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Kirill Borgia

**ECHOES FROM THE WOMBS
OF TARTARIA**

Erotic Saga

2

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Echoes from the Wombs
of Tartaria — 2. Erotic Saga

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Аннотация

An immortal archivist fleeing his own century boards a southbound train into the fading Russian Empire — drawn by whispers of a forgotten female cult tied to the lost soul of Tartaria. As desire, memory, and ancient bloodlines entwine, Yarosvet Zorich is pulled into a shadowed world where beauty becomes ritual, motherhood becomes power, and the past refuses to stay buried.

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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Echoes from the Wombs of Tartaria — 2 Erotic Saga

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The Fourth Echo

The day had unraveled quietly in the soft hum of their whispered confidences and the gentle rustle of sheets, punctuated by the occasional sigh or murmur that seemed to linger in the warm, enclosed air of the carriage. Night had folded itself over the train like a velvet curtain, and morning arrived with the low clatter of wheels on rails, the distant cries of street vendors, and the faint, briny scent of the river mingling with the earthy aroma of the city waking. They scarcely touched their breakfast before the train slowed, and through the window they glimpsed the bustling chaos of Rostov-on-Don — the stir of carts along cobbled streets, the barking of dogs, the clanging of metal — and the city, alive and unhurried, welcomed them with all its rough, vivid presence.

Their luggage was swiftly lifted down from the iron belly of the train, and the morning air of Rostov greeted them with a mixture of coal smoke, horse sweat, and the sharp tang of the Don carried by a restless wind. On the square before the station stood a ragged line of carriages; drivers, in their worn caps and fur-trimmed coats, called out hoarsely to the arriving passengers.

Yarosvet helped Taissia into one of the waiting droshkies, its leather seat polished by years of weary travellers, then turned to the driver — a broad-shouldered fellow with a russet beard and eyes narrowed from the sun.

«We need a hotel, somewhere close to Pushkinskaya Street,» Yarosvet said, adjusting his gloves with that careful, measured manner of his.

The man scratched his temple with a rein, squinting. «Pushkinskaya, eh? That's the one they used to call Kuznetskaya, ain't it?»

Yarosvet's brows lifted slightly; the name stirred no memory. He shook his head.

«No matter,» the driver continued with a sudden spark of pride, «I'll take you better yet. Newest place in town — „Moskovskaya,“ just opened this very year. Grand building on Bolshaya Sadovaya, can't miss it. Finest rooms in Rostov.»

Yarosvet inclined his head, and a faint smile touched his lips. «Very well. To the Moskovskaya, then.»

With a click of the tongue and a lash of the whip, the droshky leapt forward, wheels clattering over cobblestones, carrying them into the broad veins of the awakening city.

The carriage clattered through the city as dawn stretched her pale fingers over the rooftops of Rostov. Hooves rang out on uneven cobblestones, scattering pigeons that rose in grey whirls above the marketplace. They passed narrow lanes smelling of coal and fresh bread, then broader avenues where chestnut trees stood in dusty rows, their branches stirring with the first breeze from the Don. Street-sellers lifted their baskets, calling out with rough voices; a church bell tolled somewhere behind them, deep and solemn, while the driver urged his horse through the living

pulse of the awakening town.

At last the carriage drew up before a newly risen grandeur on Bolshaya Sadovaya. The Moskovskaya Hotel, its four storeys gleaming with fresh stone, stood like a proud announcement of the city's new ambitions. The façade, carved into strong vertical rhythms, bore a central portico with Corinthian columns that caught the early light, their shadows falling in precise, noble lines. Rusticated masonry on the ground floor gave the whole a sense of weight and permanence, while above, rows of windows unfolded in measured harmony — rectangular at first, then gracefully arched on the upper storey, like a slow crescendo in music.

To Yarosvet it seemed less a building than a declaration, a confident gesture of modernity in this southern town. Taissia, leaning forward, let her eyes linger on the pilasters and the pediment crowning the portico, her lips parting in a quiet smile of admiration. The driver, swelling with pride as if he himself had laid the stones, swung his whip aloft and repeated, «The finest in Rostov. Sixty rooms, all new — opened this very year.»

Yarosvet inclined his head, paid the man, and stepped down to the pavement. Together they stood a moment, gazing up at the fresh splendour, as if the very edifice were an omen awaiting them. Then, side by side, they passed beneath its arching doorway and into the silence of polished marble and echoing halls.

At the reception desk, beneath the glow of gas lamps and the faint smell of fresh varnish, a clerk in a stiff collar politely

extended his hand for their documents. Taissia, eighteen years old and carrying herself with the quiet confidence of legal adulthood, slid her passport across the polished wood with an almost careless air; the young man glanced at it briefly, nodded without comment, and returned it with a deferential smile.

Yarosvet's turn, however, was less seamless. The clerk frowned, holding the booklet to the light, his eyes travelling from the inked description of age and appearance to the man who stood before him — whose features seemed too youthful, too vigorous, for the birth year inscribed on the page. A moment of awkward silence hovered, broken only by the rustle of ledgers being turned in the adjoining office.

Yarosvet, calm but inwardly tense, laid a banknote discreetly beside the passport. The hesitation in the clerk's gaze melted swiftly; the paper vanished into a drawer with the same smoothness as the doubt in his eyes. «Very good, sir,» he murmured, sliding back the document and dipping his pen into the register.

Thus the matter was settled, not with explanations but with the quiet eloquence of the rouble.

They ascended by the broad central staircase, its marble steps faintly resonant beneath their tread, the polished banister gleaming like a stream of dark honey under the flicker of gaslight. Taissia, with that sprightly insistence of hers, had asked for the very top floor, «closer to the sky,» as she whispered, her eyes alive with mischief. The climb was long, each landing

opening upon a corridor hushed and carpeted, the air tinged with varnish and the faint perfume of lamp oil. From the tall windows along the stairwell the city unfolded in fragments: slate rooftops, a glint of the Don, the pale smoke of chimneys rising into the morning.

At last they reached their room. The porter unlocked a heavy door with a brass key, bowing as he withdrew, leaving them alone in the hush of the space. Within, they found high ceilings painted in soft cream, tall arched windows that admitted a river of light, and curtains of damask falling in stately folds. A large bed dominated the chamber, its carved headboard gleaming under a fresh polish, while on the marble-topped table stood a vase with roses — slightly wilted, yet still breathing a faint fragrance into the air.

From the window, when Taissia hurried to draw aside the drapes, they could see far across the city: the bustle of Bolshaya Sadovaya below, the green ribbon of Pushkinskaya beyond, and, in the distance, a thin silver gleam of the river. For a moment, the world seemed hushed and remote, as if the lofty chamber itself were a private eyrie suspended above Rostov, set apart for the two of them alone.

Taissia's laughter, bright and girlish, rang through the lofty room the instant the door closed behind them. «At last — just us!» she exclaimed, and with the careless ease of a child at play she began tugging at her garments, letting them fall in a careless trail across the carpet. In a heartbeat she stood bare as the day,

her skin gleaming softly in the slant of daylight, and darted, fleet as a swallow, through the side door in search of the promised conveniences of so modern a house.

What she found made her pause in delighted wonder. The chamber opened into a small tiled anteroom, the walls clad in pale faience, cool to the touch, and there stood a shining porcelain tub — deep, oval, its brass claw-feet polished like gold. Beside it rose curious fittings: gleaming taps and pipes that whispered of hot and cold water at command, a marvel she had only half-believed until now. Against the far wall a cabinet concealed a flush toilet, its wooden seat lacquered to a dark gloss, while above it a polished cistern bore the discreet crest of some foreign maker. A large mirror hung over the washstand, framed in oak, and on its marble surface lay folded towels of startling whiteness, faintly scented with soap.

Taissia gave a cry of delight, turning on her heel, her nakedness unashamed, her eyes wide as though she had stumbled into some enchanted grotto. To her, raised in more modest conditions, this little sanctuary of modern comfort seemed a treasure-house; she touched everything, laughing, tugging the chains and handles just to hear the gurgle of water, marvelling that all this splendour belonged — at least for now — to them alone.

Taissia, still full of her childlike daring, perched herself upon the porcelain seat as though upon a throne, leaving the door wide so that the light fell in unabashedly upon her bare limbs. With a

sly gleam in her eyes she called out, half-laughing, half-serious:
«If you wish, you may watch me while I relieve myself.»

He chuckled, deep and warm, leaning against the doorframe with folded arms, the corners of his mouth betraying amusement.

«There will be time enough for such spectacles, little one,» he said softly. «Do not hurry me with your bold inventions.»

She wrinkled her nose, then bent forward, her voice suddenly gentler, almost wistful:

«Tell me — could we not remain here forever? Just you and I, in this high room above the city, with hot water and velvet curtains, with no one to disturb us?»

The air between them held a mingling of laughter and yearning: her question naïve in its simplicity, yet carrying the unmistakable tremor of longing, as if in the glittering modern comforts she had glimpsed a promise of permanence, of shelter from the restless world that had cast her into his arms.

Yarosvet, still smiling at her audacity, inclined his head as though indulging a child:

«Yes, of course, we may remain here as long as you wish. This chamber, this city — they are yours, little bird.»

Taissia gave a sly, conspiratorial smile, her eyes narrowing with that quick spark of cunning which so often flashed beneath her playfulness. «Thank you, my dear lord,» she murmured, half in mock solemnity, as though he had bestowed upon her an empire. Yet even as the words left her lips she shook her head, her voice sharpening with a sudden realism.

«But no — I do not need such sacrifices from you. This fine city and its gilded hotel will soon weary us both. And besides» — she laughed lightly, with the cruel candour of youth — «you cannot have such coffers as would keep us in this splendour forever. I would not make a beggar of you for the sake of marble tubs and velvet curtains.»

The air quivered between jest and truth, her teasing words edged with a strange tenderness, as if she wished to spare him while at the same time reminding herself that such glitter was but a passing disguise, and that their true bond lay elsewhere.

Yarosvet's gaze softened, and he let out a low chuckle, the sound reverberating in the tiled chamber.

«Money is not such a difficulty,» he replied evenly. «Only until you appeared, little one, it never occurred to me to build a nest of my own. I was quite content with rented rooms, fleeting roofs, places to rest without belonging. For me, permanence has always been a stranger.»

Perched upon the porcelain throne, relieving herself without the least concern, Taissia laughed — a bright, silvery ripple, shameless yet girlishly curious. The water whispered beneath her, unembarrassed, while she tilted her head to regard him through a curtain of loosened hair.

«And may I ask, since we are in such... intimate confidence,» she said slyly, «how it happens that you always have roubles at hand? You do not look like one who works, not in any ordinary sense. What is your secret, Yarosvet? A fortune hidden in a

mattress? Or perhaps some long-forgotten inheritance?»

Her eyes sparkled with mischief, yet behind the jest was an eager hunger to pierce the mystery of him, to know from where his freedom and his strange, unmoored life drew its quiet strength.

Yarosvet stepped across the threshold with unhurried ease, the faint echo of his boots softened by the tiled floor. He bent toward her, fingers brushing her cheek in a gesture at once tender and possessive; his other hand found the warm curve of her breast, closing over it with quiet familiarity.

«My little inquisitor,» he murmured with a smile, «when one has a century to observe the ways of the world, one learns how to make money breed money. I was left, long ago, with a modest inheritance from my parents — a seed rather than a fortune. By the advice of well-placed friends, I invested in shares of certain industrious companies. They have grown, as such things do, while I, for my part, have lived rather simply, spending little upon myself.»

He spoke with that tranquil frankness which carried no boast, only the calm assurance of a man long accustomed to turning the invisible cogs of fortune, while Taissia — unabashed upon her porcelain seat — listened as though to a secret door creaking open in the mansion of his life.

Taissia tilted her head, a strand of dark hair slipping across her brow as she regarded him with half-mocking seriousness.

«And why,» she asked, her eyes narrowing in playful

reproach, «have you not even undressed from the road? You still smell of dust and iron and all that rattling train.»

Yarosvet gave a measured shrug, his gaze drifting for a moment to the tall windows where the sun struck through the gauze curtains.

«I had thought,» he replied evenly, «to call without delay upon Inga. It is, after all, for her that I have come.»

She gave a quick, bell-like laugh, shaking her head with the impatience of youth.

«Nonsense. What is this fever to rush? First you will take a proper bath, then change into something worthy of the city, and perhaps even dine. Only after that should you go chasing new acquaintances.» She leaned against the doorframe with sudden softness, her voice slipping into a coaxing murmur. «I promise to be a good little girl meanwhile — to sit here quietly if you prefer it so, or, if you mean to bring her here, I shall go out for a walk. Whichever pleases you best. I shan't be in the way. Truly, I will not.»

There was in her tone both generosity and that faint tremor of hurt one hears in a violin string stretched too taut — a girl's loyalty tested against the man's wider, older purpose.

Yarosvet paused, her words settling into him like a quiet truth. Indeed, there had been no appointed hour with Inga, no pledge that demanded his haste. The city would not vanish, nor would she. He exhaled slowly, conceding in silence, and stepped out into the room.

With deliberate motions he undressed, folding his garments neatly, and hung them — alongside Taissia's lighter dress — within the tall, cedar-scented wardrobe whose doors gave off a faint, resinous creak. The act carried with it a subtle intimacy, as though, by placing their clothes together, he acknowledged a shared existence, however fragile.

When he returned to the tiled chamber, the sound of running water reached him first, a crystalline music echoing against porcelain. Taissia was already there, barefoot upon the cool floor, mischievously presiding over the bath she had set to fill. Steam curled in languid ribbons about her bare shoulders, and her eyes flashed with the triumph of a child caught in some delicious prank.

«You see?» she said, testing the water with her hand, her smile bright with unrepentant mischief. «I thought you might forget yourself, so I remembered for you.»

The room had grown warm and fragrant, the rising steam softening its sharp edges, so that it seemed less a hotel bathroom than a private grotto conjured for two. Yarosvet sank slowly into the water, the heat embracing his weary limbs, coaxing from his shoulders the stiffness of travel. The porcelain sides rang faintly at his descent, a muted hymn to repose. Across from him, Taissia lowered herself with a playful shiver, droplets scattering from her skin like beads of glass. For a moment she reclined against the rim, eyes half-closed, a satisfied sigh escaping her parted lips.

It was she who reached first for the soap, lifting it like a

treasured jewel, turning it in her wet palms until it bloomed with white, silken lather. She leaned forward, the candle-like glow of her arms drawing near, and pressed the froth to his chest. Her fingers moved deliberately, tracing the hard planes of his torso, circling with an intimacy both practical and tender. She soaped his shoulders, his neck, lingering upon the slope of his collarbone, as though polishing some timeworn statue restored to youth. He smiled at her earnest industry, yet did not stop her — there was something oddly soothing in her girlish seriousness, her intent gaze fixed upon each patch of skin as though nothing else existed in the world.

When it was his turn, he took the soap from her, their fingers brushing, slippery and warm. He set to work on her arms, lifting them gently, running the suds along their length, until she giggled and let her wrists dangle like a marionette. He soaped her shoulders, the tender hollow where neck met collar, and then, with greater care, her back, the curve of her spine glistening beneath the sheen of lather. She arched slightly, feline in her pleasure, hair clinging damply to her cheeks. The intimacy of the act was heightened by their unhurried pace: there was no urgency, no feverish grasping, only the unbroken rhythm of touch and water, as though each gesture were both caress and conversation.

They spoke as they washed, half in jest, half in confidences. She teased him about the seriousness with which he worked, calling him a monk disguised as a lover; he replied that monks would envy such duties, and perhaps their prayers had been

misplaced all along. She laughed, splashing water against his chest, only to have him retaliate, drawing her closer under the pretext of rinsing the soap from her shoulders. Their words wandered, as lightly as their hands — of the strangeness of this southern city, of the vastness of Russia itself, of how fleeting it seemed to arrive and already feel a room one's own. She asked if he was happy, truly, in this moment; he answered not with solemn protestations but by lathering her hair, his fingers sliding slowly over her scalp, massaging the suds until she gave a low murmur of pleasure.

At last the bath was clouded with foam, their skin fragrant and slick. They sat opposite each other, knees brushing beneath the water, exchanging looks that were more eloquent than any jest. Time had loosened its grip — minutes stretched like silk threads, unbroken, delicate. It was not the hunger of bodies that filled the space, but the steady weaving of intimacy: the knowledge that they could share silence, touch, and laughter all at once, and that none of it demanded more than simple presence.

It was Taissia who slid lower first, slipping almost beneath the surface, her dark hair floating like ribbons upon the water. She took his ankle into her hands, the contrast of her small fingers upon his strong calf almost childlike, yet charged with mischief. With solemn exaggeration she soaped his shin, her thumbs circling carefully, as if she were polishing a relic for some secret rite. Down she went, lingering over his heel, the arch of his foot, until at last she lifted it from the water. Droplets streamed

down his skin, caught the lamplight, and broke in tiny mirrors upon her breast. She pressed his toes together playfully, then bent her head, brushing her lips across the ball of his foot in a kiss that was both mock-ceremonial and tender.

Yarosvet chuckled, not from embarrassment but from the novelty of the act, and reached for her in turn. He drew one of her legs across his lap, pale and glistening, the sheen of soap still clinging to her calf. His hands moved reverently, rubbing the lather along the long line of her shin, squeezing gently at the soft flesh of her thigh before returning downward. He lingered upon her ankle, marvelling at the delicacy of its bones, before cupping her foot as though it were a fragile bird. Raising it above the water, he rinsed it slowly, then kissed the tender underside with the gravity of a vow.

Their laughter subsided into a hush, broken only by the faint trickle of water and the distant hum of the city beyond the shutters. It felt like play, and yet not only play: there was a strange intimacy in baring one's soles to another, in submitting that unguarded part of the body to lips and touch. She leaned back against the porcelain rim, watching him through half-lidded eyes, her mouth curving in a smile that was both girlish and knowing.

They took turns, almost solemnly, soaping, rinsing, and kissing each other's feet, until it seemed less a game than a ritual, binding them in some private liturgy of flesh and water. When at last they paused, their legs entwined beneath the surface, the

bath was quiet save for the soft whisper of bubbles breaking. She whispered something about never having been treated so like a princess, and he, brushing wet hair from her cheek, answered that queens had been crowned with less ceremony.

The bathwater lapped softly around them, rippling over the curves of her skin and the firm plane of his chest. Taissia's fingers drifted along the hidden landscape beneath the surface, tracing the undeniable hardness that throbbed with quiet insistence. A shiver ran through her, half from the cool embrace of water, half from the intimate, unspoken gravity of what she felt.

With a careful tilt, she rose, her thighs pressing into the bath, her knees finding the warm porcelain beneath. Slowly, deliberately, she lowered herself, her body aligning with his in a taut, unyielding press of flesh. Water clung to them both, glistening, magnifying every curve, every subtle movement. She lingered, suspended in that delicate balance, the bath a cocoon of murmured gasps and the slick whisper of skin on skin.

The moment was suspended, ritualistic almost, a silent communion of heat and touch. She felt the subtle pulse beneath her, the rigidity of his body welcoming her weight, and she allowed herself to be enveloped in the sensation — the firm, unrelenting presence that pressed against her, the quiet surrender to the pressure of flesh under water. Time seemed to dilate; the world beyond the tiled walls and the faint city hum receded, leaving only the warm, trembling intimacy of two bodies in fluid harmony.

Her hands braced against the edge of the bath, eyes half-closed, lips parting in a soft exhale, and she savored the strange, intoxicating paradox of dominance and surrender, of yielding to pressure and yet commanding every tremor of sensation. Water slipped in rivulets down her back, catching the soft glow of the bathroom light, accentuating the curves and tension of her form.

And there they stayed — suspended, connected, a private ballet of flesh, water, and quiet, unvoiced devotion — until the rhythm of the bath and their breathing became one, indistinguishable, almost sacred in its intensity.

She lingered there, suspended between yielding and command, every curve of her pressing into the rigid insistence beneath her. The bathwater pooled around their entwined forms, clinging and sliding with each subtle adjustment of her hips, tracing the line of their contact like molten glass. Her fingers drifted again, seeking the familiar swell of muscle and hardness, caressing not just the contours but the almost magnetic tension that seemed to emanate from him.

With a slow, deliberate tilt, she shifted, letting the water embrace them, softening the friction, amplifying the pressure. Her breath hitched in a delicate gasp as the heat of their bodies mingled with the cool liquidity surrounding them, creating a sensation both intimate and almost ritualistic in its intensity. The tilt of her pelvis, the gentle arch of her spine, the subtle grinding and settling of her weight — all these became a language spoken in water and flesh, a dialogue of pressure, resistance, and

suspended motion.

Her thighs pressed around him, the tautness of her muscles balancing the unyielding core she felt beneath her. Water cascaded in tiny rivulets over the tension, catching the light in glittering streams that seemed to mark each delicate tremor of contact. She could feel, in every fiber of her body, the subtle push and pull of gravity and flesh, the warm, pliant give of skin against skin, the unspoken rhythm of their shared presence.

Slowly, almost reverently, she adjusted herself, pressing against him with the gentle, unyielding embrace of her inner muscles. The subtle, rhythmic contraction of her flesh around him became a pulse, a silent cadence that seemed older than time itself, a secret liturgy of sensation performed beneath the gleaming surface of the bathwater.

Each squeeze was measured, deliberate, as though she were memorising a sacred chant through touch alone. Her hips shifted imperceptibly, allowing the water to amplify the friction, each ripple catching on their skin like whispered verses of an ancient rite. The tension of her muscles, warm and pliant, moulded around the rigid core beneath her, a communion of softness and firmness, yielding and commanding in equal measure.

Her breath came in quiet, uneven waves, mirrored by the slight shiver that passed through him, a tremor that the water magnified into a gentle, shivering rhythm. She leaned forward, letting her hands glide over his shoulders and chest, guiding, supporting, becoming both priestess and acolyte in this private temple of

skin and liquid. Every motion, every subtle tightening, was part of the ritual, an invocation performed without words, a sacred choreography of flesh and warmth.

The water clung to their bodies, glistening like molten crystal in the dim light, carrying the soft sounds of their shared intensity: the hiss of liquid, the sighs that escaped her lips, the minute shifts and counterpoints of muscle and pressure. In that suspended, watery world, nothing existed beyond the deliberate, measured closeness, the secret celebration of touch, of tension, of the silent, sacred contraction that bound them together.

She lingered above him, the water embracing them like a sacred veil, her weight a gentle assertion that drew a soft, responsive tension from his body. Each subtle shift, each deliberate movement, was a quiet ceremony, a measured rhythm that felt less like motion and more like an invocation. The press of her flesh against his was a whispering pulse, the muscles of her being tightening and releasing in delicate cadence, as if speaking in the secret language of water and warmth.

Ripples radiated outward, carrying the echo of each undulation across the bath, each glide a silent affirmation of intimacy and presence. She traced a slow, ascending path along him, then descended in a mirrored descent, the water magnifying the sensation into a sensuous hymn. In that private liturgy of skin and liquid, time dissolved; only the ritual remained, a communion of bodies attuned to the subtle poetry of touch, a dance of tension and release, of yielding and control, where every

movement was consecrated by the sacred hush of the bath.

Her eyes half-lidded, she felt the ebb and flow of their shared warmth, the rise and fall of currents that were theirs alone. It was a slow, sacred litany, a wordless dialogue of flesh, water, and intention, a moment suspended between devotion and desire, trembling yet disciplined, intimate yet untold.

He felt her presence above him like a tide pressing softly against a shore, her weight and warmth a constant, deliberate insistence. Each subtle shift, each glide, traced along his length, awakened a deep, resonant awareness in him, a vibration that seemed to echo through the very marrow of his body. The water carried every motion, amplifying the friction into a quiet, insistent pulse that reverberated along his senses.

It was not mere touch, but an invocation: he felt the gentle squeeze of her muscles, the measured cadence of her pressure, and the rhythm settled into him like an ancient, unspoken chant. Each ascent and descent was a whispering dialogue of flesh against flesh, a secret language of intimacy that made his pulse stutter and his breath catch in the hush of the bath.

He was aware of every nuance — the subtle tilt of her hips, the slight shift of her weight, the ebb and flow of her tension — each sensation magnified by the water's embrace. It was a communion that seemed to stretch time, a private liturgy of presence and anticipation. His body responded with reverent obedience, muscles taut yet yielding, a vessel for the delicate, sacred rhythm she orchestrated above him. In that suspended,

liquid silence, he felt both consumed and exalted, entwined in the slow, reverential dance of their shared flesh.

He laughed, a low, warm sound that rippled through the bathwater, disturbing the gentle sway of their entwined limbs. «I never thought you'd be so... possessive,» he murmured, eyes twinkling with amusement.

She tilted her head, feigning innocence, a sly veil over the sharp glint in her gaze. Her lips curved into a delicate smile, light yet knowing, as if daring him to see through her playful guise.

«You want me to stay within you,» he added softly, voice threaded with half-teasing, half-serious longing, «even when I go to see Inga?»

Her smile deepened, mischievous and secretive, and she leaned forward, pressing her lips to his in a kiss that was at once tender and slightly challenging. The water around them seemed to hold its breath, cradling the heat of that brief, intimate collision. Every subtle movement — the tilt of her chin, the brush of her fingers along his shoulder — spoke of unspoken claims, of the quiet tension that shimmered between desire and restraint.

In that suspended hush, he felt the weight of her gaze, the craft of her cunning affection, and the latent, teasing fire in her kiss. It was not a surrender, nor a conquest, but a ritual acknowledgment of their strange, private tether — a bond woven through laughter, water, and the silent liturgy of bodies pressed close yet careful, reverent, teasing.

She pulled back slightly, letting her gaze linger on his, half-

mocking, half-serious. Her voice, soft yet deliberate, traced the contours of the air between them: «You know very well,» she murmured, «that if you do not wish, you will not... not in me.»

He chuckled, the sound bubbling up and shaking the water around them, but there was a flicker of something more — curiosity, restraint, the subtle thrill of being observed and measured. The bath seemed to lean closer, the warm liquid embracing their thighs and knees, carrying the tremor of unspoken understandings.

She let her hand drift along his chest, tracing invisible lines as though drawing a map of his will, of his limits, daring him with the gentlest of provocations. The tension between them hung like incense smoke, curling and lingering, neither pressing nor yielding, yet pregnant with the ritual of their mutual recognition — of power, play, and the intimate contract they were weaving beneath the quiet shimmer of water.

Her eyes sparkled, mischievous, almost triumphant, and she pressed her forehead lightly against his, a whisper of laughter caught in her throat, as though to say: «I know, and I wait.»

«What is this Inga like?» she asked, the water swirling around them like molten glass.

«I have never seen her,» he replied, the words hanging heavy, yet measured, between the soft whisper of bubbles and the distant hum of the city beyond the shutters.

«And if she... is ugly? What then?»

«Experience shows,» he said slowly, «that Matrosmira

bestows the gift of continuation only upon those fair and healthy. The others... she spares.»

A quiet, knowing laugh rippled from her, catching the faint reflection of the lantern. Desire and jest intertwined, a private liturgy of gaze and whispered promise, filling the warm, confined space around them.

«Very well,» she said, a cunning glint in her eyes. Slowly, she slipped down, sliding off his shaft as the water trembled around them, carrying the quiet resonance of their closeness, as if the bath itself had witnessed the subtle, intimate withdrawal of her body from him.

She sank onto him, pressing her chest to his, her body aligned so that the curve of her belly met him, the friction sending a gentle, throbbing warmth between them. The bathwater swirled softly, reflecting the muted light, and their lips met in a long, lingering kiss, each contact laden with a sacred rhythm, a private liturgy of breath and bodies that existed beyond the ordinary world.

«Should I... leave, or stay here in the apartments so as not to be in the way?» she asked again, her voice light, teasing, yet carrying a hint of genuine curiosity.

«You need not go anywhere deliberately,» he replied, his tone measured, almost indifferent, yet threaded with a subtle amusement. «Remain, if you wish. Perhaps I might even introduce you to Inga...» He paused, letting the thought hang, as if the very nature of that girl would determine the outcome.

She blinked, eyes widening, a small, triumphant smile tugging at her lips. «Well, then,» she said, «she shall certainly be fair and healthy. She must be, if Matrosmira has anything to do with it.»

For a fleeting instant, the room felt suspended — steamy, intimate, and almost sacred — each of them wrapped in the unspoken cadence of expectation and knowing.

She reached beneath the water and pulled out the stopper. The bathwater began its slow retreat, swirling around their limbs as if reluctant to leave. Rising gracefully, she climbed out, water dripping in glistening rivulets down her body.

He stood as well, watching her movements with quiet amusement. She took a soft cloth and began to rinse him from head to toe, her hands following the contours of his body with deliberate care. When she finished, she wrapped a warm towel around him, pressing it snugly against his shoulders.

«May I remain here in the warmth of the fresh bath, while you go about and perhaps meet Inga?» she asked, her voice tinged with both mischief and tenderness, eyes searching his.

«You may,» he replied, the corner of his mouth lifting ever so slightly. «Just... don't catch cold.»

A sly smile curved her lips, and she tilted her head, voice soft but charged with a hint of triumph. «You are far too indulgent,» she said, the words teasing, almost purring. «I shall not overstay, but... the warmth is terribly persuasive.»

He pulled on his fresh linen, fastening his collar with absent hands, while she, still bare and glistening, padded back into the

bathroom. The cold tiles seemed to kiss her feet, her shoulders rolling with a feline stretch as she leaned over the porcelain. Her breasts swayed gently as she reached forward, the curve of her back arching with effortless grace. When the water began to rush in, steam rose to veil her body in wavering clouds, yet each line of her — hip, waist, thigh — gleamed for a moment longer, as though the mist itself lingered in admiration before swallowing her shape.

Before he could reach for his coat, she darted out of the bathroom, droplets still beading on her skin, and flung herself against him. Her damp body pressed to his freshly clothed chest, the contrast of linen and wet flesh sending a shiver through him. Tilting her face up, she caught his mouth in a swift, ardent kiss, her breath warm against his lips. «I'll be a good girl,» she whispered with a mischievous softness, as though making a vow and breaking it in the same instant, her eyes glimmering with playful obedience.

A rough warmth escaped him, half laugh, half sigh, as his palm settled at the hollow of her back, taking in the slick heat of her skin against his clothes. «Good girl?» he said, his voice low, brushing her lips as he spoke. «That would be something new.» His eyes held hers, teasing yet intent, as though weighing her vow and savouring the taste of her defiance. With a lingering touch he drew her closer for a heartbeat more before letting her slip away, his hand sliding down her spine like a farewell caress.

She tipped her head just enough to catch his mouth again, her

breath sweet against his lips. «Then perhaps you should keep me under watch,» she whispered, her smile glinting with mischief. «Otherwise... I may forget my promise.»

He laughed into her mouth, the sound muffled between their lips, and then pulled away with a last, playful brush of his thumb across her cheek. The echo of his laughter still lingered in the room as he reached for his coat. On the little table by the window lay Inga's letter; he folded it once more with care, tucking the paper into his breast pocket as one might carry both weapon and talisman. Without another word he opened the door, the air of the corridor rushing in cold and strange against the warmth they had shared, and stepped out, leaving behind the hush of steam and her waiting presence.

* * *

He walked steadily along Bolshaya Sadovaya, the sunlight striking the façades of low, stuccoed buildings, gilding their cornices with a fleeting brilliance. The southern air carried the faint, briny hint of the Don River, mingling with the rich scent of horse sweat and the earthy aroma of wet stone and damp leaves. The day hummed with life: the muted clatter of cart wheels on worn pavement, the distant toll of church bells, and the murmured chatter of townsfolk blending together into a rhythm that felt both ordinary and sacred.

Horses trotted past, their hooves striking the stones with

precise cadence, while street vendors called softly, offering fresh fruit, roasted chestnuts, or newspapers, their voices drifting through the cool air like smoke. Women in heavy coats and scarves, their hands tucked into mufflers or gloves, moved with a careful, measured grace, brushing past men in frock coats and hats, each step deliberate, yet in harmony with the city's pulse.

Turning onto Pushkinskaya, the street broadened, and the crowd thinned, the light catching on the glass windows of small cafés and shops, scattering reflections across the pavement like molten bronze. The aroma of freshly baked bread mingled with the faint tang of river mud from the Don, the earthy smell of damp leaves, and the subtle perfume of flowers in market stalls. Well-dressed ladies in winter cloaks and felt hats glided past, while gentlemen spoke softly in clusters, their voices merging with the distant clang of a tram and the occasional sharp cry of a hawker touting fruit or fish.

He noticed the little details: a child pausing to watch a dog chase a stick, a woman adjusting her hat or scarf against a gust of wind in a mirrored window, the shimmer of iron railings catching the low sun. Even the distant barking of dogs or the metallic clang of the tram bell carried a rhythm that echoed the cadence of his own steps. He observed quietly the subtle dance of town life: a nod of a hat in greeting, the flicker of impatience on a passerby's brow, the soft rustle of heavy coats over the pavement.

By the time he reached a small square shaded by plane trees, he paused, allowing the weak warmth of the early spring sun and

the gentle murmur of city life to seep into him. Even amidst the bustle of Rostov, there was a peculiar intimacy in these walks — an almost sacred communion with the living pulse of the city, the slow, deliberate unfolding of days, each step a witness to the rhythm of life along the Don. He lingered a moment longer, observing a man adjusting his coat against the crisp breeze, a woman stooping to tie her child's boot, the subtle gleam of the tram rails catching the light as it slid past the square, before letting the current of purpose draw him onward.

It was a narrow, unassuming street that caught his attention, distinguished only by a small, dark-green plaque fastened beside a worn wooden door. The letters, gilt but fading, spelled out something he recognized instantly — «*Bureau of Civil Documents — Registration and Amendments*» — an office where certain matters of identity could be «arranged,» a place removed from the rigid scrutiny of officialdom. A faint memory of irritation at the hotel registration — a clerk scrutinizing his passport, muttering at some minor inconsistency — surfaced unbidden. The thought of having his documents properly, and discreetly, aligned with the visage he had maintained for decades urged him forward.

He ascended the narrow wooden stair, the soles of his boots muted against the worn treads. For a moment, he paused, hand hovering near the latch, attuned to the faint movement above and the subtle creak of the floorboards. Then, with the same deliberate calm that guided his every gesture, he opened the door

and crossed the threshold.

The interior was narrow but not oppressive, the scent of ink, paper, and faint polish blending with the dust of old ledgers. Sunlight filtered through a tall window, catching motes in the air, and casting a warm glow over the modest counter behind which a young woman sat. She glanced up, her features alert yet gentle, her hair pulled back in a practical coil. Her eyes, a clear and vivid shade, met his with the faintest hint of curiosity — an instinctive appraisal of the stranger who had entered without fanfare.

«Good afternoon,» he said, his voice steady, formal yet imbued with a softness that betrayed nothing of impatience. «I need some information regarding... adjustments to a passport. Not a simple correction, but a matter of certain particulars.»

The woman's gaze sharpened, and she tilted her head, as if weighing his words against a thousand unspoken rules. «You mean a legal amendment?» she asked, her tone polite, cautious. «Or something... more discretionary?»

He allowed himself the smallest of smiles, the kind that was barely perceptible but full of a quiet confidence. «Discretion is exactly the word. It concerns both description and... temporal details,» he said, nodding slightly toward the aged leather-bound ledger that lay open before her, a silent testament to bureaucratic precision. «I would not wish to trouble those who cannot help, but I must speak with the person who oversees such matters.»

Her lips curved into a subtle, knowing smile, and for a brief moment, he caught the flicker of something unspoken — a

recognition that not all requests were ordinary, that not every visitor carried trivial matters. «The manager handles the sensitive cases,» she said softly, her hands folding over one another, the motion practiced yet natural. «I can inform them of your presence. Please, wait here.»

She paused just inside the doorway, glancing at him with a slight tilt of her head. «And how shall I introduce you?» she asked, her tone casual, yet carrying the quiet attentiveness that seemed to weigh his very presence.

«Yarosvet Alexeyevich Zorich,» he replied evenly, measuring each syllable as if it were part of a ritual, noting the subtle, almost imperceptible change that flickered across her features — an eyebrow lifted, a tightening at the corner of her mouth — but she said nothing. Without another word, she turned and stepped into the office, leaving the door ajar for a brief instant, a muted invitation that marked the passage into the private sphere where the city's rules bent to discretion.

He inclined his head in acknowledgment, settling into a chair placed against the far wall, his posture composed, the faint rustle of his coat the only sign of movement. From this vantage, he observed the narrow office — the precise placement of folders, the gentle tick of a clock on the far wall, the occasional creak of the floor above, and the quiet diligence with which she attended to her duties. In this small, ordinary space, the city outside seemed to recede, leaving only the charged expectation of what was to come: the introduction to the one who could bend the

official record to align with the reality he had long maintained in solitude.

Through the glass pane of the closed office door, he caught sight of her — leaning slightly over the desk, her expression attentive, eyes bright with concentration as she spoke to the man behind it. Even from this distance, he sensed the quiet precision of her movements, the careful deliberation in the tilt of her head, the subtle grace with which she engaged the matter at hand. And in that brief, charged interval, their eyes met across the thin barrier of wood and glass, and he noticed the spark of intelligence and attentiveness that would mark this encounter — the quiet beginning of a connection whose significance he could not yet measure. For now, she was a mediator, a gatekeeper, the bridge to the authority he sought, yet already he perceived that the turn of fortune that had brought him here was no mere chance.

She emerged from the office a moment later, her steps quiet but measured, carrying with them an air of efficiency that seemed to command the corridor itself. «Mr. Zorich,» she said, her voice even, courteous, yet touched with an almost imperceptible warmth, «the manager, Mr. Petrov, is ready to see you now.»

He dipped his head in assent, a faint shadow of a smile touching his lips, and stepped past her into the manager's office. The door closed behind him with a gentle thud, leaving the corridor silent and still. She returned to her desk with effortless

grace, resuming her watch over the empty bureau, the soft rustle of papers marking the quiet rhythm of the day, as if nothing had disturbed the calm — but he, now alone in the office, felt the weight of anticipation pressing gently against the tranquil space.

Yarosvet stepped fully into the small, book-lined office, the faint scent of aged paper and varnished wood greeting him with the understated authority of a space accustomed to delicate matters. Behind the desk sat a man of moderate age, neither particularly imposing nor frivolous in appearance, yet there was an air of measured attentiveness in the way he regarded visitors. A pair of thin, wire-rimmed spectacles perched lightly on the bridge of his nose, catching the muted light of the window and lending him the quiet authority of someone accustomed to reading not only documents but intentions. *Ivan Dmitrievich Petrov*, as his nameplate declared in modest brass lettering, lifted his gaze from the ledger he had been inspecting, and for a moment, allowed his eyes to appraise the visitor as if weighing an unseen measure.

«Good afternoon,» Petrov said, his voice calm, unhurried, carrying the precise cadence of someone used to listening before speaking. «How may I be of assistance?» He gestured subtly toward the chair opposite his desk, inviting Yarosvet to take a seat.

Yarosvet bowed his head in recognition, the faintest trace of a smile brushing his lips, and folded his hands over one another on the edge of the desk. «I find myself in need of

certain amendments, rather delicate in nature,» he began, his tone measured, neither abrupt nor pleading. «It concerns the official record — my personal dossier, so to speak. I seek to ensure that it reflects what is, at present, a rather... particular reality.»

Petrov's fingers tapped lightly upon the ledger, a gesture at once casual and probing. «I see,» he said, lifting one brow in polite inquiry, though the movement suggested a quiet demand for precision. «Particular how?»

Yarosvet allowed a breath to pass before answering, as if carefully selecting each word. «In matters of appearance,» he said finally, «and of the date of my birth. Certain changes in the exterior — though not drastic — would render the record more... consistent with what one might presently encounter. And the date, to correspond, so as not to surprise those who might rely on these particulars in assessing me.»

Petrov's eyes narrowed fractionally, not with suspicion, but with a subtle insistence that the truth be evident through the manner, not the statement alone. «Am I to understand,» he asked, «that you wish these modifications for reasons social, or... personal?»

Yarosvet's gaze met the other man's steadily, unflinching. «I am... engaged, in a manner of speaking, to a young lady whose family might — if guided solely by the ledger — consider me advanced in years. I prefer, naturally, that the records convey a certain... suitability. Nothing more than propriety, nothing that

would invite undue scrutiny.»

Petrov's hands rested lightly on the desk, the fingers laced in thought. «And you are, of course, aware that such amendments cannot be made lightly,» he said. His tone carried the weight of experience, tempered with caution, the subtle authority of someone accustomed to judging both request and requester. «One must be certain of the veracity of the applicant, the genuineness of their identity. There are... precedents, regrettably, of those who sought change under less than forthright pretenses.»

He gave a slight nod to show his acceptance, his composure steady. «I am prepared to verify any detail, Mr. Petrov. My identity is open to such scrutiny as you deem necessary. I would not ask for confidence without offering its assurance.»

Petrov leaned back slightly in his chair, eyes tracing the contours of Yarosvet's face as if measuring the claim against the subtle evidence of gesture, posture, and expression. «And the alterations you seek — cosmetic, and chronological — are not intended for concealment of misdeeds, or for evasion of responsibilities?» he asked, his voice gentle but probing. «Merely to reconcile public perception with present reality?»

«Exactly,» Yarosvet said, the words deliberate, precise. «Nothing more. I am not evading law or duty. Only... seeking congruity between appearance and record.»

For a long moment, Petrov allowed silence to settle, his gaze never leaving Yarosvet. Then, slowly, he nodded. «Very well,»

he said. «I believe I understand your position, and I believe it... reasonable, given the circumstances you describe. There are procedures, of course, and delicacies to be observed. But I can assist you. Provided we proceed with the proper care, and that all matters remain... discreet.»

Yarosvet inclined his head, a faint, almost imperceptible sigh of relief passing through him. «I would be grateful,» he said simply, allowing the weight of centuries of careful observation and caution to ease for a moment in the presence of someone who appeared to understand the quiet precision of his predicament.

Petrov's hands resumed their rest upon the ledger, yet now with a subtle shift, as if acknowledging a shared understanding. «Then we shall proceed,» he said, voice calm, steady, measured. «Step by step, and with care. You will need only to provide the particulars, and we shall reconcile them with the record. Nothing rushed, nothing exposed. The matter will be handled... with discretion.»

Yarosvet allowed a subtle glance at the neat pile of ledgers and official books on Petrov's desk, the very sight a quiet reminder of the machinery behind every change of record. «I trust you understand,» he said, his tone measured, «that such a request cannot be without consequence — both in terms of cost and the necessary patience. I am prepared to offer what is required, though I prefer clarity from the outset.»

Petrov's eyes flickered briefly over the top of his spectacles, a signal of comprehension rather than surprise. «Indeed,» he

replied, his voice deliberate, the cadence of careful consideration threading each word. «To effect such an amendment, the first necessity is the verification of your existing documentation. Only once the authenticity of your current passport and related civil records is confirmed may I proceed.» He paused, letting the weight of the process sink in. «The alteration, particularly of the date of birth, must reflect not solely in the passport itself, but also in the parish metric books, the registry ledgers maintained here, and the internal archives of the civil authority. The procedure is not swift: in total, you may expect a fortnight's duration, and the sum required, accounting for formalities and the delicate nature of the task, will be... two hundred rubles.»

Yarovet tipped his head in silent acknowledgment, his eyes gathering each syllable as one might collect delicate fragments of light, weighing them with measured care. «A fortnight, then,» he murmured, «and two hundred rubles. I anticipated no less, and the assurance of discretion is, of course, implicit.»

Petrov allowed a shadow of a smile, though it was careful, restrained, a professional acknowledgment rather than a personal indulgence. «Discretion, naturally. For matters such as these, it is not merely advisable — it is essential. Any variance from proper conduct would imperil both the request and those who administer it. Should you consent, I shall begin the verification immediately, and once satisfied, draft the requisite petition to amend the records. Only upon the formal confirmation of approval may the new passport be issued with the corrected details, thereby

aligning your documentation with the reality you now maintain.»

For a fleeting moment, Petrov's composed expression flickered with something almost imperceptible — a subtle tightening at the corners of his eyes, a pause in the otherwise unbroken rhythm of his calm speech. «The sum I named — two hundred rubles — covers the official, sanctioned portion of the service,» he said carefully, his voice low and measured, each syllable chosen as if to weigh its significance. «Yet, considering the private and delicate nature of your request, and for the potential — though by no means guaranteed — expedition of the procedure, there exists... an additional agent's fee. One hundred rubles, in cash.»

He let the words hover in the air between them, the hint of discretion woven into the cadence, acknowledging the unspoken understanding that not all measures were dictated by the letter of regulation, and that some matters required a shadowed path alongside the light of officialdom.

Yarosvet allowed a faint, imperceptible smile to curl the edge of his lips, a smile that bore the lightest tint of irony, tempered by the courtesy of a lifetime spent navigating both the subtleties of society and its many functionaries. He regarded Petrov with a steady, calm gaze, noting the careful phrasing, the measured hesitation over the additional fee — a dance he had witnessed countless times before in the offices of lesser men, in the quiet corridors of bureaucratic routine.

«Two hundred rubles for the official part,» he murmured

softly, the words carrying a tone of polite amusement rather than judgment. «And another hundred, should one wish to... grease the wheels of fortune.» His voice was smooth, courteous, yet tinged with the knowing levity of one who has long seen the machinery behind such masks. Beneath the politeness lay the quiet recognition of an ordinary man performing his office with the utmost conscientiousness, unaware — or perhaps unconcerned — of the subtle amusement he had stirred in his visitor.

He leaned back slightly in the chair, fingers steepled lightly upon his knee, his posture composed, as if to convey the perfect ease of a man entirely at home in the company of predictable minds. «I see,» he added, with a gentle inflection that suggested both understanding and a barely veiled acknowledgment of the ordinary cleverness of the profession, «that even in these matters, one finds the familiar rhythms of a well-worn dance.»

Yarosvet's fingers brushed the edge of a supple leather pocket-purse, the kind a well-to-do gentleman carried tucked deep in his coat pocket — flat, rectangular, yet generous enough to hold folded notes without crumpling them. With calm precision, he withdrew it and let two hundred-ruble notes flutter into his palm like autumn leaves.

Petrov's composure cracked for a fraction — the faintest pause, a tightening around his eyes, an unspoken calculation. But he said nothing, merely inclined his head. Yarosvet folded the first note, placing it atop the ledger with a quiet authority. The

second followed.

Then, with a subtle, ironic tilt of his brow, Yarosvet drew out a third note and let it rest, half-visible, between his fingers. He did not lay it on the desk, but held it as one might hold a final card in a game not yet concluded. «This,» he said softly, wry courtesy glinting in his tone, «you shall receive when the passport is placed into my hands.» The phrase carried no threat, only the urbane assurance of a man long practiced in such tacit bargains, where politeness masked the firmest of conditions.

Petrov's fingers hovered briefly over the notes, then withdrew, returning to the ledger. No word passed, but the agreement — official and unofficial — shaped itself between them with the weight of paper and the soft rustle of deliberate compliance.

Petrov, perhaps wishing to reassert the official air of his office, straightened in his chair and reached not for any government ledger but for a small, well-worn notebook that clearly belonged to him alone. He flipped it open with a measured deliberation, the faint rasp of the pages betraying long familiarity, and poised his pencil above the margin.

«Let us be exact,» he said, his voice assuming the neutral cadence of a clerk transcribing immutable fact. «The present entry: year of birth — 1831. Appearance — hair grey, full, worn long; beard thick, same colour.» His eyes lifted from the page, one brow arching slightly. «And what, precisely, shall it be corrected to?»

Yarosvet allowed himself the faintest smile, his tone even yet

touched with quiet amusement. «Why not appeal to impartial judgment, Mr Petrov? Ask your assistant what she sees before her. That, I think, would be closer to truth than anything I might dictate.»

Petrov's lips pressed into a line, neither approval nor disapproval — only the suggestion of a man momentarily discomfited by being made to rely on another's discretion. Yet after the briefest pause, he turned his head toward the door and called, his voice carrying with a clipped firmness:

«Inga!»

At the abrupt call of her name, Yarosvet's brows lifted ever so slightly. Fortune, it seemed, had chosen to play its hand with an almost playful symmetry: the same young woman who had guided him through the threshold was now summoned as arbiter of his outward semblance. Yet in that moment, a keener thought stirred within him. Was this not the very Inga — she whose name alone had drawn him across provinces to Rostov-on-Don? The coincidence pressed against his mind with the quiet insistence of fate's whisper.

To test the truth of his surmise, he let his gaze rest upon her with a sharpened patience, noting each delicate contour of her face, the composure of her step, but most of all — the look in her eyes. It was there, in that steady, unflinching regard, that certainty dawned: she already knew who he was, and her recognition carried neither alarm nor surprise, but a calm acknowledgment, as though his arrival had been expected long

before he crossed the threshold.

The realisation sent through him a subtle thrill, though outwardly he betrayed nothing but the polite intensity of his gaze. It pleased him, this tacit recognition, as though he were less a petitioner before officialdom and more an actor in a play whose companion upon the stage had already grasped her role.

Petrov cleared his throat softly, the tip of his pencil pausing above the page. With a glance that straddled both formality and casual authority, he turned toward the young woman who had just stepped into the room.

«Inga,» he said, his voice carrying the unadorned cadence of a man accustomed to practical shortcuts, «we have here a matter that requires a certain impartial judgement. Would you, on your unprejudiced female eye, tell me how our visitor's appearance ought properly to be set down for a passport? Hair, beard — those trifles clerks like to embroider with needless detail. And, most importantly, how many years would you say may honestly be ascribed to him?»

The request, though framed as a task, bore the casualness of a man certain of his authority: not a question so much as an instruction, softened by the notion of feminine discernment.

Inga's gaze shifted to Yarosvet, calm yet alert, the barest flicker of understanding sparking in her eyes. She measured him in silence, her expression free of exaggeration, as though she were appraising not a person but a portrait in need of annotation. At length, she spoke evenly, her voice carrying a clarity that left no

doubt she had considered him carefully:

«His head is shaven clean,» she began, her tone even, her gaze never straying from Yarosvet. «The beard — trimmed short, of a deep chestnut.» She allowed the words to rest between them, the faintest nuance in her voice betraying awareness of the artifice. A heartbeat passed in silence, her eyes still fixed upon him, steady and searching. «As for his years,» she concluded, with a slight curve of her lips, «I would say no more than forty-five.»

Petrov nodded slowly, tapping a finger against his desk in measured consideration. «Forty-five,» he murmured, almost to himself, yet with a clarity that drew Yarosvet's attention. «Ah, that is excellent. Quite convenient, indeed — merely a small alteration in the date, and 1831 need only have its „3“ replaced by a „5“. Simple arithmetic, yet it spares us unnecessary complication.» He allowed a faint, self-satisfied smile to flicker, as if this small numerical insight were its own quiet triumph of efficiency.

Inga let her head drift to one side, as if weighing her words before they formed, curiosity glinting in her eyes. «And... what else?» she asked, her tone neither pressing nor casual, but precise, as if she sought only what was essential.

Petrov's gaze shifted to Yarosvet, calm and deliberate. «If we have covered all necessary particulars, then Inga will see you out,» he said, the hint of command tempered by the ease of routine. His words bore the weight of office authority, yet delivered without friction.

Yarosvet inclined his head, a gesture of quiet acknowledgment, and followed Inga. The door closed behind them with a soft click, leaving the office in its familiar, measured stillness.

Inga guided Yarosvet to the exit, her steps measured and unobtrusive. Reaching the threshold, she leaned just slightly closer, her voice a quiet murmur meant for him alone. «I am glad you have come,» she said, a soft warmth threading through the words. «In half an hour, I have my lunch break. Wait for me at the café across the square,» she added, indicating the modest establishment with a subtle tilt of her hand. Her glance lingered only briefly, but it was enough for Yarosvet to sense both welcome and discretion — an invitation cloaked in careful civility.

Yarosvet offered a half-smile, inclining his head with a trace of mischief. «It appears I shall find your company worth every minute of waiting, » he said, letting the words linger with gentle amusement.

He stepped onto the sun-dappled square, letting his eyes roam with deliberate ease until the modest café on the far side of the street caught his attention. Its exterior was modest — cream-painted walls, ivy creeping lazily along the façade, a wooden sign swaying gently in the breeze — but there was a quiet charm in its restrained elegance, the kind that suggested both discretion and a measured hospitality.

He crossed the cobblestones with the unhurried precision of

a man accustomed to observing the world as he passed through it, noting the subtle arrangement of tables beneath the awning and the soft clink of porcelain from within. Choosing a table set slightly back from the window, out of immediate view from the square, he ensured that any passerby would not easily spot him — nor, more importantly, make Inga uneasy. The seat offered both privacy and an unobstructed line to the entrance, allowing him to see her approach without strain.

Once seated, he perused the menu with the faintest arch of an eyebrow, then beckoned a waiter with polite authority. «A pot of green tea, if you please,» he requested, «and perhaps a small plate of delicate pastries to accompany it — nothing too heavy, as I understand we shall soon share a proper meal.» The order was both practical and considerate, a prelude to a leisurely lunch that he intended to share with her.

As he settled in, Yarosvet allowed himself a small, reflective smile, noting the simple yet meticulous arrangement of the café: the soft linen napkins, the polished wood of the tables, the gentle warmth of sunlight filtering through the awning. Every detail spoke to the quiet care of its proprietor, and to him it seemed perfectly suited for a meeting that required both attention and the subtle comfort of discretion.

Yarosvet lifted the delicate porcelain cup, the steam curling in thin, aromatic spirals, and let the warm infusion settle into him with a calm, measured rhythm. As the gentle bitterness of the green tea touched his tongue, his thoughts drifted inevitably

toward Inga.

He recalled the first impression she had made upon entering the office: her posture, at once assured and unassuming, the fluid grace with which she navigated the space, the faint quirk of a smile that suggested wit tempered by discretion. He remembered how her eyes — sharp, yet not unkind — had met his, holding a knowing steadiness that betrayed her awareness of him before he had even introduced himself. There was a quiet luminosity in the gaze, a subtle confidence that neither demanded attention nor shied from it.

He traced, in memory, the gentle sweep of her hair, the soft contour of her face framed by strands that caught the light, the way she inclined her head in response to Petrov's summons, a motion both deliberate and fluid. Even the faintest gestures — the tilt of her chin, the poised angle of her shoulders — spoke of a mind fully alert, attuned to the nuances of her surroundings.

Yarovet sipped his tea, letting its warmth anchor him while his thoughts traced her movements. He pictured her crossing the square, the casual elegance of her stride, the effortless grace that made the mundane act of walking appear significant. His mind lingered on her eyes, the way they had met his with an almost conspiratorial understanding, and he allowed himself the private pleasure of anticipation — the exquisite sort that made waiting less a trial and more a delicate indulgence.

By the time the café door opened, Yarovet's attention was fully attuned, his eyes scanning for her familiar presence. The

moment she stepped inside, he caught her glance instantly, noting how it carried the same knowing steadiness he had seen earlier, a silent acknowledgment that seemed to bridge the short distance between observation and recognition.

Yarosvet's gaze dwelt appreciatively as she stepped into the café, and he noted, with the quiet delight of a connoisseur, how subtly she had transformed since their encounter at the office. A gentle sweep of colour touched her cheeks, and her eyes seemed to have gained an almost imperceptible extra brilliance, widening with the play of light that made each glance feel more intent, more alive. Her lips, tinted just enough to catch the eye without artifice, curved into a greeting that was at once modest and magnetic.

Her attire spoke more of modesty than display: a plain woollen skirt of deep grey, practical yet well-fitted, and a high-necked blouse of pale cream, softened by the faint shimmer of a silk ribbon at the throat. Over her shoulders had hung a dark coat trimmed with a narrow band of fur, now left in the cloakroom, so that her figure seemed at once lighter and more defined. A small felt hat, sober in shape, bore only a slim ribbon and a discreet veil, which framed her face without obscuring its freshness. There was nothing lavish in her appearance, and yet, in that very restraint, lay a grace that drew the eye more surely than any finery. Yarosvet, with a subtle inward smile, allowed himself the pleasure of noticing these details — the soft interplay of fabric, colour, and form — each element reinforcing the impression

that she was, in every careful measure, both unassuming and compelling, a person whose very appearance invited attentive, deliberate observation.

Yarosvet rose as soon as she approached, his movement unhurried yet full of that courtly precision, which lent the smallest gesture a quiet dignity. Inga returned his courtesy with a soft smile, lowering herself gracefully into the chair he had drawn forward. Her glance moved briefly around the little dining room, then back to him.

«You have chosen wisely,» she said, the corners of her lips curving with a warmth not entirely formal. «This little secluded corner could not have suited the occasion better.»

He inclined his head, amusement flickering in his eyes, and when the waiter lingered near, he asked gently, almost as if it were part of their private understanding:

«And what will you take for luncheon? Indulge me, I insist — it shall be my pleasure to play host.»

At that, she coloured faintly, lowering her lashes in a semblance of modesty; yet her gaze soon lifted again, steady and discerning, the same keen look with which, in the office, she had so boldly appraised his years. It was clear enough she felt the difference — he was not, for her, merely another gentleman caller, but something she had already half recognised, though she would not yet name it.

«They prepare their dishes with unusual care here,» she replied at last, her voice composed though carrying that secret

undertone. «The stewed lamb, I am told, is excellent; and for those with lighter taste, their fish soup is praised as well.»

«And tell me, Inga,» he said, the trace of a smile warming his tone, «what shall we order to drink? Tea again — or will you allow me to tempt you with something stronger?»

She smiled, lowering her eyes for a moment before lifting them to his with a hint of playfulness. «I leave it to your choice, Yarosvet Alexeyevich — only keep in mind, I must still serve half a day in the office.»

«Then we shall not tempt fate with anything stronger. A pot of fine black tea, perhaps — tempered with lemon for clarity, and a touch of honey, to sweeten the labours yet ahead.» He beckoned the waiter with the unhurried assurance of a man long accustomed to being obeyed, and when the order was given, turned his gaze back to Inga with quiet amusement. «Thus fortified, the office hours may seem less cruel, and our conversation more companionable.»

Yarosvet, having leaned back a little with the air of a man at ease, caught her sidelong glance. It was fleeting, almost cautious, yet not without a trace of curiosity — as if she could not quite resist continuing her silent survey of him. A faint smile touched his lips; he lowered his voice, allowing it to carry a warmth that did not contradict his habitual irony.

«You have,» he said, with the deliberateness of one who does not squander words, «a remarkably beautiful face. One that ought not to go unremarked.»

Inga's lashes flickered, and though she composed herself quickly, a blush rose faintly upon her cheekbones. She tilted her chin with a mixture of defiance and shy pleasure, and in her eyes there was both reproach and laughter.

«Liza wrote to me that you were terribly direct in your speech,» she answered, half in jest, half in earnest. «Now I see she did not exaggerate.»

Yarosvet let a faint, teasing curve tug at his lips, his gaze flicking to hers with a subtle gleam of amusement. «One might hazard that your visage has a certain... persuasive charm, though I fear I lack the proper vocabulary to do it justice,» he offered, voice smooth, measured, the compliment wrapped in an almost scholarly detachment. «Would you deem this version more pleasing, or does my tongue still rush where it ought to linger?»

Inga laughed, soft and genuine, a quick sparkle in her eyes. «Oh, that's much better,» she said, still smiling, «I think your tongue might manage to linger just right this time.» Her amusement was warm, effortless, and unmistakably sincere.

With a faint, teasing arch of his brow, he said, «By the by, speaking of Liza, may I ask — how many years grace your count?»

Inga's smile softened, and she met his gaze without hesitation. «I have reached twenty,» she replied, her tone calm and assured, carrying neither boast nor bashfulness. «Though, I daresay, most would have given me more.»

He shook his head with a faint smile, a shadow of mock

reproach in his gaze. «Ah, I see — it must be the office that takes years from you. But tell me, why waste your time there, instead of reveling in the pleasures that befit a young woman of twenty?»

Inga sighed, a soft, measured sound, as if the air itself carried a hint of resignation. «I am obliged to attend to such matters,» she explained, her gaze steady on him, «and not merely for the sake of coin, though one never scoffs at a little extra.» Her tone carried no bitterness, merely the quiet weight of circumstance. Then, as if acknowledging a shadow that had lingered too long, she added, almost sotto voce, «Mr. Petrov... he is, in fact, my fiancé. A match arranged by my father, who has known him for years — he is hardly remarkable in appearance, but he holds weight in Rostov, and that matters to him.»

Yarosvet's eyebrows rose in a faint, incredulous arc. «I'd wager,» he said with a teasing lilt, «from what I've seen of him, Petrov is more interested in money than in women.»

Inga gave a small, wry smile. «He is wealthy — and frugal — but my father deems him a desirable son-in-law.» Her tone was almost factual, yet a subtle thread of irony lingered, as though she relished the incongruity of it all.

«And you?» Yarosvet asked, leaning just slightly closer, curiosity bright in his eyes. «What do you want, in all this? And why... why agree to my visit?»

Inga looked down, a gentle smile playing on her lips. «There is another gentleman, one Mother favors for me, and I, truthfully, prefer him far more than Petrov. Yet... alas, he is often away

on military duty, and Mother fears such distance would render a proper courtship impossible.»

Yarosvet fixed his gaze on her, calm and intent. «And do you, Inga, fully grasp the purpose of my visit? Have Liza's hints reached you as she intended?»

Inga nodded, a faint curve of acknowledgement touching her lips. «Yes, I have,» she admitted quietly, just as the waiter arrived with their order. She fell silent, offering no hint of the conversation, yet her eyes followed each movement, attentive but guarded.

Once the waiter departed, her voice dropped to a near whisper, yet carried a startling frankness. «Your visit,» she said softly, «gives me a chance... a chance to bear a child unlike any other, from a man unlike any I have known.»

Yarosvet's eyes narrowed slightly, a subtle mix of curiosity and something darker threading his expression. «And how many men have you known, Inga?» he asked, his tone careful yet probing.

She met his gaze without hesitation, her voice measured, almost serene. «Only one,» she replied, a faint inflection of respect in her words. «Mother's protégé. He is the only one I have truly known.»

Inga lowered her voice, her tone both candid and composed. «You see, children born to officers — *ober-officer children*, as they're called — are entitled to certain privileges. They receive preferential treatment in education, access to military

service, and often, a smoother path in life. My mother believes that aligning my future with such a man would secure these advantages for me and any children we might have.» She met his gaze steadily. «But I am not seeking a mere alliance for status. I desire a child who is... exceptional. And you, Yarosvet Alexeyevich, are the only man I know who might fulfill that role.»

Yarosvet's eyes held her steadily, calm yet questioning. «And you would have me, in this fashion, be at ease concerning you?»

Inga's lips curved in a faint, confident smile. «Indeed, and with good reason,» she replied softly, her tone measured yet unmistakably earnest. «A pregnancy would bind my father's hands — he does, of course, care for me deeply — and he would be compelled to desist from pressing the match with Petrov. Thus, in this matter, your involvement offers not only the extraordinary child I seek, but also the freedom for me to choose.»

Yarosvet took a delicate forkful, letting the flavours linger before speaking. «You have a remarkable eye for the agreeable, Inga. Each dish, though simple, carries a certain wit, a suggestion of care that elevates the ordinary to something... engaging.»

A delicate arch of her brow accompanied a smile that danced just at the edges of her lips, and her reply carried a hint of mischievous restraint. «I trust you find more delight in the arrangement of food than in my modest attempt at taste, yet I am gratified that it meets your approval.»

He laughed softly, the sound like the quiet rustle of autumn leaves. «I confess, it is both — the taste and the subtle thought behind it. One rarely encounters such harmony without a hidden hand guiding it, and I see yours here, unmistakably.»

Their words wove around the table like a subtle game of shadow and light, each remark a brushstroke on the canvas of conversation, lightened by laughter, shaded with a gentle challenge. He paused, his gaze tracing the curve of her smile, the faint sparkle in her eyes that had caught him from the first.

Then, as if pressing a finger to the pulse of the moment, he asked, his tone lowered yet firm, carrying neither urgency nor doubt: «Inga... when might I have the honour of seeing you again? I would not impose, yet I am compelled to know when the next meeting may come to pass.»

The words hung between them, not as a demand but a soft invitation, and the quiet in the room seemed to draw nearer, as if the walls themselves leaned to hear her answer.

Her gaze met his with a quiet, knowing light. A faint, elusive smile curved her lips. «It seems your stay will be longer than you intended,» she said softly. «Two more weeks, if my calculations are correct — your passport ensures it.» She spoke plainly, with just a trace of amusement, acknowledging the small twist of circumstance that granted them this unexpected interlude. «As for timing,» she added, lowering her voice so that only he might catch it, «the best days are Wednesday, Friday, or Sunday... and always under the waxing moon. Nature itself, it seems, has a

preference.» She spoke with a calm assurance, as if revealing a delicate, hidden rhythm to which only a few were attuned.

«I remember seeing the waxing moon from the train window,» he said, his tone casual, as if recalling a familiar sight rather than marveling at it. «And today, by chance, is Friday itself.»

Inga's eyes held his, a sudden, quiet awareness dawning that she was gazing upon the man who might father her child. There was no mistaking it — she liked him. She had liked him from Lisa's tales, and she liked him now, in the flesh, here before her. Yarosvet, reading the subtle play of her gaze, allowed a faint, teasing lift to the corner of his mouth and asked, voice edged with tender irony, «Shall you surrender to me without delay, or will you keep your patience until Sunday?»

Inga paused, as if awakening from a dream, a soft flush brushing her cheeks. Then she replied, with a measured breath and a hint of decisiveness, «Today... yes, today, if need be... and then again on Sunday.»

Inga's lips curved into a soft, startled laugh as she realised she had spoken aloud what had only been thoughts a moment before. The sound, light and unrestrained, carried a hint of mischief, as if she were half-chastising herself for letting the secret slip into words. Her eyes danced with the awareness of her own daring, meeting Yarosvet's with a spark that spoke both of amusement and anticipation.

Yarosvet chuckled, a low, warm sound that matched the teasing light in his eyes. «And should you find today agreeable,»

he murmured with a playful gravity, «there will be another Wednesday... and a Friday to follow.» Inga felt a rush of color bloom across her cheeks, her gaze dropping shyly to the plate before her, as if it could shield her from the gentle audacity of his words. The air between them thickened with a sweet, quiet tension, each moment charged with the unspoken promise that lingered just beneath the surface.

Yarosvet let the pause stretch just long enough to let her cheeks cool, then leaned forward a fraction, his tone light though edged with intent.

«Tell me then, Inga, where and when would it best suit you? I have taken rooms at the *Moskovskaya* — convenient, yes, but hardly discreet.»

Her lips curved in a quick smile, touched with mischief and caution alike.

«Oh, *Moskovskaya* will not do at all,» she replied softly. «Too many eyes, too many ears — one might as well proclaim one's secrets from the balcony.» She toyed with her fork for a moment, then added in a murmur, «There is a dacha my uncle keeps just beyond the city gardens, where the vineyards spread towards Nakhichevan.» Mother holds a duplicate key — I know where she hides it.»

She lifted her gaze, steady now, though the colour in her cheeks betrayed her excitement.

«The question is only this: where shall you meet me, so that we may go there together tonight?»

Yarosvet's calm gaze lingered on her a moment longer, noting the precision in her words.

«Then I shall wait for you with a cab near your office. It will spare you the trouble of wandering far alone.»

Inga let a smile touch her lips, as if measuring how much to reveal.

«That will suffice. Half past six, then. It gives me just enough time to leave the office at closing, make a brief stop at home to change, and alert Mother. She is never one to be left in ignorance, and besides...» She let her words trail for a heartbeat, eyes glinting with mischief, «...it pleases her that I take such matters with decorum, even while following my own inclinations.»

Her voice was serene, yet threaded with a subtle daring, as though every syllable carried the knowledge of what awaited them — and the unspoken understanding that Yarosvet was no ordinary man, but the father of her carefully envisaged child.

Inga rose first, smoothing the folds of her skirt with a measured grace, her gaze briefly catching Yarosvet's. «Thank you for the lunch,» she murmured, the corners of her mouth tilting in a faint, conspiratorial smile. «I shall await the evening with some impatience.» She inclined her head, offered a whisper of a curtsy, and stepped out into the cooling streets, leaving behind the quiet warmth of the café.

Yarosvet lingered a heartbeat longer, observing the sway of her figure as she disappeared into the shadowed thoroughfare. Then, with deliberate calm, he signaled the waiter, settled the bill

with the precision of a man accustomed to affairs both minor and weighty, and stepped out himself. The city's evening air greeted him, brisk yet familiar, and he chose to walk back to the hotel, the cobbled streets echoing softly under his boots.

Yarosvet returned to the hotel room, guided by the faint, lingering scent of lavender and the warmth that still clung to the air. The bathroom was a soft haze of steam, curling in lazy spirals that blurred the edges of tiles and fixtures alike. There, in the shallow embrace of water that reflected and distorted the dim lamplight, Taissia reclined, her body half-submerged, the contours of her skin glimmering as the last warmth of the bath caught the light. Her shoulders and arms floated just above the surface, glistening, while the swell of water obscured the gentle slope of her hips and thighs, leaving only hints — fleeting, teasing — of the form beneath.

Damp strands of hair clung to the planes of her temples and neck, dark against the pale sheen of her skin, and tiny rivulets traced patterns along her shoulders, catching the glimmer of the lamp as they fell. Her breasts were partially concealed beneath the water, nipples just brushing the surface, the curve of each softened and diffused by the rippling warmth. The bath hid enough to preserve a sense of mystery, yet revealed enough to ignite the mind, leaving nothing explicit yet everything suggested.

She breathed in slow, even rhythms, eyelashes brushing lightly against the damp skin of her cheeks, lips parted as if caught

between sleep and some dream she alone inhabited. Yarosvet lingered at the threshold, the quiet pulse of his own anticipation tempered by awe, by the accidental intimacy of witnessing her like this. He observed the gentle rise and fall of her chest, the subtle arch of her neck, the way her fingers rested lightly on the rim of the bath, and he felt the tender irony of his presence — unseen, yet utterly drawn into this private tableau.

For a long moment, the world beyond the bathroom ceased to exist. Steam, water, and pale lamplight conspired to render Taissia both ethereal and fleshly, a creature suspended between dream and reality. Yarosvet's eyes traced every curve, every subtle shadow, not with crude desire, but with the meticulous attention of a man recognizing a rare, delicate beauty. It was as though the bathwater itself had become a veil, softening the edges of her form, yet leaving enough of her exposed to draw his thoughts unwillingly forward. He allowed himself a slow, silent smile, aware that the intimacy was accidental yet unavoidable, the space between observer and dreamer pregnant with quiet tension and promise.

«So, you've kept the lady content, and now shall we move on?»

Her words slipped through the heavy, fragrant steam, soft and laced with a deliberate, teasing slur, as though she were drifting between sleep and wakefulness, yet seeing, hearing, remembering everything. Eyes closed, her body curved languidly in the bath, the water clinging to the swell of her breasts, the slope of her belly, tracing each intimate contour. A subtle, knowing

shift of her hips sent tiny ripples across the surface, and her fingers, gliding with casual intent between her thighs, spoke in quiet, insolent commentary of her awareness. Each syllable, each gentle touch beneath the water, dripped with a mischievous, unmistakable invitation, turning the steamy enclosure into a private theatre where desire and audacity entwined with the soft, seductive rhythm of her breath.

«You may continue to indulge yourself, Taissia,» he said gently, his tone even, almost conspiratorial. «At the dacha, I will be occupied with Inga at her dacha, so you can remain in here undisturbed — no one will intrude, and nothing will trouble you.»

Her eyelids fluttered open, revealing a gleam of mischief as she stretched luxuriously in the steaming water. «I'm... hungry,» she confessed, the word spilling from her lips with playful reluctance, as if waking from a dream yet fully conscious of his presence.

He considered her for a moment, his measured gaze tracing the curve of her shoulders and the delicate rise of her collarbones, then asked, «Would you prefer to descend to the restaurant, or shall I have the meal brought to our room?»

Taissia shook her head, letting the water drip from her hair and skin in rivulets that glimmered like molten glass. «No,» she murmured, a quiet defiance in her tone. «I don't wish to dress yet.» With a fluid motion, graceful and self-assured, she lifted herself from the bath, the warm water cascading down her bare

form, leaving a trail of glistening moisture along the contours of her body. The air seemed to cling to her, carrying the faint scent of lavender and soap, and the faint blush on her cheeks betrayed her amusement and the undeniable awareness of her audacious freedom.

Naked and bare-footed, she approached him with a deliberate grace, taking his hand and raising it to her lips. Her mouth brushed his skin in a soft, lingering kiss, a whisper of warmth and audacity. With her eyes half-closed and a mischievous tilt to her head, she murmured, her voice, velvet-soft and teasing «Did you enjoy Inga... have you seen her unclothed yet?»

He watched her with quiet amusement, the calm of his voice a gentle counterpoint to her bold playfulness. «Inga is pleasant, clever even,» he said, tracing a slow, deliberate circle on the back of her hand. «But she has a fiancé; there's no reason for jealousy.» He paused, letting the words sink, then added with the same measured ease, «It turns out she works at the office that handles all manner of documents. I've already arranged for certain changes in my passport... and if you wish, I can take care of your name change there as well.»

She let her fingers linger on his hand, the warmth of her touch teasing yet deliberate. «I wouldn't refuse a name change,» she said softly, her voice carrying that familiar mix of mischief and calculation, «but only so that it appears nowhere — just a new passport, nothing else.»

Her gaze, half-lidded, met his with a spark of daring; she was

careful, yet entirely self-possessed, testing his intentions without need for words. Steam curled around them, draping her naked form in a private haze, as though the room itself softened the edge of her request. Even in the quiet, the meaning was clear: she trusted him to make it happen discreetly, yet she held the reins, daring him to respond with equal subtlety.

He explained that they would linger in the city for a while longer — his own documents, he said, were promised to be corrected in a fortnight. If the officials were honest, they would manage it, and then it would be her turn.

«I'm in no hurry,» Taissia murmured, her eyes still half-closed, her voice soft but yielding, «I'll do as you wish.» She paused, then added with a playful lilt, «If you insist on going down to the restaurant, I'll dress.»

He noted, with a faint smile, that her options were pitifully few: only the clothes she had arrived in. «Then we shall take a walk,» he suggested, «and find something more suitable for you.»

A light, delighted laugh escaped her lips, and she leaned forward to press a gentle kiss to his hand, the simple gesture carrying all the warmth and gratitude that words could not contain. Her bare feet whispered over the polished floor as she moved closer, the steam curling around her like a soft veil, and he could not help but marvel at the quiet confidence in the ease of her gesture.

His fingers closed firmly around the tips of her breasts,

drawing her close with an insistence that was gentle yet undeniably commanding. He pulled her toward him, and their lips met in a deep, lingering kiss, a collision of warmth and desire.

Taissia dried herself with brisk efficiency, the towel wrapping and unwrapping around her body like a fleeting caress, before hastily pulling on the only set of clothes she had brought. Yarosvet, observing her movements with a faint, approving smile, reminded her gently not to catch a chill, and they agreed that the evening meal would be safest in the hotel's restaurant rather than venturing into the afternoon air.

They descended the grand staircase together, the soft echo of their footsteps mingling with the low hum of conversation and the subtle clatter of silverware. The warm glow of the chandelier above cast a gentle light over polished wooden banisters, and the scent of roasted meats and fresh bread drifted up to greet them as they entered the dining hall. Waiters in dark uniforms moved with quiet precision, their white gloves catching the light, offering the impression of a carefully orchestrated ritual.

The restaurant was pleasantly occupied but not crowded; small groups murmured across linen-draped tables, the atmosphere a comfortable hum of evening relaxation. They were shown to a secluded table near the windows, where heavy drapes framed the darkening city streets outside, a scene softened by gas lamps and the occasional passing carriage.

Menus were opened, and Yarosvet perused the selections with

measured interest, commenting on the local specialties: tender roast veal, golden-crust ed pike, a delicate medley of seasonal vegetables. Taissia, following his lead, allowed herself a lighter choice — an aromatic consommé to start, followed by sautéed chicken with a gentle herb sauce, each selection a deliberate echo of her desire for comfort and warmth rather than indulgence. Yarosvet, noting her preference, smiled discreetly, then ordered a modest portion for himself, having already satisfied his appetite with Inga, but now willing to share this quieter, more intimate meal with her presence.

As the dishes arrived, steam rising and mingling with the faint scent of lavender still clinging to Taissia's hair, they fell into an easy rhythm of conversation. The clink of utensils and the muted laughter from surrounding tables formed a gentle backdrop, allowing the two of them a sense of shared solitude, an oasis of warmth and attentiveness in the midst of the city's evening stir.

Taissia stirred her consommé lazily, the spoon barely disturbing the surface, and lifted a gaze that was both playful и внимательно изучающая. «Describe her to me,» she murmured, a slight tilt of her head betraying curiosity as delicate as it was teasing.

Yarosvet leaned back slightly, the candlelight catching the angles of his face as he measured each word. «She is... pleasant,» he said, his voice steady, almost clipped, «Her hair is dark, pinned neatly, framing a face that is intelligent rather than overtly

striking. Eyes are alert, brown, quick to notice detail. She carries herself with a certain composure, perhaps a hint of hesitation at first, but nothing that diminishes her... overall presence.»

Taissia's lips curved, almost imperceptibly, at the corners. «And her figure?» she prodded softly, letting her gaze flick toward him with a quiet amusement.

«Slender enough,» he replied, «yet not without subtle softness. Not someone to inspire envy, though she is far from plain,» he added with a faint, almost imperceptible emphasis.

A faint, knowing smile passed over Taissia's face, and the casual elegance of her posture seemed to assert that she had already understood — and perhaps accepted — the boundaries implied in his words. Still, there was an unmistakable glint of mischief lingering in her grey-brown eyes, as if she were cataloguing everything with the quiet amusement of one who had learned to wait and see.

She shifted just enough for him to notice, her gaze catching his in a flash that suggested amusement rather than inquiry. «And her lips?» she murmured, voice low, careful, yet carrying the tiniest edge of curiosity. «Have you kissed them already?»

Yarosvet's eyes followed the faint curve of her cheek in memory. «Full, well-shaped, with the subtle firmness of youth... inviting, yet not provocatively so,» he said, deliberately slow, each word measured. Then, almost as an afterthought, he added with a faint smile, «No. Not yet.»

Taissia leaned closer, her voice low and teasing, «Do you wish

to feel Inga's lips... on your beautiful member?»

He chuckled softly, shaking his head. «That, my dear, is a rather idle question,» he said smoothly, his tone carrying a gentle amusement. «It is no more pressing than asking whether you would taste the spoon from which the broth has cooled, though you proclaimed yourself hungry just moments ago.»

Yarosvet's smiled. «That, my dear, is a rather idle question,» he said smoothly, his tone carrying a gentle amusement. «It is no more pressing than asking whether you would taste the spoon from which the broth has cooled, though you proclaimed yourself hungry just moments ago.»

Taissia narrowed her eyes with a sly sparkle, the corner of her mouth lifting in that impish curve he already knew too well. As if making a point, she dipped the spoon deeper than needed, raised it high, and with exaggerated relish began to sip the broth, letting the sound of it linger with a teasing deliberation. The gesture was a little performance, half-mocking, half-girlish in its play. She ate and ate, spoon after spoon, as though proclaiming with each noisy mouthful that her hunger had nothing to do with the feast he had hoped for. All the while her smile remained, glinting with mischievous triumph — her lips silently saying: *see, I was starving indeed, only not for what you imagined.*

Taissia leaned closer, her voice low but insistent:

«What sort of dacha is that, then? Who owns it?»

Yarosvet shrugged lightly, not breaking the rhythm of his stride. «I have no idea. Some house beyond the edge of town. It

was arranged, that is all I know.»

She narrowed her eyes, quickening her pace so as not to fall behind. «And are you planning to spend the whole night there with her, leaving me at the hotel as if I were a piece of luggage?»

His mouth twitched, half in irritation, half in restrained amusement. «First of all, as my companion you ought to endure without unnecessary questions. That is the price of being at my side. Second» — he glanced at her briefly, his gaze sombre — «I do not know how it will turn out. Inga... she wants a child. Not just any child, but one conceived deliberately, with full awareness. And such children are not brought into being in haste or by accident.»

Her lips curved in a sudden, quick smile, though her eyes kept their watchful mischief. She shifted a little closer, curling one leg beneath her, as if to make herself smaller and yet more insistent in her presence.

«So,» she whispered, tilting her head, «you speak of children as though they were born not from heat or accident, but from some... covenant. A planned miracle, weighed and measured before it even stirs in the womb. Tell me — » she paused, her gaze narrowing with a spark of mockery — «is that how you were conceived? With deliberation and solemn vows?»

She laughed softly, almost kindly, yet with a blade hidden in her tone. «Or perhaps you are merely afraid that if it happens with me, it will be too alive, too reckless, too unlike your Inga's tidy design.»

Her laughter subsided, and for a moment she leaned nearer still, her voice dropping, low and warm. «And what if I were to want such a child — not later, not planned, but now? Would you still hide behind her wishes, or behind your rules?»

«You see, Taissia,» he said, his voice calm though carrying that inner weight of finality, «life grants us little that is chosen, even less that is lasting. If she believes a child may be called into this world with intent rather than blind chance, then I cannot mock that wish. It is serious, and I must treat it seriously. You may laugh, you may tease — but do not think I treat you so. With you I need no pretence. Only patience. And indeed, me dear, I have been told by my mother that I am what I am precisely because of a conception guided, as she put it, by... intention. Neither she nor my father, though they lived long — my father past eighty, my mother nearly a century — trod beyond the bounds of ordinary lives. It seems, then, that even amidst the mundane, a certain care at the very beginning may shape what endures beyond mere years. One might scoff, yet here I stand — or rather sit — as living testament.»

Taissia's playful demeanor softened, her eyes clouding with a trace of wistfulness. She drew a slow breath, as if weighing the thought carefully before speaking. «It is... a pity,» she murmured, her voice low and thoughtful, «that I never knew my true parents. I might have asked them... asked how they conceived me, what they hoped for, what they intended.» Her fingers absently traced a delicate pattern along the table,

betraying the quiet gravity settling over her, the fleeting shift from jest to reflection. Then, with a faint, wry smile tugging at the corner of her lips, she added under her breath, «But perhaps some questions are better left for the imagination, lest one finds the answers rather less amusing than expected.»

He allowed a quiet nod, a shadow of a smile playing at his lips, eyes softening with a mixture of understanding and gentle amusement. «Perhaps,» he said, his voice measured yet warm, «yet imagination often proves a far more generous tutor than reality. One may find truths inconvenient, or intentions far less poetic than the mind dares to dream. It seems, in some matters, it is better to let the question linger and the fancy flourish.»

He paused, letting the words settle, his gaze briefly meeting hers with a subtle insistence that was neither pressing nor commanding, but quietly attentive — acknowledging the turn of her thoughts, while offering the solace of discretion and the delicate charm of shared understanding.

Taissia's gaze flickered downward, a faint shadow of a smile tugging at her lips. «Do not mind me,» she murmured, voice soft yet edged with a teasing insistence. «You are quite right — I am merely jealous of your attentions to Inga. But that is my concern, not yours. I have no claim here, no right to barge into your affairs or disturb your purpose. I — » she hesitated, a light laugh escaping her — «I am simply not ready to think of children yet. I have little experience in such matters, and I wish, for a time at least, to live for my own amusement.»

Her eyes lifted, catching his in a glance half-serious, half-mischievous, and her tone lowered into something almost conspiratorial. «So, for now, you may practise as you will,» she added, her lips curling with playful intent, «so that when the time comes, you may give me a child... the very best of the best.»

Her words lingered between them like a soft, fragrant promise, teasing the edges of propriety, and Yarosvet could see the spark of delight in her expression, the thrill of saying aloud what she half-meant and half-played.

He regarded her for a long moment. «Then be assured,» he said softly, «that I shall take no offence should you, having gathered experience at my side, one day choose to live and bear children with another. I will not impose, nor linger where my presence is unwelcome.»

Taissia's lips curved into a half-mocking, half-exasperated smile. «Then if you are so grown-up, why, I wonder, are you so singularly foolish, and so hopelessly unaware of women?» Her eyes gleamed with gentle defiance. «I have made my choice. If it does not weary you, if you do not send me away, I shall remain with you always — until I, too, grow old, like that past lady of yours we glimpsed in the café at Voronezh.»

Their first courses were cleared with quiet efficiency, the aromatic consommé leaving a gentle warmth that seemed to linger in the space between them. The waiter arrived promptly with the sautéed chicken, its herb-scented steam curling upward, promising a subtle richness. Taissia delicately pushed the plate

closer, her fingers brushing the edge, and Yarosvet followed suit, allowing the pause for their eyes to meet briefly over the shared warmth. The simple act of moving to the main course provided a natural interlude, a small moment of silence before their conversation resumed, threaded now with lighter laughter and renewed curiosity.

Taissia set down her fork for a moment, her gaze sharpening with mild curiosity. «Do you know,» she asked, her voice measured yet probing, «how to recognize a... doll, like Inga or her friend Liza? Have you noticed anything in common between them?»

Yarosvet's eyes flicked toward her, calm but thoughtful. «I believe I mentioned it once aboard the train,» he said quietly, «that for the moment, it is they themselves who point me toward those I am meant to visit. I inquired of my first „doll,“ Samira, with my mother — but Olga Vladimirovna's answer was far too elusive. Apparently, she preferred to guard her feminine secrets rather than share them with me.»

He let the pause linger just long enough for her to absorb the weight of his words, the murmuring clinks of their utensils against porcelain the only backdrop to the unspoken layers of understanding threading between them.

«If it is truly a „woman's secret,“» she finally murmured, «perhaps I might be able to unravel it... provided, of course, that you ever choose to introduce me to such girls, rather than hiding me away in hotel rooms.»

Her glance lingered on him, bright with teasing curiosity, daring him to respond, while the gentle clatter of their meal continued around them, as if the world itself held its breath for his answer.

Yarosvet allowed the faintest shadow of a smile to trace his lips. «An intriguing notion,» he said, his voice calm yet lightly amused. «I have no objection, truly. Only... it would be wiser to postpone such introductions until after I have fulfilled my current purpose.»

She only lifted her shoulders in a light, almost careless shrug, as if to show that his reservation neither offended nor surprised her. Then, with an air of deliberate unconcern, she bent again to her plate, the silver fork flashing briefly between her fingers. The rhythm of her eating was calm, measured, as though his words had slipped past her like a passing draft, noted but not worth clinging to. A faint glimmer of mischief still played in her eyes, however, betraying that she had not abandoned the idea, merely set it aside, as one tucks away a card for later play.

After their meal, they rose from the table and departed the restaurant, heading upstairs to freshen themselves before venturing out. Once in his room, Yarosvet offered her his coat, complimenting her lighter attire, and they made their way to the reception desk.

At the front desk, Yarosvet inquired in quiet tones, «Could you tell us which shops downtown — both for men's and women's ready-made clothing — are available? We would like to walk and

see what might suit.»

The clerk, adjusting his spectacles with discreet pride, offered guidance: «On Moskovskaya Street, just beyond the old bazaar, there are several «ready-made dress’ shops — men’s frocks, ladies’ garments, hats and gloves. Not yet boutiques as in Petersburg, but fine in their offering: coats, gowns, travelling frocks, a mix of imported fabrics and local tailoring.»

Taissia smiled with a quick spark of excitement. «Perfect,» she said warmly. «Let’s walk and see what catches our eye,» she added, buttoning her coat with deliberate grace.

Arm in arm, they descended and stepped out into the early evening, the air crisp against the fading warmth of the bath and dinner. The gaslights had just been lit, casting a soft glow on the busy Moskovskaya. Merchants’ lanterns blinked behind shop windows displaying garments — dark wool coats, silk scarves embroidered with floral patterns, modest frocks suitable for provincial elegance.

They passed under a sign reading «Готовое платье» (Ready-Made Dress), pausing to observe a display of wool walking coats and delicate, lace-trimmed camisoles. Around the corner, a separate window framed fine men’s waistcoats and silk ties — worn, dark green velvet vests, accented with brass buttons that caught the lamplight.

Yarosvet offered her his arm in the gentlemanly way he always did, asking softly, «Shall we start with the women’s side first?» She nodded, eyes shining with anticipation — not for

extravagance, but for something quiet and well-chosen.

They stepped into the merchant's shop as though crossing a threshold into another life. The air smelled faintly of wool, starch, and polished wood, the aroma of order and permanence, in strange contrast with the fleeting, almost stolen quality of their journey. For Taissia, the racks and folded piles seemed like a sudden revelation: she had nothing but the clothes on her back, the hurried garments in which she had leapt onto the train. Now each dress that the shopgirl unfolded before her was not merely fabric but a suggestion of a future, of belonging, of some shape her days might take. She laughed, half-mocking, half-dazzled, as silk slips whispered across her fingers, as a heavy winter coat was lifted to her shoulders, making her appear almost solemn, like a lady of rank.

Yarosvet, for his part, approached the business with the restrained calm of a man long accustomed to necessities and propriety, yet even he found himself tempted by variety — another waistcoat, a softer scarf, a fine shirt whose cut promised a discreet elegance. He did not need them, not truly; yet to watch her eyes widen at her own reflection, to see her bare existence clothed in layers of colour and texture, lent his own purchases the charm of complicity. She was choosing, inventing herself anew in each garment, and he, though silent, felt the subtle tug of destiny in these simple transactions. For it was not fabric alone they carried away, but a shared step into the semblance of a common life.

Under the faint glitter of the gas lamps they made their way back to the hotel, parcels pressed close against their sides. At the desk Yarosvet received the key with courteous nod, and soon the hush of their chamber enfolded them once more. The faint warmth of bathwater lingered still in the air, now mingling with the sharper scent of new fabrics — stiff silk, fresh wool, polished wood from the counters where they had been chosen.

Taissia carried her bundles with mock solemnity, but the moment the door closed behind them, her composure broke into laughter. She threw the parcels onto the bed and turned to him with the gleam of conspiracy in her eyes. «Wait,» she said, already reaching for the fastenings of her frock. «It is no good to try them on piece by piece. I must begin from nothing, like a true mannequin.»

Without hesitation, she stripped away her travelling dress, her shift, her stockings, each garment falling with a soft, matter-of-fact whisper onto the floor. Soon she stood before him entirely bare, pale as a statue and yet warm with life, her body neither flaunted nor concealed, but simply offered to the light. The contrast between her nudity and the untouched piles of shop-fresh clothing was striking — like some mythic Eve amid bolts of man-made finery.

Laughing softly, she sat upon the bed and tore open the first bundle, drawing out a lace chemisette. She slipped it over her head so that the fine fabric clung to her breasts and belly, translucent enough to reveal more than it hid. Rising to her feet,

she paraded before the mirror with exaggerated dignity. «Here I am a respectable young lady,» she declared, pursing her lips primly. A heartbeat later she pulled it off again, tossing it aside, the lace collapsing upon the coverlet like a discarded veil.

Next she tried on a sober winter coat, heavy with dark wool, but wore it open over her naked form, so that its severity only heightened the intimacy of what it failed to conceal. She turned slowly, solemn as a governor's wife, then dropped into laughter again, letting it slide from her shoulders. Then a blush-coloured muslin gown, which she pressed against herself before slipping into it, pirouetting clumsily until the fabric tightened across her hips, making her seem for an instant like a provincial bride.

Not content, she rifled through Yarosvet's parcel and stole a velvet waistcoat meant for him, buttoning it crookedly across her breasts, the hem falling absurdly to her thighs. «See?» she teased, striking a mock-heroic pose. «I am the gentleman now.» A bonnet followed, its ribbons tied beneath her chin while her body remained otherwise bare, a parody so bold she could not help but collapse into fresh laughter.

Each costume lasted only moments before she stripped it away, leaving the garments strewn like defeated masks about the room. Naked once more, she climbed onto the bed amidst the coloured fabrics, stretching her limbs across them as though they were offerings at her feet. The lamplight gilded her skin, touched the hollow of her collarbone, shimmered along her thigh where a length of silk half-covered her.

She looked at him with eyes still bright from play, her voice now lower, softened by the intimacy of the hour: «You see, I can be all of them, or none at all. But for you — perhaps I should remain only myself.»

Yarosvet, until now silent in his chair, rose and approached, his hand brushing over the scattered garments as if to still their restless whisper. He gazed down at her — no longer the playful mannequin, but the girl herself, revealed, unmasked. In that gaze, her laughter softened into quiet expectancy, and the room, thick with the mingled scents of cloth and flesh, seemed to draw its breath and hold it.

Taissia, flushed from her playful parades and the lingering warmth of the lamplight, suddenly surged forward, wrapping her arms around Yarosvet's neck. Her lips met his in a kiss that was at once urgent and teasing, pressing, searching, leaving a faint echo of laughter in its wake. He responded instinctively, his hands settling around her waist, holding her close as though to measure the very heartbeat of her delight.

When at last he drew back slightly, just enough to meet her eyes, his expression carried that measured gravity he often wore, tempered now by affection. «Will you be a good girl for me,» he asked quietly, his voice a low murmur against the rustle of silks and wool scattered about the bed, «while I am gone?»

«Already leaving?» she asked, half in jest, half in a hint of reproach, tracing a fingertip along the lapel of his coat.

Yarosvet's hand moved to the small pocket of his waistcoat,

drawing forth the glint of polished brass and silver — the chain of his pocket watch. He studied it with the calm precision of a man who measures both time and consequence, and then replaced it, closing his fingers around her with the faint pressure of reassurance. «Yes,» he said finally, voice steady, «in half an hour I must find a cabman to take Inga to her uncle's country house. It pains me to leave you so soon, but duty calls.»

Taissia's gaze flickered, half mock indignation, half the subtle longing of someone unaccustomed to absence. Yet in that moment, she allowed herself a softer smile, pressing once more to his chest before reluctantly stepping back. The parcels of clothes, the scattered silks, the lingering warmth of their shared laughter — all seemed suspended, awaiting his return, while outside the lamplight continued to pool over the quiet streets of Rostov.

He released her slowly, with care, his hand brushing a stray lock of hair from her face. «Be patient, Taissia,» he added, his tone both gentle and firm, «and I shall return before the evening grows too old.»

She nodded, letting a delicate sigh escape, eyes shining with mischief and promise. «I will,» she said, her voice soft yet ringing with certainty, «and perhaps I shall find ways to amuse myself in your absence.»

Yarosvet's gaze lingered a moment longer, the subtle tug of duty pressing upon him even as desire lingered in the air between them. Then, with deliberate calm, he began gathering his coat

and hat, preparing to depart, while she remained amidst the scattered garments, a radiant vision of impatience and playful grace.

He stepped out into the street, the cool air of Rostov brushing against his face, fresh with the scent of damp stone and faint horse-sweat from the waiting cabmen. He hailed one with a quiet motion of his hand, the driver shifting on the box, whip in hand, lantern swinging faintly from the shaft. Settling into the carriage, Yarosvet let the wheels begin their slow roll over the uneven cobbles, carrying him towards the quieter quarter where Inga's office had stood during the day, now closed and darkened.

The rhythm of hooves gave his mind space for thought, and Taissia's image returned, vivid, as though she had remained pressed against his breast even now. Her laughter, her reckless nudity among the strewn parcels, the sudden urgency of her kiss — all rose before him with a force both sweet and troubling. He felt for her a kind of sorrow: the girl had been swept into a current stronger than her own choosing, and perhaps, in her youth, she had begun to weave feelings around him that were not mere play. If she indeed nourished true affection, her heart might soon ache with an earnestness that he could not afford to repay in equal coin.

Yet, even as pity stirred in him, he was conscious that he had never lied to her, never promised what he could not give. She had leapt into his life like a flame thrown upon dry straw, bold, uninvited, demanding to be seen. It was she who had thrust

herself into this strange procession of duties and allegiances, not he who had lured her with false hopes. And what was more — his path had been chosen long before her arrival. The rules that bound him were not arbitrary trifles; they were threads in a larger weave, a solemn design to which he had sworn obedience.

He followed them not from caprice nor selfish gain, but for a higher cause — for the benefit of many, though most would never know the nature of the service rendered in their name. His mission was not a thing he could discard because a girl, however enchanting, grew jealous or restless at his absences. To deviate now, for the sake of indulging her possessive tenderness, would be to betray not only his calling but also her, in a deeper sense — for then he would make her complicit in his abandonment of duty.

The carriage clattered to a slower pace as they neared the appointed corner. The street was darker here, the shops shuttered, their painted signs faintly visible in the flickering gaslight. He saw ahead the outline of the familiar building, Inga's office by day, now silent, its windows black and unwelcoming. Yarosvet leaned slightly forward, his hand upon the seat's worn leather, and felt the weight of the moment pressing upon him: the delicate balance between his tenderness for Taissia and the unyielding obligations that pulled him elsewhere.

As the horse stamped and the cab halted, he drew a slow breath. The night was not yet deep, and his task awaited. Whatever storm brewed in the heart of the young girl he had left

amidst silks and laughter, he must keep to his road, for that was the condition of his life, the very covenant he had accepted long ago.

If she could only learn to trust him fully — if she could bring herself to believe that these encounters of his with the so-called «dolls» were not mere indulgence, not some roving libertinism, but a duty he bore, almost a form of labour — then perhaps her jealousy might soften into something nobler. For in truth, these meetings were never only for pleasure, though pleasure was inevitably interwoven. They were part of a design, a hidden service, a continuity greater than himself.

Should Taissia come to see it in that light, to glimpse the necessity beneath the apparent betrayal, she might cease to regard those women as rivals. Instead, she could begin to see them as pieces of a larger code — a riddle written in flesh and blood, which he alone had been set to decipher. And if she, sharp as she was, learned to read that code beside him, to discern in their gestures and voices the secret markers that distinguished them from the multitude, then she might become not his wounded lover, but his ally, his feminine counterpart, his mirror in this strange vocation.

Such a shift of vision would change everything. No longer would his departures wound her pride; instead, they might quicken her own sense of purpose. She could point him toward the chosen ones, guide his steps, and in so doing make his path hers as well. The thought stirred him: to have by his side not a

jealous girl but a companion who understood, who lent her own intuition to his mission — this was no idle dream. It would root her more firmly in his life than any vow of affection could.

Taissia must, sooner or later, meet Inga. Not in rivalry, not as a wounded spectator, but as a witness to truth — so that she might grasp, with her own sharp senses, the meaning behind his path and the mystery of those women whose destinies intersected his. Only through such revelation could she truly become his comrade, his counterpart, not merely the impetuous girl he had plucked from her narrow life.

Yet timing was everything. To bring them together before the appointed act, before the seed was sown, would risk discord, shadowing Inga's heart with hesitation. The conception must unfold under the spell of clarity, untroubled, with Inga's whole being turned towards him as towards the father of her child. Any flicker of doubt, any intrusion of jealousy, might poison the moment, twist it awry, and the balance of their secret labour would be lost.

This he knew without reasoning, felt it in the depth of his being as one senses the rhythm of breath or the beat of blood. It was no dogma, no commandment taught by others, but an intuition older than thought: that the mystery of conception required purity of intention, the woman's spirit leaning wholly towards the man chosen for her. Only then would the act bear its true fruit.

And so he resolved, silently, that Taissia should wait. She

would be introduced to Inga not as a rival, but afterwards — as confidante, perhaps even as witness of the code itself. When she saw with her own eyes that he did not chase pleasure alone, but served a hidden necessity, her heart might shift, her jealousy transform into knowledge. Then she would stand beside him not as a child clinging to his absence, but as the feminine force he needed — a partner in deciphering the riddle of these women, his ally rather than his hindrance.

The thought steadied him. He sat straighter in the cab, his fingers resting against the polished wood. It was not only a rendezvous he approached, but a step in a design whose strands now began, faintly but unmistakably, to entwine.

At precisely half past six the figure of Inga emerged from the dim mouth of a side alley. The street was quiet; no other carriages waited, no footsteps but hers broke the hush. She paused a moment, lifting her gaze, and at once recognised Yarosvet in the lone cab. A faint smile, swift and almost conspiratorial, touched her lips. With the composure of one accustomed to concealment she crossed the cobbled street and, gathering her skirts neatly, stepped into the carriage beside him. Her voice was low, assured, as she leaned toward the driver: she gave the address of her uncle's country house, her words measured, without a trace of uncertainty, and the cab lurched forward into the dusking streets.

Already he noted how different she appeared from the Inga of the day. In the office, beneath the pale light of ledgers and papers, she had seemed a brisk young woman: hair bound severely, cuffs

ink-stained, her speech quick, functional, clipped as the clicking of an abacus. There had been in her an aura of diligence, a slight dryness, as though her person were wrapped in the same grey restraint as her clerk's frock.

But now, released from that environment, she seemed transformed. Her hair, loosened from its earlier knot, spilled in softer lines about her cheeks; a few strands caught the glow of the nearest gas-lamp, lending warmth to her features. She wore not the stark dress of her work, but a travelling gown of a subdued violet, with a mantle trimmed in sable at the collar, lending her a gravity both feminine and composed. Her gloves were pale, finely fitted, the sort not for drudgery but for society, and the faint scent of rose-water clung to her, delicate, almost unexpected after the dust of accounts and ink.

The daylight Inga had belonged to her desk and her sums, a diligent shadow among ledgers; the evening Inga, by contrast, revealed herself as a woman stepping into her own sphere, conscious of her role, deliberate in her bearing. She met his gaze briefly, a flicker of something both candid and reserved in her eyes, before turning it outward to the passing streets. It was not concealment but poise: she was already preparing herself for what lay ahead, as if she understood, without need of words, that tonight she must appear not as clerk or niece, but as woman.

The carriage lurched forward with a slow creak, its iron-rimmed wheels clattering against the uneven cobbles. Within, the dim interior seemed a little cocoon of dusk, cut off from the

bustle outside by the lowered leather blinds. They sat close, so near that the faint warmth of her sleeve brushed against his coat whenever the vehicle swayed.

She turned her face to him, the fading daylight catching upon the quick gleam of her eyes.

«And you, Yarosvet Alexeyevich,» she asked with a gentle curiosity, «how have you settled here? Do you find Rostov to your liking, or does it weary you already with its dust and its clamour?»

«It has its peculiarities,» he said. «Bustle, noise, a certain untamed vigour. Yet there is also... a breadth to it. The river, the markets, the faces — all different from the northern towns. I cannot say it displeases me.»

He spoke without haste, careful not to let slip any detail of Taissia. The words hovered between candour and reserve, as though he allowed her a glimpse into his impression yet kept the true core of his experience hidden in shadow.

«In passing,» she said in her careful, deliberate manner, «I ought to tell you that Mr Petrov has already set your papers in motion. He wasted no time. By now, they are on a clerk's desk and will find their way into the proper channels.»

Yarosvet inclined his head with a quiet smile, as though acknowledging both the efficiency and the inevitability of that machine into which his name had just been fed. The clip-clop of hooves muffled his reply:

«That is good of him — and of you, to mention it. It seems

matters here move swifter than in the capital.»

The words hung between them with the measured sway of the carriage, the knowledge of official machinery grinding on in the background lending their conversation an undertone of weight he did not care yet to unfold.

The carriage creaked onward, wheels clattering against the uneven stones, and the faint sway of the interior seemed to set the pace for their words. Inga glanced sideways at him, her eyes catching the pale gleam of the lantern suspended from the driver's box, and offered a mild, conversational smile.

«Have you found your room comfortable enough?» she asked, letting the syllables fall lightly, as if testing the air rather than seeking true information.

«I have,» Yarosvet replied evenly, letting his gaze drift to the shadows that lengthened along the street. «The accommodations are modest, yet sufficient. One notices the small distinctions in light, in woodwork... and in the quiet that follows the bustle of day.»

She nodded, seeming pleased at his observation. «Yes, the city takes on a different character when the shops close, when the streets are left to the lamps and the wind. One might almost hear the river itself settling for the night.»

He inclined his head slightly. «Indeed. There is a certain rhythm to it, subtle yet persistent. The river, the lamps, the distant cries of carts — it all sets a cadence unlike anywhere I have been.»

A pause fell between them, the soft rocking of the carriage carrying their silence like a gentle instrument. Then she ventured, lightly, almost without conscious intent: «I wonder if the markets tomorrow will appear the same, or if the morning sun changes them as it does the colors of the river.»

Yarosvet allowed a faint smile. «I suspect it is the same world, yet transformed by light and expectation. One notices otherwise invisible details in the early hours, small gestures that the day swallows.»

Their words continued in this careful, meandering manner, brushing against the shapes of streets, the sounds of the city, the subtleties of light and shadow. Each topic was slight, inconsequential, yet in the act of speaking they maintained a shared rhythm, a polite intimacy, feeling for the threads that might later draw them toward a subject of mutual fascination.

The carriage swayed over a slight rut, and for a moment the silence reigned, punctuated only by the steady clop of the horse's hooves, as if the city itself waited for the conversation to find its true current.

After another pause, her gaze shifted slightly, holding his for just a moment longer than polite conversation required.

«Tell me,» she asked, almost in a whisper, «do you find it... difficult, managing the arrangements for your work with those... special women? I mean, must one keep one's own desires carefully in check, or does it ever... trouble you?»

Yarosvet's eyes flickered toward her, noting the subtle tension

in her posture, the way her hand rested lightly upon her lap, fingers brushing the folds of her gown. He inclined his head slightly, maintaining the calm exterior he always wore, yet a faint shadow passed over his expression.

«It requires... discretion,» he said, measured, deliberate. «A certain vigilance, a steady hand. Pleasure may exist, in part, but the work must remain foremost. There are rules, codes, consequences; the heart cannot be allowed to sway the mission. Yet the work itself... demands attentiveness, presence, understanding of what is... delicate.»

She let her breath catch imperceptibly, the carriage rocking gently beneath them. Her eyes did not leave his face, searching, curious, probing the subtle layers of meaning behind his careful words. «I see,» she murmured. «And the women themselves... can they sense this? Or is it hidden, always?»

Yarosvet did not answer at once. He allowed the faint clop of hooves and the quiet rattle of the carriage to fill the pause, then spoke, his tone still restrained but tinged with something that made her lean slightly closer. «They are not unaware,» he said quietly. «Some understand more than one might think. And one... learns to read them, as one must. The rest... is for the moment to conceal.»

The conversation had shifted, barely perceptibly, from civility to the edge of intimacy, and the carriage continued its slow journey, carrying them closer — both physically and in thought — toward the purpose of their meeting.

Yarosvet inclined slightly toward her, his voice low, carrying just enough curiosity to breach the polite distance the carriage enforced. «And you,» he asked, «do you ever feel... *special*? In what way? How does it manifest itself — if you notice it at all?»

Inga's eyes lifted to his, and for a moment she let herself sink into memory, the gentle rocking of the carriage a quiet accompaniment to the thoughts rising in her mind. «I suppose,» she began, her voice soft, almost reflective, «one feels it most in comparison, in the sense that some understand or see you differently. I remember — Kislovodsk, with Liza... She introduced me, in her way, to the notion that we are... set apart, though it is subtle. Not in grandeur, but in how one is observed, how one's presence matters more than one realizes.»

Her gaze fell to her hands, folded neatly in her lap, as though she could see the traces of that meeting on her fingertips. «Liza had a certainty I lacked, a sense that the rules of our... arrangement were visible even to the one guiding them. And yet, she treated me as if I could learn, as if she knew the world of the others, and I might understand it too. There is a weight to being seen that way... it makes one conscious, and careful, and at the same time... aware of a kind of responsibility.»

Yarosvet's fingers lightly brushed the edge of his coat where it met his lap, a shadow of a smile crossing his lips. This was precisely the insight he sought — the reflection of one «doll' upon another, the way experience and perception wove a subtle map of allegiance, understanding, and subtle hierarchy. «And

that... that sense of being set apart,» he murmured, «does it make you bolder, or more hesitant?»

Inga thought for a moment, the carriage's sway marking time with her contemplation. «Both, I suppose,» she admitted. «One learns to navigate, to measure one's own impulses against the currents of expectation. Liza... she showed me that one could command attention without demanding it, that the balance lies in presence and discernment. To be «special' is to be aware of the influence one carries, and yet not to misuse it.»

The words fell into the space between them, mingling with the rhythmic clop of the horse's hooves. Yarosvet leaned back, absorbing her reflection, noting the precision with which she described a world he had long observed, yet could now view through another's eyes. In this subtle illumination, he glimpsed how Taissia might one day see the same truths, if she were guided to read them rightly.

Yarosvet's gaze lingered on her for a moment longer, probing gently. «And tell me — are there any outward signs,» he asked quietly, «that one of you might recognize another? Or is it entirely a matter of... subtle perception, the sense that passes beneath the visible?»

Inga considered this, tilting her head as if weighing the air itself for clues. «I can only speak for myself,» she said cautiously, «but it seems... mostly the latter. It is not in dress, nor in voice, nor in the gait. One senses it rather than sees it — an awareness that something in the other resonates, shifts in response to your

own presence. A glance, a hesitation, a small change in the way a smile curves... these are the threads one reads.»

She paused, glancing briefly out the window where the streetlights shimmered across the cobblestones. «That said,» she continued softly, «there are moments — tiny gestures, habitual tilts of the head, the way a hand moves over a book, a pen, a table — that may mark familiarity. But these are subtle, easily missed, and perhaps only one who has long observed would recognize them. To the untrained eye, nothing appears unusual. One might imagine it as instinct, though I suspect it is practice as well.»

Her hands rested lightly in her lap, the carriage's gentle sway accentuating the rhythm of her words. «And I speak only of what *I* perceive,» she added, with a quiet humility. «Others may see differently. Perhaps some «dolls' have other signs, secret ways of marking recognition that I have not noticed — or do not yet understand.»

Yarosvet nodded slowly, absorbing each nuance. The carriage moved steadily through the streets, the muted clop of hooves punctuating the weight of her explanation. In that small, intimate space, the subtle architecture of perception between these women began to take shape before him — a map of instinct, habit, and awareness that he could read only through the reflections of those who had traversed it.

Yarosvet remained silent for a moment, pondering the threads she had just outlined. The carriage rocked gently beneath them, and in that movement his thoughts circled a question he felt

compelled to ask. *Are there others like her — others I might approach, guided by your knowledge?*

He opened his mouth, hesitated, then closed it again. To voice it now would be perilous; it would sound no different from a premature inquiry about Taissia, a risk he was not yet willing to take. The timing was wrong. The girl had only just entered his life; any mention of her, or of further «dolls,» might betray connections that must remain hidden, and might awaken in Inga a curiosity or suspicion that could complicate everything.

Instead, he settled into a measured quiet, letting the carriage's gentle sway and the rhythmic clop of hooves fill the pause. He observed her profile in the half-light: the concentration in her eyes, the faint shadow of thought crossing her brow. It was enough, for now, to note her perception, to gauge her instincts, and to sense how she might, when the time was right, become a conduit to the others.

His question remained unspoken, hovering like a promise deferred. He would wait — allow the moment to ripen, the circumstances to align — before seeking her guidance. For now, the journey continued, and he kept his knowledge and his desire restrained, wrapped carefully within the polite cadence of their conversation.

The carriage creaked steadily as it left the narrow streets behind, the city's bustle fading into the distance like a half-remembered dream. Gas lamps blinked out one by one as they crossed the last cobbles, replaced by the dim glow of twilight

lingering over low houses and shuttered shops. A faint murmur of the river drifted up from the east, its waters dark and steady, reflecting the pallid wash of the early evening sky.

Beyond the city's fringe, the air grew cooler and sharper, scented with the damp earth of gardens left fallow and the faint tang of riverweed. Fields stretched outward in muted greens and browns, their edges marked by hedgerows and the occasional tall poplar, silhouetted against the horizon. Small homesteads dotted the landscape, smoke curling lazily from chimneys, promising hearth and quiet. Occasionally, a flock of birds rose from a marshy patch, startling into the dimming light and tracing long arcs before settling again.

The road itself narrowed, worn ruts cutting deep into the clay soil, and the carriage swayed as the horse navigated the uneven path. On either side, the shadows of willows and elder trees stretched, their gnarled trunks forming intermittent tunnels through which the carriage passed. Somewhere ahead, the faint glimmer of a distant lantern suggested another house, a gate, or perhaps the first lights of a country road that led deeper into the countryside.

The movement was steady, almost hypnotic, and in that half-light, with the sounds of hoofbeats and the soft creak of leather, the world seemed suspended between city and field, between the known and the secret paths that lay beyond. Each detail — the scent of the soil, the hush of evening, the faint rustle of leaves — seemed to promise that what lay ahead was both imminent and

carefully veiled, waiting for those patient enough to notice.

«Do you visit your uncle's dacha often?» he asked, voice low, casual but edged with curiosity.

Inga's eyes flicked toward the receding city, then back to him, as if weighing how much to reveal. «Not as often as I might wish,» she said, her tone thoughtful. «The days are full with the office, and travel between Rostov and the country is never swift. Yet I try, whenever I can, to spend a few days there. The house is quiet, removed from the streets, and the grounds... they allow a certain freedom one cannot find in the city.»

She glanced out the window at the darkening fields, the carriage's sway catching the last light on her hair. «It is easier to think there,» she added, almost to herself, «to observe, to anticipate, and perhaps... to understand better one's own place in the patterns of others.»

Yarosvet nodded, noting the careful phrasing, the subtle way she skirted too much personal detail while still giving a glimpse of her relationship to the place. For him, it was precisely the kind of hint he needed — enough to guide his steps, without disturbing the delicate balance of trust they were cultivating within the enclosed intimacy of the carriage.

«And your uncle himself — why is he not at the dacha now? Does some business keep him in town?»

Inga considered this, her eyes momentarily tracing the receding outline of the city before returning to his. «He has matters to attend to here in Rostov,» she explained, her voice

calm but precise. «The estate requires oversight, and his presence is necessary to manage both the household and his affairs in the city. The dacha is maintained and ready, but it is seldom a place of constant habitation when there are obligations closer to the river and the markets.»

She shifted slightly in her seat, brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear, as if the carriage's sway reminded her of the distance she kept from full disclosure. «It is, in truth, a place of retreat more than residence — a refuge for those who go there, rather than the home of one who must oversee his fortunes. That is why he sends me ahead when he cannot attend himself.»

Yarosvet leaned gently toward Inga's face, his presence deliberate yet soft, a quiet invitation rather than an insistence. He sensed the subtle tension within her — a flicker of uncertainty, a quiet struggle between reserve and desire — and he approached it with the care of a man accustomed to reading such nuances.

She did not pull away; her hands remained lightly folded in her lap, though the faint tremor in her fingers betrayed the inner conflict he perceived. The darkness of the carriage and the absorbed focus of the driver allowed a cocoon of privacy. He brushed a gentle hand across her arm, an almost imperceptible touch, before letting it linger near her shoulder, drawing her a fraction closer.

Then, quietly, he pressed a soft kiss to her cheek. Her breath caught, a small, involuntary sound, and in that instant he leaned closer still. His lips found hers, light at first, tentative, testing the

boundary between permission and hesitation. The warmth of her response came slowly, a gentle yielding, a mirrored curiosity. Her lips parted slightly, returning the kiss, hesitant but earnest, and the subtle pressure of her hand against his coat indicated both compliance and a quiet assertion of self.

The carriage rocked steadily beneath them, the world outside muted and distant. Hooves clattered over the uneven road, the driver's focus fixed forward, and in that enclosed, moving space, their intimacy expanded, a careful, unspoken negotiation of trust, desire, and restrained surrender. The first kiss, fleeting as it might have seemed to an outsider, carried the weight of acknowledgment: of need, of curiosity, and of the fragile beginnings of mutual understanding.

The carriage rocked gently, the dim lantern light flickering across Inga's face, when Yarosvet reached for the small, neat hat perched atop her head. His fingers were careful, deliberate, as he lifted it, freeing her dark hair from its restraint. A quiet gasp escaped her lips, barely audible, as strands of black silk began to tumble forward.

Her hands moved instinctively, almost in a reflex of modesty, but also in consent, as she helped him unpin the carefully placed clips. Each fastening released allowed her hair to cascade slowly, a smooth, shining curtain of midnight silk, long enough to brush against her shoulders and the curve of her back. The carriage's movement seemed to animate it, the strands shifting with the sway, catching glimmers of lantern light that danced across the

glossy surface.

What had been disciplined and controlled — tight, proper, a symbol of social restraint — now transformed into something soft, fluid, and intimate. The loose hair framed her face differently, softening the angles, emphasizing the curve of her cheek and the dark intensity of her eyes. Her neck and the delicate slope of her shoulders were suddenly more visible, vulnerable yet elegant, hinting at a freedom forbidden by propriety but allowed by the quiet secrecy of the carriage.

The transformation was subtle, but undeniable: Inga's presence shifted from composed and restrained to sensuous and immediate. The long, straight black hair, reminiscent of an Indian maiden, contrasted with the delicate refinement of her features, lending her a quiet, magnetic allure that was at once natural and profoundly intimate. The gesture — so small, yet so charged — marked the first outward sign that the space between them had moved beyond mere conversation, that the shadowed carriage had become a private realm of shared consent and awakening desire.

Yarosvet, feeling the weight of the moment and the slow liberation of her hair framing her face, leaned in once more. His lips met hers with a quiet insistence, seeking consent and granting space in equal measure.

This time, Inga's response was different. She pressed closer, her hands moving almost unconsciously to the lapels of his coat, as if to anchor herself against both desire and propriety. Her lips

parted more freely, warm and eager, and the faint brush of her tongue against his was a sudden, breath-stealing admission — a spark of fire breaking through the careful, polite restraint that had governed her until now.

The kiss deepened, slow at first, exploratory, then with increasing confidence, a mutual negotiation of heat and curiosity. The soft sway of the carriage amplified the intimacy, each gentle lurch pressing them subtly together, and her breath mingled with his, warm, quickening, almost intoxicating.

Her eyes fluttered closed, dark lashes resting against the flushed curve of her cheeks, and in that small, enclosed space, the world outside — the road, the clop of hooves, the distant murmur of the city — faded entirely. There remained only the quiet rhythm of their lips and the shared, unspoken acknowledgment of a desire that had been long restrained but now claimed the shadows as its own.

Yarosvet's hand moved with careful deliberation, brushing against the curve of her breast through the soft fabric of her gown. The contact was measured, tentative at first, testing the boundary of consent.

Inga did not pull away. Instead, a subtle shiver ran through her, her breath catching softly, an unspoken acknowledgment that she did not resist. Her hands remained poised on his coat, yet her posture shifted imperceptibly, allowing the warmth of his touch, the weight of his presence, to press closer.

The intimate movement of the carriage lent the gesture

a rhythm, a gentle rocking that accentuated the connection between them. Each shift of his hand traced the outline of her form, and she responded not with words, but with a quiet yielding, a delicate surrender to the closeness, her awareness heightened by the dim, enclosing privacy of the carriage.

The moment was charged yet restrained, a careful dance of consent and curiosity, as the two navigated the boundary between polite intimacy and the more private, heated recognition of desire that neither had spoken aloud but both now acknowledged in the hush between the clop of hooves and the sway of the moving carriage.

Yarosvet's gaze fell, almost instinctively, to the subtle movements of her body. He noticed the gentle parting of her legs beneath the soft folds of her gown, a shift so delicate that it might have been dismissed, yet to him it carried unmistakable intent.

With measured care, he placed one hand upon the smooth plane of her stomach, letting his fingers trace a light, attentive path downward. The warmth of her body beneath his palm was immediate, almost electric, and he lowered his hand further, pressing through the thin fabric that shielded her most intimate contours.

Inga's eyes fluttered closed at the touch, lashes resting against the high curve of her cheeks, and a quiet shiver passed through her. Yarosvet recognized, with a subtle thrill of both respect and desire, the depth of her sensitivity — the way her body responded, keenly attuned, as if every nerve and every subtle

contour had been waiting for such attentiveness.

Her breath quickened in soft, almost inaudible sighs, the intimate rhythm of the carriage amplifying each small movement and touch. He allowed his hand to linger, learning the language of her body through fabric, sensing the delicate tension and the exquisite responsiveness that marked her as profoundly aware, intensely sentient, and fully present in the shared space of their clandestine intimacy.

The driver's rough voice, strained from the cold evening air, announced with unceremonious brevity that they had reached their destination. At that signal, Inga stirred, like a sleeper roused too suddenly from a reverie: she drew in her shoulders, glanced down, and, with swift feminine precision, smoothed the folds of her dress where his hand had moments ago lingered. The movement was neither hurried nor timid — rather, it bore that instinctive grace with which women reassemble their dignity after yielding, even slightly, to intimacy. Her pale fingers fluttered across her bodice, coaxing the muslin into order, pressing away invisible traces of his touch.

Yarosvet, already composed, reached into his coat pocket, withdrew the well-worn purse and pressed a few coins into the driver's palm. The exchange was curt, practical; he did not tarry over it. With the slow, deliberate manner of a man accustomed to being observed, he pushed open the carriage door and stepped down first into the twilight. Gravel crunched beneath his boots. He straightened, turned back, and extended his hand.

She appeared in the frame of the door, gathering her skirts carefully lest they catch. For an instant her figure was silhouetted against the lamplight inside the cab — slender, poised, a dark outline against the faint gold. Then she bent slightly, and her hand — white, almost luminous in the dusk — slipped into his palm. He received it firmly, with a courtesy that made the gesture almost ritual, and guided her down to the ground. Her shoes met the earth lightly, as though she alighted from a higher world rather than a simple step.

Behind them the driver gave a grunt, flicked the reins, and the carriage rolled away with a muted creak of wheels, leaving only the thin plume of dust dissolving in the evening air. A hush, sudden and palpable, descended in its wake, broken only by the faint stir of leaves overhead.

Hand in hand now, without words, they advanced toward the gate. It was not a hurried pace; their steps fell in a quiet rhythm, as though their bodies already obeyed some secret concord. Their fingers, entwined, spoke more plainly than speech, and there was in that joined movement something at once innocent and irrevocable.

The road, shaded by birches and pines whose crowns whispered above like patient confidants, led them to a modest clearing where the house at last revealed itself. It was not some aristocratic villa built with pretension of grandeur, but rather the kind of country retreat so common to provincial Russia in those years: a wooden structure of two storeys, painted in a weather-

faded ochre, its planks darkened by rains and summers past, yet still clinging to a quiet dignity. The roof sloped steeply, clad with grey shingles that bore the sheen of countless dawns, and from the chimney rose a thin, almost transparent thread of smoke, which mingled with the cool evening air and dissolved into the treetops.

A wide veranda stretched along the front, its columns simple, whitewashed, and slightly warped with time, bearing upon their shoulders a modest awning that shielded the house from the full fury of the sun. Wooden railings, carved by an unhurried provincial craftsman, framed the porch in delicate patterns that were less ornament than memory — the labour of some forgotten hand who had carved for his own pleasure rather than for acclaim. A pair of wicker chairs and a small iron-legged table were set near the entrance, still bearing the pale marks of teacups from afternoons long gone.

The windows were tall, their panes clouded slightly with age, each framed by shutters painted green, the paint flaking to reveal the raw wood beneath. Some shutters hung loosely, creaking when the wind caught them; others had been carefully latched, as though the house had its own will to maintain its privacy. Behind the glass could be glimpsed lace curtains, yellowed with years but lovingly kept, swaying faintly in the draft of the opening door.

Around the house spread a garden both humble and unruly: lilac bushes bowed under the weight of blossoms, and wild grasses pressed close to the porch, unafraid of human order.

Apple trees, crooked and patient, bore their small fruits, while a cluster of currant bushes lined the path, their sharp scent rising as one brushed past them. A narrow track of trodden earth, not stone, led from the gate — a simple construction of two boards held by rusted hinges — towards the veranda. Its surface was scattered with fallen petals, pale and silent, as if a secret procession had passed shortly before.

No gilded lanterns hung from its eaves, no coach-house stood grandly by its side; instead, a small shed leaned at a slant near the fence, and beyond it a shallow well, its wooden bucket worn smooth by many palms, reflected a shard of the sky within its depths. The fence itself was low, more symbolic than protective, its pickets irregular, as if they had grown there naturally rather than been hammered in.

The air about the place carried a fragrance of damp earth, pine resin, and the faint sweetness of hay drying in some unseen meadow. It was a house that seemed not so much built as grown into its place — unassuming, enduring, waiting for the footfalls of its inhabitants to bring it once more to life.

And so, as Yarosvet led Inga towards it, their hands bound together in a tender, almost ceremonial clasp, the dwelling did not proclaim wealth or splendour, but something older, quieter: a retreat where shadows lengthened peacefully, where time slowed its pace, and where the trembling of a girl's heart and the steady resolve of a man might find both concealment and freedom.

At the threshold of the dacha, under the modest awning where

dry vines curled in last year's braids, Inga drew from her small reticule a brass key on a silk cord and placed it soundlessly in Yarosvet's palm. The gesture was as though she were not merely offering access to a dwelling, but entrusting him with something of her own secret realm. He inserted the key into the old lock, the tumblers responded with a low, reluctant sigh, and the door yielded.

Inside, the air was tinged with coolness and a faint resinous odour, as though the pine walls still exhaled the forests from which they had once been cut. Dust motes floated in the narrow shafts of afternoon light, gilding the quiet interior. The hallway was spare but not unfriendly: a simple wooden chest pushed against the wall, a mirror clouded with age, the faint trace of worn carpets leading inward. There was a muted sense of pause, of life arrested mid-breath, waiting for footsteps to wake it. The silence of the house seemed to lean toward them, curious, almost expectant.

She led him into the front room — a plain, square parlour whose chief dignity was the whitewashed masonry stove occupying one corner like a calm, benevolent animal. Its iron mouth, soot-licked and solemn, sat above a low hearth; beside it a neat stack of split birch and pine waited, ends pale as bone where the axe had bitten. The air here was colder than the hall, holding a faint smell of lime, old tea, and winter dust.

Inga moved with practiced economy. She knelt, skirts gathered under her, and he reached above her shoulder to lift the

flue's little lever. The damper slid with a dull clink; a thread of draft woke and drew through the chimney. He passed her two short logs; she set them crosswise with a practicality that had no vanity in it, then tore last year's newspapers into twists. For a heartbeat the type flickered in his mind — dead dates, forgotten decrees — before her hands crumpled them into tinder and fed them under the wood.

She struck a match. The brief hiss, the sulphur's sting, a fragile coin of flame cupped in her fingers — then the paper took, blue at the edges, turning quick and confident to gold. Fire licked the birch, found resin in the pine, popped once like a muffled laugh; a breathing began deep in the stove, as if the house had drawn its first warm breath all season. She closed the little iron door until it kissed the frame and latched, and in the same motion rose from her haunches.

Turning, she faced him from inches away. The lamplight made a soft halo of her loosened hair, and the newborn heat pressed a faint colour into her cheeks. From that lower vantage — still half in the crouch's memory — her gaze travelled up the line of his coat to his face, steady and inquisitive, as if taking his measure anew under this other light. He could feel the draft tugging past his shoulder into the flue, could hear the small, steady conversation of flame behind the iron.

He stepped in, closing the remaining space without ceremony. The edge of her bodice brushed his vest; the fall of her hair grazed his knuckles where his hand hovered at her waist,

undecided only in appearance. She held his look — no flinch, no hurry — eyes dark and reflective as if keeping their own counsel; and in the hush, with the stove's first warmth gathering about their knees, the room seemed to tilt discreetly toward them, sanctioning the nearness they had brought through the door.

She leaned against the heavy wooden door, cheeks flushed not from the night's cold but from the fire that already smouldered within her. Her lips parted, a tremor in her breath betraying the impatience that had been gnawing at her since the moment their eyes had locked.

«The stove will need its time,» she murmured, her voice husky, the consonants dragging like silk across stone. «The air will warm, yes — but why should we squander what we cannot regain? If you allow me...» Her gaze slid up to his, gleaming with both plea and mischief, «...I would undress you. Myself. Every button, every stubborn fold, until there is nothing between us but skin. I want to see you bare — utterly bare.»

Her fingers, already restless, touched the edge of his coat as if testing whether he might resist. He did not. Instead, the faintest smile crept over his lips, a wordless assent, like a key slipped into her palm. That smile — so quiet, so indulgent — set her alight, and she laughed softly, almost savagely, as though his compliance had granted her a forbidden prize.

The room still smelled of cold pine and the dust of travel, shadows clinging in corners, but she was already weaving heat with her hands. To her, the stove could smoulder as it pleased;

she would make her own blaze, strip by strip, until the silence of the house was broken by the music of cloth falling to the floor.

The first time he had seen her — in the dim half-light of the office corridor, with her files clutched close to her chest and her eyes politely lowered — he had taken her for a shy, almost nondescript creature, the sort who faded into the grey routine of bureaucracy without leaving the faintest trace. But now, here, alone with him in the silence of a private chamber, that meek mask was falling away like gauze touched by flame.

She stood close, breathing quietly, and he noticed at once that she was not nervous — no trembling of the hands, no bashful averting of her gaze. Instead, there was a slow, feline deliberateness in every movement, as if she were a priestess at some forbidden altar, and his body the offering.

Her fingers, pale and precise, found the knot of his cravat. She did not tug at it with haste; she teased it loose, watching how the fabric slackened and gave way. The silk slid down against his chest with a sigh, and she folded it carefully, almost ceremonially, laying it aside upon the chair. Then her glance returned to him — measuring, drinking in how one small absence of clothing altered the whole geometry of him.

The waistcoat followed. She unfastened each button with deliberate pauses between them, as though every click of the clasp were a drumbeat in some unspoken ritual. Once freed, she drew it from his shoulders with a slow flourish, smoothed it across her palms, and placed it atop the cravat, neat and

square, her orderliness contrasting cruelly with the chaos she was summoning inside him. Her eyes lingered on the way his shirt now clung to his frame — the faint swell of muscle beneath, the breadth of chest that pulsed with breath quickened by anticipation.

«You keep yourself hidden,» she murmured, almost in reproach, her voice carrying both accusation and delight. Her hands brushed against his sleeves as she turned her attention to his jacket. She pulled it down with the gravity of undressing a lover for the first time, folding it with the same quiet reverence, yet all the while her lips curved with a secret smile — mocking the stiffness of his daytime self, that rigid clerk she had outwitted so easily with her midnight daring.

When only his shirt remained, thin and taut over his body, she stepped closer. The faint scent of her perfume — amber, musk, something warm and primal — wove into him, and he felt how utterly false his earlier impression of her had been. By daylight she was modesty incarnate; by lamplight she was appetite itself, unashamed and unhurried.

Her fingers slid across the collar of his shirt, down the row of buttons. One by one she opened them, each interval of skin unveiled drawing her gaze like a flame draws a moth. First his throat, the hollow where his pulse throbbed; then the plane of his chest, lightly dusted with hair; then further, the taut line of his stomach, hard beneath her feathering touch. She did not yet peel the garment away — she let it hang open, savouring the view as

one might pause before a painting half-unveiled.

At last she eased the sleeves down his arms, slow, luxuriant, until the shirt joined the growing, ordered pile. She stepped back a little then, her eyes roving across him — bare-chested, alive, no longer the figure she had first greeted across the polished desk. Her lips parted slightly as though she might speak, but instead she reached out once more, tracing with the back of her hand along his ribs, down his side, a lover's appraisal mingled with something fiercer.

And he stood, motionless under her ministrations, hearing in the rhythm of her breath and the deliberate cadence of her movements the truth about her: this was no timid creature. This was a woman who relished unveiling, who delighted in stripping away not merely garments but facades, taking possession piece by piece, folding each discarded layer with the precision of a thief cataloguing stolen treasures.

Already he knew — when the final garment fell — her gaze would devour him whole.

The final fold of his shirt lay on the chair, crisp and deliberate, a silent testament to her growing command over the scene. Inga's dark eyes lingered on him for a heartbeat, the corners of her mouth lifting in a slow, knowing smile that carried a promise of exploration yet to come. She did not rush, for urgency would have spoiled the ceremony; instead, she moved with the luxuriant patience of one who savors every revelation, every curve, every subtle tremor of anticipation in her companion.

Her hands traced the waistband of his trousers, fingers brushing against the fabric with a teasing lightness, testing the tension of buttons and laces. With deliberate care she unfastened them, and the faint sound of snaps and clasps echoed in the quiet room, each click a small drumbeat to which her pulse quickened. The trousers slid down over his hips, their weight momentarily stilled in her hands before she folded them neatly atop the growing pile of discarded garments.

She stepped back to admire him fully now, her gaze roaming with an intensity that made his own chest tighten. The curve of his hips, the line of his stomach, the subtle swell of his shoulders — all lay exposed to her eyes, every detail magnified by the low lamplight and the soft glow of the stove behind her. She reached out again, fingertips grazing the firm plane of his abdomen, tracing down to the edge of his undergarments, and then lingering just above, letting the heat of her touch communicate what her words could not.

Inga's hair, dark and falling over her shoulders like a river of midnight silk, swayed slightly as she moved closer. She bent at the waist, eyes fixed unwaveringly on him, and the room seemed to shrink until the walls, the fire, the muted shadows — all collapsed into the singular focus of her intent. Her fingers, deliberate and reverent, traced the edges of the undergarments, loosening them with a patience that was almost ritual. As the fabric slipped down his hips and pooled at his feet, the final barrier fell away, leaving him utterly exposed.

Her breath caught, soft and tremulous, as her gaze met the sight that had driven her subtle yearning: his member, full and warm in the soft lamplight. She did not recoil; she did not avert her eyes. Instead, she let them linger, drinking in every line, every curve, the gentle swell and the subtle pulse that bespoke life, vitality, and want. Her hands hovered for a heartbeat, fingers brushing the smooth skin almost in homage, before daring a tender touch, tracing along its length with careful curiosity.

A faint shiver ran through him under her touch, and she leaned closer, lips parting slightly, tasting the heat in the air, feeling the raw, immediate power of her own desire reflected in the rigid form before her. Her hands roamed slowly, deliberately, exploring, learning, claiming — but always with that same precise reverence, turning every inch into an intimate ceremony.

She drew back just enough to study him from head to toe, eyes dark and luminous with a fire that matched the glowing hearth. The anticipation, the hunger, the triumph of having reached this threshold — all coalesced in her gaze. Finally, she lifted it to meet his, dark eyes bright with unspoken desire, lips parted in a slow, teasing smile. «You are... magnificent,» she whispered, voice low, husky, and intimate. «All of you. Entirely, completely. And now... I want more.»

Her hands lingered, warm and delicate, as she let her fingers glide along his shaft, feeling the firm swell beneath the soft, yielding skin. She traced every ridge, every subtle contour, letting her touch memorize the weight and tension, the slight give under

her palms. She bent closer, inhaling the faint, musky heat, and with a careful motion, rotated him gently, observing the way his body responded — how the slight shift of her grip sent a ripple through the taut muscles of his abdomen, how the veins beneath the skin swelled subtly under the soft, intent pressure of her fingers.

She explored with a careful curiosity, rolling him lightly between her hands, measuring, mapping, as though learning a secret language written only in flesh. Her thumbs traced circles along the underside, testing its sensitivity, her other hand bracing lightly against his hip for balance. Each movement was slow, reverent, deliberate — an intimate communion, a study of the living form before her.

Inga's eyes followed every reaction, every subtle twitch or shiver that betrayed pleasure, delight, and anticipation. Her lips parted slightly as she let her gaze wander down the full length she now commanded with careful hands, and she allowed herself the briefest brush, fingertips grazing the tip in tentative, exploratory strokes. She drew him closer, pressing her body subtly forward, her own breath quickening in response to the palpable warmth of him beneath her touch.

She rotated him again, more confidently this time, mapping angles, noting the weight and firmness, feeling how each shift altered the tension and curve. Her hands moved in tandem, one cradling, the other tracing, and in every deliberate action she was fully absorbed, entirely possessed by the private study of his

manhood. Her mind was concentrated on nothing else — the subtle tremors, the heat, the undeniable potency pressed before her eyes and palms.

And yet, even in this singular focus, she found pleasure not only in the tactile sensation but in the power of observation, the intimate knowledge of his reactions under her careful ministrations. Every curve, every pulse, every slight quiver under her touch became a measure of both his desire and her control, an unspoken dialogue conducted in flesh and heat alone. She pressed lightly against him, rolling, adjusting, teasing, her eyes luminous with a mixture of triumph and need.

Her breath caught when a particularly subtle shiver ran through him, and she leaned in, brushing her lips across the apex of his length in a whisper of contact, careful, reverent, teasing. Her hands did not falter, moving in soft, deliberate patterns, holding, feeling, adjusting, and in every movement asserting her complete, almost sacred attention to what she had so longed to see and touch.

Her hands moved with increasing confidence, no longer tentative, but deliberate and intimate, mapping every contour, every subtle swell, every pulse beneath the taut skin. She pressed lightly along the length, feeling the shift of weight, the tension that coiled and released like a living instrument under her touch. Her fingers slid along the sides, rolling, kneading softly, exploring the firmness and suppleness in a rhythm entirely of her own design.

Inga leaned closer, lips hovering, barely brushing the apex with the merest whisper of heat, tasting the subtle salt of him in the air, inhaling the scent that had awakened her hunger from the first moment he stood unveiled. She rotated him slowly in her palms again, attentive to every reaction — the slightest shiver, the tension of muscles, the quickened pulse at the base — and adjusted her grip accordingly, as if she were a sculptor shaping clay, shaping desire, learning the language of his body stroke by stroke.

Her eyes, dark and luminous, followed each subtle motion, drinking in the fullness of him, the glint of arousal in the lamplight. Her hands were confident now, coaxing, guiding, teasing, stroking with a patient, almost ceremonial reverence. She traced the veins that swelled beneath the surface, feeling the way the skin yielded and tightened with each gentle press, each careful glide.

Her breath came quicker, low and soft, matching the rhythm she imposed, and she let her lips brush him again, a fleeting kiss at the tip, teasing, tasting, and sensing the shiver that ran through him in response. She pressed closer, body almost touching his, fingers wrapping lightly around him as she tested firmness, subtle bends, the give and resistance that spoke of pleasure and vitality.

Each movement was slow, sensuous, measured, a private exploration in which she held both awe and possession. Her hands traveled along every ridge and curve, adjusting, rolling, pressing lightly, and in each action she discovered a new depth of

sensation, a new angle of intimacy. She smiled faintly to herself at the power of this knowledge, the thrill of total command, yet tempered with a quiet reverence for the living, pulsing form she now held entirely in her attention.

And still, she paused between touches, letting her gaze drink him in, her fingers lingering at the apex, tracing lines with the faintest pressure, drawing out each subtle reaction, each micro-shiver, and in that exquisite suspension of time, she reveled in the complete communion of sight, touch, and breath. Every heartbeat, every pulse, every subtle twitch became a language only they shared, a silent affirmation of the desire she had so long restrained and now indulged fully.

Inga's hands now roamed with an intimate audacity, exploring every inch with deliberate attention. Her fingers pressed along the smooth, warm length, feeling the tautness, the subtle flex of muscles beneath, the pulsing vein that betrayed its own urgency. She cradled him gently, rolling him in her palms, testing the weight and resistance, letting her thumbs trace the sensitive undersides, coaxing a shiver that ran like electricity through him. Every movement was precise, almost ritualistic, yet utterly consuming, each touch a declaration of possession, of fascination, of appetite.

She leaned closer, lips brushing lightly, barely grazing the sensitive tip, teasing, tasting the warm air around it, inhaling the faint musk that spoke of his arousal. Her breath mingled with his, a low exhale escaping as she felt the subtle hardening under

her hands, the way the heat radiated outward, pressing against her palms, coaxing her to draw him even closer, to feel every responsive quiver along the shaft.

Her fingers traveled downward, along the base, tracing the subtle swell, the smoothness, the taut line that led to the hidden depths she had not yet touched. She circled, pressed, rolled, the soft friction of her touch against the tender flesh drawing tiny shivers, a muted gasp, a trembling acknowledgment of her deliberate mastery. Her other hand cradled the length with gentle firmness, adjusting, lifting, letting the heat of her body brush against his, feeling the pulse and weight in every motion.

Her eyes followed every movement, dark and gleaming with unrestrained hunger. The lamplight flickered over the taut planes, over the subtle glisten of moisture, over the sensitive ridges and veins that stood prominent under her touch. She leaned closer still, letting her lips hover, brushing the tip again in teasing circles, tasting the faint salt of him, her own breath warm and quickening with the knowledge of how completely he yielded to her ministrations.

She rotated him slowly in her palms, watching the subtle shiver that ran along the length, the way his hips responded with each gentle adjustment, the tension in his abdomen that reflected every brush of her fingertips. She pressed lightly, rolling and kneading in rhythm with the pulse, tracing circles with her thumbs, letting her gaze linger on every ridge, every subtle quiver, drinking in the tactile map of his masculinity.

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