wanted her there without any task for her to do. Here, she did not even know how to fill the next hour. She poured herself some water just in case, although she was not thirsty.

“What if I disappeared altogether and never owed anyone anything again?”

Bonnie froze with the cup in her hand. The thought had come as matter-of-factly as a decision to cancel an appointment. That made it more frightening.

She put down the cup. Water splashed onto the slip beside the teapot. Bonnie picked it up automatically. Above a spreading line of ink, the words “Felix Renard” were still clearly legible.

You can talk to him when you’re feeling bad.

Bonnie sat down. She sat for a while, pressing the slip against her knee. Then she decided she had better wash first.

Washing proved difficult too: finding a towel, pouring water, getting her hair out of the way. Each time, a stretch of time passed between intention and movement. She looked in the mirror for a long time, unable to work out what she had not yet done, until she noticed yesterday’s paint beside her ear.

She could go. Just ask.

But he would not see her without an appointment. And if he did, someone would have to wait. There were people there who were really suffering; she could not turn up because she had slept through the morning and did not know what to do with herself. He would ask what had happened. What would she say? Everyone was doing their work well, no one had hurt her, she had spent the evening drinking wine with a pleasant woman, and now she was complaining?

She put the slip in her handbag, then took it out again. She sat down before she had finished fastening her dress.

She needed to eat. She would probably feel better afterwards. She broke off some bread and chewed it. She felt no better. She did not want to look at the letters, and immediately felt ashamed: only recently she herself had been delighted that people came to her.

Bonnie picked up the top envelope to finish her reply after all. On the back she found the note she had made yesterday: “Musicians—ask Madeleine”.

She remembered the stag with the woman on its antlers.

Felix and Madeleine had never really talked it through, had they? Each had expected the other to guess. If she met him, carefully found out... Not arrange a dinner, no. Just see whether there was anything she could do to help.

Bonnie raised her head. That would give her a reason to leave the house. She did not have to talk about herself straight away. She would drop in briefly, pass on Madeleine’s regards. Then she would see.

She fastened her dress and put up her hair. The slip went back into her handbag. Already at the door, Bonnie turned back for it, although it was in there; she had to open the bag and make sure.

Outside, she walked slowly towards the clinic. Twice on the way she almost turned back. Both times she remembered Madeleine.

* * *

Felix saw his patients in a separate wing of the clinic. Outside were pale stone, trimmed shrubs and a brass plaque; beyond the door began burgundy, green and gold. In the waiting room, Bonnie stopped before a painting: a peacock had spread its tail against a backdrop of a storm at sea and an ancient colonnade. She tried to find a spot where the peacock could have stood without getting its feet wet, but the receptionist was already asking whom she had come to see.

Bonnie gave the doctor's name and immediately explained that she had no appointment. She could come back another day if he could not see her now. She had come on Madeleine Renard's recommendation; it was only a small matter.

"Were you at yesterday's festival?" the receptionist asked, brightening. "My granddaughter still has the paper sun hanging over her bed."

Bonnie wanted to ask whether the fastening was holding properly. She opened her mouth and forgot what it was called.

The woman stopped smiling.

"Are you feeling unwell? Sit down for now. I'll ask the doctor."

Bonnie sat in an emerald armchair. The armrest was uncomfortable, and for some reason she felt relieved: here was something about which she could make a perfectly straightforward complaint. While she was thinking about this, the door opened.

Felix Renard was so handsome that the absurdity of his green waistcoat with its lilac flowers only became apparent at a second glance. He heard the receptionist out, looked at Bonnie a little more closely than she liked, and invited her in. The peacock was left behind him. There was no mistaking who had chosen the furnishings.

"I'm told you've come on Madeleine's recommendation," he said. "What's happened?"

Bonnie began by saying how highly his former wife spoke of him. It helped her start talking. She explained that they had met the previous day, that Madeleine was a woman of great enthusiasms, and that it was probably difficult for both of them to find time for each other.

Felix stood at the desk, his hand still on the back of the chair.

"Forgive me, did she ask you to tell me this?"

"No. She doesn't even know I'm here."

He sat down. Bonnie suddenly realised that going on to mention dinner would sound quite ridiculous.

"I was given your address," she said. "I'm not feeling very well."

"Tell me about it."

She began with the day before: the festival, Madeleine, the wine, then the recording in the Interpreter. At the word "recording", Felix paused a little, but asked only what was on it. Bonnie explained: the assistants were discussing the preparations, everyone was working, no one had said anything bad. She spoke faster and faster, as though she might get straight to the point where her visit would be justified.

"And this morning I thought I could disappear altogether. And never owe anyone anything again."

He stopped her.

"When you say 'disappear', do you mean go away from everyone? Or die?"

Bonnie was looking at the flowers on his waistcoat. A stem broke off beside a button; she wanted to match up the two halves of the pattern.

"Die. I wasn't going to... I didn't do anything. I just thought it. And it frightened me."

Felix asked whether she wanted to do that now, whether anything specific had occurred to her, whether she had made preparations to harm herself. He spoke plainly, without lowering his voice at the awkward words. Bonnie answered hurriedly at first, then more slowly. She had no plan and had taken no action; she did not want to die now, but was afraid of being left alone with that thought again. Nothing like it had happened to her before.

"I like being alive," she said, and immediately regretted it: it sounded as though she was arguing with herself. "Yesterday we laughed. Really laughed. I wasn't pretending."

"I believe you. And I still want to understand what happened this morning."

He asked how she slept, how long she had been finding work difficult, whether she had had similar periods before, who could stay with her today. When he heard about the apple and the sudden

sleep at the table, he put down his pen. She had to go through it all again, in order: the wine, the fruit, the time she had woken. Bonnie was growing irritated: she had come because of what was going on in her head, and they were counting glasses and hours.

“I was getting tired before the apple.”

“That’s important. How long before?”

She had no precise answer. First there had been busy days, then weeks. She had stopped going anywhere just for the sake of it: if she went out, there was always something to be done. But she had felt happy at the festival itself, and yesterday with Madeleine too. Felix listened, sometimes asking her to go back to something she had skipped. Being tired every day and feeling the same thing all day turned out not to be the same answer.

“I’m not going to put everything down to the apple,” he said. “But drowsiness like that after an unfamiliar magical fruit also needs a medical examination. Don’t eat any more of it. Do you still have what’s left?”

She nodded. He went out briefly, made arrangements for the examination and asked for the next visitor’s appointment to be changed. Bonnie could hear his voice in the waiting room and was already thinking up an apology.

On returning, Felix put some water beside her and opened his notebook at a fresh page.

“Did you hear something hurtful on the recording?”

“No, I told you. They’re good people. They said I was wonderful and I needed a rest. I even listened to it twice.”

“At first I wanted to write to them about the tables,” Bonnie went on. “Then I watched the rest. They noticed everything and moved them themselves.”

She ran a finger along the wet mark left by the glass.

“They didn’t even need me.”

“Did it hurt that they hadn’t asked your advice?”

“I told them myself not to wait for me over every little thing! Do you think I want them to ruin everything when I’m not there?”

Felix looked up from his notebook.

“No. I asked that badly. Try explaining it yourself.”

Bonnie had been ready to defend her assistants, and now did not know what to do with the indignation she had set in motion. She drank some water. It was warm.

“I wanted someone to ask when I was coming back. Not because of the tables. Just to ask.”

Felix wrote nothing down.

“And when I was sitting with Madeleine, I was happy no one was calling for me. As soon as she left, I felt hurt. Even though they hadn’t...”

Bonnie fell silent, pushing the glass away in vexation.

“You don’t have to bring me evidence of their bad behaviour,” he said.

Bonnie gave a brief smile and immediately stopped. She liked organising festivals. She liked the way people at first did not understand the idea, then began arguing and coming up with ideas of their own; the way someone who had come for half an hour stayed right to the end. She began talking about it, grew absorbed, and almost forgot what she was explaining. Then she remembered.

“Only don’t tell me I do it all for praise.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

Bonnie was silent for a while. Felix waited.

“It’s just, if I’m happy to see them, why do I feel bad when they’re happy without me?”

“I don’t know yet. One recording isn’t enough to answer that.”

Felix returned to her ordinary days. This time she did not reel off her tasks one after another: she paused, trying to remember when she had found time to eat, what she had put off until night-time, what she could have turned down. Before yesterday evening, she had gone almost a week without

sitting and doing nothing with anyone. An evening at home had proved no rest either: she had worked through bills until late at night.

"I asked about rest, not your address," Felix remarked when she said again that she had not gone out.

Bonnie gave a short laugh. Then she admitted that she herself did not know how to say no while she was still able to help. If she said she was tired, people would start worrying, cancelling things, rearranging them. She would have to explain that it was not so bad. It was easier to say at once that it would not take long.

"But sometimes it really doesn't take long," she added stubbornly.

"Sometimes," he agreed. "Let's look at one instance. Not all of them at once."

She chose yesterday's letter about the lists, began explaining why they could not do without her, and discovered that she had not yet seen the lists herself. She fell silent. From the other end of the desk came the sound of pen touching paper.

"It's the same with Madeleine," Bonnie said. "She wants you to ask about her letters yourself. She feels awkward reminding you all the time, though of course she'd never admit it. You could..."

"Bonnie."

She stopped.

"I am not going to discuss my marriage with you now."

It sounded sharper than anything else he had said. Bonnie apologised at once and moved to the edge of her chair. Felix put down his pen.

"I'm not asking you to leave. Madeleine and I have a great deal of experience of separating. We'll manage without your help today."

She nodded, but was still sitting as though waiting to be dismissed.

"You can stay here without arranging anything for us," he added.

Bonnie took out her handkerchief. She wanted to explain that she had not intended to bring them back together, only to meet him and understand. That was turning into too many untruths for one explanation.

"I'm not coping," she said.

He did not answer straight away. He let her blow her nose and moved the water closer. Someone passed outside the door; Bonnie's head shot up.

"I've arranged it," Felix said. "We have time."

They talked some more. Bonnie would not afterwards have been able to repeat everything in order; but she remembered how he had asked her to repeat for herself what she would do if the dangerous thought returned. Not wait until the next appointment. Seek immediate help at the clinic, call someone she trusted; if she was not sure she could stay safe, not remain alone. They discussed who was available today and how to contact them. Bonnie remembered her friends: on this day of the week they usually gathered at one of their homes. She knew the address and could call in after the examination. Felix asked her not to stop at promising to drop in, but to tell someone plainly that she was finding it difficult to be alone just now.

Felix arranged the next appointment and wrote the time in large figures, because Bonnie had asked him to repeat it twice. She held the slip in her hands for a while.

"And what should I do until then? Apart from what we've agreed."

He looked at her.

"You don't have to put your whole life right before our next appointment. If you feel up to it, try one thing: before you help, ask whether help is needed. And if the answer is no, don't immediately set about persuading them."

"They might refuse out of politeness."

"They might."

Bonnie waited for him to continue. He did not.

“Then what?”

“You’ll have to survive their independence.”

She looked at the slip. The task only sounded short when he said it. She remembered the workmen by the paper sun, Madeleine’s hand on the envelope.

“What if someone’s drowning?”

“Rescue people who are drowning.”

Bonnie gave a little smile.

“So first find out whether the person is drowning.”

“And don’t call everything you’d like to put right a drowning. Afterwards, tell me how it went. If you couldn’t do it, tell me that too.”

At the door, she asked whether he had anything she should pass on to Madeleine. Felix looked at the sealed envelope at the edge of his desk.

“I meant to send it this morning,” he said. “If you see her. There’s no need to go looking for her specially.”

Bonnie took the letter. She wanted to ask whether it was personal, but put the envelope in her handbag without asking.

In the waiting room, the painted sea was still raging. Bonnie stopped in front of the peacock while the receptionist checked where she was expected for her examination.

“Do you like it?” asked Felix, who had followed her out.

She looked at him. She wanted to thank him, to say something pleasant, but he was waiting for an answer about the painting itself.

“No. I’m sorry, it’s dreadful.”

Felix cast his eyes over the canvas.

“Madeleine says that too. Absolutely no eye for colour.”

He adjusted the edge of the frame, although it was hanging straight. Bonnie thought of the woman with the harp stuck in the stag’s antlers, and barely kept from laughing. The doctor was already busy with his next visitor.

Chapter 3. Two Lemon Pastries

After the examination, Bonnie went to see her friends. Out in the street, she no longer had to stop before each new thing she did, as she had that morning. She straightened the twisted strap of her handbag, skirted a puddle, noticed that the bakery had changed its sign. She was still tired, but walking proved easier than sitting at home deciding whether to go out at all.

She paused on the stairs: laughter was coming through the door, and suddenly she no longer wanted to go in. She would have to smile. Or, worse still, someone would ask what was wrong, and they would all fall silent.

The door opened before she had time to ring. Her hostess was carrying out an empty tray.

“Bonnie! We thought you were busy.”

“I won’t stay long. I thought you might have some tea left.”

She was taken by the arm and led into the room. They moved an armchair for her and found a cup with an unbroken handle. The friend opposite pushed the plate of cherry pie towards her and asked for the story to be told from the beginning: Bonnie simply had to hear it.

It turned out that someone’s mother-in-law had arrived a day early and found two visiting musicians in her own bedroom.

“Were they at least playing?” Bonnie asked.

“Asleep. That was the trouble. She decided we were keeping them.”

Bonnie laughed. Hearing her, someone laughed even louder, and at once it became easier to breathe in the room. She settled the plate on her knees. Hot cherry burnt her tongue; Bonnie caught a drop from the spoon with her lips and listened to how the musicians had been ushered out through the kitchen.

Laughing with everyone else, her hostess was sorting through invitations. Then she pulled an Interpreter out from under the envelopes.

“I’ve something better to show you: what I’ve thought of for Saturday.”

She took the wand in her hand and concentrated. An image of a hall appeared: white tablecloths, branches covered in tiny flowers, garlands above the tables. For a minute, the conversation fell quiet.

“Will the flowers be real?”

“On the tables, yes. Overhead, I want to use images. I’m still trying things out.”

Her hostess tried a different arrangement, and white birds appeared among the garlands. She admired them, frowned and removed them. She liked it better without the birds.

Bonnie was barely looking at the flowers. The end table came right up against the door. She pictured someone coming in with a tray, turning sideways, catching the tablecloth... All they needed to do was move the table. No, then there would be no room for the second one.

She set her plate on the small table and was already reaching for the invitations to see how many guests there were, but stopped her hand. No one had asked her. For now, she could simply eat her pie.

“What do you think?” Her hostess turned to her. “Can it be done like this?”

Bonnie straightened.

“How many people are coming?”

“Forty. Perhaps forty-two.”

“Show it with the chairs.”

When chairs appeared in the image, the passage almost vanished.

“At least no one will leave early,” one of her friends remarked.

They all laughed, except their hostess. She was looking at her hall with such dismay that Bonnie felt sorry for her—and happy at the same time: this could be put right. She could already see how.

“Give me a pencil.”

She turned an envelope over and sketched a rectangle. Her hostess ended the display and pulled her armchair closer. Their heads came together over the drawing.

“We’ll leave the entrance here. And put this table across the room. Only don’t seat your aunt here; she’ll be in a draught.”

“You remember?”

Of course Bonnie remembered. She remembered the aunt, and the folding chair she had once been unable to get out of, and that she would have trouble hearing at the far end of the hall. The pencil moved faster and faster. A pleasant, familiar effort was gathering inside her: just a little more, and it would all come right. That morning she had been unable to decide where to put a cup, and now forty-two people were obediently taking their places on the back of an envelope.

“There,” her hostess said, with such relief that the party might already have been a success. “I’d never have managed it myself.”

Bonnie wanted to do something else while she was still being looked at like that.

It turned out that they had been promised the hall from noon on Saturday, and now could only have it after six. Her hostess produced a letter. Bonnie read it and asked for the receipt for the deposit. The pie was moved to make room for a folder.

“They need a letter,” she said. “These are quite different terms.”

“You write it. Mine will sound angry.”

Bonnie willingly took up the pen. She knew this manager: the main thing was not to begin with threats. First remind him when the agreement had been made, then enclose a copy of the receipt. She could also refer to...

Laughter broke out behind her.

She smiled without looking up. Let them talk for now; she would soon be finished. She crossed out a word that was too sharp and chose another. Asked for the date; her hostess answered, then turned back to the others.

The other voices grew distant, as though behind a closed door. Now and then a name reached Bonnie, and she tried to hold on to the sentence in her letter while working out who they were talking about. Once she turned round, ready to join in, but did not recognise the story. It had all happened without her by then: someone had arrived, someone had been caught, and now they were laughing about something.

“What did he say?” she asked.

“Oh, just a moment,” her friend replied, laughing too hard to finish.

Bonnie waited. She began to smile herself, hoping to catch their merriment. But another woman was already telling a similar story, and the explanation was lost. The pen had dried. Bonnie dipped it again.

Now she wanted to finish as quickly as possible. She wrote the last line, read it through—she had left out a name. She inserted it above the line. It looked untidy. She could hardly hand the manager something like this; he would think the request did not matter.

While she was copying it out, they offered her more tea. Bonnie nodded. Only when the cup was set beside her did she notice that the first was still almost full. A cold film trembled on its surface.

“May I give my cousin your address?” someone asked her. “They’re having a children’s party. She’s completely at sea. You could at least give her some advice?”

“Tell her to write,” Bonnie replied.

Only after answering did she feel the weight of it: another letter. Another person who would need her. A few minutes ago, that was exactly what she had wanted.

Her plate stood at the other end of the table. Cherry juice had dried along its edge. Bonnie tried to remember what she herself had wanted to tell them when she arrived. Something funny. About Madeleine’s hat, she thought. Now she would have to interrupt everyone, explain who Madeleine was, begin far back. And suddenly there was nothing funny left in a broken hat anyway.

“How lovely that you came,” her hostess said, taking the letter.

Bonnie looked at her and smiled a moment too late.

Now she could return to her armchair. Her hostess even took the folder off it, making room for her. Bonnie sat down, laid her hands on her knees and tried to listen.

Her friends were choosing a day for their next meeting. Someone could not make Thursday; someone suggested getting together in the morning. Bonnie waited to be asked too, already dreading the question: she would have to open her notebook, promise something. She had only just wanted to join in, and now even saying whether she was free on Thursday seemed difficult.

Her hostess leant towards her.

“Shall I cut you another slice?”

Bonnie shook her head. The kindly voice suddenly made her nose sting. If they asked her what was wrong now, she would probably cry. In the middle of a pleasant evening, when everyone was so happy to see one another. And she would not be able to explain it properly.

She began looking for her handbag. She wanted to be out in the street, where she could walk without looking at anyone.

“I think I’ll go.”

“Already?”

“Yes. I’m rather tired.”

It was true, and yet Bonnie said it guiltily, as though she had made up an excuse. Her friend held the door for her; from the room came one more question: “So are we agreed on Thursday?”

At the door, it emerged that it would be a good idea to deliver the letter as well: since Bonnie knew the manager, perhaps on her way... She was about to ask how late he would be there. Her eyes fell on the porcelain peacock beside the mirror. Felix would have liked it. She remembered his peacock amid the waves, then the brief words: “Rescue people who are drowning.”

No one here was drowning. The letter was finished.

Bonnie took hold of her glove fastening. Her finger would not go through the loop.

“I won’t deliver it today.”

It came out dryly. Almost angrily. At once she wanted to add a reason—a serious, sufficient one that could not be mistaken for an unwillingness to help.

“Of course,” her hostess said. “I’ll send a messenger. Thank you.”

She hugged Bonnie, pressed her cheek to hers and returned to her guests. Behind the door, someone asked where the sugar was.

Bonnie stood on the landing. Nothing had happened. No one had followed her to find out what was wrong or demanded an explanation.

For some reason, that did not make her feel any better.

She could have delivered the letter. It was only a few streets away. Now her hostess would have to find a messenger, pay him, worry—and she would go home and sit down. Just sit down. She would not even be ill enough to justify herself.

Bonnie went down a few steps and stopped. She could go back and say that it was on her way after all. Her hostess would be pleased again; this unpleasant, cold feeling inside would end at once.

There was laughter upstairs. Bonnie gripped the banister more tightly and went down.

* * *

Out in the street, she kept changing the hand in which she carried her bag. She felt she had left badly. She should probably have stayed another quarter of an hour. Or at least finished the pie. What if they thought she had taken offence?

She had taken offence. But try explaining why. They had welcomed her, fed her, praised her. No one had made her write. And she had wanted someone to notice how long she had been sitting with her back to them all, and call her back of their own accord.

Bonnie was walking home, but picturing a different door. Madeleine would open it without her hat and be surprised; she could ask whether she had made it to the milliner's. Only where was that door?

She had given Madeleine the milliner's address. She had been given Felix's address. They had never got round to Madeleine's own.

She could ask the doctor to pass on a note. But she had already tried to arrange his personal life today. To appear in the waiting room again and begin, "I need your wife"... Bonnie pictured the secretary's face and turned into her own street.

The scent of thyme came from a shop. Freshly washed shelves were drying in the doorway, and the bitterness of the herb mingled with the smell of wet wood. Lately, people had been trying herbs in everything: soap, skin oils, sweet dough. Imported spices were coming into fashion too. Even the familiar bakery now offered a filling each week that no one had tasted before. But passers-by still smelt more often of thyme than of expensive blends from the Eastern Isles.

Then a warm, sweet scent drifted towards her—and Bonnie decided she was hungry.

Cinnamon. Warm, rich, with the sweetness butter takes on as it soaks into hot dough. Then came something fresh, faintly bitter, like a strip of peel bent over a cup. Bonnie breathed in more deeply. For a moment she wanted to close her eyes and bite into the crisp edge of a bun.

She looked at the signs. "Memory Recording." "Accumulators." "School of Wishes." No bakery.

The fragrance passed her in the company of a plump woman who was no longer young. She carried a small handbag and held up her hem as she skirted a puddle. Bonnie involuntarily took a step after her, examining her hands: no parcel, no basket. The woman stopped. Bonnie went on staring at her face until she realised how rude she was being.

"Forgive me. You smell of..."

"Too strong?"

"Buns."

The woman raised her wrist to her nose, waited and frowned.

"I've been fiddling with it since this morning. I couldn't distinguish anything at home any more. I thought I'd get a better idea outside."

"You made it yourself?"

She nodded.

"At first I thought someone was baking here," Bonnie said. "Then I started looking to see what you had in your bag."

"It's empty. I'm going to buy accumulators. Used up every last one in the space of an hour, with nothing to show for it."

Bonnie could not help breathing in again.

"But it smells wonderful."

"It does. Only I wanted people to catch the cinnamon close up. Almost by chance." The woman looked across the street. "Where were you standing?"

Bonnie showed her.

"Over there. By the sign."

The woman looked at her wrist and lowered her hand.

"You see."

Bonnie looked at the sign too. It was quite a distance.

"What if I wanted perfume like that myself? A scent that carries a long way. Would you help me choose?"

“That far, exactly?”

“A little less would do.”

The woman smiled.

“Only not today. Today I can’t distinguish anything any more.”

“I’ve kept you, I’m sorry. You were going to buy accumulators.”

“There’s time.”

The woman looked Bonnie over again, as though she were about to ask something about her clothes.

“Don’t cut the trousers down. You’ll have to give them back.”

Bonnie looked at her dress.

“What trousers?”

The woman looked down too. She was silent for a moment.

“I’m sorry. My mind was elsewhere.”

A boy carrying a long parcel asked them to move aside. The woman stepped out of his way and walked on; Bonnie moved in the other direction and saw Madeleine over his shoulder.

Madeleine was standing outside a pastry shop, studying the window. She had no hat on. Bonnie had time to feel delighted, then to fear that Madeleine would go in and she would have to catch up with her inside.

Bonnie waited for a carriage to pass and crossed the street.

“Did they mend your hat?”

Madeleine turned.

“Bonnie! I left it with your milliner. She looked at the feather for a long time, then asked whether it had sentimental value. I had to tell her about the bridge.”

“I can explain how to straighten it. There’s wire...”

“She’ll manage. Tell me this instead: what’s in those?”

Bonnie went up to the glass. Madeleine pointed to round pastries under a thin layer of white icing.

“Lemon. I bought some for the actors after a rehearsal.”

“And?”

“There weren’t any left for me.”

“Then let’s find out.”

Madeleine took hold of the door handle. Bonnie stepped forward with her and stopped.

“Are you taking them home?”

“I haven’t decided yet. Why?”

“No reason. I just... I was nearby. With friends.”

Madeleine looked at her more closely. Bonnie adjusted her glove, hiding the ink stain, and felt how tiring it would be just now to say that everything was all right.

“Let’s go in,” Madeleine said. “Then I want to have a look at the new salon round the corner. Will you come with me? They change your appearance for an evening. I’ve walked past twice already, but never had the time.”

“Why change it?”

“I don’t know yet. Let’s see what they offer. I might like it.”

She opened the door. Bonnie went in first and immediately stepped aside to let a customer out. It was warm inside. Bonnie took off her gloves and only then noticed that all this time she had been holding them against her chest, as though she were about to ask the shopwoman for a favour.

“Two lemon pastries?” Madeleine asked.

“What about you?”

“One for me too.”

“Two, then,” Bonnie told the shopwoman.

* * *

The salon still smelt of paint. Gold lettering on the glass read, “A New Appearance for Your Evening.” Through the open door they could see a narrow bench, a large mirror and a screen with people talking behind it.

A young man peered out to greet them. He was holding an Interpreter.

“Good afternoon. I need to finish with a client. Would you mind waiting a little?”

“We’ll wait. We’ve only come to look for now,” Madeleine said.

He nodded and disappeared behind the screen. They heard him say:

“Now turn round. No, you needn’t hold your face still. Smile, please.”

Madeleine sat down and unwrapped the parcel. Bonnie perched on the end, leaving space between them for their handbags.

“I went to see Felix today,” she said.

Madeleine stopped unfolding the paper.

“Did he see you?”

“Yes. Without an appointment. I thought we’d just talk for a little while, but he sent me for an examination as well.”

“Did you go?”

“I did. I feel better now. This morning I couldn’t do anything at all. Not even get dressed properly... Yesterday I ate your apple and fell asleep at the table. But I’d been getting tired before that too, so I don’t know whether it was the apple or not.”

“I haven’t touched mine yet,” Madeleine said. “And I don’t think I will. He was shouting something to me about the apples, the man who owns the orchard. I was already leaving by then.”

She fell silent for a moment, looking at the parcel.

“I’m glad you went to Felix.”

Bonnie wanted to explain that that was not why she had gone at all. She began, “Actually, I...” but Madeleine handed her a pastry, and she took it in both hands, paper and all.

The icing cracked, and lemon came through its sweetness. Bonnie licked a crumb from her lips and took another bite at once.

“Well?” Madeleine asked.

Bonnie held up a finger, asking her to wait until she had finished chewing.

“Now I see why they didn’t leave me a single one that time.”

Bonnie smiled, but then she heard the laughter behind her again—the laughter at her friends’ house, while she was copying the letter and trying to understand what they were talking about.

“After the doctor’s, I went to see some people I know. I wanted to sit with them. Then I started helping with a party, wrote a letter... They were talking, and I kept thinking, I’ll be finished in a moment. In the end I left having heard almost nothing.”

“Did they ask you?”

“At first I volunteered. Then they asked me to deliver the letter as well. And I said I wouldn’t.”

Madeleine waited for her to go on.

“She said she would send a messenger. She hugged me. Everything’s all right.”

“Where’s the letter?”

“I left it with her.”

“Good. I was beginning to think it was in your bag.”

Bonnie smiled, but Madeleine did not smile back: she was waiting.

“I could have delivered it, you see. It isn’t far. Now I’m sitting here thinking: why did I do that? She hugged me goodbye, and I almost went back to fetch that letter.”

She lowered her eyes to the pastry. The icing cracked, and a piece fell onto the paper. Bonnie picked it up with a finger and suddenly felt terribly hungry.

Madeleine moved her handbag off the bench.

"Come closer; there's a backrest here. You're right on the edge."

Bonnie moved along and leant back. The wood pressed between her shoulder blades; she wriggled a little to get comfortable and ate the last of the icing off the paper. Behind the screen, the client laughed; the young man said something in reply.

Sticky icing lingered on her fingers. Bonnie reached for her handkerchief and saw the envelope.

"Oh, goodness, I forgot. He asked me to give you this."

"Felix?"

"I offered. The letter was already written."

Madeleine wiped her fingers on the paper and opened the envelope.

"Madeleine,

I looked in at Under the Skirt yesterday, behind Market Square. Laugh all you like. They put on the show with an Interpreter, and all evening I had the feeling I'd met some of the ladies in more respectable circumstances. I should like to make sure it's only a resemblance.

Will you come with me? I'm free tomorrow after seven. Though now, of course, you'll want to get there sooner.

Felix."

Madeleine gave a small, amused smile and held the letter out to Bonnie.

"Read it. He's inviting me out for the evening."

Bonnie took the sheet with a smile. At the name of the establishment, her smile froze. She read to the end, looked back at the beginning and lowered her voice.

"There?"

"There."

"And you'll go?"

"I will. Look at what he says about people he knows. I won't sleep now until I find out who he saw there."

Bonnie read the part about "respectable circumstances" again. That morning she had been sitting in front of Felix, struggling to find words, while he listened and asked questions... And this same man had been watching something like that yesterday evening. Of course he had a life of his own. But for some reason it proved much harder to picture him in the audience than Madeleine.

"Doesn't it bother you that he goes there?"

Madeleine shrugged.

"It bothers me that he recognised the women and didn't give me their names. He could at least have dropped a hint. We know so many of the same people..."

She reached for the letter. Bonnie gave it back and smoothed the pastry paper on her knees.

"Though no," Madeleine said. "If he'd named someone, I'd already be running over there. Very well, I'll question him tomorrow. Come with me today."

Bonnie raised her head.

"Are you serious?"

"Quite. I want to have a look. Aren't you the least bit curious?"

There was movement behind the screen. Bonnie waited until the rustling stopped and drew closer to Madeleine.

"I don't even know how to behave in a place like that. At least you know what to do in a theatre: sit and watch..."

"So we'll sit and watch there too."

"You know what I mean."

"I do. We're going to see a show, Bonnie. We aren't obliged to do anything else. If it's horrid, we'll leave."

Bonnie smoothed the paper again. She pictured cramped rows, men's shoulders on either side, someone's face turning towards her in the dark.

"But it's all men there, isn't it?"

"Yes. Women aren't allowed in."

Bonnie looked at her. Madeleine glanced round the salon, let her eyes linger on the large mirror and slowly smiled.

"And we seem to have come to just the right place... Bonnie, have you played men on stage? Will you give me a few tips?"

The client emerged from behind the screen. At the mirror, she adjusted her hair and turned sideways.

"Now I like it. Leave it like that."

The young man saw her to the door. Madeleine waited until he came back.

"Tell me, could you give us men's appearances? So that no one in the street would notice."

Bonnie felt herself blushing. If only he would not ask why.

"I can. But your voices will stay the same. And you'll need men's clothes."

"We'll find the clothes. Can we see ourselves first? She needs to decide." Madeleine nodded towards Bonnie.

"Of course. I'll show you some options, and you can choose. Only come in the suits: it's easier to find the right appearance when I can see everything together."

He went over to a small table, clearing the space in front of the mirror. Bonnie touched Madeleine's sleeve.

"You want us to dress as men and go and look at naked women?"

Madeleine bent towards her.

"Yes. Only say it a little louder; I don't think he heard you."

Bonnie pressed a hand to her mouth. The young man went on moving things around on the table, and she could not tell whether he had heard. Madeleine was already laughing quietly beside her; Bonnie nudged her with her elbow, lost the struggle and began to laugh too.

"Stop it. I really don't know if I can."

"We'll try them on first. I want to see how it turns out myself. I have two suits at home, Felix's. Though you already know his taste."

Bonnie wiped the corner of her eye.

"What if he meets us there? In his suits?"

"Then we'll see how well they've disguised us."

"He'll recognise you. You'll start talking to him."

"Without fail. And I'll ask who he's waiting for."

Bonnie smiled. She pictured him turning at the sound of Madeleine's voice, and regretted that he would most likely not be there.

"Perhaps you should go with him tomorrow after all? He did invite you."

Madeleine looked at her with narrowed eyes.

"Bonnie. If I need to get married again, I promise to tell you first. Today I'm asking you. Shall we go?"

Bonnie glanced in the mirror. Her cheeks were burning; the young man must have understood everything. But she did not want to leave. She wanted to laugh with Madeleine a little longer—and find out what sort of man she would make herself.

"Let's try," she said. "Only I want to choose my own face."

Chapter 4. Her Ex-Husband's Suit

Madeleine lived very close by. Bonnie memorised the house number before they even reached the door.

In the bedroom, Madeleine opened the wardrobe and pushed the dresses aside. Two men's suits hung on the rail at the back.

"He didn't take everything. He left these until next time."

"Until next..."

"The next time he comes to collect his things," Madeleine said. "Let's leave it at that for now."

Bonnie looked away, but not in time to hide her smile.

Madeleine took down a dark green jacket with broad plum stripes and spread it on the bed. The other suit was wine-coloured, with gold lapels; beneath it hung a waistcoat patterned with peacock feathers. Bonnie ran her palm over the fabric. The pattern was woven in, and each eye in the feathers changed colour in the light.

"Lovely silk."

"Don't say that in front of Felix. He'll only hear the word 'lovely'."

Bonnie held the waistcoat against herself and looked in the mirror.

"I'd choose it for the stage."

"He chose it for dinner. Though we're putting on something of a show ourselves today. Try the wine-coloured one; I'll take this."

Madeleine found shirts and belts. They changed on opposite sides of the bed; Bonnie folded her dress, then unfolded it to take her handkerchief out of the pocket. The slip with her appointment time fell onto the bed. She put it in her handbag and picked up the trousers.

Felix was a good half a head taller than Madeleine. She stood in front of the mirror with her arms raised: the cuffs still covered her fingers. Bonnie first turned up the trouser legs, then tightened the belt and turned towards the mirror too. She did not feel like putting on the jacket yet—everything was roomy enough without it.

"The waistcoat suits you," Madeleine said. "Look at it from the side."

Bonnie took a step. One turn-up came undone, and her shoe caught in the fabric. She tried to free her foot and fell to her knees, just managing to put out her hands.

"Don't get up yet."

Madeleine was already crouching beside her, unwinding the trouser leg from her heel.

Bonnie caught her breath and sat back on her heels. Her knee stung. Carefully, she bent one leg, then the other.

"Nothing broken?"

"No. Only my pride. At the theatre I run up and down stairs in a dress with a train."

Madeleine helped her up. Bonnie looked in the mirror: a sober wine-coloured waistcoat, an expensive shirt and her own indignant face. She laughed, quietly at first, then could not stop. Madeleine began laughing too, still holding her by the elbow.

"Sit down; I'll hold it," Madeleine said, gathering the trouser leg off the floor. "And let's do both at once. I've already trodden on mine too."

Bonnie sat on the bed and took out her Interpreter. Madeleine turned up the trouser leg to the ankle. Bonnie wrapped her hand round the device, concentrated on the fabric, and the turn-up held in place. She put out her other leg herself.

Bonnie tugged at the turn-up. It held.

"Don't cut the trousers down. You'll have to give them back."

"I wasn't going to," Madeleine said.

“No, someone said that to me today. In the street, before I met you. We were talking about perfume, and suddenly—trousers. I even looked down at my dress.”

Madeleine let go of the sleeve she was working on.

“Wait. Who said that?”

“A woman outside a shop. Plump, no longer young, with a quiet voice. She smelt so strongly of cinnamon that I started looking for a bakery. It turned out she makes her own perfume. She’d used up all her accumulators, and the scent had still come out too strong. She was on her way to buy more.”

“Could that have been Severin’s wife? It sounds very like her. She’s become fascinated by the Eastern Isles; now she’s trying everything—oils, perfume... But predicting other people’s trousers as well!”

Madeleine sat down beside her and held out an arm with a dangling cuff.

“Severin who sold the postal company?”

“Yes. They say you’d hardly recognise him since he left—he’s aged so much.”

Bonnie smoothed a fold in the sleeve.

“I thought he was taking a rest now.”

“He hadn’t meant to sell. After the new laws, he had to give up a share to the state. He stayed on as director for a while afterwards—it was his own business, after all. And now he’s bought two Interpreters, one for himself and one for his wife. From what you say about the cinnamon, she’s getting somewhere. He isn’t doing so well yet, but the schemes he has! Once I was so carried away listening that I almost agreed to help.”

“With what?”

“I never had time to ask.” Madeleine laughed. “We were already discussing the next idea.”

Bonnie smiled and fastened the cuff.

“He’s a close friend of Quentin’s, by the way. The very man whose apples I stole yesterday. Though why do I say stole? I took them for an experiment. Someone had to find out what he’d grown.”

Madeleine moved round to her other side, still looking at Bonnie’s trousers.

“Didn’t you ask where she got those trousers from?”

“I did. She looked at my dress and said, ‘I’m sorry. My mind was elsewhere.’”

“Her mind was elsewhere,” Madeleine repeated.

Bonnie pulled up the second sleeve.

* * *

They returned to the salon in their suits. Madeleine held the door, and Bonnie stepped over the threshold, looking down at her feet. The young man rose to greet them and inspected their clothes without a smile.

“A little large. That can be put right.”

“Only don’t cut anything down,” Madeleine said. “The clothes are borrowed.”

Bonnie and Madeleine exchanged a glance.

“I understand. Take off your jackets, please.”

He used the Interpreter to release the fixed turn-ups and rearranged the fabric. Bonnie asked him to leave a little more room at the waist. Now she could sit down and stand up without holding on to her belt. The sleeves no longer covered her palms; wrists appeared in the mirror, and the shoulders sat properly.

While he fitted Madeleine’s jacket, Bonnie walked round the room. She kept wanting to hold up a skirt that was not there. She put her hands in her pockets. Deep, comfortable pockets—there would be room for her handkerchief and the slip of paper, with space left over.

“Didn’t they used to sell crockery here?” Madeleine asked.

“My uncle did. I sat behind the counter sewing when there were no customers. Tablecloths, aprons... Turn round, please.”

He ran his fingers along the shoulder seam, asked Madeleine to lower her arm and only then took up the Interpreter. The fold beneath the collar smoothed away.

“Have you had the salon long?”

“I opened last week. I started by altering clothes. One customer was turning about in front of the mirror and joked that she could do with a different hair colour to go with her dress. We laughed, and then I thought: why not try? The hair took some work, but afterwards she brought a friend. That one wanted darker eyebrows, another a shorter nose. Little by little, I got the knack, and now I can change the whole face. For a while, of course. But that’s all they want: to go out in a new guise for the evening, then be themselves again.”

Madeleine looked at him in the mirror.

“Only recently, those wands were all anyone talked about, and now wherever you go, someone’s already opened a business. Did you at least finish sewing the aprons?”

“There’s still one lying here. The woman comes here now and reminds me every time.”

Bonnie smiled. The young man stepped back, inspected the jacket and came up to Madeleine again.

“It’s still pulling here. Raise your arm.”

“I thought we were finished.”

“We are, while you stand still. But you’ll need to move.”

He adjusted the fabric under her arm and asked her to repeat the movement. This time the collar stayed in place.

He finished with the jacket and stepped back to let her look at herself.

“Now, what appearance would you like?”

“A man’s,” Madeleine replied.

“I gathered that. Younger, older? Anything in particular?”

Madeleine glanced round at Bonnie.

“You go first. I’ll watch for now.”

The young man projected an image of a man above the small table: a straight nose, dark eyebrows, hair swept smoothly back. Bonnie moved closer.

“Too angry. Take out that crease here. And let his hair be looser; he’s not going to the office.”

The young man changed the image and turned it sideways.

“Could the nose be a little...” Madeleine pointed. “No, now it’s too short. Put a little back. There.”

Bonnie walked round the table.

“I liked the old one.”

“Look from this side. Only the chin needs to be more defined. And the eyes shouldn’t be quite so wide apart. Just a little.”

The young man turned the image this way and that; Madeleine kept asking him to go back to something or keep a new change. Bonnie was about to remind her that they were choosing a face for her, when suddenly she took a closer look.

“And the eyebrows?” Madeleine asked. “Raise them a little here.”

The image turned towards them. Bonnie looked at Madeleine. She was smiling contentedly.

“There! A wonderful face. We’ll keep it.”

“Madeleine, that’s Felix.”

Madeleine looked at the image again. She tilted her head, studying it from the side.

“Well... he is a handsome man.”

Bonnie could not help laughing.

“I can see that. But I don’t want to be your ex-husband.”

“Then I’ll have it,” Madeleine said. “Keep that one for me, please. Let’s give her a different one.”

Bonnie asked him to bring back the first appearance. She softened the chin, chose a different hairstyle and turned to Madeleine. Madeleine raised her palms: not a word.

“Can we try it on me now?”

He gave her a narrow ribbon covered in intricate lettering and asked her to tie it round her wrist. He took up the Interpreter and concentrated; in the mirror, a young man in a wine-coloured suit stood in Bonnie’s place.

Bonnie leant towards the reflection. She ran her fingers over her cheek: under her hand, her own cheekbone remained. She smiled. The man smiled with her, and she smiled again, deliberately this time, to see how it looked.

“Your voice stays the same,” the young man reminded her. “And so does your body. The appearance is only an image.”

“I can manage the voice.”

Bonnie squared her shoulders, took her hands out of her pockets and offered one to Madeleine.

“May I?”

Her voice came out lower, with an unhurried assurance. Madeleine placed her fingers in her palm and suddenly paused to examine the face.

“Keep this one. I’ll go with him.”

Bonnie bowed over her hand. Madeleine laughed and took it away before Bonnie could kiss it.

“My turn now.”

Madeleine took her place in front of the mirror and held out her wrist to the young man. He secured the ribbon and picked up the Interpreter. The face of Felix, which they had just been studying above the small table, appeared in the mirror.

Madeleine turned her head, admiring the profile, then adjusted her tie. Bonnie watched her, biting her lip.

Madeleine caught her eye in the mirror and asked in her usual voice:

“Well, will I do?”

Bonnie clapped a hand over her mouth.

“No, wait. Say it again, only not so high.”

Madeleine tried a bass voice and coughed.

“Don’t force it,” Bonnie said. “A little lower than usual. And take your time. You have nowhere you need to be.”

“I do, as it happens,” Madeleine objected, but repeated it more slowly.

Bonnie nodded.

“There. That’s better.”

Madeleine turned to the mirror and said, “Well, will I do?” once more, listening to herself. This time Bonnie did not laugh.

The young man asked them to untie the ribbons. The appearances vanished. Then they tied them again and made sure they could manage on their own.

“Now, about the time,” he said. “It usually lasts between three and six hours. The image is sustained by your magical core. The greater your reserves, and the less magic you’ve used today, the longer it will last. If you start to feel drained or hungry, it’s time to remove it or feed it from an outside source.”

“Can we use an Interpreter?” Bonnie asked.

“If it has any reserves. You can use an accumulator too. I have some small ones for hire.”

“We’ll take two,” Madeleine said. “I don’t want to hurry home because of my face.”

He showed them how to use the accumulators and had each of them try it. Bonnie put hers in her pocket; Madeleine asked him to show her again how to check that the energy was coming through. She tucked her ring on its chain beneath her shirt.

“May we leave our handbags with you?” Madeleine asked as she paid. “We’ll collect them on the way back.”

The young man nodded. Madeleine held the door, and Bonnie went out first.

* * *

Dusk was already falling outside. A man with a folder asked Bonnie to move aside, addressing her as “sir”, and walked past. She looked round after him. Madeleine took her arm.

“Well? He didn’t even look.”

“But you keep looking at me. And smiling.”

“I like how it turned out.”

Bonnie smiled too, but when Madeleine spoke again, she gave her elbow a small squeeze.

“Don’t try so hard to make it deep. It’s uncomfortable for you; I can hear it. You were better in the salon.”

“It’s noisy here.”

“Then come closer. And don’t rush to finish. You turn back into yourself at the end of every sentence.”

Madeleine leant towards her.

“Is that better?”

Bonnie nodded.

“Now say something longer.”

Madeleine thought for a moment, then said with a serious face:

“Will you come with me? I’m free tomorrow after seven.”

Bonnie laughed and turned away, covering her mouth.

“There you are,” Madeleine said in her own voice. “Now you’re giving us away.”

They stopped outside a closed shop to let a cart pass. Bonnie saw their reflections in the dark glass. Madeleine noticed them too and straightened her tie.

“What do I do with my hands?”

“Leave your tie alone, for a start. You keep checking it’s still there.”

Madeleine put both hands in her pockets.

“Like this?”

“Now offer me your arm. We did come together.”

Madeleine took out a hand and offered Bonnie her arm. Bonnie took it, still studying them in the glass.

“I like that better.”

They walked more slowly to Market Square. Madeleine told her about an editor who had cut the best part of her article. Sometimes she grew carried away, and Bonnie touched her sleeve; Madeleine lowered her voice without breaking off the story. Before long Bonnie stopped listening to how she sounded and asked what had been in the passage he had cut.

Beyond the square, the shops had already closed. They walked past dark windows, looked into a courtyard and turned back. Madeleine took out the letter, read “behind Market Square” once more and folded it irritably.

“He could have been more precise.”

“Perhaps that’s why he invited you to come with him?”

But Madeleine was already looking across the street. Two men stepped out of a carriage. The driver remained on the box; his passengers climbed a low flight of steps between a closed office and a narrow passage. One gave a short knock. The door opened, light fell across the paving stones and immediately vanished.

There was neither a poster nor a sign by the steps. The tall, dark doors rose almost to the second storey; the brass knocker was polished where hands gripped it. Madeleine knocked, and one door opened a little, without a sound.

A woman in a long black dress greeted them. She waited for Bonnie to come in, closed the door and turned to them.

“Good evening, Doctor.”

Bonnie gripped Madeleine’s elbow. Madeleine covered her fingers with her hand.

“Good evening,” she replied, a little lower than usual.

The woman smiled at her guests and held out a small tray.

“Your Interpreters, please.”

Madeleine took hers out first. Golden dolphins wound round the handle, supporting a mother-of-pearl flower; a lilac crystal rose from its centre. One of the tails caught on the edge of her pocket. Madeleine freed it and laid the device on the velvet of the tray.

The hostess’s eyes lingered on it for a moment.

“Is that a new one? Yesterday you had a different one. But this is just as unmistakable.”

“I like variety,” Madeleine said.

Bonnie hurried to set her own Interpreter beside it. The woman put both in a compartment behind the counter, turned the key and handed Madeleine a numbered token.

“I’ll return them when you leave. This way, please.”

She headed for the stairs. Bonnie glanced back at the counter once more and followed, feeling the weight of the hired accumulator in her pocket.

After the street, it was so quiet here that she could hear the hostess’s dress brush the steps. There was no music. No laughter or voices. For some reason, Bonnie trod more carefully, although her shoes were already making almost no sound on the carpet runner.

On either side of her, white marble was threaded with fine grey veins. The staircase curved gently; from halfway up, the entrance doors were already out of sight. Bonnie laid her palm on the cool banister and raised her eyes. Lamps glowed beneath frosted shades overhead. Their light fell on the bare shoulders and bowed heads of marble figures along the wall.

Madeleine walked beside her. At the turn she leant towards Bonnie, as though about to say something, but the hostess glanced round, and both straightened. The woman merely pointed to the upper landing.

“This way, gentlemen.”

Deep wine-coloured velvet curtains closed off the entrance. Up close, music became audible—only low notes for now, barely discernible through the fabric. The woman took hold of a curtain edge, stepped back and let them through.

Light struck Bonnie’s eyes. She stopped, catching sight of a woman in feathers right in front of her, and only a moment later realised that she was looking into a mirror. The real woman was far away, on a raised platform, and between them people moved, glasses gleamed and ribbons of smoke drifted. In the mirrors, the room went on and on; Bonnie did not immediately find where the reflection ended and the passage began.

Glowing images of dancing girls revolved slowly above the tables. They were no bigger than a palm. One threw back her head in laughter; her full skirt fell apart into petals, revealing bare thighs. The man sitting beneath her raised his glass, as though offering her a drink. His neighbour did not even break off his conversation.

The air smelt of tobacco, sweet perfume and hot wax. The music sounded very close now; Bonnie could feel its rhythm in the soles of her feet. She turned her eyes to the stage. The feathers parted, a long leg in a black stocking appeared, a buckle gleamed—and everything was hidden again before Bonnie had time to take it in.

She wanted to say something to Madeleine, but Madeleine was already looking elsewhere. Bonnie followed her gaze and saw another platform between the columns. She wanted to take Madeleine's hand. Instead, she put her hands in her pockets and moved closer to her.

Chapter 5. Preliminary Trials

Felix had drunk half a cup before he realised they had brought him wine.

It was milky white and cool, and smelled of rice and something floral. The small jug was round, with a short spout and no handle. Felix wrapped his hand round it and poured himself some more: they had filled his cup less than halfway, as though afraid their guest might drown.

At the next table, a young man in a short jacket was feeding a girl with a spoon. The girl laughed, covered her mouth with her hand, and ate it all the same. Their table held the same little jugs, only with a green glaze. A noisy party sat along the wall; they were arguing about what exactly they had been served in the guise of quails' eggs, and would not let the waitress answer.

Felix looked at the menu again. The wines covered both sides of a narrow sheet. The food fitted at the bottom, under the heading "With Wine".

This was where Severin had suggested meeting.

A folder of drawings lay on the next chair. Felix rested a hand on it, then took it away. He had brought good drawings and prepared his case thoroughly; that made it all the more irritating to sit among people who did not have to justify their presence in order to enjoy an evening.

The window looked out on the lane behind Market Square. An office, closed for the day. A narrow passage. A tall, dark door with a brass knocker.

He did not recognise it at once: yesterday he had approached from the other direction.

Madeleine must have received his letter by now. If she had, she was hardly going to wait until tomorrow. She would come today, discover that women were not admitted, and start demanding to know whose idea that was. They would explain. She would demand to speak to the person who had thought of it first.

Felix took a sip of wine.

He had offered to go with her. Had written quite clearly when he was free. She might at least have answered.

"Doctor, forgive me! I can see you, but I can't seem to reach you."

Severin stood by the entrance, holding the chair of an unfamiliar young woman who had got up to let him past. There was little room between the tables; on the way over, he managed to exchange a few words with the waitress, make way for a tray, and pick up a dropped glove. He was smiling by the time he reached Felix, but sat down carefully, bracing one hand on the edge of the table.

"What do you think of it here? I've been meaning to look in. My wife says everywhere now serves you something you haven't ordered, and that's precisely what they charge you for. I thought I'd see."

"So far they've brought me wine in a cream jug."

"Then they haven't cheated you of the main thing."

They shook hands. Severin started to reach for the jug, noticed there was only one cup, and called the waitress over.

"Another of these for us, please. And something to eat. What do you have that's substantial?"

"I can offer you stones with a cheese cream, and tomatoes."

Severin waited for her to continue.

"And anything hot?"

"Warm stones."

Felix lowered the menu.

"Bring them," Severin decided. "Just tell us which bits to bite and which to leave for you."

When she had gone, he took off his gloves and folded them beside him. One was inside the other. Severin shook it out, folded them again, and finally looked at the folder.

“Well, show me. Your letter intrigued me. This is the first time a psychiatrist has sent me a proposal for a country holiday resort. They usually want money for a roof.”

“I want to create a place people will come to for adventures. And pay enough for them that I won’t have to ask for more money every year.”

“Better already.”

Felix moved his cup aside, untied the ribbons, and took out the top sheet.

Severin bent over the drawing. Huts with high roofs stood on a lakeshore; wooden walkways ran between the trees, and an enormous bonfire blazed in the middle of a clearing. The people round it were scantily clad. In one corner, Felix had drawn an example of ceremonial headgear: feathers, horns, long pendants.

Severin lingered over it.

“Is that for wearing?”

“For one of the ceremonies. Though the details can still be changed.”

“I’ve no objection. I’m just working out how high the doors need to be.”

Felix pushed a second sheet towards him.

“Imagine several days when no one expects you to be yourself. No official positions. No visits, obligatory conversations, people who absolutely must have your decision. You choose a role. A hunter, a wanderer, a builder. You needn’t choose anything at all; you can watch first. We’ll have enough good performers to keep the adventure going without your participation.”

“Performers?”

“Real people. Actors. Someone has to guide the game, notice when a guest is at a loss, change the course of events. Beautiful images alone can’t do that. The Interpreters will help us create a place unlike anywhere else.”

“And people will go and live in huts for that?”

“That’s why they go hunting already. Only afterwards they sit round the table in order of seniority again and tell one another the same stories. I’m proposing to spare them that necessity for at least a few days.”

The tomatoes arrived. Small and glossy, with little green stalks, they lay on a black tile sprinkled with coarse salt. Severin put one in his mouth and stopped chewing.

“Strawberries,” the waitress explained. “And the white is sugar with basil.”

“Good thing I didn’t have time to ask for pepper.”

He finished it, took a second, and pushed the dish towards Felix.

“Try them. Very good indeed. But this is why I’m asking about the huts. A man has a bath at home, a cook, a soft bed. He’ll be delighted to be a hunter right up to the moment he wants a wash. What will you do with him then?”

“Let him wash.”

“Where?”

Felix unfolded the third sheet. Severin looked at it, then at him, and laughed for the first time.

“You’ve got a whole bathhouse there! And I was wondering why savages needed such a long building.”

“They aren’t savages. They’re guests playing a game. I have no intention of testing their character by depriving them of hot water.”

“Quite right. A warm privy will keep you more customers than all the horns put together.”

He moved the jug away from the drawings so as not to knock it, and turned the plan to a better angle.

Felix loosened his tie a little.

“What matters to me is something else. Sometimes people spend years forbidding themselves things that would harm no one. Laughing loudly. Being the first to speak to a stranger. Asking someone to look after them. To them, that seems almost more indecent than anger. Anger is still

allowed: a respectable person is displeased. But jumping over a stream because you feel like it—that's shameful."

"I jumped over streams without your village. These days I just think of my knees."

"Which is why I'm discussing a business with you, rather than diagnosing you."

Severin nodded, as though that was precisely what he had been waiting for.

"Go on."

"In role work, one can sometimes get round that prohibition. Not persuade a person that he has the right—he can repeat that perfectly well already. Give him a chance to try. Someone can't make a simple request in his own name, but speaks freely for an invented person. Sometimes afterwards he can do it as himself too. Sometimes he can't. He played his part wonderfully, enjoyed himself, and then went home and said nothing again."

"Then what's the point of it all?"

"Because the second doesn't cancel out the first. But I wouldn't call him cured."

Severin chewed the last tomato. Felix could see the answer had not disappointed him; he went back to the plan and ran a finger along a drawn path.

"Suppose so. Only your man who can't ask for things will still be carrying everyone's firewood in the forest. And the others will be delighted. It won't even occur to them that you're treating anything."

"That's why we need people there who can see beyond an armful of firewood."

"That's more than actors, then."

"Yes. And I'm not going to declare every visitor a patient. The adventure is worth paying for in itself. The chance to work with particular people outside the consulting room interests me separately."

"Then cost it separately," said Severin. "Otherwise you'll end up with a clinic advertised as a holiday, and a holiday the doctor won't let anyone bill for."

Felix wanted to object, but Severin was already searching his pocket for a pencil.

* * *

The stones turned out to be thin, crisp shells. Severin bit into the first too firmly. Warm cheese spilled onto his cuff, but he was already bending over the drawing of the clearing.

"The forest I understand," he said. "I think better in the fresh air myself. But these dances of yours round the bonfire... You were serious when you drew them?"

"Quite serious. Though the bonfire will be smaller. In the drawing it came out more dramatic than it should have."

"People pay to come, undress, and stamp their feet?"

"You've just paid to be fed a stone."

Severin took another stone from the dish.

"By the way, bring us some more," he asked the passing waitress. "The same again. And wine."

"There's something interesting in accounts of group experiments," Felix continued when she had gone. "People do something very simple together. Move to the same rhythm, sing. Afterwards they find it easier to cooperate, even in something completely different. They don't have to grow fond of one another first."

"Marching, for instance."

"For instance. Which is why I wouldn't claim that a shared rhythm is exclusively beneficial. It can be easier to obey together too."

"So singing is fine, but we should be more careful about appointing a chief."

"Especially for life."

Severin smiled with one corner of his mouth and finally found the pencil—in the very pocket he had checked first.

"And the forest?"

“There are medical observations on walking and working in natural surroundings. People do feel better sometimes. But try to work out exactly why: the walks, a week of proper sleep, the company, or getting away from their own family. I don’t want to sell the forest as a cure for everything.”

“People will be keener to buy a forest as medicine.”

“I know.”

Felix said it so drily that Severin looked up.

“All right, Doctor. I’m not suggesting you lie. I need to understand what you want to build. So far you have everything at once: a theatre, a hotel, baths, therapeutic work. And then this fellow with the fish. What’s he doing?”

“In the drawing? Taking it away.”

“From whom?”

“Another participant. A contest.”

“And will they both get supper?”

“Of course.”

“Write that down, then. I was beginning to feel sorry for the other one.”

Felix turned over a sheet with his expenses written on the back. Severin stopped smiling.

He read for a long time. Twice he returned to one line, then put a question mark beside it.

“Have you counted only wages here?”

“Yes.”

“What about staff accommodation? Transport? The laundry? You won’t send forty people home from the forest every evening.”

“I don’t yet know how many we’ll need.”

“That’s what you need to work out first. Not the price of horns.”

The pencil moved swiftly over the paper, leaving thick marks. Felix wanted to take the sheet back: his neat columns were disappearing under arrows. He restrained himself.

“We don’t have to build everything at once,” said Severin. “We’ll take a plot with a house on it already. Use the first guests to see where you’ve miscalculated. We might discover, for example, that after supper your hunters don’t want a ritual, but more supper.”

“Have you found a plot already?”

“No. But I know how to look. Do you know people who can do everything you’ve drawn?”

Felix shook his head.

“Some. I’ll have to talk to the others.”

“Talk to them first, then. And get rid of this path. You can’t bring supplies along it; it cuts straight through your guests.”

“It’s the initiation path.”

“All the more reason. A man goes to be initiated and meets a cartload of laundry coming the other way.”

Felix pictured his drawing: torches, long shadows, a figure in a horned headdress appearing out of the darkness. A cart between them really would be out of place.

“The service road could go here.”

He drew the sheet towards him. Severin held the corner.

“There’s a slope there. Since the lake’s lower down, there’s no need to take everything over the hill. Move over, I’ll show you.”

Severin moved to the next chair. The folder that had lain between them was now open before them both. The waitress brought a second jug and asked where to put it. They answered at the same time, each pointing at the other’s cup.

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