

ABRAHAM VAN HELSING

THE VAMPIRE HUNTER



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Table of contents

The Letter from Transylvania	3
Fog over London.....	13
The House of Locked Windows	24
A trail of ash	35
The man in the black coat	45
Whispers in Whitechapel	53
The Diary of the Missing	63
The smell of iron.....	73
The carriage at midnight	82
A shadow in the mirror	92
The staircase behind the wallpaper	104
The visit to the madhouse.....	114
The coffin in the cellar.....	125
A Bite at Dawn.....	135
The map with the red cross.....	146
The train to Whitby	157
The room with the scratch marks	169
The priest who remained silent	179
The trail of blood at the quay.....	191
The portrait that changed	201
The Ball of Masks	213
An invitation without a sender.....	225
The child at the window	238
The Bell in the Fog.....	247
The last confession	256
Chase through the alleys.....	266
The key made of bones	276
The Castle of a Thousand Doors.....	286
The Chamber of the Sleeping.....	296
The Pact of Darkness	306
The knife in the velvet	317
Fire in the snow	328
The Dawn Victory	339
Silence after the bite	349
imprint.....	360

The Letter from Transylvania

It began as it so often does when the night pretends to be harmless: with a noise that didn't belong there.

Outside it wasn't quite dark yet, but the London light had already taken on that tired, dirty hue, as if the day had something to hide. On Gower Street, the sounds of the city pressed against the windows like an uninvited guest: horses' hooves, wagon wheels, distant laughter from a tavern, then silence again, so sudden it seemed suspicious. I sat at my desk, my back against the cold wall, sorting through notes I never wanted to read again. Not because they were trivial. But because they knew too much.

The letter slot rattled.

A very ordinary sound. That's precisely why I sat up. Ordinarieness is the garment danger prefers to wear. I waited until the footstep in the hallway had faded away, and it was as if the house itself had held its breath. Then I got up, went to the door, and saw the envelope lying on the floorboards like something that had fallen from another room.

The paper was thick, almost stiff. Not the delicate, pliable stuff bankers and lawyers prefer, but material more akin to parchment than paper. The color wasn't white, but the kind of yellow that old dentures take on. On the front was my name in handwriting that was both elegant and impatient. The ink had seeped lightly into the fibers, as if it had been rubbed in with force.

Abraham van Helsing.

Below it, as if it were a second address or an addition meant to be visible only after the first glance, was a single word.

Transylvania.

I could have laughed. It's a country that, in the minds of the English, lies roughly where one would expect to find dragons and unicorns. A place that could be impressed by a map held upside down in the dark. But I didn't laugh. The laughter caught somewhere in my throat, and for a moment I tasted the metallic tinge that comes when the body makes a decision before the mind comprehends it.

I picked up the envelope with two fingers, as one might handle an insect that might still be alive. It was sealed. Not an ordinary wax seal, the kind academics use for formal letters. This wax was darker, almost black, and had a smell that didn't belong in this hallway. Not sweet, not resinous, more...old. The imprint on it was a coat of arms or a symbol that disappeared the moment you stared at it for too long. A circle. A hook? A tower? It seemed to change depending on how the light fell.

I carried the envelope back to the desk. My hand was steadier than it should have been, and that was unsettling. Above me, the rafters creaked. The house was working. Or listening.

The scissors lay beside the inkwell. I picked them up, placed the tip against the wax, and the moment the blade touched the seal, the lamp's flame flickered. Just for a breath, just a twitch. But it was enough to make the shadow on the wall look as if it had broken free.

I cut open the envelope.

A single sheet fell out. And another. Both were covered with writing smaller than mine, more nervous, as if the writer had been constantly watched over their shoulder. The first sentence jumped out at me because it was written in a different ink, darker, fresher.

If you are reading this, I am either dead or already on my way there.

I continued reading, slowly, not because I had to, but because I felt the words might move if I rushed them.

My name is Ion Szekely, Doctor of Medicine, formerly employed at the hospital in Cluj-Napoca. I am writing to you, Mr. van Helsing, because I have been told you are a man who takes seriously things that other men dismiss with a smile. I am writing to you because I have not slept for three nights without something being in my room. Not a person. Something else. And because this morning I found blood under my fingernails, without knowing whose it was.

I laid the sheet of paper flat on the table and felt my gaze involuntarily drift to the window. Outside, it was more twilight than day. The street was still there, yes, but it seemed far away, like a stage set that could be dismantled at any moment. A man with an umbrella walked by, even though it wasn't raining. A child tugged at its mother's hand and pointed at something I couldn't see.

I continued reading.

Two weeks ago, a stranger came to our town. He claimed to be a nobleman, someone who needed to stay nearby for a while to conduct business. His name isn't important. Names here are just masks. What is important is that since his arrival, things have been happening that one doesn't talk about if one wants to continue being greeted by one's neighbors.

The following are the accounts of a nurse who heard screams at night that could not have come from a human being. A priest who avoided the stranger's house and yet was seen there shortly before sunrise. A servant who said the dogs didn't howl when the wind came from the forest, but when it came from the manor.

The letter wasn't a narrative, not a dramatic exaggeration. It was a list of facts, and that's precisely what made it dangerous. Drama can be shaken off, facts stick.

I turned to the second page. There were drawings. Rough sketches, done with a trembling hand. A window with thick curtains. A neck with two marks on it. A coffin whose lid didn't close properly. And a symbol that resembled the seal on the cover, as if the writer had tried to copy it, making mistakes because the original wouldn't stay still.

At the edge, almost like a note to himself, it said:

He never goes outside during the day. He has no reflection.

I glanced at the small mirror hanging on the wall next to the bookshelf. Not out of vanity. Out of habit. You check reality when it begins to shift. The mirror showed me sitting there, paper in hand, brow furrowed. An ordinary scene. I could have calmed myself down.

Then I noticed something in the background of the reflection.

A movement behind the curtain.

I froze so quickly that the chair scraped softly across the floorboards. The curtain at the window was made of heavy, dark green fabric, and it moved as if a draft had passed through the room. But no window was open. And the lamp burned steadily.

I looked directly at the window. The curtain hung still. No movement.

I looked in the mirror again.

The curtain moved again, very slightly, just enough to be sure that I wasn't making it up.

I stood up slowly, the paper still in my hand. The room seemed to narrow, as if it had decided to push me closer to the window. I heard my own breathing, and somewhere deep in the house, the faint ticking of a clock. Each second a small confirmation that time still worked, even when everything else didn't.

When I reached the curtain, I placed my hand on the fabric. It was colder than it should be. Not the chill of the evening, but the chill you feel when you touch a metal plate that's been lying in shadow. I pulled it aside.

Outside: nothing but street, streetlights, a cat huddled between two garbage cans. No face. No shadow clinging too close to the glass. Just the world pretending to be normal.

I exhaled, but the relief was faint. Too faint.

Back at the table, my gaze fell upon the letter, and I understood that the out-of-place noise hadn't been the letterbox. It was something else that had intruded upon the background noise. Something I only noticed now because the silence of the room no longer masked it.

A soft scratching sound.

Not from the window. Not from the door.

From the inside, from the wood of the desk.

I leaned forward. The scratching sound came at irregular intervals, as if someone were running a fingernail-like object against the underside of the tabletop. I placed my hand on the wood. It didn't vibrate. But the cold was there again, that strange sound in a familiar chord.

Suddenly I knew that the letter wasn't just a message. It was a key. And something in my house had just realized that I had accepted it.

I turned to the second page, looking for the ending. There it said, almost pleadingly:

If you are a man of knowledge, come. If you are a man of faith, come faster. And if you are both, bring someone who is not afraid of the dark.

Signed: Ion Szekely.

Below, as an afterthought, in even more shaky handwriting:

He knows that I write.

Again it scratched, this time longer, more persistently, as if someone downstairs had lost patience. I didn't sit down. I remained standing, my fingers closed around the paper, and felt a very old, very sober certainty spreading within me: that the world is full of doors, and that some letters are nothing more than invitations to open one of them.

And somewhere deep in my house, the scratching sound answered, as if it understood.

I still kept my hand on the paper, as if I could press what I'd written back into the envelope. The scratching under the tabletop stopped, as if it had realized it had my full attention. In that pause lay something unspoken, something worse than any sound: the possibility that it could start again at any moment.

I forced myself to stay sober. Sobriety is a tool. Fear is a stage. And I refused to step onto the stage.

The desk was old, made of dark wood, with a surface that gleamed from decades of ink and elbows. I knew every scratch, every tiny crack in the varnish, like you know the wrinkles of a familiar face. That's precisely what made it so unpleasant to now sense that there was something in it that didn't belong.

I knelt down and pushed the chair aside. It was darker under the table; the lamp cast only a narrow crescent of light on the turned wooden legs. I lay half on the floor, a posture not befitting a professor, and listened.

Silence.

Then, so quietly that it was more of a thought than a sound: a scraping. Not frantic, not like an animal panicking in a trap. More like something taking its time.

A nail across wood.

I felt the underside. My fingers encountered a small bump, a tiny edge that shouldn't be there. Not large enough to notice in everyday life, but noticeable enough to deceive me now. I withdrew my hand, suddenly knowing that I would find something as soon as I dared to look more closely.

I stood up, picked up the lamp, and placed it on the floor. The light crept under the table, revealing its underside as if illuminating a stage. And there it was: a narrow, rectangular plate, almost invisible in the wood grain, with a small, inlaid metal pin that served as a handle. A secret compartment, so neatly crafted that I had overlooked it all these years.

I should have wondered why a desk I owned had a secret compartment I didn't know about. But I wasn't. Life had taught me that secret compartments have less to do with furniture than with people.

I pulled on the pen.

The panel gave way, reluctantly, as if remembering a time when it had been opened more frequently. A brief resistance, then it slid to the side, and a rush of cold air, not coming from the room, wafted towards me. It was the same unfamiliar sound I had felt at the curtain.

In the compartment lay a small object wrapped in fabric. The fabric was dark, almost black, and smelled of something I couldn't immediately identify. Not mold. Not dust. More like soil that had been stored in a closed room for a long time.

I took the bundle out, laid it on the table, and unwound it.

A flat wooden box, barely larger than a hand, came into view. The same symbol I had seen on the letter's seal was etched into the lid. And below it, almost invisible, a line of dried wax, as if someone had tried to seal the box and then changed their mind.

I stared at the sign until my eyes began to doubt whether it was truly stationary. Then I lifted the lid.

Inside lay no jewel, no document, no precious memento. There lay something far more troubling: a handful of dark earth, dry and fine as ash, and within it a small object that was immediately obvious because it didn't belong in that earth.

A tooth.

Not human, no. It was too long, too curved, too... purposeful. It was yellowish, darker at the tip, as if it had touched something there that wasn't quite of this world. I didn't pick it up. I looked at it as if it were looking at me.

Beneath the ground lay a piece of paper, folded as if it had been hastily shoved in. I pulled it out with tweezers I usually used for preparing specimens. The paper contained only one sentence, in German, written in a handwriting I recognized, even though I hadn't seen it for years.

He's not from there. He brings it with him.

No signature. No explanation. And yet I knew immediately who it was from. A man I had once respected, until I realized that some ghosts don't haunt cemeteries, but minds. A man who later refused to shake my hand, believing I had drawn him into something he couldn't escape. I hadn't drawn him in. I had merely opened the door.

I closed the box slowly. My heart didn't beat any faster. That was almost the worst part.

I went back to the letter, read the lines again, and suddenly I saw what I had previously overlooked. Not out of carelessness, but because the mind first decides what it considers possible.

In a paragraph, between the reports about dogs and curtains, there was a small note, almost casually tossed off:

They say he has connections to England. That his crates are already on their way, and that someone is waiting for them in a large seaside city.

A large city by the sea. England.

I went to the window and looked out. London wasn't a sea, but it was a tide. People streamed, carriages rolled, the streetlights switched on one after another, as if someone in the distance were opening a row of eyes. Everything was in motion, everything was alive. And that's precisely why something could hide within it without being noticed.

I took my coat from the hook. Not out of determination, but out of an instinct older than any scientific doubt. I put on my hat, as one puts on armor.

In the hallway, I picked up the letter again. The paper seemed to have become heavier. Or perhaps I had become lighter.

Downstairs, by the front door, I stopped. The house was quiet, but not in the usual way. More like a person pretending to be asleep to avoid answering. I opened the door and stepped out.

The cold stung my face, and the smell of the city—coal, horse, damp stone—helped me cling to the ordinary world. I walked down the street, and each step seemed like a promise I couldn't take back.

Halfway to the corner, I noticed it: A man was standing under a lamppost that had just been lit. He wasn't holding a newspaper, shopping bags, or a walking stick. He was simply standing there, as if he'd forgotten where he was going. His face was half in the light, half in shadow. As I approached, he looked up.

There was nothing unusual about him. And that was precisely what was unusual.

I walked past without slowing down. I felt his gaze on the back of my neck, as if it were a hand. After ten steps, I turned around.

The man was no longer there.

The lamppost burned on, its light falling on the empty sidewalk as if searching for something. I looked to the next corner, to the next row of houses. Nothing. Just the city, innocently going about its usual routine.

I continued walking until I reached a public telegraph office. Inside it was warm, smelling of oil and paper. Behind the counter sat a young clerk with a mustache so neatly groomed it probably stayed in place even at night. He looked up when I entered and smiled a service smile that could be used for anything.

I dictated briefly. To a colleague. To a man I trusted, insofar as I still trusted anyone at all. I mentioned no names, no symbols, no teeth. I simply asked for information: whether any shipments from the East had been announced in recent weeks, whether anyone had inquired

about specific goods, whether anything unusual had been noted in the ports. In the language of reason, it sounded harmless. In my mind, it sounded like an alarm.

When I went outside, the air had grown colder. The sky was the color of old lead. And somewhere, not far away, I heard a sound that one rarely notices consciously in London because it is so commonplace.

The rustling of paper.

I stopped. Not abruptly. Just a little.

A newspaper lay on the ground next to a doorway, blown there by the wind. The pages moved as if someone were turning them. I stepped closer, and then I saw that it wasn't the wind.

A hand, half in shadow, held the newspaper from below. The fingers were long and moved slowly, as if they had all the time in the world. Then, as I held my breath, the hand withdrew. The newspaper crumpled in on itself and lay still like a piece of lifeless routine.

I didn't pick them up. I pretended I hadn't seen anything. Sometimes that's the wisest way to see.

I walked on, and in my coat pocket I felt the letter like a stone. London was big, yes. But not big enough to hide from something that had already found its way here.

And I suddenly knew that Transylvania wasn't far away.

It was just an envelope away.

When I returned, Gower Street was a different street, even though nothing had changed. The houses were still there, in the same row, the same chimneys spewing the same grey breath, and yet everything seemed like a stage set erected on the wrong night. London is a master of disguise. It can drown out a murder with the sound of a milk bottle and conceal the monster behind a polite bow.

The house smelled of cold and wax. Not the wax of candles, but of the seal I had broken, as if I had awakened a memory that now refused to sleep. I didn't hang up my coat. I placed the lamp on the desk, sat down, and forced myself not to let my gaze wander to the mirror.

The box of soil was next to the letter. Two pieces of evidence that proved nothing, except that someone had gone to the trouble of sending me fear. Fear by mail. A neat idea. Very modern.

I picked up a sheet of paper to take notes and paused, noticing that my pen holder wasn't where it usually was. It was a little further to the left, as if a hand had moved it, a casual movement, like you do when you're making room.

I was alone. I had been sure I was alone.

I stood up and walked across the room. Nothing was open, nothing was knocked over. The bookshelf displayed the usual order I had cultivated so as not to think that knowledge was chaos. The carpet lay flat. The curtain hung heavy and still.

And yet there was this small, outrageous detail: the pen holder.

I went to the door and listened. The hallway was silent. Not a footstep on the stairs, no clearing of throats, no coughing. Just the house, pretending to be a house.

I locked the door. A useless reflex. Whatever wanted to get into my room didn't need a key, I'd already figured that out. But rituals are what you do when you can't do anything else without going insane.

I sat down again. The paper in front of me was blank. My hand held the pen as if it were a weapon. Then I heard the next noise.

A soft knock, twice.

Not at the door. Not at the window.

From the fireplace.

I glanced over. The fireplace wasn't lit, the opening black as a mouth remembering something. In the soot below was a bright trace, as if something had made its way up or down. The trace was fresh, too bright for old soot, like a fingerprint on dark glass.

I walked slowly towards the fireplace. If I increased my speed now, I would betray my fear to myself. And I didn't want that, not even to myself.

I leaned forward and listened into the opening.

Silence, then a breath, so quiet that I may have only thought it. But one doesn't think so coldly.

I reached for the fire poker that stood beside the fireplace, a simple piece of iron, as harmless in London as a teaspoon. I held it tight, and at that moment I could have sworn something retreated into the darkness, as if it had decided not to reveal its nature just yet.

The knocking never came again. The fireplace remained a fireplace.

I returned to the desk, and my gaze fell upon the letter. Ion Szekely. A name I had never heard before that evening, but which now sounded as if it had always existed in my house. I reread the lines until I almost knew them by heart. The last note stung like a thorn.

He knows that I write.

The door of the house creaked, as if someone had moved downstairs. I froze. Then nothing followed. No footsteps. No shouting. Just that creaking sound every old house makes when it cools down.

I forced myself to breathe again.

The doorbell rang at that exact moment.

The telephone stood on a small table next to the shelf. It wasn't modern, not comfortable, but a device acquired because it was considered necessary in certain circles. The ringtone was sharp, almost insulting, and it cut through the room like a blade.

I didn't go right away. You learn not to react immediately. The world expects you to jump at the doorbell like a dog at a whistle. I wanted to show the world that I was human. Or at least try to.

The phone rang a second time. I picked up the receiver.

A voice, muffled, as if the man were speaking through fabric. Then I recognized him: my colleague, the one to whom I had sent the telegraph. He didn't sound like someone who liked to talk.

"You were right," he said.

I said nothing. I let him talk. People say more when you give them space.

"A consignment was recorded in the Tilbury port registers three days ago," he continued. "Crates. From a place I can't pronounce, and I have no desire to learn it. It says: soil. For... botanical purposes." He gave a short, unenthusiastic laugh. "Botanical purposes. And do you know who received the crates?"

I held the receiver so tightly that my fingers hurt.

A certain Mr. Renfield, he said. Or something like that. An address in London. A warehouse near the docks. And another thing. This morning someone inquired about you. Here. In my office.

That was the moment when the space truly changed. Not because the air changed, but because the idea that something had found its way to me was suddenly no longer abstract.

Who? I asked.

He didn't mention a name, my colleague said. He just described what you looked like. Tall, he said. Foreign. Eyes that pretended to be friendly. Then he asked if you were planning any trips soon. I said I didn't know anything about that. And then he left. But before he left, he put something on my desk.

What?

A small box. Made of wood. Empty. Just a little bit of soil inside.

I closed my eyes. For a moment there was nothing but the darkness behind my eyelids and the knowledge that someone was playing a game whose rules only he knew.

Did you touch them? I asked.

"No," he said quickly. "I wrapped them in a cloth. I knew you'd ask something like that."

"Fine," I said. "Don't bring them to me. Stay where you are. Lock your door. And if someone knocks, don't open it."

"That sounds ridiculous," he said.

"Of course it sounds ridiculous," I said. "That's his greatest strength."

A noise in my room abruptly silenced me. Very quiet, barely more than a sigh. Behind me, by the desk.

I slowly turned around.

On the paper, which had just been blank, there was now something. A small mound of earth, fine as dust, as if someone had dropped it from the air. Next to it, neatly laid out like a business card, was a thin wood shaving. It was fresh, as if it had just been cut.

And on it, engraved with a point sharp enough to scratch wood and perhaps other things, was a word.

COME.

I felt my throat go dry. I still held the receiver to my ear, but the voice on the other end seemed far away, as if my colleague were in another world.

"Mr. van Helsing?" he asked. "Are you still there?"

Yes, I said, and I sounded calm. That was the only decent thing I could do at that moment. I'm still here.

I hung up.

The word on the wooden chip lay before me, and it wasn't the plea of a desperate man from Transylvania. It was an order. An invitation one cannot refuse unless one wants the consequences to come knocking at one's door.

I didn't pick up the wood shaving. I examined it until I knew every crevice. Then, using the edge of a book, I pushed it into a glass jar I usually used for specimens and sealed it. As if glass could stop something that had already found its way through walls.

Outside, dusk was beginning to fall, but the light was strange. It had that milky veil you sometimes see over the Thames when the air is still and the river decides to carry its secrets not to the surface, but into the city. The fog, I thought. Not yet thick, not yet threatening, but already there, like a thought taking hold.

I went to the window.

The man with the umbrella walked past me again on the street below. This time it still wasn't raining. He stopped right under the lamppost where the other man had been standing. He looked up as if he knew exactly where I was.

For a moment I saw his face in the light. It was ordinary. Too ordinary.

Then he smiled.

Not broad, not friendly. Just a small, precise pull at the corners of the mouth, as if someone had slipped a blade between their lips.

I drew the curtain closed, not hastily, not panicking. Simply with the same care with which one closes a door when one knows that something patient lies behind it.

On the table lay the letter, the box of soil, the glass with the wood chip. Three things that all said the same thing without saying it aloud: Distance is a lie.

I took the letter, put it in the inside pocket of my coat, and as my fingers touched the fabric, I again felt that taste of metal in my mouth, that sign that the body knows a truth before the mind accepts it.

I didn't turn off the lamp. I left it burning. It was a foolish act of defiance, but it was mine.

And while outside the fog quietly thickened, I packed my things as if I were setting off on a journey I had already begun when the letter had fallen through the slot.

Fog over London

The fog didn't come like weather. It came intentionally.

In the early morning, it lay only as a thin veil over the streets, like a poorly hung curtain through which the lamplight still shone. Around midday, however, it began to grow, as if someone high above had scattered a handful of cotton wool into the city and then added more, until the outlines of the houses softened, as if they were ashamed to be seen. London breathed differently then. Sounds were muffled, footsteps sounded closer than they were, and voices from nowhere suddenly seemed familiar because they couldn't be identified.

I left the house before sunrise. Not out of haste, but out of a need to no longer sit in rooms where things shifted without a hand touching them. The air outside was damp and cold, and it smelled of coal and river water, of the thousand small combustions that kept this city running. As I walked, the fog pushed its way between the facades, felt its way along the doorframes, and crept into the cracks of the windows, as if it knew that the truth likes to hide where it isn't cleaned.

I didn't take the direct route to the docks. That would have been far too obvious. London rewards those who don't think the simplest way. In a side street, I bought a newspaper, not because I wanted to read it, but because I needed something in my hand that looked normal. Then I continued walking, letting myself drift, as if I were a man with ordinary appointments.

The fog thickened.

I stopped at an intersection because I thought I heard a sound behind me: the faint scraping of shoe soles, out of step with the others. When I turned around, there was no one there. Just two workers heaving a crate onto a cart, and a boy with a pipe in the corner of his mouth, too

young to pretend to be so old. The city seemed busy, as always, and yet there was this quiet air about its mouth, as if it were hiding something.

I continued walking and asked myself a simple question: If someone wanted me to come, why didn't they just let me come in peace? Why the mark in the wood, the earth, the movement in the mirror? Why the unnecessary theatricality?

Because theatricality is a disguise. You look at the curtain, not at the hand holding the blade behind it.

By the time I reached the docklands, the fog had thickened so much that the world seemed to shatter into isolated islands: a gaslight hanging like an eye in milk; a patch of pavement abruptly ending; a mast jutting out of nowhere like a finger admonishing someone. The sounds of the harbor were muffled, as if they were underwater. The shouts of dockworkers, the creaking of wood, the clanging of chains—everything sounded as if someone had turned down the volume to make a background conversation more audible.

I had the warehouse's address. A simple piece of information, hardly taken seriously in London, because there are too many warehouses and too many addresses that reek of grime and routine. Nevertheless, I felt my stomach clench as I entered the street where the numbers no longer followed each other in a friendly sequence, but juttied out like teeth in a bad set of teeth.

A man stood in front of a gate, smoking. His face was weathered by the wind, but not hard. More like tired. He saw me coming, looked me up and down, and I noticed that tiny moment when he decided how he would treat me.

I nodded at him, as if I belonged. He nodded back, not invitingly, not dismissively. Just the kind of nod that says: If you cause trouble, I know where you stand.

I walked past the gate and entered the courtyard.

The air there was heavier. The fog hung between the walls, seemingly motionless, as if tethered to that spot. Crates stood stacked high, marked with dark symbols that refused to reveal anything if you stared at them for too long. A cart rumbled over the cobblestones, its wheel squeaking, a sound that lingered in the fog, as if it refused to disappear.

In the middle of the courtyard stood a man with a clipboard. He wore a vest that must once have been tidy and held his pencil as if it were a fine instrument. When he saw me, his eyes narrowed, not out of suspicion, but from the instinctive need to categorize things.

Can I help you? he asked.

I gave him a name I'd made up on the way. A name that sounded like a bank, a delivery, a boring business. Then I showed him the newspaper as if it were identification. People like to believe that paper proves something.

He wasn't looking at the newspaper. He was looking at me. His gaze lingered on mine a fraction too long, and I sensed something shifting within that fleeting moment: the decision of whether I belonged here.

He finally said: You're early.

I replied: I don't like it when things wait.

A tiny twitch at the corner of his mouth. Perhaps a smile, perhaps a reflex. Then he waved to me with a gesture that was more orderly than inviting.

He led me into the warehouse.

Inside it was dark and cool. The smell hit me like a memory: wood, rope, sweat – and underneath it all something else, something dry, like earth that hadn't seen the sun for too long. Rows of crates stood there, neatly arranged, as if someone were afraid that disorder would attract something.

Some had a word written on them in chalk: EARTH.

I stopped and looked at the boxes. They weren't particularly large, but they seemed heavy. Not just because of their contents, but because of the way they stood in the room, as if they hadn't been given their place, but had taken it.

The man with the clipboard continued talking, something about shipping documents, fees, delays. His voice was steady, but I only half heard it. My attention was caught by a detail: the corner of one of the crates was damaged. A small spot where the wood was splintered, as if someone had deliberately damaged it.

I stepped closer.

The man noticed and took a step, as if he wanted to place himself between me and the box. Not quickly. But decisively.

"Careful," he said. "Splinters."

I looked at him. He avoided my gaze, just for a moment. That moment was enough.

I said: Who received this delivery?

He cleared his throat. Renfield, he said. A messenger, I'm told. He signed it.

"Is he here?" I asked.

The man shook his head. No. He rarely comes himself. He sends people.

"People," I repeated, as if considering it. "And these people... do they look like him?"

It was an innocent question, almost ridiculous. But it hit him like a small blow. I saw it in his forehead, in the sudden tension around his eyes.

He said: I don't know what he looks like.

Of course he knew. Or he knew that it was better not to know.

I took a few more steps into the aisle between the crates. The fog outside wasn't in here, but its logic was there: visibility was limited, the air felt thicker, and every sound seemed to wait to be heard.

Then I heard something that didn't come from the warehouse.

A soft knock.

Not distinct, not rhythmic. More like a fingernail tapping against wood to check if it's hollow.

I stopped. The man with the clipboard fell silent. For a second we were both quiet, as if we had unconsciously had the same thought: that sometimes you hear things you'd rather not hear, because then you have to decide whether to react to them.

The knocking came again.

This time from a closer perspective.

I slowly turned around and saw a figure at the end of the aisle, among the crates. Just a suggestion, a dark outline that didn't clearly stand out against the shadows. Someone was standing there, motionless, as if waiting for me to make the first move.

The man with the clipboard said hastily: There's nobody there. This is just...

He didn't finish the sentence. Words are useless when the fog swallows them up anyway.

I took a step forward.

The figure at the end of the corridor didn't move. But I noticed something that briefly took my breath away: the air around it seemed darker, as if it were a hole in the twilight. And although I couldn't see the face, I had the distinct feeling that it was looking at me.

Then there was a third knock.

And this time I knew that the knocking wasn't coming from a hand checking if wood was hollow.

But from something that wanted to check if it was me too.

I stopped because sometimes the body negotiates faster than the mind. The man with the clipboard was behind me, and I felt his impatience like a tug on my coat. He wanted me to turn around, to go back to the door, to pretend again that the world was made of wood and not of possibilities.

The figure at the end of the aisle didn't move. It was as if it had understood that movement is a gift not given lightly. Perhaps twenty paces separated us, yet in the diffuse semi-darkness of the warehouse, it felt like a longer distance, as if the space had been stretched. The crates to the left and right formed walls, and each one suddenly seemed no longer merely merchandise, but a small, self-contained statement: Something is inside. Something is ready.

I took another step. My shoes were making too much noise on the floor, and that was precisely the point. When you're afraid, you become quiet. When you want to drive away something that feeds on fear, you make yourself heard.

The figure raised its head. Nothing more. Just that slight change, enough to know that it wasn't merely observing me, but acknowledging me as a factor. For a second, I thought I saw a glimpse of its face: a bright line that could have been a cheek, or an eye reflecting the light incorrectly. Then it was just shadow again.

Behind me, the man with the clipboard whispered: Sir... You shouldn't...

I raised a hand without turning around, and he fell silent. It wasn't a threatening gesture. More like a plea. And perhaps he sensed that in this corridor, there were only two kinds of stupidity left to choose from: flee or stay.

The knocking came again, this time clearly from the left, as if someone were checking if a box was properly closed. I looked at the damaged corner and noticed that it wasn't just splintered wood. A fine strip of dark earth lay beneath it, fresh, as if it had just trickled out. It formed a trail almost invisible in the dim light, but I saw it because I now knew what to look for.

I knelt down, keeping my eyes on the figure at the end of the corridor. The floor was cold through my trousers, and the smell of earth filled my nostrils. I took a pinch of it between my index finger and thumb.

It was dry, yes. But not dusty. It had a texture reminiscent of finely ground bark. And there was something in it that didn't smell like earth. A faint hint of something sweet, as if dried blossoms had been mixed in with the soil. A scent too peaceful to be honest.

I let the earth fall and stood up again.

The figure moved now. Not forward. It glided sideways, between two rows of crates, so smoothly that I couldn't tell if it had been walking or simply stopped where I had seen it. A moment later, the aisle was empty.

"That's ridiculous," said the man with the clipboard too hastily, as if he needed to convince himself. "There's nobody there. They're just... lost people. Dockworkers."

I walked slowly to the end of the aisle. My hand stroked the crates, not out of affection, but to feel if anything about them was different. Wood is more honest than people. It creaks when it's under pressure. It vibrates when something bumps against it.

Nothing. Just wood. Just nails. Just the cold, stubborn silence of a commodity that doesn't ask where it's going.

At the end of the corridor was a door, half open. Behind it was a small room, presumably an office or a storage room. I pushed it open further.

The room was empty except for a chair and a small table. On the table stood a lamp, unlit, and next to it lay a sheet of paper. As if someone had placed it there and then decided to leave the room before it could be read.

I stepped closer.

The paper wasn't blank. It was covered with a single sentence, written in a hurried, almost childlike handwriting that nonetheless possessed a certain relentlessness:

He comes with the fog.

I looked at the man with the clipboard. He looked away. His gaze suddenly settled on a corner of the room, as if he had spotted an interesting speck of dust there.

"Who wrote this?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. His voice sounded thin. "Maybe a joke. People here... joke around."

I lifted the sheet of paper. The ink wasn't quite dry yet. Whoever had written it had been here not long ago. And yet I hadn't heard any footsteps, no creaking doors, no breathing. The fog outside had made the city quieter, but it hadn't abolished physics.

On the floor, right next to the chair, lay something small that didn't belong there. A short piece of string, as if it had been torn from a box. I bent down, picked it up, and noticed the dark stain on it. Not ordinary dirt. Something that appeared almost black in the dim light, but had a reddish depth when held up to the light.

The man with the clipboard cleared his throat. "If you don't have any official business here," he said, "you should leave. There are regulations. And... it's very busy today."

Too much activity, I thought. Or too much that should disappear into the operation.

I put the sheet of paper in my inside pocket. Then I turned towards the warehouse door. The man followed me, visibly relieved, as if leaving the building could somehow undo everything that had happened inside.

Outside in the courtyard, the fog was thicker. The air tasted damp, and the courtyard seemed smaller, as if surrounded by cotton wool. The men on the wagons moved like shadowy figures. Voices came from somewhere, but I couldn't see any mouths. For a moment, it was as if I were standing in a dream that was trying hard to seem real.

The smoking man was still leaning against the gate. He looked at me, and this time his gaze held more than just weariness. It was a cautious curiosity, the kind you see in people who have just decided that a stranger might bring trouble.

I walked towards him. "Have you seen anyone today who doesn't belong here?" I asked.

He took a drag on his cigarette. "Everyone belongs somewhere," he finally said.

I repeated: Someone who doesn't look like a dockworker. Or who doesn't act like he isn't one.

He snorted softly and spat to the side. "A guy was here this morning," he said. "Didn't speak. Just looked. Like he was counting." I asked him what he wanted. He smiled, as if I'd said something funny.

What did he look like? I asked.

The man shrugged. Normal. That's the strange thing. So normal that afterwards you're not even sure if you really saw him.

I nodded, as if confirming something I already knew.

And Renfield? I asked. Was he here?

The smoker shook his head. You don't see him. You only see his people. They come and go. And sometimes they bring animals with them. Rats. Pigeons. Anything you don't need.

Animals, I repeated quietly.

The man looked at me more sharply. "You're not from the tax office, are you?"

No, I said. If I were from the tax office, you would have noticed me sooner.

He grunted, and for a moment he seemed almost amused. Then his face went flat again.

As I left the courtyard, I immediately sensed that I wasn't alone. Not because I heard footsteps, but because the fog behaved differently. Behind me it was thicker, in front of me thinner, as if it were laying a trail or obscuring one.

I didn't walk any faster. I took one turn, then another, not because I didn't know the way, but because I wanted to see if the world was following me or if I was just imagining it. At the next corner, I stopped as if I'd spotted something in a corner shop window.

In the reflection of the window, I saw the street behind me, gray and milky. A cart passed by. Two men carried a sack. And there, a little off to the side, stood a man with an umbrella.

Even though it wasn't raining.

He stood still, precisely where the fog was thickest. His face was invisible, only the edge of his umbrella and the dark shape of his coat. He could have been anyone. And that was precisely why he could be no one.

I turned around.

The street behind me was empty.

When I looked at the window again, there was no one there either. Only the fog, pretending it hadn't seen anything.

I continued walking, and my breath became visible. The mist absorbed it and mixed it into its own mass, as if saying: Everything you give out of yourself now belongs to me.

In my pocket I felt the letter from Transylvania and the sheet from the warehouse. Two voices from two worlds, whispering the same sentence, only in different words. And I realized that I wasn't simply following a delivery.

I was investigating a presence.

And London, with its fog and its thousand doors, seemed to have decided to accompany me on this journey.

By afternoon, the fog was no longer just a veil, but a state of being. It lay over the city like a thought that lingers, no matter how hard one tries to focus on something else. And because London is a city that, even amidst the thicket of its own sounds, strives to maintain an air of order, life went on: carts rumbled, voices called out, a bell tolled somewhere. Only it all sounded as if it were coming from another room.

I took a cab, knowing the driver was scrutinizing me without even looking at him. These men see everything because they're not allowed to see anything. I gave an address I'd pieced together from my colleague's information, and the driver repeated it as if checking to see if it actually existed. Then he clicked his tongue, and the horse started moving.

We drove through streets I knew, and yet they felt strange because the fog had taken away their corners. It turned every house into a potential hiding place and every lamppost into an interrogation light. More than once I had the feeling that we were slowing down without the coachman pulling on the reins, as if the horse were hesitant to step into this milky void.

"You are not from around here," the coachman finally said, without turning around.

I didn't reply immediately. You should never give a stranger more than you have to, especially not one who knows the city like a map.

"Yes," I said then. "I've just been gone for a long time."

He grumbled. "Gone is gone," he said. "And some don't really come back."

He probably didn't even mean it dramatically. It was the kind of phrase you pick up in this city like dirt on your shoes. Nevertheless, it hung in the air between us, fitting all too well.

As we crossed a bridge, the air smelled of river water, heavy and putrid. The fog hung over the Thames as if the river had decided to hide itself. I looked down and saw nothing but shifting gray, in which a dark shape occasionally emerged—perhaps a boat, perhaps a piece of driftwood, perhaps something that shouldn't be floating.

Then I realized we were being followed.

Not by a car, not by footsteps, not by a sound. But by the way the fog looked behind us. It closed in where we were and remained thick for a moment longer, as if preserving our tracks. That's no proof, a part of my mind said. Fog behaves. It has moods.

People have moods, too. And yet, you can still die from them.

I knocked on the wooden side of the carriage. The coachman leaned slightly to the side.

"Don't go straight ahead," I said. "Take a detour. Two streets further on the right, then back again."

He glanced at me briefly in the mirror, and in that look lay the question he didn't ask: What are you running from?

He simply said: It costs more.

I paid him in advance. Money is a language everyone understands, even when the fog obscures the words.

The detour took us through an area where the houses stood closer together and people carried their heads lower. As we rounded a corner, I saw a figure in the mist, standing still as if waiting. An umbrella. No rain. It was precisely this silly detail that made the image so sharp it hurt. I forced myself not to stare. You gain nothing by proving to a shadow that you've recognized it.

The figure didn't disappear. It was simply gone the next moment, as if it had decided to be somewhere else, somewhere I wasn't looking.

The coachman eventually brought me to a street so unremarkable that it would probably seem welcoming on a clear night. Now, however, the fog lay between the houses like compressed cotton wool, and the windows were dull patches staring back.

"Here it is," said the coachman, and his voice sounded as if he were glad to be able to breathe again.

I got out. The ground was damp, and my shoes made that faint sound you get when you walk on cobblestones that have been soaking up fog all day. I paid the coachman the rest and told him not to wait.

"Waiting is bad for the nerves," he muttered, and immediately started the carriage rolling, as if he were afraid that something on the curb would grab the wheels.

I was left alone.

The house number was correct. The building wasn't large, not impressive. It was simply there, like a sentence in a text, too inconspicuous to be suspicious. And that was precisely why it was suspicious.

All the windows were closed. Not just closed, but completely blacked out, as if the curtains behind them had been reinforced with boards. No light escaped, even though it wasn't quite evening yet. Not even the faint glimmer of a lamp that would betray a person's presence, an effort to conceal it.

There was something dark on the steps.

I moved closer and saw that it was dirt. Not much. A fine streak, as if someone had spilled a little while carrying a crate, or as if someone had deliberately laid a trail. The smell was the same as in the warehouse. Dry, old, and underneath it all, that incongruously sweet aroma.

I knelt down, took a pinch, and rubbed it between my fingers. It wasn't sticky. It wasn't fresh. It was as if it had fallen from a box that had been sealed for a long time. And yet it lay there as if it had just been set down.

I stood up and looked down the street. Fog. A streetlamp. A few footsteps that sounded from somewhere, but you couldn't tell where. Then silence. I turned back to the door.

The door knocker was made of metal, polished smooth, as if it had been touched frequently recently. I lifted it and dropped it. The sound was dull, immediately swallowed by the fog, but it was loud enough to be heard in a quiet house.

No answer.

I knocked a second time, this time with my knuckles. The tone was different, less official, more personal. Still no answer.

But then, very quietly, I heard something from inside.

Not footsteps. Not a voice.

A scratch.

It was the same scratching sound I'd heard at my desk, only muffled, as if it were coming through thick walls. A fingernail on wood. Or something that sounds like a fingernail because it knows exactly how to mimic human sounds.

I held my breath. The scratching stopped. For a moment everything was silent, as if the house had also been listening.

Then I heard another sound: a soft scraping, like something being dragged along the ground. And immediately afterward, a barely perceptible click, as if a bolt were moving.

The door opened a crack.

Beyond it was darkness. Not the darkness of an unlit hallway, but a darkness that felt like matter, as if you could push it aside with your hand. In this crack, two things shone: the edge of an eye, white and quickly gone again, and a breath, cold, as if it came not from a lung, but from a cellar.

"Who is there?" asked a voice.

Her voice was hoarse, but controlled. A voice that had learned not to reveal too much.

I didn't give my name. Names are gifts, not something you give to everyone. Instead, I said: I'm here for the boxes.

A brief silence. Then the door opened a little wider, just enough to see part of a face. It was a man, perhaps middle-aged, with eyes that were too alert. Not the alertness of someone who's just had coffee. The alertness of someone who hasn't slept in days, afraid of missing out.

"They're not from Renfield," he said.

No, I said.

He swallowed. The fog pressed against the crack in the door, as if it wanted to come in too. The man glanced outside briefly, and I realized he wasn't looking at me, but at the street behind me.

Are you alone? he asked.

I didn't answer immediately. Not because I wanted to lie, but because I didn't know the truth. "Alone" is a word that has a very shaky meaning in this city.

"I came here," I said.

He closed his eyes for a moment, as if he had to decide whether that sentence was enough. Then he opened the door wider.

"Come in," he said. "But quickly."

I crossed the threshold.

At that moment, I felt the temperature drop. It was as if I hadn't entered a house, but another part of the world. Behind me, the man pulled the door shut, and the sound of the bolt clicked shut like a final sentence.

Inside, it smelled of dust and of something that couldn't hide in it: of earth, of old wood, and of the metallic whiff of something that had too often belonged in the wrong place.

The hallway was narrow. The wallpaper peeled as if it had seen enough. No picture on the wall, no sign of life, only the silence that accumulates in houses that no one truly inhabits anymore, but merely uses.

The man didn't lead me into the living room, nor into a kitchen. He led me toward the cellar stairs without saying a word. It was even darker down there, and as we descended, I heard that scratching sound again, now more clearly. It was coming from somewhere to the right, behind a door that had no handle, only a bolt on the outside.

The man stopped. His hand trembled as he reached for the bolt.

"You shouldn't be here," he whispered, and I didn't know if he meant me or himself.

Then he pushed the bolt back.

The scratching stopped immediately.

And from the silence behind came a single breath, so slow and so calm, as if something down there had been waiting all along for us to arrive.

The House of Locked Windows

The breath behind the door didn't sound like that of a man standing in a basement. It sounded like something that had learned to breathe like a man because it could open doors without touching them.

The man next to me—I still didn't know his name—held his hand on the bolt, as if he could push it back at the last moment and undo everything. His face glistened in the meager light of the stairwell lamp, and in that glimmer lay not only sweat, but also that particular kind of fear that arises when you've fought for too long against something that accepts no rules.

"What's in there?" I asked quietly.

He shook his head as if the movement had caused him pain. Not... not loudly, he whispered. He can hear everything.

I didn't reply. Not because I thought his statement was nonsense, but because I already knew he was right. There were too many places in this house where silence acted like a listener.

The door didn't open by itself, but something pressed against it, almost imperceptibly, as if a hand were feeling its way along the edge without revealing that it was a hand. The man finally pulled the door open a crack, and a scent wafted out that reminded me of the inside of a long-closed chest. Earth, dry and cold, and underneath it, that sweetish note so out of place that it lodged itself in my brain like a foreign object.

At first, there was only darkness in the crack. Then something bright slid into it, a brief reflection, like an eye that dislikes light. The man sharply inhaled and pulled the door shut again.

No, he said. No, no, no.

He pushed the bolt shut as if he were nailing something to the wall. For a moment he stood motionless, his forehead pressed against the wood, and I had the absurd feeling of witnessing a very private prayer, even though no god was present.

"They let him in," I said.

He raised his head. His eyes searched my face, as if he needed to check whether I would judge him. Then he laughed briefly, a sound without warmth.

"I didn't let anyone in," he said. "He was just suddenly there. First, there were the boxes. Soil. I thought it was one of those strange deliveries, you know? For plants, for some rich fool. Then came the letters. And then... then came the nights."

He led me further down the cellar corridor. On the floor stood two crates, broken open, their lids lying beside them like a torn-off coffin lid. Some of the earth inside had been dumped out, as if someone had been rummaging around in them. Or lying in them.

I didn't bend down. You don't have to touch everything to understand it.

"What is your name?" I asked.

He hesitated, as if even one name would be too much of a revelation.

Mason, he said finally. George Mason.

I nodded. An ordinary name. Exactly the kind of name that disappears in London amidst the fog and grime, leaving no trace.

And Renfield? I asked.

Mason grimaced as if I'd offered him bitter medicine. "Renfield isn't coming," he said. "He's sending people. Young men who look like they've never made a proper decision. They bring the crates and leave again. They don't talk much. But sometimes they smile, as if they know something they're not allowed to say."

He led me back upstairs, not to the cellar room with the locked door, but back into the hallway. I noticed that he took the stairs as if the steps were made of thin ice, not wood. Once at the top, he stopped and listened.

I listened in.

Nothing. Yet the nothingness had structure. It was not the silence of an empty house, but the silence of a house that had decided to pretend to be empty.

Mason pointed to the right. A passage led to several doors. All were closed. A heavy curtain hung on the first one, even though there was apparently no window inside to cover it. He pulled the curtain aside slightly, and I saw another piece of wood behind it: an extra board nailed across the door, hastily and crookedly, as if someone had fastened it in the dark.

"You're crazy," Mason said quietly, as if he were diagnosing me. "I tried to prevent it. I locked the windows, reinforced the doors, I..."

He stopped and rubbed his face. His fingers were dirty, with dirt under his nails as if it had lodged inside him.

I went to the next door. The handle was cold. Not just cold like metal, but cold like something that had lain for a long time in the absence of warmth. I didn't press it down. I just listened.

A faint noise, somewhere inside. Not a scratching sound. More of a scraping, like fabric against wood. Then a clacking sound, vaguely reminiscent of teeth grinding together.

Mason grabbed my arm. Please, he said. No.

I looked at him and noticed something I hadn't seen before: his pupils were unusually dilated. Not like someone in the dark, but like someone constantly waiting for the next fright, whose body has decided to always be ready.

"Why are the windows locked?" I asked.

Mason led me into a room that had probably once been a living room. Now it was a room that seemed bare, as if everything that signified life had been removed. There was a table, two chairs, and a chest of drawers. On the chest of drawers was a bowl containing what at first glance looked like nuts.

As I approached, I realized they were dried insects. Beetles, flies, small bodies carefully collected, as if someone had started a collection here, not out of interest, but out of hunger.

Mason noticed my gaze and hastily wiped his hand over the bowl, as if trying to hide it. "I don't know," he said. "I wake up and they're there. Sometimes they're on the pillow. Sometimes in the teacup. I don't drink tea anymore."

I went to the window. It wasn't just closed. It was nailed shut with boards from the inside, and heavy fabric panels, several layers thick, had been hung over them, as if they wanted to block not only the light but also the view.

I pulled a strip of fabric to the side, slightly.

There was a tiny gap between the board and the frame. Through it, I saw the fog outside, thick as milk. And in that milk, right in front of the window, something dark hovered, motionless. It was so close that at first I thought it was a smudge on the pane. Then I recognized the outline of an umbrella.

No one was visible underneath. Only the umbrella, as if someone had hung it there. Or as if someone had held it in such a way that one shouldn't be sure whether anyone was there.

I let the fabric fall again, slowly, without any sudden movements. Mason watched me, seemingly trying to read what I had seen on my face. I gave him nothing.

"He's here," Mason whispered.

I nodded. Yes, I said. Or something that wants us to believe he's there.

Mason swallowed. "He can't get in if the windows are closed," he said. "I've tried. Once I opened a window, just a crack, so... so some air could get in. It was a warm day. I thought I was going to suffocate. And then... then I heard this sound. Like someone outside smiling."

He looked at me, and his voice grew thinner. And then there was something in the room, even though I was alone. I didn't see it. But I smelled it. Earth. And that... sweet thing. And when I turned around, the mirror was... empty.

My gaze automatically drifted to the mirror above the mantelpiece. It was old, slightly cloudy at the edges, but it reflected the room. It reflected Mason. And it reflected me.

I stepped closer and observed our reflection. Nothing was missing. Nothing flickered. That was precisely what was unsettling. You expect a lie to crack. If the surface remains smooth, you know it's been practiced.

Mason went to the door and slid the bolt into place, even though we were in the living room. When the bolt clicked into place, he flinched, as if the noise had woken someone.

"They came," he said. "Why?"

I could have given him a reasonable answer. Duty. Science. Curiosity. But in this house, reasonable answers sounded like bad jokes.

Because someone wrote to me, I said. And because someone else showed me that the way to Transylvania is shorter than you think.

Mason stared at me. Then he nodded slowly, as if accepting something he had long feared.

"He's going upstairs," he finally said. "At night. Always upstairs." I once heard him take the stairs. Not with any difficulty. More like... as if he didn't need the stairs, but was pretending out of politeness.

I looked towards the stairs. The hallway beyond was dark; the fog outside made even the daylight gray. And as we both stood there, I heard it: a very faint creaking sound, somewhere upstairs, as if someone had been testing a floorboard.

One more thing.

And then the sound, which in this house now sounded like a greeting: a gentle scratching on the wood, patient, sure, as if something were knocking very politely before taking what it wanted.

Mason whispered: Don't move.

I moved anyway. Not quickly. Not dramatically. Just one step toward the stairs, as if testing whether fear still controlled me or whether I could now control it. The air seemed to grow colder as I approached. And somewhere, up in the darkness, a tiny piece of earth fell onto a step, so quietly that you felt it rather than heard it, as if the house itself were scattering a trail so I wouldn't get lost.

I stopped at the foot of the stairs and felt Mason behind me hold his breath, as if the sound of my footsteps were an insult to something waiting above. The hallway seemed longer than it should be, and the dimness robbed the space of its certainty. On a clear night, I probably would have counted each step. But now the steps looked like teeth disappearing into the jaws of a house.

The faint crackling sound from above never returned. That was no consolation. It was a decision.

Mason whispered close to my ear: He doesn't like to leave when he's expected.

I replied: Then it's a good thing that I don't like to wait.

I placed my foot on the first step. The wood gave a soft sigh. Not the creaking that old staircases like to use to let their owners know they're alive. More like a sound that suggests the staircase had just been built and was already being worn down.

As I climbed, I noticed something strange: the fog outside, which was pressing through the cracks in the windows, seemed to be gathering inside the house as well. Not as a visible mist,

but as a kind of pressure, a heavy, damp presence in my throat. I breathed cautiously, as if taking too deep a breath might cause me to inhale something that wouldn't come out.

Reaching the top, I found myself in a small vestibule. Three doors led off it, all closed. Above one hung a cross, hastily nailed to the wall. It was poorly made, more of an improvised gesture, conveying more despair than faith. Below it, someone, presumably Mason, had lined up a row of garlic cloves. They were long since withered, blunt, and looked like an old man's teeth.

I heard footsteps behind me and turned around. Mason had followed me, although his face betrayed that every step took a toll on him. He held a hammer in his hand, as if it were a talisman.

"You shouldn't come up here," he whispered.

"They're already here," I said.

He pressed his lips together. Then he pointed to the middle door. Behind it, he said. There is... the room. The room where he lies down. I opened it once. Just once. Just a crack.

And? I asked.

Mason swallowed. It smelled of earth. And of... flowers. Too sweet. Like a grave that someone has decorated too kindly.

I stepped closer to the door. The handle was brass, tarnished. I didn't put my hand on it. Instead, I listened.

No sound came from within. But silence can be a sound if it is too concentrated. This silence was not the absence of life. It was the presence of something that remained so quiet that it went unnoticed.

I looked at the key. It was in the lock on the outside.

Mason noticed my gaze and immediately shook his head. "I didn't take the key out," he said. "I... I always wanted to know if... if it locks from the inside."

"From within," I repeated. "That's an interesting word."

I took the key and turned it very slowly. Not because I didn't want to provoke the lock, but because I needed to delay the moment when a possibility became a reality. The key moved without resistance. A soft click. Then the door was unlocked.

Mason took a sharp breath, as if he had just choked on a thought.

I pressed down the handle.

The moment the door gave way, I heard a noise behind us, downstairs in the house. A dull thud, as if something heavy had fallen against a wall. Mason flinched. I paused, leaving the door slightly ajar.

"What was that?" whispered Mason.

I didn't answer. Sometimes it's better not to know immediately where a sound is coming from. Knowledge can force you to look.

I pushed the door open further.

The room beyond was dark, but not completely. A thin, gray light filtered through the cracks in the boarded-up windows, making the dust visible. The dust wasn't floating; it was hanging, as if it too were trapped.

In the middle of the room stood a crate. One of those crates from the harbor, broken open. Next to it were two more, still closed. On the floor lay earth, spread in a circle, as if someone had carefully scattered it. And in the middle of this circle stood an armchair.

An armchair, too well-maintained for this house.

On the armchair lay articles of clothing: a dark coat, neatly folded, and next to it an umbrella. The umbrella was closed, but the handle gleamed as if it had been touched often. It looked as if someone had just undressed and laid things out so they could find them again later.

Mason whispered: He was just here.

I took a step into the room. The temperature dropped immediately, as if I had crossed an invisible boundary. My breath became visible, even though it couldn't be that cold inside. There was something in that cold that wasn't weather.

I looked at the mirror on the wall. It was large, almost floor-to-ceiling, but it was covered. A cloth hung over it, heavy as if someone had tried to nail it down. The fabric was pinned to the edges, as if someone had been afraid it would slip.

"Why is the mirror covered?" I asked.

Mason stared at the cloth. Because I... because I once looked inside. And there was nothing. No picture. No space. Just... nothing. As if I had looked through a hole.

I stepped up to the mirror and grabbed the fabric at the edge. Mason took a step towards me, hammer raised.

"No," he said. "Please don't."

I pulled off the cloth.

The mirror wasn't empty. It showed the room. It showed me. But something was wrong: the mirror didn't show Mason.

I turned to Mason. He was standing there, exactly where he should have been in the mirror. He was there, real, breathing heavily. But in the mirror, behind me, there was only an empty space.

Mason whispered: Do you see?

I nodded. Yes.

He began to tremble, and I realized that his trembling wasn't just fear. It was also anger, perhaps even relief that someone else had finally seen what had cost him so many nights.

He's not alone, Mason said. He's... not alone when he comes. It's like something comes with him that... takes things away. Reflections. Sounds. Sometimes... sometimes even thoughts. I've forgotten things mid-sentence. I've forgotten my own name.

I looked in the mirror again. My reflection stared back at me, as seriously as I rarely did. Behind me was the empty space where Mason should have been standing. And in that emptiness, if you gazed at it long enough, something began to take shape.

Not a shape. More like a condensation of light, as if a shadow without a body were forming. A dark spot that didn't match the lighting. It seemed to be moving, but not in a certain direction. More like it was swelling up.

I said quietly: Leave the room, Mason.

Mason shook his head like a child who doesn't want to be alone in the dark.

Go, I repeated, this time more sharply.

He stepped back, almost tripped over a box, caught himself, and stood in the doorway again. At that moment, he appeared in the mirror.

As soon as he left the room, his reflection reappeared, as if the room itself had decided to accept him. This wasn't a relief. It was a confirmation that the rule didn't apply to Mason, but to this room. This boundary.

I stood in front of the mirror and watched as the dark spot in it continued to thicken. It didn't take on a clear shape, but it grew heavier, as if it were gaining weight. Then I saw that the spot wasn't in the mirror. It was behind me.

A cold breath brushed against my neck. Not wind. Not a draft. Rather, a closeness that the skin perceives before the eye comprehends it.

I didn't turn around immediately. I continued looking in the mirror. And there, behind my reflection, I could now see a contour.

A shoulder. A collar. A face, half in shadow. And the umbrella handle, glistening in a hand that was too still.

The man—or what looked like a man—wasn't smiling. It was no longer a friendly game. He simply stood there, so close that I could feel the cold emanating from him.

I didn't speak. Words are often just a distraction for the one who speaks.

Instead, I reached into the inside pocket of my coat, slowly, without any jerky movements. There I had a small bottle that I didn't like to carry around because it instantly made the world seem like a place where you need such things. I pulled it out.

The stranger behind me didn't move. But in the mirror, I saw his eyes fall on the bottle. And in that look, there was something like curiosity. Or hunger.

I removed the cork.

The smell emanating from it was sharp, bitter, antiseptic. Not perfume. Not holy water. Something used in a laboratory to cleanse things that shouldn't be alive.

I squirted a narrow stream of it onto the floor between us.

It hissed.

Not like liquid on wood. But like liquid on something that wasn't wood.

The stranger took a step back. In the mirror, his face contorted for a moment, as if I had shifted his mask. Then it was smooth again, calm, almost polite.

And at that exact moment, I heard that dull thump again downstairs in the house.

This time, a sound followed that I had not heard before: a short, high-pitched squeak, like that of an animal that has fallen into the wrong hands.

Mason called my name, finally, loud enough that he couldn't take it back: Van Helsing!

And behind me, close to my ear, came a voice, so quiet, as if it were meant only for me:

Not here. Not yet.

The words were barely more than breath, and yet they seemed to hang heavy in the air, as if they held weight. Not here. Not yet. It wasn't a threat in the usual sense. It was the kind of sentence you say when you're sure you set the terms.

I stopped, my hand still closed around the bottle. The hissing on the floor faded slowly, as if something invisible were retreating without breaking sight. In the mirror, I saw the stranger—if that's what he was—take a step back, just enough for the light to swallow him again. His coat hung smoothly, as if he'd never known a breath of wind. And yet, there was this coldness clinging to me, as if he'd touched me without actually touching me.

Mason stood in the doorway. His face was chalk-white. He gripped the hammer so tightly his knuckles turned white. His lips moved, but no sound came out. He had apparently decided that words were dangerous in this room.

The squeaking downstairs had stopped. Instead, I heard something else: a scraping, quick, frantic sound, as if a small animal were running across wood in a panic. Then a dull thud, as if something had hit a door.

Mason whispered: The rats.

I looked at him. He nodded, almost mechanically. "He's bringing her," Mason whispered. "Or he's... calling her."

The bottle in my hand was only half full. I closed it and put it back in my pocket without taking my eyes off the mirror. For there, in the mirror, something strange had happened: The stranger was no longer visible, but the room behind me seemed darker, as if he had left a trace. And in the place where he had stood, a shadow hung, no longer needing a body to exist.

I slowly backed away from the door until I felt the threshold. The moment I left the room, the air became slightly warmer. Not warm, not pleasant. Just the way air in a house should be. Mason stepped back as if afraid the shadow might follow him if he came too close.

We were standing in the anteroom. Behind us, the door to the room was still half open. Mason took a step forward as if he wanted to slam it shut, but stopped, as if afraid of locking something inside that would then become angry.

"Close," I said.

He looked at me, and in his gaze lay the question: What if he doesn't get out then? Or what if he does get out, but differently?

"Close," I repeated.

Mason pushed the door shut. The sound of the lock—that click—was louder than it should have been. It sounded like a decision that couldn't be reversed. Mason slid the bolt forward, and this time his hand trembled so much that he only caught the bolt on the second try.

For a moment, there was silence.

Then we both heard it: a soft knocking from inside.

Not frantic. Not angry. Rather polite. Almost like an acknowledgment.

Mason pressed his hand to his mouth as if he were about to scream. I let my gaze wander over the other doors. The third door at the end of the hall was also locked, but not as hastily as the others. The bolt there was new, the wood freshly finished. Someone had reinforced it recently.

What's behind it? I asked.

Mason swallowed. "This is... my bedroom," he said. "Or was. I sleep downstairs on the floor. I can't... up there anymore. Not since... since I saw him in my bed once. Not lying down. Just standing. In the corner. Like he was checking if I'd fit."

I went to the third door. Not to open it, but to test its proximity. The handle wasn't as cold as the one in the room with the boxes. It was just ordinary cold. That meant nothing, and yet it meant everything: it was a room that hadn't quite been taken over yet.

Mason said quietly: You don't understand. This house... it's not just a house. He's doing something with it. He... he's furnishing it.

Furnishing. The word had something ridiculous about it, as if one were speaking of curtains and carpets. But it fit. Crates of earth. Covered mirrors. Closed windows. A room that breathed cold. It was as if someone had begun to carry a piece of Transylvania here, layer upon layer, and London was too big and too tired to notice that the air was changing.

Downstairs in the house we heard the scratching again, this time closer. It was coming up the stairs. Not heavy footsteps, but the quick, nervous patter of small paws.

Mason backed away. I held his arm, not out of affection, but to prevent him from retreating into a corner from which he couldn't escape.

Then we saw her.

A rat darted out of the darkness of the stairwell. Large, gray, its fur shaggy, its eyes like small black pearls. It didn't simply walk. It stumbled, as if fleeing from something it felt behind it. Two more followed immediately, then four, then a whole swarm, a wave of bodies that surged up the steps and across the hallway.

Mason made a stifled noise. He raised the hammer, but one doesn't strike a flood. The rats scurried past us, crowded under doors, disappeared into cracks, and dashed up the stairs as if there were some salvation or doom up there that drew them in.

I knelt down, not because I was brave, but because I wanted to see something. In the middle of the swarm, I noticed one rat that was different. It wasn't running around in a panic. It was running purposefully. Straight towards the door to the room with the boxes.

She stopped there.

Not for long. Just a moment. Then she raised her head, as if listening.

And at that moment the polite knocking came again from inside, twice, in exactly the same rhythm, as if it were an answer.

The rat didn't squeak. It turned and ran back to the stairs, as calmly as if it had gotten what it wanted. The rest of the rats followed it, as if they had recognized a leader.

Mason whispered: This is not normal.

No, I said. That's not it.

Then we heard another sound coming from the floor below: a dull thump, as if someone were bumping into a piece of furniture. And then a voice. High-pitched, strained, almost singing with excitement.

Master... Master is here...

Mason froze. "That's..." he said hoarsely. "That's Renfield. The madman. I've never seen him, but I've heard of him. He's in an asylum, they say. Or was. He... he talks about a Master."

The voice below continued, sounding as if someone were praying and giggling at the same time.

He comes in the fog... he comes in boxes... he comes through the eyes...

I went to the stairs. Mason grabbed my sleeve.

"Don't go down," he whispered. "The man is crazy. He bites. He eats... things."

"Crazy people are dangerous," I said quietly. "But crazy people are also often more honest than they want to be."

I descended, slowly, step by step. The fog outside made the light from the cracks in the windows appear gray. Down in the hallway it was darker. The smell of earth was stronger, as if it had been concentrated here.

Someone was standing in the living room.

A gaunt man with disheveled hair, his clothes dirty as if he had been lying in the mud. His eyes were wide and bright, and his mouth moved incessantly. In his hands he held something he regarded as a treasure: a fly, which he wriggled between his fingers.

When he saw me, he froze. Then he began to smile, slowly, like a child who thinks he has recognized Santa Claus.

"You are not the master," he said, disappointed.

No, I said.

His gaze fell on my coat, on my bag, as if he could smell something inside. But you smell... you smell of knowledge, he whispered, lifting the bow tie to his lips. Knowledge is sweet, you know. Sweet like... like blood that's still warm.

I said: Where is your master?

Renfield – for it could only be Renfield – closed his eyes and listened. As if he heard a voice that no one else heard.

Up above, he whispered. Up above he is. Behind the windows that won't open. He's turning the house into a mouth. And when the mouth is finished, then...

He opened his eyes and looked at me, suddenly serious. Then he came out.

A floorboard creaked behind me. Not Mason. Mason was upstairs. This creaking was closer, right in the hallway.

Renfield's gaze slid past me, and his face lit up in a kind of religious rapture. He whispered: Master.

I didn't turn around immediately. I already knew that I couldn't prevent it by not looking at it.

Then I heard the voice behind me, quiet, calm, almost friendly.

You are punctual, Mr. van Helsing.

A trail of ash

The voice behind me was so calm it seemed out of place in the house. It had that tone you hear in drawing-room conversations when someone speaks a truth they've already decided for themselves. I turned slowly, not to show courage, but because in moments like these, it's best to maintain control over your movements. Hectic movements are what you give the other person.

The man with the umbrella was standing in the hallway.

He didn't seem out of place down here, but rather perfectly at home, as if the house had been built around him. The fog hanging in the streets outside seemed to follow him, settling into the air of the hallway. His coat was dark and dry, as if he hadn't needed to wade through any dampness to get here. His face was ordinary enough that it would be impossible to describe the next day. But his eyes were not ordinary. They didn't hold the flickering unease of a person, but a quiet patience more commonly found in things that can wait.

Renfield chuckled, his eyes never leaving him. His fingers squashed the fly as if it were a casual sacrifice.

"You're punctual," the man repeated. He pronounced my name as if he had practiced it for a long time until it sounded exactly as it should: familiar yet not intimate. He took a half step closer. The umbrella didn't touch the ground; it almost floated, held by a hand that was too still.

I asked: Who are you?

He inclined his head slightly. Politeness, I thought. Or the imitation of it. A name is an unnecessary luxury, he said. For both sides.

Renfield smacked his lips softly, as if in agreement. "Master has many names," he whispered. "But only one hunger."

The man looked at Renfield, and there was no warmth or contempt in that look. It was the kind of look one gives to a tool that has done its job. Renfield ducked, so suddenly it seemed painful, and then chuckled again, as if he needed to reassure himself that he was happy.

I kept my hands visible, not out of submission, but because I wanted to keep my options open. The vial was in my inside pocket, within reach, yes, but not so obvious as to arouse him. I said: You leave things behind here. Earth. Boxes. Traces.

"Traces," he repeated, the word taking on an amusing quality in his mouth. They believe a trace always leads to a perpetrator. Sometimes it only leads to a bystander.

I studied his face, trying to focus on a detail that wouldn't change when I thought about it later. The contour of his nose, the line of his mouth, a small shadow under his left eye. But the longer I looked, the less remained. It was as if my gaze slipped away, as if the face had the quality of being unsupported. A mask without fastenings.

Mason called something upstairs, a muffled sound, as if he were repeating my name, but the walls swallowed it. The house held sounds when they were useful to it.

I said: What do you want?

The man didn't smile. His face remained blank. "I don't want anything," he said. "I'm just taking back what's rightfully mine."

Renfield raised his head. Yes, yes, he whispered. Take, take. Then he'll grow up. Then he'll be strong. Then there will be more.

I kept a close eye on Renfield. A person teetering on the brink between fear and rapture is more dangerous than someone who is simply evil. Renfield's hands were dirty, his nails black, and his movements possessed that unpredictable speed you see in animals when they suddenly strike.

The man approached again, so quietly that I didn't hear his shoes touch the ground. The temperature dropped, as if his body were a piece of winter brought indoors. And in that cold lay once more a hint of something sweet, as if blossoms had been buried in the earth.

They received letters, he said. They searched. They came. This is an old pattern. Many men have gone through this pattern before. Some believe they are the main character. That is always the mistake.

I said: Ion Szekely is dead.

His eyes didn't change, but something in the air seemed to twitch. Perhaps it was my wish that he react to it. Perhaps it was a reaction. He replied: Perhaps.

Renfield began to whisper, faster: Dead, dead, but not gone. Not gone. Nothing goes away when the Master sees it.

I took a step to the side, so that I was no longer standing directly between the man and the stairs. I didn't want to be in a straight line. Lines are good for guns, not for people. The man didn't follow the movement with his body, only with his eyes, and that was precisely what was worse. He didn't need a position. He already had one.

I said: You scared the man in the warehouse. You harassed Mason. And you visited my colleague. Why all the fuss?

He replied as if it were harmless conversation: Because England is a country that only believes when you touch it. And because you don't touch until you see. So I had to make sure you saw.

Renfield chuckled, and suddenly, without warning, he dropped to his knees. He began rubbing his hands on the floor as if searching for something that wasn't there. Then he raised his head and pointed to a spot at the base of the wall.

"Ashes," he whispered. "They like ashes. He saves them for the wise."

I looked over there. On the wood, just above the floor, was a gray streak. Not dust. It was too concentrated. Too fine. Like burnt paper rubbed between your fingers. The streak ran along the surface as if someone had drawn a line with it.

The man said: You are attentive.

I didn't kneel. I just moved closer, bent down to smell. Ash has a smell when it's fresh. This didn't smell fresh. It smelled like something that hadn't completely burned. A sweetish residue in a gray death. And underneath, heavier, that earthy smell.

"What is it?" I asked.

He didn't answer. Instead, he raised the umbrella slightly and tapped the tip once, very gently, on the ground. An inconspicuous sound. But as the tip touched the ground, I saw the ash line at the base tremble ever so slightly, as if it had reacted. Not much. Just enough for my eyes to register it.

Renfield groaned softly, like someone humming along to a familiar song. Open, he murmured. Open, open.

I suddenly sensed that there was something behind the wall. Not a cavity, not a pipe. An emptiness that didn't belong to a house. A kind of interstitial space. And the ash wasn't there by chance. It was a clue, a marker. A trace.

The man said: You know ash. You know how to clean things up, how to erase traces. And yet you are here because you believe you can save something. That is... admirable.

Admirable, I thought. The word had the sound on his tongue of a knife that is praised for its sharpness.

The stairs creaked upstairs. Mason was clearly moving; perhaps he was coming down, perhaps he was trying to escape. I couldn't blame him. But if Mason appeared now, he would come between us. And I was certain that this man knew no haste when it came to breaking someone.

I straightened up. I said: You're not here because of me. You're here because of the city.

The man kept his eyes on me. London is a good place, he said. Lots of breath. Lots of dreams. Lots of doors that don't close properly. And this fog... it's very kind. It blinds people without offending them.

Renfield laughed, and it sounded like a child who had discovered something disgusting. Blind, blind, he whispered. Then he can be anywhere.

I felt my pulse quicken, not in a panicky way, but in that clear way the body prepares itself. In my inside pocket, I felt the vial, and I knew it wasn't a solution, just a provocation. A moment to pause.

I looked again at the line of ash. It didn't just run along the base. It turned at the corner, disappeared beneath the door to the cellar room, which Mason had locked. There, I thought, was the cold. There, where the earth revolved. There, where the reflection was different.

A trail of ash.

Not because something had burned, but because something had tried to draw a line here. Or to open one.

The man said quietly: They will follow.

It was not an order. It was the statement of a person who already knew the outcome of the conversation.

And at that moment I realized that the house wasn't just being furnished. It was being prepared. Like a stage set. Not for a murder that happens quickly, but for something that happens slowly, while everyone watches and only realizes at the end that they've been complicit all along.

I could have disagreed with him. I could have said that I don't follow, that I go my own way, that I don't dance to the tune others blow in the dark. But disagreement is only useful if the other person takes it seriously. This man took nothing seriously except time.

I let my gaze drift over the ash again. It wasn't scattered randomly. It was too neat, too deliberate. A line, an arc, a trace under the door, as if someone had painted with powder using a finger. And the longer I looked, the more I understood that it wasn't so much about the ash itself as it was about what it suggested: a boundary that wasn't made of wood or stone.

Renfield scratched his neck so hard that the skin underneath turned red. Then he stopped and stared at me as if he had suddenly seen a secret in my eyes.

"They have doors too," he whispered. "Inside them. Some are closed. Some are... only ajar."

The man with the umbrella paid no further attention to Renfield. He looked at me as if Renfield were already furniture again. Then he said: Some call it superstition. Others call it science. In truth, it is only... habit. The world pretends to be solid. And people help it along by believing it.

I didn't move any closer to him. I moved closer to the track. A small difference, but it was important. I wanted him to see that I was choosing my own path.

The ash on the wall shimmered faintly when the dim light from the hallway fell upon it. I pulled out a small pocketknife and scraped a tiny amount onto the blade, carefully, as if it were poison. Not because I expected it to tell me something immediately, but because things you can hold in your hand seem less sinister than things that elude touch.

The ash was as fine as flour, but it didn't feel like it. It had a graininess more typical of bone dust. An unpleasant thought, which immediately hid behind a series of sober terms: combustion residue, organic material, temperature, duration.

Renfield rocked on his tiptoes. He hummed softly, a melody without beginning or end. The man lifted the umbrella handle slightly and tapped the ground a second time. Not loudly. Not threateningly. But I saw it: the ashes seemed to shift ever so slightly, as if an invisible breeze had caressed them.

"This is no trick," I said, more to myself than to him.

He replied: Of course it's a trick. Everything is a trick. The only question is who's better at it.

A hurried footstep came from upstairs, then another. Mason. He called out something, choked, as if he didn't want his voice to linger in the house. Then he stood in the hallway, pale, and saw the man with the umbrella. The moment Mason saw him, his posture slumped as if a thread had been cut.

They... said Mason. They are here.

The man simply nodded, as if he were an acquaintance visiting. Mason took a step back, pushed against the wall, and remained there as if the wallpaper were his only support.

I whispered to Mason: Go upstairs. Lock yourself in. And stay away from the windows.

Mason shook his head, tears or sweat in his eyes. He whispered: He was in my mirror.

The man still wasn't smiling. But there was something in his eyes that was close to a smile, without actually being one. Mirrors are very honest things, he said. People don't like honesty when it concerns themselves.

Renfield clapped his hands once, much too loudly. "Mirror, mirror!" he cried, and then suddenly very quietly: "No reflection, no shadow, no sleep."

The man looked up at Renfield. Just a glance. Renfield immediately fell silent and began to giggle again, as if embarrassed that he had said too much.

I leaned towards the cellar door, where the ash disappeared beneath the crack. The wood was old, but the bolt was new. Mason had tried to fight with fresh force against something that knew no freshness.

I didn't put my hand on the bolt. I only placed my fingertips on the wood next to the lock. The cold was stronger there. And it wasn't even. It was like a pulse, slow, patient.

The man said: You want to go in.

I didn't answer. Instead, I took the small wood shaving from the glass jar I'd brought with me and held it briefly against the door, as if it were foolish, a superstition. But the wood became damp at the edge, as if it had suddenly been exposed to breath. I withdrew it. A tiny dark stain remained. Not water. Something that smelled of earth.

Mason whispered: Please don't. Please.

I would have liked to reassure Mason. But reassurance is also a promise. And I had no more promises I could keep.

I went to the table in the living room and took a candle. Mason had placed candles everywhere, as if they were soldiers against the darkness. I didn't light it. Fire in this house was a discussion I didn't want to have yet.

Then I went back to the cellar door and said: Open it.

Mason jerked his head up. Me?

Yes, I said. They put the lock on. They're unlocking it.

Mason stared at me as if I'd ordered him to reach into an oven with his bare hands. Then he looked at the man with the umbrella, and that look was a kind of silent plea for permission that frightened Mason himself. The man gave no permission. He gave nothing. That was his form of power.

Mason placed his hand on the bolt. His fingers trembled so much that I thought he wouldn't be able to push it back. But then, with a small, ugly metal scrape, the bolt moved. A sound like a needle on bone.

The door remained closed. For a moment, everything was silent. So silent that I could hear my own blood rushing to my ears. Renfield's breathing quickened. The man wasn't breathing at all, or if he was, it was so quiet it seemed otherworldly.

Mason whispered: I can't.

I said: Then resign.

He did it immediately, like someone glad to receive an order. I grabbed the handle. The coldness of the metal was so intense that it hurt for a moment. I pressed it down.

The door opened.

Not far. Just a crack. And from that crack came a smell that instantly changed the air in the hallway. Earth, yes. But not just earth. It was as if someone had buried flowers in a cellar and then lit a fire over them. Sweetness and ash and something metallic underneath, reminiscent of blood, without actually being blood.

Renfield groaned with delight, as if he had smelled a feast.

I pushed the door open wider.

Beyond it, a staircase led down. The steps were dusty, but a clear path ran down the middle, as if someone had often gone up and down them. Or slid down. There was ash on the first step. And on the second, too. A fine line leading downwards, as if someone had marked the cellar so they wouldn't forget where their home was in the dark.

Mason whimpered softly, a sound he immediately swallowed. I stepped onto the first step, then the second. The hallway behind me narrowed, as if the house were pushing me down. I could no longer hear Mason. I could only hear Renfield, as if from a great distance. And I couldn't hear the man with the umbrella at all, which told me he was following me.

It was colder downstairs. The air was heavier. And there, at the foot of the stairs, I saw something that didn't belong in a cellar: a clean patch on the floor, as if the dust had been wiped away. In this clean patch lay a circle of ash, carefully drawn. And in the center of the circle stood a small metal bowl, containing remnants of something burnt.

Paper, I thought. Or fabric.

I knelt down without touching the circle. A piece remained in the bowl, not completely burned. A scrap, barely larger than a thumbnail, with a line of ink on it. I leaned closer until I could make out the letters.

...Szek...

The name had been there. Ion Szekely. Someone had tried to burn it. Not to destroy it, but to transform it. Ashes are not waste. Ashes are what remains when something loses its form.

A faint noise behind me made me freeze. Not a footstep. Not a creak. More like the gentle rustle of a coat.

The man stood at the foot of the stairs, umbrella in hand, and looked at the circle as if checking whether it had been drawn properly.

He said: You're slowly understanding.

I straightened up without taking my eyes off the bowl. I said: They are marking names.

He replied: Names are doors. Some must be closed. Some must be opened.

And as he said this, the ash began to tremble in a circle, very slightly, as if someone had breathed underneath it.

The trembling of the ash was so subtle that, at the wrong moment, one could mistake it for an illusion. But illusions have no consequences, and this movement felt as if it were about to have them. The circle remained closed, yet the grains lifted in places, as if magnetically attracted. It wasn't wind. The cellar was airless. It was more as if something were testing the ash from below, like a finger testing skin before cutting.

The man with the umbrella stood at the edge of the stairs and didn't enter the circle. I noticed that immediately. He, too, was respecting a boundary. Or he knew that this boundary wasn't meant for him.

I also kept my distance. And yet I was close enough to smell the scent rising from the bowl: burnt paper, yes, but also a note reminiscent of ink drying in old diaries. Memory as smoke.

Upstairs, far away, I heard Mason sobbing. Renfield murmured words that sounded like prayers, but too fast, too hungry. The sounds came muffled through the steps, as if wrapped in cotton wool. The cellar didn't just swallow light, it swallowed the world.

The man said softly: You could destroy the circle. You could step inside, scatter the ashes, overturn the bowl. And yet you don't.

I didn't reply immediately. One should never let an opponent know that they've hit the nail on the head. But my silence was also a form of response.

I finally said: You want me to see something.

He inclined his head. I want you to understand. Seeing is cheap. Understanding is rare.

The ash rose higher. A tiny vortex formed in a circle, as if fed by an invisible breath. Then, quite suddenly, the bowl changed. Not its shape, not the metal. Its contents. The burnt scrap of paper stood upright, as if it had become light again. A narrow strip, spinning in the air without falling.

And then I heard something that didn't come from the cellar, but from within me: a short sound that sounded like the end of a word. A fragmented thought.

...Hels...

I gritted my teeth. The sound wasn't loud, unspoken. It was like an echo in my head, as if someone in an empty room had uttered my name and swallowed the rest.

The man didn't smile, but his eyes brightened. He said: Names are doors.

I felt my neck tense. I thought of the wooden splinter with the word COME. I thought of the letter from Transylvania, Ion Szekely's trembling handwriting, the boxes of earth, the mirror in which Mason had disappeared. All were variations of the same message: You are invited, but you are not the host.

I said: What does Ion Szekely mean to you?

The man didn't answer directly. Instead, he raised the umbrella slightly and tapped the tip against the ground, this time not hard, but like someone ringing a bell.

A soft clinking sound. And the swirl in the ashes took shape.

Not a shape, not immediately. At first, it was just a condensation. A shadow different from another shadow. Then an outline, as if the smoke were remembering a body. A face, half-visible, pale, eyes wide, and around the neck two dark dots that looked like ink, but were too deep.

Ion Szekely.

He wasn't standing in a circle, and yet he was in a circle. He wasn't in the cellar, and yet he was there. His mouth moved, and I heard nothing. Then, as if through a wall, a sound came, clipped, as if someone were cutting the conversation into pieces.

...he knows...

The man with the umbrella said quietly: He wrote well. He bled well.

I felt my fingers cramp. Something inside me wanted to break the cycle, simply to no longer be a spectator. But something else held me back. Not cowardice. Caution. When you see a trapdoor, you don't jump through it just to prove you're brave.

I said to the shadowy figure: Where is he?

Ion Szekely's eyes jerked as if he recognized me. His mouth formed a word. The sound was clearer this time, but it sounded as if it came from a different throat.

...London...

Renfield, upstairs, shrieked with delight as if he had heard the word. "London, London," he murmured, as if it were a sweet.

I continued asking, because I sensed that the window that had opened was about to close again: What did you see?

Ion Szekely's head turned slightly, as if he sensed something in the darkness behind me. His lips moved, and this time a sentence came, quiet, broken, but intelligible enough to linger in the mind:

He carries the houses like coats.

Then the shadow flickered, as if someone had held their breath. The swirl in the ash became restless. Ion Szekely's face contorted, not in pain, but in a kind of pulling sensation, as if something were pulling him back. The ash began to tremble more violently, grains leaping beyond the circle's edge as if trying to escape.

The man with the umbrella said: Enough.

He didn't say it aloud. It wasn't a command in the human sense. It was more like the closing of a hand. And immediately the shadow shrank, became smoke, became nothing. The scrap of paper fell back into the bowl. The ash calmed down, as if it had never trembled.

I stared at the circle. My heart was beating faster, but my mind was clearer. Ion Szekely wasn't simply dead. He had been used. His words hadn't just been a cry for help. They were material that could be burned and molded.

The man took a step closer to the circle, still outside it. He said: You've seen what I wanted to show you. Now there's only one question left: What will you show me?

I replied: I will show you that I am not your stage.

A very human sentence. Perhaps even a stupid one. But it was my sentence, and I had to own something, even if it was just a sentence.

The man lifted his umbrella slightly, as if to open it, but he didn't. Then he said: You are not the stage. You are the spectator who thinks he can end the play by leaving the theater. But outside, it's the same fog.

I heard a faint sound behind me on the stairs. Footsteps. Not Renfield's nervous, mincing steps. Not Mason's hesitant ones. These steps were calm, orderly. A person coming down, believing they are invited.

I turned around.

Renfield stood on the third step from the bottom, his head tilted, his eyes shining. In his hand he held something which he extended towards me like a gift.

A small bundle of paper, tied together with string. And on the top sheet was a coat of arms or a symbol that I immediately recognized: the circle that eluded view, the hook, the tower – the symbol that never quite stood still.

Renfield whispered: For you. From the Master. He says you should read. You should... follow.

I didn't take the bundle immediately. I looked at the man with the umbrella. He stood still, content, as if he knew that Renfield would appear at that very moment.

I said: So you do have a messenger after all.

The man replied: Everyone has messengers. Some just don't know it.

I finally took the bundle without touching Renfield's finger. The paper was cold. Not just cool. Cold like the metal latch, cold like breath that doesn't breathe. I put it in my inside pocket, and it felt like I'd taken a piece of the cellar with me.

Then the man said, almost kindly: You will find a trace. Not earth. Not ash. Something more subtle. Something that people in London don't take seriously.

He paused briefly. And during that pause, there was suddenly the feeling that the house could return to normal if one only stopped looking. That's precisely why the pause was dangerous.

The man added: And if you lose your way, look in the mirror.

I forced myself to remain calm. I said: And what if I don't follow you?

He looked at me, and for the first time I had the impression that he was truly honest.

"Then follow anyway," he said quietly. "Only later. And with greater loss."

Upstairs, somewhere in the house, a door slammed. Mason, perhaps, who had finally escaped. Or the house itself, closing off another room. I heard Renfield chuckle, but it sounded more tired, as if he had just completed a task and didn't know if it was a reward.

I climbed the stairs, step by step, feeling the cellar behind me clinging to the cold. The fog outside waited. And in my bag lay the bundle of papers like a new chapter, one that had written itself.

The man in the black coat

When I left the house, the fog had become so thick that the street seemed like a memory. Mason was gone. So was Renfield. And the man with the umbrella—the Master, as Renfield called him—was no longer where he had last been standing. But absence in such cases is simply another form of presence. You sense it, like you sense a gaze, even if you don't turn around.

The doorknob was damp on the outside, as if someone had just gripped it with cold fingers. I didn't lock the door. It would have felt like locking up an animal that had long since learned to walk through walls. Instead, I went down the steps and stood for a moment to listen.

Nothing.

But the nothingness was wrong. It was too smooth. As if the fog had gone to great lengths to polish the sounds.

I set off, aimlessly, without hasty steps, for those who appear harried are easily manipulated. The streetlights had already been switched on in the afternoon, as if the city had decided to weaponize itself against the twilight. But the lamps only cut small holes in the fog, and everything beyond those holes remained indistinct. People emerged from the gray and vanished into it, their faces indistinct. Wagon wheels rolled past like muffled thunder. And somewhere a dog barked, briefly, then abruptly silent, as if someone had covered its mouth.

I felt the bundle of papers in my inside pocket like a foreign object. It wasn't heavy, but it pulled. As if it had a weight that wasn't measured in grams, but in a direction. I turned into a side street, stood under a lamppost, and pulled the bundle out.

The string was coarse, and the knots were tight, as if whoever had tied them had been afraid the leaves would escape. I untied the knot with my pocketknife without tearing the paper. The topmost leaf did indeed bear the symbol: the circle that eluded view, the suggestion of a tower or hook, something that defied easy identification.

Among them were several densely written pages, this time not in a trembling hand like Ion Szekeley's, but in a handwriting that seemed calm and deliberate. Too calm. As if someone had taken the time to plan every turn.

I read the first line.

You think you are hunting. In reality, you are being led.

I turned the pages. It wasn't a letter in the usual sense. It was more like a record, a list, as if someone had written down my steps before I took them.

Gower Street. The desk. The mirror. The crates at the docks. Mason. The cellar. The ashes.

A shiver ran down my spine, not from surprise, but from the sobering realization that I had not only been observed. I had been studied.

At the edge of a page was an address, neatly written down: a place name, a house number, and below that a date.

Tonight.

And below that, as a comment that seemed more like a friendly suggestion:

Come alone. London is crowded enough.

I folded the pages back together, put them back in my pocket, and forced myself not to rush immediately to the nearest lamppost, as if I needed to cling to the light. The address wasn't far. But in a fog like this, a short distance can turn into a journey.

As I continued walking, I noticed that the fog had changed. Not thicker, not thinner. Different. It was no longer uniform. It seemed to stand still in some areas and flow in others, as if following some kind of logic. And this logic wasn't meteorological.

I stopped at the next corner because I had the feeling someone was walking right behind me. I didn't hear any footsteps. But the proximity was there. A coldness that clung to my coat.

I continued walking without turning around.

A man emerged from the mist, right in front of me, as if he had been waiting for me there. He was tall, wearing a black coat that hung on him like a shadow. His hat was pulled low over his face, his hands in the coat pockets. He walked past me, so close that I caught the scent of damp fabric—and beneath it, the sweet note that I could no longer ignore.

I stopped.

The man also stopped. Not immediately. Only after two steps, as if he wanted to give me this slight delay so that I wouldn't imagine he was obeying.

He didn't turn all the way around. Just his head. The brim of his hat cast a shadow across his face, but I could see his mouth. He wasn't smiling. He was simply... ready.

Are you the messenger? I asked quietly.

The man didn't answer. He simply lifted his hand from his pocket and dropped something on the floor.

A tiny pile of grey ash.

Then he continued walking and disappeared into the fog, as if the fog had taken him back. I stepped closer to the ash. It lay on the pavement like a period at the end of a sentence. I didn't bend down. I just looked at it.

A trail of ash, I thought. And now a man in a black coat, scattering it like breadcrumbs.

I continued walking, and after a few steps I saw the next spot: a second pile of ashes, this time in front of a door. And then a third, at the edge of a manhole cover. It was as if someone had drawn a line that only I was meant to see.

The fog swallowed the world, but this trace remained visible.

I followed her.

She led me through streets I would never have taken in clear weather. She took me past backyards, past quiet shops whose windows were covered with paper, past a small square with a fountain whose water was inaudible. And again and again, the man in the black coat briefly appeared in the mist, a shadow that showed me I wasn't alone, but also not accompanied in the human sense.

Once he stopped under a lamppost, just as the man with the umbrella had done. The light fell on his coat, and I saw that it wasn't simply black. It was mottled, as if it had fallen into the earth and hadn't bothered to get clean. Or as if something had stuck to it.

I stepped closer, and he looked up. For a moment, I saw his face beneath his hat. It wasn't a stranger's face. It was... too familiar. As if I'd seen it before, in a mirror, in a newspaper, in a dream.

Then the moment was over. He lowered his head, and his face became just an ordinary face again.

He finally spoke, and his voice was quiet but clear.

"No going back," he said.

I asked: Where to then?

He didn't answer. Instead, he dropped another pile of ashes, right in front of my shoes, as if it were a sign that questions aren't paid for here.

I ignored it.

The man in the black coat went ahead, and the trail led us onward, deeper into the fog, deeper into a city that suddenly seemed as if it had been waiting for this night for a long time.

The trail of ash didn't lead straight ahead. It wound its way in curves, taking small detours, as if someone wanted to prevent me from realizing too soon where I was. But London is like an organism: those who move within it long enough learn its habits. And this particular habit was clear. We were approaching the river.

The man in the black coat walked in front of me, neither fast nor slow, but at a steady pace that reminded me that impatience is a luxury possessed only by those who believe that time belongs to them. His coat barely swung. He moved like a shadow that has learned to be silent on pavement.

Every now and then he turned his head a little, never completely, never enough for me to see his eyes for long. Just enough to confirm that I was still there. And every time he turned, I caught a whiff of that sweetish scent in the air, like a perfume that didn't belong in this city.

The piles of ash lay closer together now. One could have mistaken them for ordinary dirt, for what falls from chimneys and furnaces when a city is left to burn all day. But these ash were too clean, too precise. They were language.

We passed a small market, long since closed, the stalls folded up, the tarpaulins damp. A dog sniffed at a pile of rubbish, briefly raised its head as I walked by, and pulled back its lips. No growl. Just that silent warning that animals give when they smell something that doesn't belong to their world. Then it ran off without looking back.

The man in the black coat suddenly stopped. I stopped too, exactly one step behind him, no closer. Closeness is a promise, and I didn't want to make him one.

He gestured to the left with a barely perceptible nod. The outline of a house was visible in the mist, low and squat, with an entrance so inconspicuous that it would likely never have been noticed during the day. There was no sign above the door. The windows were dark, but not boarded up. Rather... more like blind. As if the panes were fogged up from the inside, even though no one was breathing inside.

A large pile of ashes lay in front of the door. Not like the others, which could be overlooked. This one was like a sign that cries out without being loud.

"Is this the address?" I asked.

The man in the black coat shook his head. Just a slight turn. No.

Then why...?

He raised his hand, and this time he did something that forced me to look more closely: he pulled his hand from his coat pocket, and for a moment I saw his skin. It wasn't pale. It was... gray, as if it were never fully supplied with blood. His fingers seemed too long, not grotesquely so, but in a way that gave them a false elegance.

He put a finger to his lips.

Silence.

I heard nothing. But then, very quietly, from inside the house: a scratching sound. Again that patient, polite scraping, as if someone inside were stroking the wall. It lasted two seconds, then it stopped.

The man in the black coat lowered his hand. He continued walking without touching the door. And as he walked on, I understood: The house wasn't the destination. It was a stop along the way. Confirmation that we were being watched. Or that we weren't alone on this path.

We turned the corner, and the fog thickened. The lampposts seemed to be spaced further apart. The light became sparser, and the city seemed to have retreated to make room. And then I heard something that doesn't belong in London: water striking.

The Thames was nearby.

We reached a stretch of riverbank squeezed between warehouses and low buildings. The fog lay so thick over the water that the surface itself became invisible. You could only hear it. A sluggish, smacking sound, as if the river were chewing.

The man in the black coat stopped again. This time he turned halfway towards me, just enough for me to see his mouth.

He said: Wait.

I asked: What for?

His head tilted slightly, and I had the feeling that he didn't understand me, not because my words were unclear, but because the concept of "for" wasn't important to him. He simply repeated: Wait.

Then he took a few steps forward until he stood at the edge of the bank. The ash dots led directly to his feet and ended there, as if this were the end of a line.

I didn't go beside him. I stayed back a little and gazed into the gray. The fog over the river wasn't still. It was moving. Not like mist carried by the air, but like something consciously taking shape. For a moment, I thought I saw a dark form within it, elongated, like a boat. Then it vanished again.

A minute passed. Maybe two. Time is difficult in fog. It loses its markers.

Then I heard it: a soft clapping sound, as if an oar were dipping into the water. Again. And then the creaking of wood.

A boat glided out of the fog.

It was small, flat, barely lit. A man sat inside, his hood pulled low over his face. He wasn't rowing fast. He was rowing as if he weren't afraid of being late. As if being late were a concept other people considered.

The boat docked at the shore without a sound beyond what was necessary. The man in the boat raised his head, and I saw that his face was not visible. Not because it was hidden, but because the fog swallowed it up. It was as if there were a placeholder there.

The man in the black coat raised his hand.

The rower handed him something. A small box. Not large. Wood. Black wood, perhaps varnished, perhaps just old. The box was tied with a thin band, and the symbol was embossed on the band.

The man in the black coat picked up the box and turned to me.

"Now," he said.

I looked at him. Now what?

He held out the box to me. His fingers touched the wood, and I saw that the varnish—if it was varnish—was dull, as if it had never truly accepted light. The box was cold, as if it had been brought in from another room.

I didn't take them right away. I said: What's inside?

His voice was quiet. A part of you.

Renfield's sentence flashed through my mind: Doors inside you. Some only ajar. I felt my stomach clench, not with disgust, but with a very distinct kind of revulsion. The man in front of me wasn't speaking metaphorically, I knew that.

I finally picked up the box, carefully. It was heavier than it looked.

The moment my fingers touched the wood, there was a brief prick in my palm. Not like from a splinter. More like an electric shock. I barely flinched, but I felt something inside me react, as if it had been expecting this contact. As if the box had recognized me.

The man in the black coat looked at me. His eyes were dark, and yet I had the impression that they weren't mine. He said: Don't open it.

I held the box tightly. Why?

After a brief hesitation, as if he had to choose the right measure of truth, he replied: Not here. Too much fog. Too many ears.

Then he turned back to the river and raised his hand as if telling the boatman to leave. The rower pushed off, and the boat glided back into the gray, disappearing as quickly as if it had never existed.

I stopped on the bank, the crate in my hands, and felt the weight not only on my palms but also in my chest. The mist smelled of river and coal, but near the crate there was that sweet note again.

The man in the black coat suddenly said, without turning around: "You think he's your enemy. That's wrong."

I asked: What is he then?

The man inclined his head as if listening. Then he said: He is in your direction.

And before I could say anything, he took a step to the side and disappeared into the fog. No sound, no hurry. Just gone.

I stood there, alone, with a box that felt as if I hadn't received it, but as if I had sent it to myself.

And above the water, the fog continued to move, as if it were laughing, without being heard.

I didn't leave immediately. Leaving immediately is an admission of being rushed. And I didn't want to give anyone the pleasure of seeing me rushed. So I stood for a moment on the bank,

holding the box and listening to the river. The sound of the water lapping against the wood and stone was muffled, as if the Thames were trying to mask the noise. The mist drifted slowly, steadily, like breath. And in that breath lay a message: Everything you do in here will be different.

The box in my hands was no ordinary object. I didn't just sense it, I knew it. The wood was too cold, too dry, too old. It had absorbed the scent of earth, as if it had lain for a long time in a box of earth, or as if it had been carved from earth itself. I held it so that my fingers didn't glide over the symbol. Not out of superstition. Out of experience.

The way back to town was shorter than it should have been. Or perhaps I was walking faster without realizing it. Fog alters distances. It shrinks houses together, stretches alleyways, and makes intersections appear in the wrong places. But it also does something else: it makes you believe you're alone because you can't see anyone clearly. And that's precisely why it's the perfect tool for someone who doesn't want to be seen.

I followed the lampposts, not like a drunk, but like someone tracing points on a map. Light, then shadow, then light. And between the islands of light, the city was a blurred painting where every figure could be a mystery.

Twice I heard footsteps behind me. Both times I didn't turn around. Turning around in the fog reveals too much. Instead, I changed my pace, stopped suddenly as if lighting a cigarette, then continued walking. The footsteps adjusted, or they disappeared. And because I was never sure if they were really there, I knew they were.

As I reached a wider road, a horse-drawn carriage approached, slowly, the horses tired. The driver stopped as if he had been expecting me. He wasn't the same as before, but coachmen all have the same look: a mixture of indifference and an inner register in which they store everything that will later be of use to them.

"Where to?" he asked.

I gave an address that wasn't mine. A colleague's apartment, far enough away not to lead directly to my life. The coachman nodded and made a gesture that was both an invitation and a warning. I got in.

Inside, it smelled of leather and damp fabric. I sat down so I could see the street through the small window at the back. The fog made everything milky, but you could still make out movement. And I waited to see the man in the black coat. Or the umbrella. Or anything to prove that I wasn't simply sitting in a city, but in a trap.

The carriage began to move. The rumble of the wheels was muffled, as if they were driving over moss. I held the box in my lap, both hands on it, and felt the wood vibrate ever so slightly with every jolt. Not because something was moving inside. Rather, as if it were reacting to the city.

We drove for a while. Then the carriage suddenly stopped.

"Why are we stopping?" I asked.

The coachman didn't answer immediately. Then, without turning around, he said: "Road closed. There's something up ahead."

Something. That word was too big for a coachman. I leaned towards the window and looked out.

Dark silhouettes were visible in the fog. People. They stood in a semicircle, motionless, as if watching a play. A few lanterns were burning, their light flickering. And in that light, I saw that something lay on the pavement.

A human form.

I got out before the coachman could stop me. His protest caught in his throat, because he was clearly glad not to have to get any closer.

The crowd wasn't large, maybe ten or twelve people. Workers, a policeman, a woman with a basket who looked as if she'd lost herself in her own curiosity. They stood there, silent, as if the fog had swallowed the words from their mouths.

I pushed my way forward. The policeman raised his arm as if to stop me, but then he saw my face, my coat, my posture – and that little bit of uncertainty in him as to whether I was someone who had to be obeyed. He let me through.

A man lay on the pavement. Or what was left of him.

He wasn't torn, not bloody, not spectacular. And that's precisely what made it so unsettling. His body lay there as if he had lain down and then been forgotten. But his skin had a color that didn't belong to the living. It was gray, dry, and in some places it looked as if someone had dusted it with something.

Ash.

I knelt down beside him so I wouldn't have to put the box on the ground. The policeman said something about a doctor, about an accident, about "the poor guy." Words used to normalize a scene.

I leaned closer and saw the man's mouth. It was slightly open. Something dark clung to his lips. Not blood. Dirt.

I looked at his hands. There was dirt under his fingernails. As if he had buried himself in something before he died. Or as if someone had lain in it.

The police officer asked: Do you know this man?

I replied: Not yet.

Then I noticed a detail that shifted the scene in a different direction: On the man's neck, just below his jaw, were two small dots. Not deep, not bloody. More like punctures made with a needle. And around these dots, the skin was darker, as if something had seeped in.

The police officer leaned forward. What do you see?

I said: One trace.

He frowned. Trace of what?

I didn't answer. Instead, I looked around. The crowd was still, and yet I had the feeling that someone was missing. A gap in the semicircle, where the fog was thickest.

I stood up and looked into that gap.

A man stood there, half in the mist. Black coat. Hat pulled low. The man in the black coat.

He raised his hand and dropped something.

Ash.

Then he turned around and walked away, slowly, as if he were sure I would follow him.

I felt the box on my lap—I had pressed it against me when I stood up—vibrate again, slightly. As if it were reacting to the ashes. As if it were a compass pointing not north, but downwards.

I told the policeman: Leave the man lying there. And don't let anyone touch him.

The policeman stared at me. Who are you, anyway?

I glanced at him briefly. Then I said something that wasn't entirely a lie: Someone who doesn't want more people to end up like that.

I left without waiting for his reply.

The man in the black coat disappeared into the fog, and I followed him because I had no choice that felt like a choice. Behind me, the crowd remained, frozen with curiosity, and the dead man lay there like a sentence no one could read.

As I walked, I realized that the trail of ash wasn't just a waymarker. It was a prize. Every dot, every pile, every line meant: Something happened here. Something opened a door here.

And somewhere in my bag, cold and silent, the box waited for me to finally carry it to where it was to be opened.

Whispers in Whitechapel

Whitechapel doesn't welcome you. It absorbs you like a dark coat smelling of smoke and old rain, and only later do you realize you no longer know where your own pockets begin and the stranger's hands end. The fog here wasn't just thicker, it was more insidious. It hung lower, clinging to the signs, the gutters, the faces that slid out of doorways and back again. London had held its breath that afternoon, and Whitechapel used the silence like a loophole.

The trail of ash didn't lead me onward with polite intervals, but with an almost childlike urgency. Small piles, closely placed, sometimes barely more than a gray fingerprint on the pavement. And wherever the ash lay, the fog seemed to linger a moment longer, as if it needed to make sure I had truly understood the clue.

The man in the black coat walked ahead of me, now only an indistinct silhouette, briefly thickening at street corners before vanishing again. At one point I saw the brim of his hat, at another only the dark hem of his coat, flashing briefly in the lamplight. He wasn't a leader, he was a pace-setter. He set the tempo without ever granting me the look that says: You are important. That was precisely what made him so effective.

I held the box beneath my coat, close to my chest. It wasn't heavy enough to tire me, and yet it felt as if it were drawing energy from me, very slowly, like a hand stealing warmth while you sleep. Each time I passed a mark of ash, I felt a barely perceptible tremor in the wood. It wasn't my imagination. Imagination is unreliable. This was rhythmic, as if the box had its own sense of proximity.

Whitechapel was full of sounds that didn't have to be loud to be threatening. Whispers in doorways, the rustle of fabric, the click of heels in a side street. And somewhere, again and again, that thin laughter that sounded more like nervousness than joy. The people here had learned to be quiet, not out of politeness, but as a survival skill.

The ashes eventually led me into an alley so narrow that two men couldn't pass each other without touching. Scraps of posters clung to the walls like old skin. The air was thick with the smell of coal sludge and sewage. The fog pressed in, as if it wanted to possess this place too. And at the end of the alley burned a lantern whose light refused to spread. It just hung there, like an eye left open too long.

The man in the black coat stood beneath the lamppost. This time he was actually waiting. As I approached, he raised his gaze just a fraction, enough to give me that same impression: the face is there, but it doesn't belong to what lies beneath it.

He said nothing. Instead, instead of dropping the next pile of ashes, he swept it from his hand onto the wall in one swift motion. A short, gray stroke, at eye level. Then he tapped the brick once with his fingernail, as if it were a sign I should understand.

A knock answered.

From the other side of the wall.

I stopped. Not in shock, but because my mind needed a moment to accept the geometry. There had to be a room behind the brick wall, a back room, a storage space, something. And inside, in a neighborhood already full of voices at night, this knocking still sounded like a secret.

The man in the black coat pulled a small, rusty iron plate aside. I would have missed it if he hadn't touched it. Behind it was an opening, just large enough for a person to squeeze through, if they were willing to shed their dignity against the wall.

He looked at me, and his lips barely moved, as he said: No eyes outside.

Then he slipped through the opening and disappeared.

I didn't wait a breath too long. I ducked, pressed the crate to me, and squeezed in after it. The brick scraped against my coat. A sharp smell of damp earth wafted from the opening, as if the wall weren't made of stone, but of an ancient tomb.

Inside it was warmer, but not pleasant. It was the warmth of a room that had been crowded with too little air. The fog stayed outside, but its presence lingered: subdued light, muffled sounds, corners that knew too much.

I stood in a narrow corridor. Doors lined both sides, all closed. At the end, a red curtain hung heavy and dirty, as if it had been pulled aside far too often. A lamp hung from the ceiling, its light yellow and sickly. The man in the black coat was nowhere to be seen.

I took a few steps forward, cautiously. Not because I believed caution would protect me, but because I wanted to gather all the information before something stopped me. Something crunched under my shoes. I looked down.

Ash.

Not in heaps. Not as a trail. But as a thin layer, as if the ground had been dusted with it. And in this ash were imprints. Footprints. Many. Some small, some large. Some barefoot. And all led in the direction of the red curtain.

I heard whispering.

Not loud enough to make out words. It was more of a hum, a muffled murmur, like when the curtain is still closed in a theater and the audience is already getting restless. I kept walking, feeling the box in my hands begin to tremble again, faster now, as if it had lost its rhythm.

I stopped in front of the curtain. The fabric moved slightly, even though no air was passing through. The whispering behind it sounded denser, as if many people were standing close together and didn't want the room to hold their voices.

I raised my hand and pushed the curtain aside.

The space beyond was larger than it should have been. That was the first unsettling thing. From the outside, I would have sworn that behind this wall there could only be a narrow storage room. But the space expanded as if it had found a corner that didn't face the street. A low-ceilinged hall, barely furnished, but full of people.

They didn't stand like guests. They stood like witnesses.

Men, women, some barely older than children, all with bowed heads, as if looking up were punished. Their faces were gray in the lamplight. Not sick. More like empty. And all of them whispered, a shallow, continuous murmur that settled on the skin like fog. None of them looked at me. None seemed surprised that I was there. That was worse than any surprise.

A circle was drawn on the floor in the middle of the room.

Ash.

A clean ring, carefully drawn, as if someone had used a ruler. A chair stood in the circle. A black coat lay on the chair. And on the coat: an umbrella, closed, its handle pointing upwards like an invitation.

I looked at the people. Their lips were moving, but their eyes were unfocused. As if they were looking at something that wasn't in the room.

The man in the black coat stepped out of a side door. He walked directly to the circle, stopped just outside the ashes, and looked at me. This time his gaze wasn't empty. It was expectant.

He raised his hand and pointed at the chair.

The box in my hands vibrated more intensely, and suddenly I understood why people weren't looking: they didn't want to see the spot where they knew something might appear. If you don't look, you can later say you didn't see it.

I stopped and said quietly: What is this?

The whispering in the room hardly changed, and yet I had the feeling that it now contained one more word. A name that passed through many mouths without ever being fully spoken.

The man in the black coat said: A choir.

I looked at him.

He added: They whisper so that he can hear.

I looked back at the circle. The umbrella handle gleamed in the light. The coat beneath it was so black that it seemed to swallow the yellow of the lamp. And in the ash on the ground, directly in front of the circle, lay a small, gray streak, as if someone had drawn a new line with a finger.

A trail that pointed directly at my shoes.

The whispering grew a tone louder. Not much. Just enough that I could no longer ignore it. And in that moment I understood that I hadn't stumbled into a room where something was being planned.

I had wandered into a room where something was already happening.

The whispering wasn't chaotic. It had rhythm. It swept through the room like a wave, breaking against the walls, returning. A choir, the man in the black coat had said. And the longer I listened, the less it sounded like individual voices. It sounded like a single organism using many mouths to create the same breath.

I took a step into the room, but remained outside the circle of ash. The crowd didn't react visibly. No heads rose, no eyes sought me. Only the whispers changed in density, as if a new tone had been added, something you can't hear but can feel.

The man in the black coat was still standing at the edge of the circle. Now I saw that he wasn't the only one respecting the ashes. The people in the room, standing close together, were also

unconsciously keeping their distance. The line was like an invisible wall. Perhaps they didn't even know why.

The box vibrated more intensely. Not continuously, but in short pulses, like an excited heart. I held it tighter, and the wood suddenly felt damper, as if it had absorbed the fog from outside. Or as if it were releasing something as we approached the circle.

I said quietly, without addressing anyone in particular: Who brought these people here?

The man in the black coat replied: You brought it on yourself.

I looked at him sharply. Voluntarily?

He inclined his head. What is voluntary when you're hungry? What is voluntary when you're afraid? He makes himself useful. He makes himself... understandable.

In the corner of the room stood a woman, barely moving, shivering as if she were cold. Her lips whispered, but her eyes were open. They stared into the distance, and yet it seemed as if she saw something closer than I did.

I slowly approached her, avoiding the crowd. When I stood beside her, I realized that her whisper wasn't a word. It was a fragment of a sentence, repeated again and again, like a prayer too long to be finished.

...not the windows... not the windows...

I asked quietly: Who told you that?

Her lips continued to move, but her eyes twitched. Then, very briefly, they turned toward me, and in that instant I saw that she saw me. It was like a sudden flash of light.

She whispered, clearly and exhausted: He was at the glass.

Then her eyes were empty again, and she fell back into the choir.

I went back to the circle. The chair in the middle wasn't for the man in the black coat, that much was clear to me now. It was for something else. Perhaps for someone. And the coat on it was like an empty shell, ready to be filled.

I looked at the umbrella. The handle was in the form of a simple knob, but the metal inside was unusually dark, as if tarnished by something that wasn't rust. And when I looked more closely, I noticed a fine line at the tip of the handle, like a seam. The umbrella wasn't just an umbrella. It was a kind of container. A way to conceal something you were holding.

The man in the black coat raised his hand slightly. Still no word, but a gesture everyone in the room understood. The whispering changed. The murmur became more even, deeper. It was as if a conductor were setting the tempo.

And then the ashes began to tremble in a circle.

Not everywhere at once. At first, only in one spot, precisely where the mantle touched a small piece of ash on the ground. The grains rose as if there were air beneath them. Then the small movements spread, in a circle, until the entire ring seemed alive, like a calm, gray pond into which a stone had been thrown.

I realized that the whispering wasn't just background noise. It was pressure. It was breath. Many breaths, bundled together, combined into something heavy enough to move matter.

The box was now vibrating so intensely that I had trouble holding it still. It was as if it were trying to break free from my hands, not downwards, but forwards. In a circle.

I took a half step back. The man in the black coat looked at me, and I had the impression that he was briefly disappointed. Not angry. Disappointed, like someone whose plan didn't work out exactly.

He said quietly: You don't have to be brave. You just have to stand in the right place.

"Stand correctly," I repeated to myself. "Like a figure that belongs in the right place in the picture."

I looked up and saw that something in the room had changed, something other than the ashes. The people who had previously stood like witnesses began to move slightly. Not as a mass, but individually. A step here, a step there. They shifted without touching, as if unconsciously forming a shape. A larger circle around a smaller one. A double ring. A spiral.

The whispering didn't get louder, but more precise. I could now hear individual syllables, although I couldn't tell where they were coming from. And these syllables formed a word that moved through the mouths as if it were the only content everyone shared.

Come.

The word wasn't loud, but it was clear. And it was the same word that had been written on the piece of wood in my study. It was the same command, only multiplied, amplified.

I suddenly felt the room expand. Not literally, but in a sense. The walls seemed to recede, as if the cellar were stretching. And at that moment, there was another sound in the whisper, something that didn't belong.

A quiet, even tapping sound.

Like the tip of an umbrella on stone.

I looked at the chair in the circle.

The umbrella was no longer standing as it had been lying before. It wasn't lying down anymore. It was standing upright. As if it had been stood upright. The handle pointing upwards, the tip on the ground. No one had touched it.

The typing returned, very gently.

The ash vibrated in a line from the screen to the edge of the circle. It looked as if someone were drawing a path in the ash without using their finger.

The man in the black coat whispered: He is near.

I asked: Where?

He didn't answer. He just pointed to the box in my hands.

At that moment, I heard it too. Not in the room, but inside the box. A soft creaking, as if wood were shifting. A tiny sound, as if something inside was pressing against the lid. Not forceful, not panicky. Testing. Patient.

Outside, the river fog had swallowed the city. In here, the whispers swallowed time.

And in the middle of the circle of ashes stood an umbrella, tapping as if it were counting.

The cracking sound in the box was impossible to ignore once you'd heard it. It came at intervals, as if something inside wasn't trying to break free, but rather to measure. Pressure. Resistance. Patience. The worst kind of strength is the kind that isn't in a hurry.

I held my breath and listened more closely. Between the cracking sounds was an almost imperceptible rustling, like dry paper moving. Or like ash rearranging itself. My fingers grew cold, even though the room was warm enough. The cold wasn't coming from outside. It was coming from the wood.

The man in the black coat looked at me, and I sensed that the chorus of whispers was no longer simply repeating "Come." It was as if the word had split into many smaller variations: come, come closer, come properly, come finally. It was no longer a call, it was a pushing.

I said quietly: If I don't open the box, what will happen?

The man replied without hesitation: Then she opens up differently.

The people around the circle had positioned themselves so that there was hardly any space between them, yet they didn't touch. Any touch would have been human. What they were doing here was different. They stood like components of a machine. Lips moved. Throats worked. Eyes stared blankly past me. And the sum of it all was a pressure in the room that felt like a hand around my chest.

The screen in the circle continued typing. A gentle, unbearable rhythm. Not fast, not threatening. Just proof that something was there, something with the patience to type forever.

I made the mistake of looking at the coat on the chair as if it were just a piece of clothing. And immediately I saw that it wasn't an ordinary coat. The fabric was too smooth, too heavy. And on the inside of the collar, where you'd expect to find skin on a person, there was a dark stain, as if someone had rubbed the fabric with dirt.

My hand involuntarily slid to my inside pocket where the bottle lay. Not because I thought it could stop all of this. But because sometimes you need a drop of burning to make sure you can still feel.

I didn't open the box. Instead, I took a step closer to the circle, just enough to test the reaction.

The box vibrated more intensely, almost joyfully. The crackling inside accelerated. At the same time, the whispering lowered a tone, as if the choir were satisfied.

The man in the black coat raised his hand and lowered it again. A conductor making only fine adjustments. And I suddenly understood that he wasn't my adversary. He was the mechanism that brought me here. The umbrella was the clue. The box was the weight. And the choir was the force.

I stopped at the edge of the ash. The ring was only a few centimeters wide, but it divided the world. The grains within it moved as if they were alive. Some jumped against the line as if they wanted to cross it, but were pulled back, as if there were an invisible tension there.

I held the box over the ring without putting it in. Just for a moment to see what would happen.

The screen stopped typing.

Immediately.

The whispering in the room faltered. Not stopped, but like a breath momentarily interrupted. And in that silence, which lasted only a second, I heard for the first time in a long time something that wasn't made of ash, fog, or fear.

My own thoughts, of course.

Then there was a creaking sound inside the box, this time louder, as if something inside had impatiently placed its hand against the lid.

I pulled the box back. The screen started typing again. The whispering resumed. The room breathed its strange breath once more.

The man in the black coat said quietly: They are playing.

I replied: I am learning.

He looked at me, and I had the impression that for a moment he felt something akin to respect, without being human. Then he raised his head slightly, as if listening to a voice that wasn't in the room.

And that was precisely when the coat on the chair began to move.

Not to slip. Not to fall. He lifted as if someone were filling his shoulders from within. The fabric stretched without a hand reaching inside. The collar stood up. The sleeves no longer hung empty, but took on the shape of arms that hadn't yet decided whether to move.

The whispers didn't get louder. They became more reverential. No less menacing, but more focused.

The man in the black coat whispered: Now.

I sensed that everyone's eyes in the room – even if they seemed empty – were fixed on the box. Not on me. On the box, as if it were the final piece of the puzzle.

The cloak lifted further. An invisible breast arched beneath it. And then, very slowly, something stepped into the circle.

Not a foot, not immediately. First, just a compression of the air, directly above the ash. The grains swirled up as if orbiting an invisible body. Then the body became visible, not as a person, but as a shadow so dense it swallowed the light.

The umbrella tilted slightly, as if a hand were picking it up.

And then I saw a shape in the shadows: a hand closing around the handle. Long, steady, without trembling.

A soft breath in the room – not from the people, but from the center.

The box in my hands creaked, this time like a groan. And before I could decide what to do, the lid of the box popped open a crack.

Just a crack.

Enough to see what was inside.

No blood. No flesh. No grotesque relic. There was a small mirror inside. Round, like a pocket mirror. The surface was clear, too clear. And when I looked into it, I didn't see my face.

I saw the cellar circle. The bowl. The ashes. Ion Szekely's flickering shadow.

I saw myself, from behind, kneeling there.

And behind my back, in the reflection, stood the man with the umbrella.

The real one.

Not the man in the black coat.

And he was closer than he should have been.

I slammed the lid of the box shut, instinctively, too quickly. The wood clanged with a dry crack. The choir fell silent for a heartbeat, as if I had offended something sacred.

Then the whispering returned, harsher, more hurried. And in the center of the circle, the cloak finally lifted, as if it were being put on.

The man in the black coat took a step closer to the edge of the ash, his voice now barely more than a whisper: He has shown you where he is.

I felt my neck get cold, as if someone had been holding their breath there.

I didn't turn around.

I knew that if I turned around, I would be confirming that he was there. And confirmation is nourishment.

Instead, I said loudly enough for the choir to hear: That's it.

A simple word. No magic. No liturgy. Just a command to myself to stop playing.

I ripped the bottle from my pocket, pulled the cork out with my teeth, and flung the contents not into the circle, but onto the line of ashes.

The acrid smell cut through the room. And this time it didn't just hiss. The line of ash flickered as if it had briefly caught fire without actually burning. The grains scattered. The circle cracked.

The whispering stopped like a choir suddenly being deprived of air. People gasped, some sank to their knees as if they had only just realized they hadn't been breathing properly for minutes. Eyes opened, confused, horrified. A few screamed, but the screams sounded small because the room was unfamiliar with them.

The movement of the coat faltered in the center of the circle. The umbrella tilted. The invisible hand on the handle seemed to hesitate.

And in this hesitation, something crucial happened: The man in the black coat pulled up his hat.

For a moment I saw his face completely.

It was my own.

Not exact, not perfect. But close enough to make my blood run cold. As if someone had taken my reflection, rolled it in ash, and put it in a coat.

He whispered, in my voice: You can break the circle. But you cannot break the path.

Then he stepped back, and with him the room seemed to narrow again, as if collapsing. The choir staggered, people stumbled, pushing toward the door, toward the opening in the wall. In the corner I heard a man choking. A woman beat her forehead, as if trying to drive the whispers from her head.

I gripped the box tighter, didn't run, walked quickly, purposefully. Through the curtain, the passage, the opening in the brick wall. Outside, the fog hit me like a wet hand.

I stood in the alley again, the lamp at the end flickering. The man in the black coat had vanished. The umbrella was gone. And yet I knew he was somewhere nearby because the cold lingered on the back of my neck.

Whitechapel was still whispering. But now it was human whispers again, panicked, confused voices. And behind it all, like a deeper tone, lay something else.

The quiet, patient promise that the next cycle would not be so easy to break.

The Diary of the Missing

Whitechapel wouldn't let me go. It clung to me, to the soles of my shoes, my coat, my thoughts, like the smell of smoke after a fire you didn't see but still breathed in. As I left the alley behind, I could still hear the whispers of the people who had just been a chorus. Now they were individual voices again, and individual voices are disorderly. They stumble, they contradict each other, they search for explanations meant to resemble bandages.

I didn't go back to my house. Not yet. The mirror in the box had shown me what happens when you trust a place too quickly. Instead, I went to a small shop whose window was full of candles and cheap religious images. Shops like that are as common as cracks in London. They sell comfort in glass and wax. And sometimes they sell something else: information.

The owner, a man with greasy hair and a cross around his neck that was too heavy to be honest, looked at me as I entered. His gaze slid down my coat, lingered briefly on the box I was carrying under my arm, and then flitted back to my face. Then he smiled the kind of smile you keep for any customer who's afraid but doesn't want to admit it.

"Are you seeking protection?" he asked.

I said: I'm looking for a book.

He raised his eyebrows. A book?

"A diary," I said. "From a woman who disappeared here."

He laughed briefly, as if I'd made a joke. Vanished? Here? This is Whitechapel. People disappear, and the next day they call it a relocation.

I placed a coin on the counter, not too big, not too small. Exactly the kind of coin that says: I don't want to beg, I want to bargain.

The man's laughter died. He looked at the coin, then back at me. His voice grew fainter.

Which diary?

I pulled the bundle of papers from my inside pocket, not the one the master had given me, but the letter from Ion Szekely. I didn't show him the whole thing, just enough so he could see the unfamiliar handwriting and the unusual paper.

"It's not for you," I said. "I just want to know if anyone has asked about something like this in the last few days. Or if anyone has handed anything in."

The man wiped his hands with a cloth, as if trying to undo a touch that hadn't yet occurred. He said: "There's a woman. She collected things. She wrote. Always wrote. She wasn't like the others. She asked questions."

"What's her name?" I asked.

He hesitated. Then he said: Mary. Mary Harker. Or something like that. People also just call her... the one who writes.

Harker, I thought. The name cut through the layers of fog in my mind, as if it had already opened a door somewhere in my memory. But I didn't let on. Names are traps. They stick.

Where is she? I asked.

The shopkeeper shrugged. Gone. For a week now. Maybe longer. Her room is empty. The landlord says she left in the night. But he says that to everyone who stops paying rent.

I leaned forward slightly. And the diary?

The man looked towards the door as if expecting someone to come in simply because we were talking. Then he nodded towards a corner behind the counter where a box of old books stood—junk that no one reads anymore. He went over, rummaged through it briefly, and pulled out something so unassuming it seemed almost brazen: a small, brown notebook, its cover worn, the edges rounded as if it had often been carried in a pocket.

He didn't hand it to me right away. He said, "This isn't good, you know. This will cause trouble." She gave it to me when... when she was already scared. She said if she didn't come back, I should give it to someone who wouldn't laugh.

I picked up the notebook. It was warm, not cold. Humanly warm. And it was precisely this warmth that suddenly felt foreign, as if I hadn't touched it in a long time. On the inside of the cover was a name, neatly written:

Mary Harker.

Among them was a date that was not that long ago.

And below that, in a hasty line:

If I disappear, don't read alone.

I didn't open the diary in the shop. Some things are better left undisturbed, surrounded by candles and religious images that might overhear. I put it in the inside pocket, next to the Master's papers, and the pocket felt heavier, as if it were carrying not just paper, but voices.

I paid the man. He put the coins away as if they were hot.

"If you find her," he said quietly, "tell her that I..."

He broke off. In Whitechapel, they don't like to finish sentences. Completed sentences are too close to confessions.

I went outside. The fog was back, but thinner, as if Whitechapel had taken a breath to rearrange its secret. I went to the nearest cab, this time giving my own address, and as the driver pulled up, I felt the box vibrate under my arm, as if protesting.

Home, I thought. But what is home when a mirror shows you that you are being watched, even from behind?

When I reached Gower Street, it was already late afternoon. The lanterns were lit, and the houses seemed to be supporting each other to keep from toppling into the fog. I paid the coachman, went inside, closed the door, and this time the click of the lock wasn't a ritual. It was an admission: if something wants to get in, it should at least make the effort.

In my study, I placed the box on the table, but I didn't open it. I put the diary next to it. Two objects, two kinds of truth: one cold, one warm.

I sat down, took a deep breath, and opened my diary.

The first page was neatly written. No wild scribbles, no hysterical exclamations. Mary Harker wrote as if she knew that order was the only thing one could set against madness.

I read.

They whispered again today.

That's how it began. No date, no place. Just that sentence. And underneath it:

It's not the whispering of people. It's the whispering in the walls. As if the house itself were speaking, when it thinks I'm asleep.

I turned the page. Each page was denser, as if fear were producing its own ink.

I saw him today. Just his coat. Black, like wet earth. And an umbrella, even though it wasn't raining. He stood in the fog and didn't blink.

I felt my fingers clench around the edge of the page. Mary wasn't describing something fantastical. She was describing an observation, so matter-of-factly that it felt like a report. And that's what made her credible.

A few pages later it said:

I tried to open the windows. Just a crack. I wanted air. But the fog isn't air. It's a hand. And behind the hand is someone waiting.

I stopped. Not because I was surprised, but because I felt the sentence in my own body. The fog as a hand. Yes. Exactly like that.

I turned the page. Then I came to an entry that was different. The handwriting was more hurried, and there was a grey stain at the edge, as if ash had fallen on it.

They called me last night. Not with voices. With my name. But not quite right. As if they were twisting it around in their mouths until it fit.

I placed my finger on the sentence and felt an unpleasant tingling sensation, as if the paper had stored a memory that did not belong only to Mary.

Then I read the next sentence, and it hit me like a cold draft:

They want me to write so that he will come.

The sentence stood there, calm, almost matter-of-fact, and yet it was like a screw tightened too much: They want me to write so that he will come. Mary Harker had apparently grasped that it wasn't just about what happened, but about who was observing it. Writing was no longer a report, but a lure. A letterbox cut into the wall oneself.

I continued reading, more slowly, and the pages felt like thin doors. Some stuck, some opened too easily.

Today I tried not to write. I put down my pen, my hands in my lap, as if I were forcing myself to pray. But then the house began to talk. Not loudly. More like someone running a fingernail along the back of wallpaper. And I knew: if I don't write, they'll write inside me.

I paused. The scratching. The polite scraping. It hadn't just been at Mason's, not just in my desk. It was a pattern. A kind of Morse code, only it didn't transmit information, but pressure.

I turned the page. A date was written in the margin, smudged as if Mary had traced it with a dirty finger: November 3rd. Below it:

Today I saw someone else in the mirror. Not myself. Not a face. Just a spot that was darker than the room. As if the mirror were showing a corner that doesn't exist.

I instinctively reached for the small mirror in the box, but I didn't touch it. I let my hand hover over it, as if glass had suddenly developed teeth. Mary's words left no doubt: the mirror wasn't simply a mirror. It was a perspective controlled by someone else.

A few pages later she wrote:

They started leaving ash behind. At first I thought it was soot from the fireplace. But it's too neat. Too deliberate. It's in lines. It lies on the floor like writing.

I looked at the table where the box stood and realized that I had almost come to see the ashes as normal. That was unsettling. Habituation is the first victory of the monster. When you begin to treat the impossible as commonplace, it has already moved into your home.

Towards the end of the diary, Mary's handwriting became more erratic. The sentences were shorter, sometimes broken off, as if she were reacting to sounds while writing.

Today they followed me, but not with feet. With whispers. I walked down the street, and everywhere I heard my own words, as if strangers were repeating them. I turned a corner, and there was my name already.

Then:

I saw a man in a black coat. He stood in front of my door. When I spoke to him, he just dropped ashes. As if I were a path to be marked.

I read those lines twice. Not because I didn't understand them, but because I didn't want to accept them. Mary hadn't stumbled into these things by chance. She had been chosen. An eye that could write. A mouth that could tell the tale. A hand that would send out the call to the world.

I turned the page, and then I came across a page that was different. It wasn't written on. It had something stuck to it.

A thin strip of paper, as if torn from a letter. On the strip were words that were not Mary's handwriting. They were neat, elegant, and the ink was darker.

Not everything that disappears is gone.

Below, in Mary's handwriting, smaller, almost embarrassingly:

He gave it to me. Through the slit. I didn't hear him come. But I smelled that he was there.

I tasted the metallic flavor in my mouth, the same flavor I'd tasted with the first letter. That wasn't a coincidence. It was a style. It doesn't announce itself. It doesn't arrive. It's suddenly there, and you only notice it when the air feels different.

Then came the last entries.

Last night I was in the room with the curtain. The one where they whisper. I didn't want to go, but my feet moved as if they weren't mine anymore. They stood in a circle. They didn't look at me. They just whispered. And in the middle was a coat on a chair.

I swallowed. Whitechapel. The choir. The cloak. The umbrella. Mary had been there. Before I was there. Or while I was there, without knowing it. Time in such matters is like mist: it cannot be grasped.

The next sentence was underlined so firmly that the ink was forced into the paper.

They want me to join the circle.

Including:

I almost did it. I even started moving. And then I saw something.

Her handwriting suddenly became large, as if her hand had trembled.

I didn't see him in the room. I saw him in the mirror. Behind me. He was standing so close I could feel his breath on my neck. And yet, there was no one else in the room.

I had to close the book briefly. Not out of drama. Out of necessity. My gaze wandered to the mirror on the wall, and I had the feeling that it wasn't reflecting me, but registering me. As if I were a name being written into a list.

I forced myself to open the diary again. The last entry began with a date: November 7th. And underneath it read:

I have decided not to flee.

Then:

If I run, I'm only running into the fog. And the fog belongs to him. If I stay, maybe I can see what he really wants.

And then, almost as if she gave herself an instruction:

I will hide the diary. If someone finds it, they should know: The man in the black coat is not always the same. Sometimes he is a messenger. Sometimes he is a mask. And sometimes he is a mirror.

The next page contained only one line. The writing was crooked, the ink smeared, as if something had fallen onto the paper – water, sweat, or tears.

He scratched at the door. Three times. Then it was silent. And I knew that the silence was a lie.

That was the last sentence.

No further entries. No explanation of where she went. No trace, except the one she herself had left: this book.

I sat there for a long time, my diary open, listening to the house. Not because I expected to hear scratching again, but because I needed to understand whether I was already part of the same chorus. Outside, the fog was still there. Inside, it was quiet.

Too quiet.

I stood up and went to the door of my study. I placed my hand on the handle without pressing it. I listened in the hallway.

A faint noise came from below, from the ground floor. Not a footstep. Not a creak.

A scratching noise.

Twice. Then a third time.

Just as Mary had described it.

I pulled my hand back from the doorknob. I took the vial from my pocket, not as a weapon, but as confirmation that I could still act. I took the diary, put it in my inside pocket, close to my chest, as if it were a heart that wasn't mine.

Then I opened the door.

The hallway was empty. The light from the lamp at the far end flickered slightly, as if someone had just walked past it. Downstairs, by the front door, something lay on the floorboards.

An envelope.

Thick paper. Yellowish. And on the front, in an elegant handwriting style that I knew all too well by now, was written:

For Mary Harker.

Below, as if the writer had changed their mind and corrected the goal:

And for you.

The envelope lay there as if someone had carefully placed it so I couldn't miss it. Not half-pulled from the slot, not carelessly dropped. It was a gesture. And every gesture in this matter was a statement about who made the rules here.

I went down the stairs, slowly, step by step, without taking my eyes off the envelope. The hallway seemed to grow colder as I approached, not because the front door was drafty, but because the air was remembering. I stopped a step away, as if paper could bite.

Then I saw it: On the ground around the envelope lay a fine border of grey dust.

Ash.

Not much. Just enough to frame the envelope. As if someone had wanted to make it a circle, but settled for a semicircle because they knew I would already draw the line in my mind.

I didn't kneel. I just bent down, grasped the envelope by a corner so my fingers wouldn't touch the seal, and lifted it. The paper was surprisingly heavy. And it was cold. Not cool like stationery on a winter's day. Cold like something that's been stored in a cellar.

The seal was made of dark wax. Again, the symbol that could never be fully grasped. I took out my pocketknife and cut the seal without tearing it. You can break a seal without shredding the letter. It's a matter of posture.

I opened the envelope.

Inside were two things: a folded sheet of paper and a small, narrow leather folder. The folder smelled old, of smoke and metal. I placed it on the hall table and opened the sheet of paper first.

The handwriting was the same as on the strip of paper in Mary's diary. Calm, elegant, as if the writer were sitting at a smooth table, taking her time.

You have read.

That was the first sentence. No greeting, no name. Just a statement, as if he were ticking off my behavior.

They believe she is a victim. That's convenient. Victims are silent. And silent people don't open doors.

I felt a muscle in my jaw twitch. That wasn't information. That was provocation. And provocation is a way to throw someone off balance.

I continued reading.

Mary wrote because she understood that words don't just describe. Words build.

I held the sheet closer to the light. The ink was dark, almost black. Too black for ordinary ink. Or perhaps that was just my paranoia, which now suspects every detail. But when I noticed the smell of the paper, I knew: It wasn't just paranoia. The paper smelled of ash.

She opened the house she lived in. Not with a key. With sentences.

I swallowed hard and forced myself to continue reading, even though part of me longed to tear the page. Tearing it up is a childish gesture. He would have expected it. And he would have been pleased.

You've seen what a circle can do. You've seen what a choir can do. Now you'll see what a book can do.

I thought of Mary's last lines. Of "don't read alone." Of the feeling that the diary wasn't just content, but a clue. A path.

At the bottom it said:

Open the folder.

No "please". No "if you wish". Just this matter-of-fact stage direction.

I picked up the small leather case. It was closed with a thin strap. I untied it. Inside was no document in the usual sense. There was a bundle of small sheets of paper, loose, as if someone had hastily stuffed them in. And among the sheets: a small key.

The key was made of bone.

Not large, not ornate. It was narrow, smooth, and had the matte color of something that had lain in the dark for a long time. The teeth of the key were finely crafted. No rough sawing. This was craftsmanship. And suddenly I understood why he had given it to me: A key is not just a tool. It is an invitation to open something that is better left closed.

I didn't take the key. I looked at it as if it would move if I touched it.

The loose sheets in the folder were labeled. Not with sentences. With sketches.

Floor plans.

A house. Several floors. Rooms, stairs, doors. And one detail made my stomach churn: This wasn't just any house. It was the house where Mason had lived. I recognized the layout of the rooms, the narrow hallway, the cellar room with the circle, the rooms upstairs.

On one of the sheets of paper, a room was marked and outlined in red. Next to it was a word:

WINDOW.

Another sheet showed a different floor plan. Not the Mason house. A larger building. I didn't recognize it immediately. But then I saw the long central hall, the side wings, the branching rooms, and in one corner, an area marked with a cross.

An insane asylum, I thought. Or something like that. And next to the cross, in the same hand, was written:

RENFIELD.

My breath caught in my throat. Renfield wasn't just a madman who had stumbled into these things by chance. He was part of a map. A junction. A door.

I turned the page. A third floor plan: a building with a series of small rooms, close together, and a large room in the center. I didn't recognize the structure, but there was a note in the margin:

WHITECHAPEL – THE CHOIR.

And below, in smaller print, almost like a commentary:

Every room has a tone. Every tone has a door.

I put the leaves back. This wasn't a gift. This was a plan. A plan that showed me these places weren't random. They were chosen, connected. A network.

I looked again at the bone key. It lay there like a small, silent joke. The man with the umbrella spoke of doors. Mary wrote of doors. Renfield whispered of doors inside me. And now there was a key, as if the world were telling me: You can either pretend there are no doors, or you can learn to open them before someone else goes through them.

I suddenly heard a noise in the house.

Not the scratching. Not the footsteps.

A faint clinking sound, as if glass had moved.

I turned my head. A faint light shone from the study upstairs, even though I hadn't left the lamp on. A thin glow, pressing like a finger through the crack in the door.

I didn't go upstairs right away. I stood still and listened.

More clinking. Then a faint, barely perceptible humming, as if someone very far away were singing a melody. A sound not loud enough to be a melody, but loud enough to realize it didn't belong to my house.

I took the key made of bone.

It felt warm. Not cold. Warm, as if it had been held in a hand.

I went upstairs, quickly but not running. The door to the study was ajar, even though I had closed it. That was the first proof that one no longer makes decisions alone in this house.

I pushed open the door.

The room wasn't ransacked. Nothing was overturned. No dramatic signs. It was worse: everything was tidy. Too tidy. The desk was clear, the papers were stacked, the diary was no longer on the table.

I immediately looked at the mirror on the wall.

He was no longer the same.

The surface had become clearer. The edges, which had previously been opaque, suddenly appeared smooth. And in the mirror, I saw the room. Myself. The desk.

And there, on the desk reflected in the mirror, lay Mary's diary.

It wasn't there in the actual room.

I moved closer until my nose was almost touching the glass. My reflection did the same. But my hand, when I raised it to touch the glass, was not visible in the mirror.

I pulled my hand back. A cold sensation tingled over my fingers, as if the glass had taken something away from me.

Then I saw it.

In the reflection, someone was sitting in my chair.

The chair was empty in the actual room.

The figure in the mirror wore a black coat. Her hat was pulled low. And she held an umbrella in her hand.

The man in the black coat, but not in the room. In my mirror.

He slowly raised his head, and this time the face wasn't mine. It was... smooth. Too smooth. As if it wasn't finished yet.

Then the lips moved, and although I heard no sound, I understood the sentence because it went straight into my mind:

Don't read alone.

I felt my heart beat hard once, as if it had kicked an invisible door.

And outside, somewhere in the city, the fog answered without needing a voice.

The smell of iron

The sentence wasn't just hanging in the air. It was stuck to the thoughts.

I stood before the mirror, so close that my breath left a trace on the glass, which vanished instantly, as if the surface tolerated nothing human. Behind me, the room was silent, too silent, and in the mirror sat the figure in the black coat like a host who had already decided who would be visiting. The umbrella in his hand, in this setting, seemed not like an object, but like a key to another order.

I forced myself not to look away. Looking away was a kind of surrender, and I had learned by then that surrender is not the end of the game, but the beginning of a new chapter written by the other party.

My hand lay at my side, and in my palm I could still feel the warmth of the bone key. A warmth that didn't belong. Warmth is something that's alive. Bones should be cold. And yet there was this telltale feeling, as if the key had briefly rested in a hand before falling into mine.

I took a step back. The figure remained seated in the mirror. It didn't follow my movement with its body, only with what one had to call a face up there. The lips no longer moved. But I knew that the sentence hadn't disappeared. It hadn't even been spoken. It had been placed there, like a needle driven under the skin.

Don't read alone.

I slowly turned away from the mirror and looked at the desk. The box lay there, closed, as if innocent. Next to it was the leather folder with the floor plans, slightly open, as if I had just touched it. The diary wasn't there. I had carried it in my inside pocket, close to my chest. I had been certain it was with me. And now it was gone, as if someone had pulled it from my body without cutting me open.

I opened the inside pocket. Empty. Just fabric and the weight of my own stupidity.

That's when I smelled it.

Not immediately like a blow, but like something slowly creeping into the room, knowing it will eventually be noticed. A metallic smell, dry and sharp, that clung to the nose. Iron. You know it from old nails, from tools left too long in damp air. But you also know it from something else, and that's precisely what made it so unpleasant: the smell of blood when it's no longer warm, but has already begun to become part of the surroundings.

I stood still, not searching for the source with my eyes. Eyes are easily deceived. I searched by smell. I breathed shallowly, cautiously, like someone who knows that a deep breath might cost them something.

The smell didn't come from the study. It came from the hallway. From below.

The house wasn't just quiet. It was attentive.

I took the lamp from the table and lit it. The light was small, yellow, and it didn't make the room safer. It only made it more visible. Visibility is not safety. Visibility is merely the stage on which things happen.

In the mirror, I saw that the figure was still sitting in the chair. But something was different. The umbrella was no longer in his hand. It stood beside him, upright, as if he had set it down. This suddenly made the scene more domestic, and that was precisely the wrong thing to do. Domesticity is the mask that monsters like to wear because they know that people prefer to believe that it's all just a bad night.

I left the study and pulled the door shut behind me. Not completely. Just enough to leave a crack. A crack is an invitation, but also a way to keep things from being fully revealed. It was colder in the hallway. The smell of iron was stronger.

The steps creaked louder than usual this time, as if the house had decided to comment on my movements. I held the lamp so that the light fell on the floor in front of me, not on the walls. Walls can wait. The floor is where traces appear.

On the third step I saw the first dark spot.

It wasn't large. A dried drop, dark brown, almost black. I stopped and looked at it. Blood on wood doesn't look like blood on fabric. Wood absorbs, holds on, turns liquid into a memory.

Another drop lay one step lower. Then another.

One clue.

I followed her down, and with every step the smell became more pronounced, until it was no longer just in my nose, but in my throat. Iron. Dry. Unyielding.

Downstairs on the ground floor, the front door was closed. The hallway table where I had opened the envelope was still there. The leather folder was upstairs. But now there was something on the table that hadn't been there before.

A handkerchief.

White, delicate, too clean for this house, and yet it was permeated in the middle by a dark stain. I didn't lift it. I only saw how the stain had eaten its way into the fabric, like a flower you don't want as a gift.

Beside it lay a small object, glinting in the lamplight: a button. Black material, perhaps Bakelite, perhaps something else. It had been torn off, the threads still hanging from it, as if someone had dropped it in a hurry. A button belongs to a coat. And in this story, coats never simply belonged to coats.

I glanced at the front door. No scratching. No movement. Only the fog outside, which didn't penetrate through the crack in the door, as if it knew it already had enough rights in here.

The trail of blood didn't lead to the door. It led to the back of the house, to a place I rarely went because I had no business being there: to the small pantry, the storage room, to the door

that led to the cellar. I had always considered that cellar a utilitarian place. A place for coal, for old bottles, for things you don't need every day. Today it smelled like another world.

I walked down the corridor. The smell of iron became so strong at the cellar door that it almost seemed sweet. That's the cruel thing about blood: it's both life and waste, and the body recognizes both.

The cellar door was ajar.

I was sure it had been closed.

I placed the lamp on the floor, took the vial out of my pocket, and held it in my hand, not like a weapon, but as a reminder that I could do something, even if I didn't know if it would help. Then I placed my fingertips against the door and gently pressed it open.

The air I encountered was cold and damp. And it smelled of earth.

It was dark downstairs. The lamp's light cast a narrow cone onto the steps. The smell of iron rose from down there like breath that isn't breathing.

I went downstairs.

On the lower steps, I saw the trail more clearly: drops here and there, some smeared, as if someone had tried to hold on. On the wall was a handprint, dark and flat, as if a hand had pressed against the wallpaper before slipping. Fingerprints, visible in the lamplight, five long lines, and I had to force myself not to think about whether those fingers had really belonged to a human hand.

There was something at the foot of the stairs.

A book.

Brown leather, worn, the edges rounded. Mary's diary.

It wasn't lying properly. It lay as if it had been dropped. And around it was a thin ring of gray dust, as if someone had indicated a circle without completing it. An unfinished border.

I stopped, a step away. The smell of iron was strongest down here. And now I knew why: next to the diary, half in shadow, lay a small rat. It was dead. Not squashed. Not bitten. It lay there as if someone had blown its life out. Its fur was wet, and around its mouth was a dark stain that glimmered dully in the light.

I glanced over at a corner of the cellar that I couldn't see into because the light didn't reach far enough. It was even darker there than the room should have allowed. And out of that darkness came a faint sound.

Do not scratch.

One drop.

Slowly, patiently.

It's as if fluid is falling from a wound somewhere above, a wound that isn't healing because it doesn't need to.

I didn't bend down to read the diary. Not yet. Instead, I picked up the lamp from the floor and directed the light into the corner.

A section of wall appeared in the cone of light. And in front of it, leaning against the wall, sat something that at first looked like a sack. Then I recognized the shape of a person. A man, slumped over, his head tilted to the side. His shirt was dark in the front, soaked through. And even from a distance, I could see the reddish-brown hue that absorbed the light.

His eyes were open.

They weren't staring. They were simply open, as if he hadn't had time to close them.

I took a step closer, and at that moment I heard behind me, at the top of the stairs, a very faint noise that made the skin on the back of my neck feel tight.

A gentle tap.

Like the tip of an umbrella on wood.

I froze, not because I was afraid of dying, but because I knew that movement in such moments is often interpreted as agreement. The typing returned, quietly, patiently, at precisely the same intervals as in Whitechapel. No one types like that when they're nervous. This typing was clockwork.

I held the lamp still so that the beam of light didn't flicker. A flickering light makes shadows come alive, and I didn't want the cellar to gain any more life than it already had.

The typing above stopped, a heartbeat eluded me. Then I heard another sound: the soft rustle of fabric, as if a coat were moving without the weight of a body beneath it. The smell of earth and iron grew a notch stronger, as if someone had opened the room like a drawer.

I didn't turn around. I forced myself to keep looking ahead, at the slumped man in the corner. He wasn't Mason. I knew that immediately. Mason was shorter, had a different face, different shoulders. This man was broader, wore a vest that must once have been tidy. A dockworker. Or someone from the warehouse. And as I moved closer, I noticed the detail that made my stomach clench: a small clipboard hung from his vest, broken, the pencil still attached. The dockworker.

His lips were slightly parted. Something dark clung to his teeth, not blood, more like dirt. And around his neck were two small puncture wounds, barely visible, but I knew them so well by now that I would have recognized them even in the fog. Puncture wounds that don't kill like a knife. Puncture wounds that take.

I knelt beside him, carefully, without taking my eyes off the stairs. My knees touched the damp floor, and I felt the dust of ash that clung to everything down here. The man was dead. I didn't just see it. I smelled it. The smell of iron wasn't fresh. It had already begun to mingle with the earth. A smell that says: This can no longer be saved, only understood.

I placed two fingers on his carotid artery, not out of hope, but out of habit. Nothing. Cold. And yet... there was something there. A tension in the skin around the punctures, as if it hadn't simply been torn, but worked on. As if someone hadn't just bitten, but written.

Behind me, above, the tapping started again. Once. Then again. And then I heard a footstep on the top step. Not Renfield's nervous tiptoeing. Not Mason's hesitation. A step so light it barely touched the step, and yet I heard it. The house heard it. The cellar heard it.

I pulled the vial from my pocket, held it in my hand, my thumb on the cork. I thought of the circle of ashes in Whitechapel, of the rift I had created. Of the choir's brief silence. If there was a circle here, I had to find it. Or I had to draw one myself.

My gaze fell upon Mary's diary, lying at the foot of the stairs. The thin rim of ash around it was no accident. It was unfinished, yes, but it was there. As if someone had started to mark a boundary, and then decided that I would finish it in my head.

I didn't go to the diary. I stretched out my arm, just far enough to reach it without turning my back to the stairs. I took it by the cover and pulled it towards me, slowly, so that it wouldn't scrape the floor. The ash around the edge was smudged, and at the moment that happened, I heard a soft, barely audible hiss, as if I had touched something that didn't want to be touched.

The typing above stopped.

I didn't open the diary immediately. I just held it. Human leather beneath my fingers, a weight that suddenly felt like an anchor. But when I opened it, a small object fell out and clattered to the floor.

A key.

Not the bone key. This one was made of metal, old, rusty, and attached to it was a small paper tag, like the kind you find on hotel keys. The tag bore a number.

17.

And below, in Mary's handwriting, hastily:

Not down below. Not alone.

I felt my throat tighten. Mary had known her diary would end up down here. Or she'd feared it. And this key... was it salvation? Or just another door?

I held the lamp higher and let the light sweep across the cellar. I could see more now: there were gray streaks on the wall, as if someone had painted with ash. On the floor lay small, irregular mounds of earth, not enough for a box, more like scraps you'd drop as you walked. And in the middle of the room, exactly where you'd normally leave space in a cellar, was a circle of ash. Not as neat as in Whitechapel, but distinct. And inside the circle lay something that didn't belong in the cellar.

A piece of fabric.

Black.

A scrap of coat, as if someone had torn it off. And at the edge of the fabric hung an empty buttonhole.

I thought of the button upstairs in the hallway. A missing button. A broken thread. Two pieces of a whole, scattered like clues, so that I could make the connection myself.

I looked at the circle of ash. The circle wasn't intact. It had a break, like a mouth that can't quite close. That's exactly where the trail of blood I'd seen on the stairs led. That's exactly where the man from the harbor had apparently dragged himself before collapsing into the corner. As if he'd been trying to reach or leave the circle.

I took a step closer to the circle without going inside. And at that moment I smelled it again, stronger than before: iron. But no longer just the iron of blood. A second metallic smell, sharper, like freshly polished metal.

A knife, I thought. Or something that loves metal.

I heard a soft, shallow inhalation behind me, at the top of the stairs. No one breathes like that when they're tired. It sounded like a smell taking in air.

Then a voice came, not loud, but close enough to touch the back of the neck.

"You see now," she said.

I closed my eyes for a heartbeat, not out of fear, but to collect my thoughts. Then I opened them again and said, without turning around: Why here? Why my house?

A quiet, almost amused sound, not quite laughter. Because you believe your house belongs to you.

I felt the cold flowing down from the stairwell, as if it were invisible water. The tapping of the umbrella came again, directly behind me, no longer up above. Behind me.

I turned around now.

At the foot of the stairs stood the man with the umbrella. Not the coat delivery man. Not my reflection. The real one, insofar as one can speak of realness in his case. His face was once again that ordinary, hard-to-remember face. But his eyes were clear. Too clear. And the umbrella in his hand wasn't closed. It was only open a crack, as if he were checking whether the cellar offered enough space for him.

He looked at me and said: You stole something from me.

I replied: I only took what you left here.

He inclined his head. No. They have broken the circle. They have broken the chorus. They have disrupted my order.

I held the vial tightly. I said: You have killed a man.

He glanced briefly at the dead dockworker in the corner, as if examining an object about to be replaced. Then he said: He's seen too much.

I said: And Mary?

His eyes rested on me again. "Mary wrote," he said calmly. "Mary opened the door."

I felt my stomach clench. The key, numbered 17, lay on the floor, gleaming in the lamplight. A hotel room. A room. A door.

I looked up and said: Where is she?

He took a step closer, but stopped before the circle of ashes. He still respected it. Or he respected that I respected him. He said: She is where the windows don't open.

Then he lowered the umbrella, and the tip touched the ground.

The ashes in the circle began to tremble.

The trembling in the ashes didn't come suddenly. It grew, like a sound you initially dismiss, then fill the entire room. The grains rose and fell, as if something beneath them were breathing. And I understood with a cold, clear thought: The circle wasn't just a boundary. It was a connection.

The man with the umbrella stood in front of the line, the tip of the umbrella on the ground as if conducting electricity. His face was calm, his gaze fixed on me. No haste. No triumph. Rather the patience of a doctor who knows that the patient will eventually take the medicine.

I looked at the key with the number 17. It lay there like a bright point in the darkness. A coordinate. A direction. And the certainty grew within me that this key had not belonged to Mary. It belonged to me. It had been written for my hand, just as Mary's diary had been written for my gaze.

I picked up the key without taking my eyes off the man. He didn't react. He didn't need to. Everything I did was factored into his plan. Nevertheless, I sensed that picking up the key shifted something. Not in the room. Within me. A small step from observer to actor.

I said: They want to move me.

He replied: I want you to arrive.

Arrival. This word was dangerous because it sounds so harmless. You arrive at a friend's house, at family's, at a warm light. But here, arrival meant: at a door you'd be better off not knowing.

The ash vibrated more intensely. The circle no longer resembled powder, but a surface on the verge of boiling. The fragment of the cloak within it lifted at one corner, as if a breeze had caressed it. There was no breeze. Not down here.

I held the bottle up, not threateningly, but visibly. I said: You respect circles. Why?

His eyes narrowed slightly, and I knew I'd hit a rough patch. He replied: Because circles are both protection and a trap. It depends on who draws the circle.

I thought of Whitechapel, of the rift I had created, of the moment the whispers collapsed. I thought of the ashes around Mary's diary, unfinished. Perhaps Mary had tried to draw a circle. Perhaps she hadn't been able to complete it.

I took a step towards the circle's edge, so close that its coldness crept into my shoes. I said: What if I completed the circle now?

He raised an eyebrow, almost imperceptibly. Then he said: "Then prove that you have learned."

I've learned something. Again, that almost friendly vocabulary. He spoke like a teacher, and I had to force myself not to slip into that role. In such a lesson, the student is always the material.

I didn't kneel. Instead, I took the lamp and placed it at the edge of the circle so that the light illuminated the ash more clearly. Then I took a small pinch of salt from my pocket, which I always carried with me out of habit, an old practice ridiculed in London and taken seriously in some parts of Europe. I didn't carry it for magic. I carried it because salt creates a boundary that even a skeptic can see.

I didn't sprinkle the salt inside the circle. I sprinkled it outside, precisely along the broken line, where the ash line was missing. A thin, light line, barely more than a thread.

The man watched, and I noticed that he couldn't tear his gaze away from the movement. As if the idea of a second line intrigued him. Or as if it made him uncomfortable.

When the salt touched the ground, something happened that I hadn't expected: the ash at the edge receded slightly, as if it had been burned. Not much. But enough to confirm that salt here is not just a symbol.

The man said quietly: You are old-fashioned.

I replied: I am being careful.

The trembling of the ash in the circle subsided. Not gone, but muffled, as if a hand had been placed on a lid. The scrap of cloak sank flat to the ground again. The smell of iron remained, but it was less acrid.

The man lifted his umbrella ever so slightly. The tip lifted from the ground. He didn't move any closer. He stood there, still, and I sensed that this moment cost him something. Not pain. Control. He had to accept that I had altered part of the stage.

I seized the moment.

I picked up Mary's diary, held it up, and said: You've brought it back to me. Why?

He didn't answer immediately. Then he said: Because it should be read.

I said: From me?

His eyes briefly flickered to the reflection of my face in the damp cellar wall, and I had the feeling he considered my question too small. He said: From the one who is leaving.

I felt the word "goes" take root within me. It was another stage direction: You go. You leave the cellar. You take the key. You look for room 17. You find a door that doesn't open.

I said: You don't need me. You have Renfield. You have the man in the black coat. You have the fog. You have a choir.

He replied: I don't need you. But I want you to be there when London understands.

London understands. As if the city were a head that eventually turns and says: Ah, I see. And in this "ah, I see," people disappear.

I looked again at the dead man in the corner. His gaze was open, and I wondered what he had seen before he died. Perhaps he hadn't seen much at all. Perhaps only the moment an umbrella opened over him.

I stood up slowly, holding the key tightly. Then I said: I'm leaving now.

He nodded. Of course.

I said: But not because you want it. Because I want it.

He didn't smile. But something in his gaze betrayed that he enjoyed this play on words. Building words, he had written. Opening words.

I walked past him, not close, not challenging him. I walked along the side, where the cellar was darkest, and felt the cold briefly tug at my sleeve, as if trying to hold me back. The man made no move to stop me. He didn't need to. The key in my hand was his leash.

As I climbed the stairs, I heard the typing behind me again. No longer patient. No longer steady.

A faster rhythm, as if someone were counting.

Upstairs in the hallway, the air was warmer. The smell of iron was still there, but now it seemed to be coming more from me than from the house. Blood isn't just a liquid. It's a memory the body doesn't forget.

I closed the cellar door behind me and bolted it. Wood against metal. A small, childish act. But sometimes you need childish acts to avoid living in an adult nightmare.

In the study, the mirror was still. The figure in the black coat was no longer reflected in it. Or perhaps it was so deeply embedded in the surface that I could no longer see it. The box lay closed on the table. It no longer vibrated. As if it were content.

I sat down, picked up Mary's diary, and flipped through the last page again. Then I noticed something I had overlooked before: In the corner of the last page, tiny, almost like a speck of dust, was a number.

17.

Mary had written it before she disappeared. She had passed it on to me. Not just the Master.

That changed everything and nothing at the same time. It meant: Mary didn't just open the door. She also tried to steer. Perhaps her writing wasn't just a lure, but also a form of resistance. A small clue in a web.

I put the key away, took my coat and hat, and left the box on the table. It was too dangerous to take with me, and too dangerous to leave here. But at the moment I only had two kinds of danger, and I had to choose one.

Outside, the fog was still there, as if it hadn't rested for a single minute. The streetlights cast yellow islands into a sea of gray. I stepped out onto the street and closed the door behind me.

And as I walked, I felt the key in my pocket become warm, as if it remembered my body heat.

Room 17, I thought.

A door that's waiting for me.

The carriage at midnight

Midnight in London has its own distinct sound. Not silent, not loud, but muted, as if the city were pulling its voices into its coat collar. The fog had become less a weather phenomenon and more a law. It hung between the lampposts like a heavy thought, unwilling to be fully thought through. And somewhere within it, invisible yet distinctly palpable, the number lay in my pocket like a stone.

17.

I didn't go straight to the nearest cab. I took two detours, turned down streets I didn't need, and emerged again as if I'd gotten lost. Not to shake off my pursuer, but to find out if there was anyone at all, someone more than my own, now well-honed, vigilance. The fog didn't answer this question with proof, but with hints. A shadow that lingered too long on a corner. A footstep that fell silent too soon. A scent of damp fabric that appeared suddenly and vanished the next moment.

I stopped by a lamppost and pulled out the key. It didn't shine. It absorbed the light. The small tag with the number 17 clung to it like an excuse you can't shake. A hotel key, you could have said. A room. A door. Something you can lock.

And yet: He was warm.

I put it back in my pocket, as if to prevent him from seeing anything of me. Then I raised my hand.

A carriage emerged from the mist, not slowly, not hastily. It was simply there, as if it had been waiting behind the nearest lamppost all along. The horse snorted, and that sound was the first thing that sounded truly alive that night. The coachman sat high, his hat pulled low, his face in shadow. I didn't give him an address. I only said: To the house where room seventeen is.

The coachman didn't answer with a question. He nodded, as if I had placed an order he was already expecting. That was the first clear indication that I wasn't just traveling, but was being led.

I got in. The door closed with a dull thud, and the carriage began to move. Inside, it smelled of old leather and cold smoke, but underneath that was that subtle, sweetish whiff that I could no longer dismiss as mere coincidence. It was faint, as if it were just a residue. Or a trace.

The wheels rolled. The fog pressed against the windows as if it wanted to ride along. I looked out, but in this gray, London was nothing more than a succession of lights and black shapes. On a clear night, you can see where you're going because the city reveals itself. In fog, nothing reveals itself. You drive and hope the road is still the same.

After a while, the coachman said without turning around: You are late.

Late for what? I asked.

He didn't answer immediately. Then he said: For those who want to disappear, it's never late. For those who are found, it's always too early.

I felt my fingers grip the fabric of my coat. His words weren't the usual superstition of a man who'd heard too many stories. It sounded more like something memorized because it was part of a role.

I said: Who told you where to go?

The coachman chuckled softly. Not a joyful laugh. More like a sound that said: You're asking questions that aren't worth a penny here.

The road narrowed. I didn't recognize Whitechapel, but I felt it. The houses were closer together, the air smelled of sewage and coal sludge, and the city's whispers were closer to my skin. We weren't driving through the middle of the market, not along the main thoroughfares, but through side streets that felt as if they had been built solely to keep us out of sight.

Then we stopped.

Not abruptly. The coachman gently pulled on the reins, as if calming the horse. The carriage stopped, and the fog pressed against the door from the outside.

I opened the window a crack. Immediately, cold, damp air rushed in, and with it the smell of iron. Not strong, not fresh. More like a place that had recently seen something that didn't want to stay.

Where are we? I asked.

The coachman said: There.

Just that one word. And then I heard something that made me lift my head.

A hoofbeat.

Not from the horse pulling my carriage. A second horse. And then the soft roll of a wagon, somewhere in the fog, without a lantern, without any identifiable sound. A second carriage, unseen, but whose presence felt through the ground.

I pushed open the door and got out. The fog was so thick here that the lamppost above us looked like a tired eye. In front of me stood a building whose facade I could barely make out. Not large. Not ornate. A house that wanted to look as if it had always been there and had never had any reason to be noticed.

A sign hung beside the door, but it was opaque, the writing blurred. I stepped closer and just made out the remnant of a name. It could have been an inn. It could have been a boarding house. It was something that rented rooms. Rooms that came and went.

The coachman remained seated. He made no attempt to help me. He wasn't there to accompany me. He was there to deliver me.

I went to the door. Before I knocked, I looked down.

There was ash at the edge of the threshold. Not much. A thin semicircle. As if someone had started drawing a circle again, and then stopped, leaving me to complete it myself. I stepped over it.

It was warmer inside. The smell changed immediately: stale tea, wet clothes, a cold fireplace. An ordinary house. And yet, beneath it all, lay something else that wasn't ordinary: earth, very faintly. And that sweetish aroma, like flowers on a grave.

A woman sat behind a counter. She didn't look up when I entered. Her hands folded paper slowly, patiently, as if she had time that stood still. Beside her was a candle, burning despite the electric light hanging from the ceiling. The candle flickered, as if reacting to something only she could see.

I said: Room seventeen.

The woman raised her head. Her eyes were dark, but not empty. Awake. Too awake for this hour. She looked at me, and I immediately had the feeling that she didn't see me as a stranger, but as part of a routine.

"Are you alone?" she asked.

I replied: I have come.

She nodded as if I had given exactly the right answer. Then she opened a drawer without looking and placed a key on the counter.

A second key. The same label. 17.

I kept my key in my pocket. I wouldn't let her see that I already had one. Information is more valuable than money here.

I took the key she gave me and asked: Where is the resident?

The woman barely moved her mouth. "Resident," she repeated, as if savoring the word. "Some live. Some wait."

I said: Mary Harker.

A brief twitch crossed her face, so small that an inattentive person would not have noticed it. Then it was smooth again.

"She's upstairs," the woman said. "But don't knock. It's better if you're quiet. In this house, the doors listen."

I looked at her. Why are you letting me in?

She looked back, and there was something in her gaze that didn't suit an employee. It wasn't fear. It was more like... habit.

"Because you have the key," she said.

I went to the stairs. Every step on the wood was a small judgment. The banister was cold. On the first floor, the smell of iron was stronger, as if someone had been injured up there, or as if the smell itself were a clue.

A hallway. Doors to the left and right. No pictures on the walls. No carpets. Everything seemed as if the house had been deliberately stripped of its personality to make it easier to inject new elements.

I found the number 17 at the end of the corridor. The number wasn't painted on a sign, but carved into the wood, as if someone had written it with a knife. The cut was fresh.

I held the key to the lock, but I didn't put it in immediately. I listened.

No whispering. No footsteps. No scratching.

Just a sound, so faint you could almost mistake it for your own blood: a steady, gentle tapping from somewhere. Not from the room. Not from the hallway. As if an umbrella in another part of the house were touching the floor and counting.

I put the key in the lock.

It turned without resistance.

The door hadn't been locked. She had only pretended to be.

I placed my hand on the door handle, took a breath, and in that breath the smell of iron was so distinct that it became like a taste.

Then I pressed down the handle.

The door yielded as if it had been waiting for me to touch it. No squeak, no creak, nothing to betray the true age of this house. The handle felt cold, not like metal on a cold night, but like something that doesn't absorb heat, no matter how long you hold it. I pressed it down, stepped inside, and the smell of iron hit me so strongly that I had to hold my breath for a moment to keep from recoiling reflexively.

The room was small. Too small for the weight it bore. A bed, neatly made as if no one had ever slept in it. A chair by the window. A small table with a pitcher of water that looked as if it had never been used. And on the wall opposite the door, a mirror, larger than necessary, its surface clear, too clear. A mirror not for adjusting oneself. It was for being seen.

I stepped further inside. The door behind me remained open. Not by itself. I left it open. A closed door is an assertion. An open door is a possibility.

There was a notebook on the table.

Not Mary's diary. Another one. New, with a clean cover, as if it had been bought especially for this room. Next to it lay a pencil, neatly sharpened. As if someone had prepared the point before leading me here. I didn't pick it up. I only saw it. It was an invitation, a trap, or both.

Then I noticed the chair by the window.

A thin, gray scarf lay on the chair. And on the scarf lay something that glimmered dully in the lamplight: a hairband. Women wear hairbands, I thought. Mary. And as I thought that, I felt the idea instantly become a leash. Feelings here aren't just feelings. They're tools.

I went to the bed. Not out of curiosity, but because the smell of iron seemed to be coming from there. The duvet was smooth. Too smooth. No body had ever pressed against it. But at the edge of the sheet, where you don't see it right away, was a dark stain. Small, dry. Blood that someone had tried to hide, without understanding that blood always remains.

I didn't lift the blanket. I only pulled it back a finger's width, and underneath I saw something that momentarily stopped me from thinking, making me react: a series of scratch marks in the wood of the bed frame. Not deep, but numerous. As if someone had been working there with fingernails, again and again, out of fear, out of anger, out of the need to feel a boundary.

I sat up and turned to the mirror. I wanted to test the reflexes that had come to distrust me. The mirror showed the room. The bed. The table. The chair.

He pointed me out.

And he showed something else.

Behind me, reflected in the mirror, stood a woman at the window. I immediately turned around.

There was nobody at the window.

I turned back to the mirror.

The woman was still there. Her head was slightly bowed, as if she were looking outside, but the fog outside the window obscured the view. Her hair was dark, tied in a bun, and something shimmered at her neck, as if the lamplight were clinging to it. A thin strip, perhaps a collar. Perhaps... a trace.

Mary, I thought.

The woman in the mirror didn't move. And yet I had the feeling that she was breathing, even though I couldn't see a breath on the glass.

I stepped closer to the mirror. Slowly, without haste. If it was a projection, I didn't want to frighten it. And if it wasn't, I didn't want to show too quickly that it frightened me.

I said quietly: Mary?

There was no answer in the room. In the mirror, the woman slowly raised her head.

And when she turned her face, I didn't see Mary's face.

I saw a face that defied capture. Too smooth, too neat. Like a mask that hadn't yet decided whose face it would wear. Only the eyes were clear. They were dark and empty at the same time, as if they weren't there to see, but to be seen.

Then the woman's lips moved in the mirror, and although there was no sound in the room, I understood the sentence because it sat directly behind my forehead, like a stranger's finger.

Write.

The word wasn't in the room. It was inside me. And the moment it was there, the notebook on the table began to act like a magnet.

I forced my hands to stay still. I said aloud, more to myself than to her: No.

The woman in the mirror didn't smile. But her eyes changed. A tiny glimmer appeared, as if she had anticipated the reaction. Then she raised her hand and pointed, not at the notebook, but at the floor.

I followed the gaze.

On the wooden floor, directly in front of the mirror, lay a thin strip of ash. Another line, carefully drawn. And at the end of this line lay something small, easily overlooked: a piece of paper, folded as if torn from a book.

I knelt down, keeping the mirror in the corner of my eye. I carefully took the paper and unfolded it.

The handwriting wasn't the Master's elegant style. It was Mary's.

If you're reading this, you're already in the house.

I swallowed.

She had written as if she had sensed that someone would come after her. And she had written as if she knew that this person was not just an individual, but also part of a plan.

The paper continued:

They told me to write so he would come. But I wrote so you would come.

I felt a brief prick, something one might call hope, if hope weren't so dangerous here. Mary hadn't just obeyed. She had turned the call on its head. Perhaps.

Another sentence:

Count the steps you take when you leave. Not the ones going there. The ones coming back.

I frowned. Counting steps. A trick to avoid getting stuck in a loop. Or to realize you're no longer in the same place.

Then:

The metal key is not for this door.

My gaze involuntarily drifted to my bag. My own key, the rusty one with the number 17 on it. And the key the woman downstairs had given me, the same one. One was for this door. The other... for something else.

I continued reading:

There is a second door that is not visible until you smell what I smelled.

The smell of iron. Yes. That was it. The room didn't just smell of it. It was saturated with it.

The last thing Mary wrote was short, hurried, as if someone had looked over her shoulder:

When you see him, don't look away. But don't look directly at him. Look at him from the side.

A sentence like a riddle, but I understood immediately what she meant. You see things in the corner of your eye that disappear when you focus on them. Like stars. Like shadows. Like that which lives in the fog.

I put the paper away. Then I heard a noise behind me.

Not from the hallway. Not from the stairs.

From the bed.

A soft crackling sound, like wood giving way. And then a barely audible rustling, as if fabric were moving.

I turned slowly.

The bed was still tidy. But the blanket wasn't as smooth anymore. There was a small indentation, as if someone had just sat down on it. Or as if something had gained weight that hadn't been there before.

In the mirror I saw that the woman at the window was no longer standing there.

In the mirror, she now stood at the foot of the bed.

And behind her, in the mirror, was a second figure.

A black coat. An umbrella.

I felt the smell of iron suddenly become sharper, as if the blood in my veins were responding.

And then I heard it, right behind me, not in the mirror, not in my head.

A soft, polite scratching on the wood of the door, as if someone were knocking without using their knuckle.

The scratching at the door wasn't the sound of someone hesitating. It was the sound of patience. Three short strokes, then silence. As if someone were testing whether I was attentive enough to understand that they weren't knocking, but marking.

I stood between the bed and the mirror, the key in my pocket, Mary's note clinging to my chest like a second skin. I didn't force my gaze toward the door. Mary's words were clear: See it in the margin. So I kept the door in the corner of my eye and focused on what the room revealed to me without telling myself directly.

In the mirror, the woman stood at the foot of the bed. Behind her were her coat and umbrella. But the contours flickered. Not like a bad reflection, but like a scene unsure whether it should take place in this world.

I exhaled once, slowly, and said softly, without shouting, without pleading: Mary?

No answer. Not in the room, not in the mirror.

Instead, that word came back, the one that sits in your head like an order you don't sign.

Write.

The pencil on the table suddenly seemed brighter, as if reflecting light that wasn't there. I felt my fingers want to twitch. Writing is a movement that looks so harmless that you forget how powerful it is. A line. A word. And suddenly there's something there that wasn't there before.

I didn't go to the table.

I went to the window. Not to look out, because there was only fog outside. But to create a second boundary. I positioned myself so that my back was no longer directly in front of the

mirror. The smell of iron intensified with every movement. It was as if the room itself bled if you touched it wrong.

The woman at the counter had said: "In this house, the doors listen." That wasn't a saying. It was a description.

I placed my hand on the window frame. The wood was damp. And cold. The pane was fogged up on the inside, although I couldn't see any breath on it. I pulled the curtain aside a crack.

Fog. And in this fog, very close to the glass, hung the dark shape of an umbrella. Open. Without the person carrying it being visible.

I immediately let the curtain fall again, not abruptly, just decisively. He was outside, I thought. Or something pretending to be. And inside was the demand to write. The room was a clamp.

The scratching at the door started again, this time longer, like a fingernail being dragged across wood, slowly, with relish. And then I heard something that made me jump despite all my caution: the lock moved.

Not because someone turned the key. It sounded more like the metal inside was giving way, as if an invisible tongue had wrapped itself around it.

I took a step back from the window, toward the bed, and saw in the mirror how the woman's coat leaned forward. The umbrella, reflected in the mirror, tilted as if it were about to open. And as it tilted, I noticed something on the handle: a fine seam, like on a container. The umbrella wasn't just a symbol. It was an instrument.

Mary had written: The metal key is not for this door.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my own key, the rusty one I'd found down in the cellar. It was heavier than it should have been. I held it in my hand and felt its warmth, almost aliveness. Was the other key, the one the woman had given me, lying on the table in the hallway? Or in my pocket? I still had it. Two keys, same number, different purpose.

The door scraped once more, then there was silence. A silence that didn't soothe, but threatened. I knew something was about to happen. Not because I'm clairvoyant, but because that's how the house works: it sets a rhythm, and by the time you recognize it, it's already too late.

I went to the table, not to the notebook, but to the water jug. I picked it up, the water inside sloshed, and I smelled it immediately: the water smelled of metal. Iron. As if a coin had been left in it for too long. Or as if something else had been washed in it.

I didn't pour the water out. I took the jug with both hands and went to the line of ashes in front of the mirror. There, where Mary's note had been. There, where the line had begun as a trace. I held the jug over the ashes, hesitated for a moment, and then let the water run slowly onto the floor, not in a gush, but in a thin stream.

The water hit the ash and instantly formed a dark, grey paste. A smear, a slurry that no longer resembled a clean line. And the moment the line lost its sharpness, the reflection flickered.

The woman at the foot of the bed flinched as if I had struck her. The coat behind her momentarily lost its shape, becoming a formless shadow. The umbrella in the mirror wobbled as if someone had knocked it from their hand.

The word "write" in my head grew louder, more aggressive. Not as a sound, but as a pressure. As if someone were pressing against my forehead from the inside.

I pushed the pitcher aside, took the small bottle from my pocket, and squirted a thin stream along the now mushy ashes. It hissed, and the scent cut through the room like a blade. The air flickered as if a candle were held in a draft.

The scene collapsed in the mirror for a heartbeat. The chair by the window was empty again. The woman was gone. The coat was just fabric. The umbrella lay back on the chair in the middle of the room, as if he had never typed.

I used the heartbeat.

I flung open the door and stepped into the hallway.

It was darker outside. The hallway light flickered. And the smell of iron was stronger here than in the room. No longer just a trace. Source.

At the end of the hall stood the woman from behind the counter. She held a candle in her hand, even though there were electric lights above. Her face was calm, but her eyes were wide.

She said: They disturbed it.

I said: Where is Mary?

The woman lifted the candle slightly. The light fell on the wall beside her, and I saw something there that took my breath away: a dark streak running along the wallpaper, as if someone had run a bloody hand over it. And below, on the floor, lay small drops leading downwards, towards the stairs.

"Room seventeen is not the end," the woman said softly. "It's just the room where you learn how to hear."

I heard footsteps. Not from below. From above.

A slow, patient walk, as if someone lived in this house.

I looked up. In the darkness of the stairs, I saw a silhouette.

Black coat. Hat. And in his hand... something that briefly caught the candlelight: the tip of an umbrella.

I remembered Mary's sentence: See him in the margin.

So I didn't stare at the silhouette. I looked at the edge of the steps, at the shadows cast by the candlelight. And in those shadows, I saw that the silhouette wasn't taking a step like a person.

She glided.

The woman next to me whispered: Don't go back.

I said: I'm not going back.

And I went down the stairs, away from what was sliding up above, away from room 17, but not away from the number. For in my pocket lay the key, warm as a living animal, and I knew now what Mary had meant: The key is not for this door.

Downstairs, in the entrance area, the carriage was waiting.

When I stepped out, she was standing there exactly like a carriage that has never left. The coachman looked at me as if he hadn't waited a minute, but had only blinked.

"Where to now?" he asked.

I pulled out the key, looked at the 17, and said, without really knowing whether I was speaking the words or whether they were being pulled out of me:

To the second door.

The coachman nodded. Of course.

The carriage started moving, and behind us, in the house, I heard a final sound through the fog.

A gentle tap.

It's as if someone is counting how many steps I take.

A shadow in the mirror

The carriage moved as if it already knew where it was going. The horse no longer snorted nervously, but in a calm, steady rhythm that was more unsettling to me than any shying. The fog swallowed the facades of the houses, turning signs into blind spots and intersections into possibilities that shifted at the last moment. I sat inside as if in a moving cell, smelling of leather, cold ash, and a hint of sweet earth, and tried not to let my thoughts become too loud.

The key with the number 17 lay in my hand. Warm. As if it weren't made of metal, but of a piece of flesh that had been carried in a pocket for too long. The warmth wasn't comforting. It was a sign that something was reacting to me.

The coachman said nothing more. He didn't need sentences. His silence was a kind of service, and I had the feeling that every word I spoke in that carriage would be written down somewhere, even if no paper was in sight.

We drove for a long time. Or a short time. Fog makes time seem like a bad story: you jump from scene to scene without knowing what happened in between. I looked out the window, but outside there was only gray and the occasional flicker of a streetlamp. Once, in that flicker, I thought I saw a man at the side of the road, black coat, hat pulled low, motionless. I blinked, and he was gone. Maybe he was never there. Maybe he was already everywhere.

The sound that remained with me was the rolling of the wheels. And beneath it, like a second layer, I sometimes heard a tapping sound that didn't match the wheels. A soft, metallic settling on stone. Not constantly. Just enough so that I couldn't dismiss it as my imagination.

The smell of iron still lingered in my nostrils. Not fresh, not bloody, more like a memory you can't shake, even after washing your hands. The dead man in the cellar. Mary's note. The mirror in room 17. The smooth mask in the glass. The word "write," imprinted on my skin like a stamp.

I pulled Mary's scrap of paper from my pocket and read it again in the dim light filtering through the carriage window. Count your steps when you go out. Not the ones going out. The ones coming back. I hadn't counted them. Or I'd counted them and forgotten. It didn't matter. The house hadn't let me leave because I wanted to. It had let me leave because it wanted me to move on.

The carriage slowed down. The rolling of the wheels became gentler. Then it stopped.

The coachman didn't open the small hatch between us. He simply said, in the same matter-of-fact voice as before: Here we are.

I looked out.

A building emerged from the fog, wider than the boarding house, but not ostentatious. It looked like a house that had decided years ago to be inconspicuous. No large windows, rather narrow openings. The entrance was recessed, as if the facade protected it. And above the door hung a sign that gleamed in the fog, as if someone had just wiped it clean.

A hotel. Or something that pretended to be one.

I got out. The air outside was colder, damper, and it no longer smelled of Whitechapel. It smelled of stone, of old smoke, of a place where many people had passed without leaving a trace. The fog pressed against the facade as if it wanted to get in, but it looked as if it hesitated just before the door. As if there were a boundary there that even it respected.

The front door was slightly ajar.

I stood there and listened. No whispering. No scratching. Just the hum of a lamp somewhere inside and the distant dripping of water, as if the house had a leak it didn't want to fix.

I entered.

The heat inside was dry. No fireplace, more like heated air, which made everything a little dusty. A reception desk stood to the right, behind it a bell that could be rung. No one was to be seen. Mirrors hung on the wall. Several of them. Three, in different sizes, as if someone

had tried to make the room appear larger. But these mirrors didn't make it larger. They made it smaller.

I walked slowly across the floor. The carpet muffled my footsteps. The smell here was different: no iron, no earth. Instead, something else, almost clinical, like freshly mopped tiles. Too clean. As if this place wanted to prove that nothing ever happens here. Places that need to prove something are the most dangerous.

A book lay on the counter. The guestbook. It was open, and a fountain pen lay beside it, placed as if someone had just put it down. The nib pointed towards me.

Write, I thought, and felt the word immediately return like a pressure against my forehead. Not aloud. Not as a voice. More like an impulse.

I ignored it. I didn't pick up the pen. Instead, I looked at the open guestbook without touching it. The last line was already filled in.

A. van Helsing

Room 17

The date was written next to it. Today's date.

It wasn't my handwriting. And yet it was my name, neat, tidy, as if someone had taken care to write it correctly. For a moment, I felt an absurd urge to laugh because it was so polite. They had registered me before I had even arrived. As if I were a reservation. As if my life were a room being prepared.

I looked up at the mirrors on the wall.

I saw myself in the middle mirror. Coat, hat, I didn't have the box with me, only the key. My face was tense, my eyes alert. Everything normal enough, if you ignore the circumstances.

I saw something different in the right-hand mirror.

Not immediately. At first, just a darker stripe in the background where there should have been only the wall. I turned my head slightly so that the right mirror remained in the corner of my eye. Mary was right: you only see some things at the edges.

The dark line became clearer. It wasn't on the wall. It was behind me. A contour that existed in the mirror, but not in the room.

A coat. Black.

I didn't turn around. I didn't stare directly at it. I let the image grow by not feeding it. And the longer I looked in the mirror, the clearer the outline became. A hat. A shoulder. And in the hand... an umbrella, its tip touching the ground.

A soft tapping sound.

I didn't hear it in the room. I heard it in the mirror. And yet the carpet beneath my feet vibrated ever so slightly, as if the sound were taking on a second form.

I was breathing shallowly.

The figure raised its head in the mirror.

The face was at first just a shadow. Then it slipped into the light of the reception lamp, and I saw that it wasn't my face. It wasn't Mary's either. It was a face that wanted to look like it belonged to a man you might forget on a London street. But the eyes were too calm. Too patient. And the gaze didn't pass by me. It passed right through me.

The figure's mouth opened in the mirror, and although no sound could be heard in the room, a sentence formed within me, like ink soaking into paper:

You're late.

I felt a sting in the hand holding the key. As if the metal had briefly bitten me. I looked down. The key wasn't just warm anymore. It was hot.

And at that moment, the bell on the counter clanged, without anyone having touched it. A small, clear tone that sounded far too loud in an empty reception room.

A man emerged from a door in the background. He was dressed like a hotelier: vest, shirt, impeccably groomed. His hair was neatly arranged. His smile was the kind of smile you see in hotels when you assume the guest is paying.

"Good evening, Mr. van Helsing," he said, as if we had arranged to meet. "Room seventeen?"

I didn't answer immediately. I continued looking in the mirror. The figure in the coat had vanished, as if it had never existed. Only my own reflection remained, and that didn't make it any better. It only made it lonelier.

I turned to the man. His smile remained. His eyes were alert, but not curious. More as if he knew exactly how this conversation would unfold.

I said: Who registered me?

He tilted his head slightly, as if the question were unusual. "You yourself," he said kindly.

I pointed at the book. That's not my handwriting.

He nodded as if it were nothing. Some guests don't remember it later, he said. The fog makes you tired.

I felt the smell of iron suddenly return, very faintly, as if someone had opened a door in my mind. I said: Where is the room?

The man gestured politely toward the stairs. Upstairs. End of the hall. Number seventeen. He paused, and in that pause his friendliness was a touch too perfect. Then he added: You've stayed there before.

I gripped the key tighter. My fingers hurt. I said: I was never here.

The man's smile remained, but his eyes twitched. Then he said softly: Yes.

And behind him, in the mirror on the left wall, I saw the dark stripe again. Just for a moment. Enough to know that I wasn't just being watched. I was being positioned.

I went to the stairs. The steps were carpeted, which muffled every creak. That made it worse. You can be suspicious of a creaking house. A house that remains silent while you go upstairs is a house that listens.

Upstairs, the hallway was long and straight. Doors to the right and left, all closed. No pictures, no plants, nothing to suggest life. Only at the end of the hallway hung a large mirror, positioned so that you could see yourself no matter which way you walked.

I walked towards him, and in the mirror I walked towards myself.

Just before I reached the mirror, I saw it at the edge.

Behind my reflection stood the man in the black coat again.

This time the umbrella didn't tap. This time he held the umbrella still, as if the counting was over.

And suddenly the hallway smelled of iron.

The smell of iron was like a sentence cut short mid-word. You only really notice it once it's there, and then it's everywhere. In the hallway, which just moments before had smelled of carpet dust and stale warmth, it suddenly hung on my tongue like a thin film. I stopped, not because I wanted to suffocate, but because I needed to understand whether the smell was coming from the building or from the painting.

The man in the black coat stood behind me in the mirror. Not in the hallway. Not in the room. In the glass. And yet the cold on the back of my neck was real, as if he had laid his hand on me without touching me.

I didn't look directly at him. I looked at my own face in the mirror, at the lines around my eyes, at the tension in my forehead. And out of the corner of my eye, I watched as the dark figure tilted its head slightly.

Then he raised his umbrella.

Not to open it. To show it. Like someone demonstrating a tool that everyone knows about, but no one truly understands.

In the mirror, the tip of the umbrella glided slowly across the carpet, and although I heard no sound in the hallway itself, something vibrated inside me, a thin nerve, as if the sound had a second track that did not run through air, but through memory.

I took a step back, very slowly. In the mirror, the figure remained in place, as if it were not bound to space, but to the gaze.

I said quietly, without turning around: What are you?

My lips barely moved in the mirror. But the answer suddenly stood in my head like a foreign word that one doesn't want to speak.

A detour.

A detour, I thought. A mask, a messenger, a mirror. Mary's sentence in the diary now sounded like instructions read too late. Sometimes it's a messenger. Sometimes it's a mask. And sometimes it's a mirror.

I continued walking towards door number 17, which was at the end of the corridor. The key in my pocket was warm again, as if it had sensed my decision. The closer I got to the room, the stronger the iron smell became. And with every step, I had the feeling that the corridor was getting longer, as if someone had stretched it.

I stopped in front of the door. The number wasn't painted on. It was carved into the wood, deep, rough. Someone had gone to great lengths to ensure that this number wouldn't disappear, even if you painted over it.

I placed my hand on the handle. Cold. I didn't press it. I listened.

There was no sound behind the door. No breathing. No rustling. No whispering. A silence too perfect to be true.

In the mirror at the end of the hall, I saw myself standing there, my hand on the doorknob. The man in the black coat was still standing behind me. But now he was closer. Not in the hall itself, but in the reflection. The distance between us shrank, even though I hadn't moved.

That's the second door, I thought. Not visible until you smell what I smelled.

I closed my eyes for a moment and counted to three in my head. Not because three is a magic number, but because sometimes you have to set an artificial pace for yourself when one is being set outside.

When I opened my eyes again, the coat had disappeared in the mirror.

The relief lasted less than a second.

Because now there was something else in the mirror: not a figure, but a stain. A dark, blurry shadow, directly behind my head, as if someone had given me a second back of the head that didn't belong to me. And this stain wasn't empty. It had depth.

I suddenly felt the urge to turn around, but I didn't. I looked in the mirror and left the shadow at the edge.

Then I heard it.

A soft scratching sound.

Not at the door to room 17. Not anywhere in the hallway.

From the mirror.

A sound like a fingernail rubbing against glass.

I pulled my hand back from the handle. My fingers tingled as if the glass had touched them. The iron smell intensified, and this time it wasn't coming from the air. It was coming from my own memory. The dead man in the cellar. The trail of blood. The rat. The handprint. I saw it all, without wanting to.

I reached into my pocket, took out the key, and briefly held it up in the air, as if I could draw a line with it. Then I put it in the lock.

The key turned too easily.

Like in the boarding house. A door that wasn't locked. A door just waiting for you to think you've opened it.

I pressed down the handle and opened the door.

The room beyond was not the same as the one in Whitechapel. It was larger, cleaner, almost elegant. A bed, a desk, an armchair. A window with heavy curtains. And on the wall opposite the door, a mirror, even larger than the one in the hall, its surface so clear that it seemed as if it were not glass, but a hole.

There was a book on the desk.

Not Mary's diary. Not the notebook from the other room.

An album.

I went inside, didn't close the door behind me, and stood there trying to pinpoint the smell. Iron, yes. But also something else: perfume, old-fashioned, the kind some women wear to cling to bygone days. And underneath that, the smell of paper that had lain too long in a damp place.

I went to the desk and opened the album.

It was a photo album.

The first page showed a picture, black and white, slightly yellowed. A house. My house. Gower Street. On the next page, a picture of my study, taken from an angle that would only be possible if someone had been in the room while I was sitting there. I saw myself in the picture, my back to the photographer, bent over a letter.

I turned the page.

A picture of Whitechapel, the alleyway, the red curtain. A picture of the ash circle. And then a picture of me emptying the bottle.

I felt cold. Not just on the back of my neck. In my hands.

I flipped through the pages faster, and the pictures became more personal. A photo of my hand holding the bone key. A photo of my face, close, too close, as if the photographer had been standing right in front of me.

Then a photo came along that stopped me in my tracks.

Mary Harker.

She sat on a chair, her hands in her lap, her face pale but alert. A curtain hung behind her. It could have been Whitechapel. Or another room masquerading as Whitechapel. Her eyes weren't looking directly at the camera, but just past it, as if she saw something at the edge that she wasn't allowed to look at.

Below the photo was a line, in the elegant script that I had come to know all too well:

She's still writing.

I swallowed. My mouth was dry.

I turned the page.

The next photo showed Mary's neck. Close-up. Two small puncture wounds. And underneath, like a caption:

Iron is the smell of truth.

I heard a faint noise behind me in the room. Not footsteps. Not scratching. A rustling, like fabric sliding against fabric. I kept my eyes on the album, but I knew I was no longer alone.

In the mirror on the opposite wall, I saw the door. I saw myself at the desk. And behind me, in the mirror, stood the man with the umbrella.

This time not as a shadow. This time clear.

He held the umbrella closed, both hands on the handle as if it were a walking stick. He didn't smile. He looked at me as if checking to see if I was finally doing the right thing.

And in my mind there was another word, not as a request, but as a command, so calm that it sounds like reason:

Write.

I didn't close the album. I left it open because I knew that's exactly what he wanted: for me to look, for me to get angry, for me to want to do something.

I looked in the mirror, not directly at him, but at my own reflection. And in the edge of the mirror, I saw the man slightly raise the umbrella.

As if he were about to open it.

The umbrella didn't lift quickly in the mirror. It lifted the way you lift a lid to check if something underneath is still alive. I felt my shoulders tense, even though I wasn't moving. The man with the umbrella stood behind me in the mirror, clear, brazenly clear, as if he'd decided that games were no longer necessary for this moment.

"Write," I thought.

Not loud. Not as a voice. As a decision that wanted to feel like my own.

I kept my gaze fixed on my reflection. Mary was right. You mustn't look away, but you also mustn't feed it directly. In the periphery, in the corner of your eye, that's where truth often lives longer than in the center.

I said quietly: You need my letter.

His mouth barely moved in the mirror. And yet the answer came not as a sound, but as a coldness in his thoughts.

All I need is for you to believe it's yours.

My heart beat fast for a moment. Not from surprise, but because the sentence confirmed something I already knew and yet had hoped wasn't true. Words build. Words open. And when you get your hand to write, you don't just build sentences, you build doors.

I reached for the pencil on the desk.

Not to write.

I took it like a needle, held the tip to my fingertip, and pressed gently. A small pain, enough to anchor me to my own body. Blood emerged, a tiny drop. And immediately I smelled it again: iron. Fresh. Undeniable. A scent that is not borrowed.

I saw in the mirror how his eyes narrowed slightly. As if he hadn't liked the drop. Or as if he had. Both were possible, and both were bad.

I let the drop fall onto the open album.

He didn't clap. He absorbed himself into the paper, and the image beneath it darkened in one spot, as if the photograph had suddenly absorbed heat. That was the first moment I understood that this album was no ordinary album. It wasn't just observation. It was a container.

The man in the mirror raised the umbrella further. The fabric began to unravel, a crack, a shadow spreading. And in that crack, I didn't see the inside of an umbrella. I saw something that looked like darkness, but was too deep. Like a hole that led not into the room, but out of it.

I slid the album cover shut, quickly, not panicking, but decisively. The cover snapped shut, and at the same moment the screen in the mirror made a small, jerky movement, as if I had taken something away from it.

I said: You want me to write. So I write.

I immediately felt this pressure, this patient urge. He was satisfied. He was attentive.

I sat down.

Not because I wanted to submit, but because I wanted to control my posture. Those who stand are easier to push. Those who sit decide where their gaze goes.

I pulled the guestbook lying on the desk closer. It wasn't the album; it was a different book, smooth and new. Someone had planned ahead with this one too. I opened it to a blank page.

The man in the mirror paused. The screen was half open. He waited as if writing were the final part of his ritual.

I placed the pen against the wall.

And I didn't write what the pressure inside me wanted me to write.

I wrote a sentence of my own choosing, slowly, letter by letter, as if forcing my own brain into line:

I'm not writing for you.

Something happened when the last letters were on the paper.

Not in the room, but in the mirror. The man flinched slightly, as if I had spat in his face. The half-open umbrella vibrated. A soft, dry sound came from the gap in the screen, like fabric rubbing against bone.

The word "write" in my head became, for a moment, as loud as pain. Not as a sound, but as pressure lifting my forehead from within. I gritted my teeth and continued writing before the pressure took over my hand.

I wrote:

I see you.

And then:

I won't name you.

The pressure increased, but I held the pen firmly and forced my hand to write a fourth sentence, which didn't have to be beautiful, just true to me:

You are not a master. You are a need.

As I placed the period, it was as if the room momentarily lost its breath. The lamp flickered. A cool breeze brushed against the back of my neck, even though no window was open. And the man in the mirror slowly lowered his umbrella, as if I had disrupted his rhythm.

I noticed my hand trembling. Not from fear, but from exertion. It's harder to write against a thought than to fight a person. A person can bleed. A thought cannot.

I raised my gaze, still looking into the mirror, still looking at the edge.

The man with the umbrella was still standing there. But his features seemed less stable. As if he couldn't quite decide whether he was allowed to remain in that mirror. His face remained smooth, ordinary. But his eyes were no longer patient. They were... intrigued.

"You have learned," I suddenly thought to myself.

I didn't answer. Learning here is a trap. Whoever learns accepts that the other person is the teacher.

Instead, I reached for the album, picked it up, and held it so I could see it in the mirror. I said, "You have Mary."

The man in the mirror didn't react immediately. Then his mouth moved, and this time I almost heard a sound, like a syllable getting stuck in the glass.

She gave herself up.

I felt anger, hot and clear, and I forced it not to take hold of me. Anger makes you fast. Fast is bad.

I said: Show them to me.

He raised the umbrella again, just a little. And the moment he did, the reflection changed.

It was no longer me at the desk. It was no longer the room. The mirror became a different room, as if a curtain had been drawn aside.

I saw Mary.

She was lying on a bed, not this one, another one. The blanket was pulled up to her chest. Her eyes were open. She wasn't looking at the camera. She was looking past something, like in the photograph. Her lips were moving.

And this time I really heard her voice, very faintly, as if through a wall:

Not... alone...

Then the image flickered. Mary's face went out of focus for a moment. And in that flicker, I saw something behind her, something dark, bent over the bed. A coat. An umbrella. A hand resting on the bedpost.

I didn't look away. I looked at the edge.

Mary's eyes twitched, as if she had seen me. Or as if she had hoped I was there. And then the image was gone, as if someone had switched off the mirror.

I stood up so quickly that the chair scraped back. The scraping sound was loud in the quiet room. I went to the door.

She was closed.

I hadn't closed them.

I placed my hand on the handle and pressed down. Resistance. Not mechanical. More like a tenacious pressure, as if the door was being held in place on the other side.

In the mirror behind me, I saw the man with the umbrella put the umbrella back on the ground.

Tap.

Once.

Then one more time.

To count.

I remembered Mary's words: Count back the steps. I exhaled, closed my eyes for a heartbeat, and began counting in my head as I walked backward, step by step, without losing sight of the door.

One.

Two.

Three.

On the fourth step, I felt something on my back: the cold surface of the large wall mirror.

I opened my eyes.

My reflection was too close. Too large. And in its edge, right next to my ear, was a line of ash, as if it had been painted onto the glass.

A circle, unfinished.

I realized what the second door was.

Not the wooden door.

The door is made of glass.

And while the umbrella continued to tap in the mirror, slowly and patiently, a dark shape rose behind my reflection, as if it wanted to come out of the mirror.

The staircase behind the wallpaper

The mirror behind me was cold as a judgment. I stood so close to it that my own breath couldn't even mist its surface. It was as if the glass repelled everything human: warmth, mist, doubt. Beside my ear, at the edge of the reflection, a line of ash ran across the mirror's surface, an unfinished circle, not painted, but placed there. As if someone hadn't laid the boundary on the ground, but directly on the point where world and image meet.

The typing continued. Not loud, not fast. A rhythm that didn't soothe, but ordered. Someone was counting me, and I felt it working inside me, as if my own body were taking over the number.

I forced myself not to make the mistake that every instinct demands: to turn around, look, confirm. Confirmation is nourishment. So I kept my back to the mirror and looked straight ahead at the closed door. Wood. Metal. And beyond it, the hallway, which no longer wanted me because it had already planned for me in another room.

I reached out and pressed against the handle again. Resistance, tougher than metal. As if a hand on the other side were holding the door, without fingers, without bones. Not violence, more like possession.

My eyes wandered, slowly, deliberately, across the room. Not looking for an exit, but for a flaw. Every house built as a trap leaves a seam somewhere. A spot where the material doesn't match the pattern. A small oversight that, if you survive, you later call "chance."

The walls were covered in pale wallpaper with a pattern of repeated tendrils, too uniform, too clean. A hotel pretending to be harmless. But on the wall next to the desk, half-hidden by the heavy curtain, I saw a spot where the pattern was ever so slightly off. Half a millimeter, barely perceptible. But it was precisely this inconspicuousness that was suspicious. In a room where mirrors are doors, millimeters are confessions.

The typing stopped abruptly. Then it started again. As if the person behind me had noticed where I was looking.

I didn't go directly to the wallpaper. I took two steps to the side, as if I were merely avoiding the mirror, as if I were looking for a better position. The cold surface remained behind me, but I shifted my position away from the center of the reflection, towards the edge. There, where things have less force because they aren't fixed in place.

The airflow in the room changed. Not drastically, just enough to be noticed if you paid attention. A subtle pressure, as if the mirror were breathing. Or as if it were preparing itself.

I ran my fingers over the wallpaper. The fabric was dry, rough, old. And beneath it, I felt an edge. A vertical seam, so neat it didn't match a random butt of wallpaper. I didn't tap. Knocking is too loud, too obvious. I pressed only lightly, and the material gave slightly. Not like cardboard. Like a door that only pretends to be a wall.

The key lay in my pocket. The rusty one, the warm one. And somewhere deeper, almost forgotten, the bone key I'd found in the envelope. I pulled it out. It was still warm, as if it held

a memory. I held it to the seam, searching with my fingertips for a hole, a crevice, a tiny irregularity.

The typing behind me quickened. Not by much. Just enough to build pressure. As if patience briefly dropped its mask.

There it was: a tiny slit in the wallpaper pattern, right in the middle of a printed tendril, so cleverly hidden that you can only find it if you don't look at the tendril, but at what is wrong.

I pushed in the tip of the bone key.

The key slid in like something finally coming home.

A soft click, so clean it sounded more like a mechanism than wood. And at that same moment, the typing stopped.

Not because the person behind it gave up. But because they listened.

I turned the key carefully. Resistance, then yielding. A short, dry jerk. The wallpaper in front of me breathed. It lifted slightly, as if a room behind it, long closed, were opening up.

I pulled at the wallpaper, and it actually moved—not the wallpaper itself, but a thin wooden panel behind it, covered with wallpaper to make it look like a wall. A door in the wall. A door that doesn't want to be learned as a door.

As the panel swung open, a smell wafted towards me that didn't belong in a hotel: cold earth, dust, old wood. And underneath it, that metallic sound again, now burning in my nose like a warning light: iron. Not strong, but there, as if the place beneath the wallpaper had stored something.

Beyond the door was darkness. No lamp. No window. Only a narrow shaft, and within it a staircase leading downwards. Narrow steps, old, worn. A staircase not built for guests, but for things meant to remain unseen.

I looked back at the mirror.

He stood against the wall, still, and yet I had the feeling he was more awake now. As if the glass were annoyed that I had found him an alternative. In the periphery of my vision, I saw the dark shape behind my reflection move, as if pressing against the surface. Not a complete breakthrough. Just a pressure, a ripple, as if the glass were water.

I didn't have time to discuss what I saw.

I grabbed the lamp from the desk. The light was dim, but better than nothing. The next moment, I felt the room behind me change. Not audibly, not visibly. More like a sudden drop in temperature, as if someone had opened a door to winter.

I stepped through the wallpapered door.

As soon as I was in the shaft, I pulled the panel behind me. It didn't close completely on its own, but it fell back into the seam, so neatly that the room could swallow it up again. A final gap remained, through which I could still see the mirror.

Something slid forward in the mirror. A dark outline, half coat, half shadow. The umbrella was there, as if it were part of the figure and not an object. And as the outline approached the glass, I saw something that truly startled me for a heartbeat: The umbrella touched the mirror's surface, and where the tip met the glass, a small, gray dot appeared.

Ash.

He placed ash on glass, as if glass were just another floor.

I closed the gap.

It was quieter in the narrow shaft, but not safe. Silence can also mean that the sounds are simply coming from somewhere else. I raised the lamp and shone it down the stairs. The light penetrated the darkness, revealing steps, dust, cobwebs, and then—further down—a small platform and a second door. Again covered with wallpaper, again disguised as a wall.

I placed my foot on the first step. The wood creaked softly. A sound that is immediately amplified in a narrow shaft. I paused briefly and listened.

No more typing. No more scratching. Only my own breath and the distant hum of the hotel, as if everything upstairs were still normal. But deep down, beneath the hum, there was something else: a very quiet, rhythmic dripping. Not water. It sounded heavier. As if something murky was falling.

I continued descending. Step by step. And although Mary had said to count the steps back, I started counting now anyway. Not because I distrusted her, but because numbers are sometimes the only thing you have left when the room is lying.

Seven steps. Eight. Nine.

At the tenth step, the smell of earth became stronger. At the eleventh, it smelled of iron. At the twelfth, I had the feeling that the air was becoming thicker, as if it were older.

Once I reached the bottom of the platform, I saw that the second door wasn't properly closed. It was slightly ajar, as if someone had recently used it. Or as if it had been left open for me so I wouldn't get the idea to turn back.

I shone a light through the gap.

A narrow corridor, low ceiling, bare walls. No longer a hotel. More like an in-between space that doesn't officially exist. And at the end of the corridor, as far as the light reached, I saw something again that is never harmless in this story: a mirror.

Not large. Not elegant. Just a piece of mirror on the wall, as if it had been hung there to check if anyone was following.

I pushed the door open further.

The moment the gap widened, I heard a noise from above, very far away, from the room I had just left, which made my back go cold.

Do not type.

A long, contented-sounding scratching across glass, as if someone were completing a circle.

And then, very close, down here in the corridor, a soft whisper answered, so faint that it was more of a thought than a sound:

Not alone.

I stepped into the corridor and closed the door behind me, not knowing whether I was locking something out or locking something in.

The door behind me closed with a sound too dry to be accidental. Wood on wood, a soft click, as if someone had slid a bolt shut from the other side. I placed my hand on the panel and pressed against it. It didn't budge. Not even a millimeter. A hotel room above me, a hallway, mirrors, carpets, polite voices—all of it was now so far away, as if I'd dreamt it. Down here, there was nothing polite. Down here, there was only material and intention.

I raised the lamp. The light seeped into the corridor, but the corridor didn't accept it. It seemed as if the darkness merely tolerated the light to show me just enough to keep me going. Bare walls, damp patches, old nails where something must once have hung. The smell of earth had intensified, heavy, damp, like a cellar that had been locked for too long. And the smell of iron lingered like a thin thread in the background.

The mirror at the end of the corridor was small and crooked, as if it had been hung up hastily. I didn't go directly towards it. I walked along the wall, on the side where the light lengthened the shadows. Mary's words were in my head: See him at the edge. So I kept the mirror in the corner of my eye, like you keep an open blade in sight.

The whisper that had just moments before breathed "Not alone" had vanished. But the thought remained, as if the air had pressed it into the stone. I had to force myself not to fall for the childish notion that in such a passage one simply had to be quiet enough to become invisible. Here, only those who are not being sought are invisible.

When I reached the mirror, I noticed it wasn't just a mirror. The surface was slightly opaque in one spot, like fogged glass. And in that opaque spot, I saw an imprint. Not of a face. Of a hand. Five fingers, long, too long, as if someone had deliberately stretched them to show they weren't entirely human.

I stopped and shone the light closer.

A small hook was screwed into the wall beneath the mirror. A piece of fabric hung from it. Black. Coat fabric. And a button hung from the fabric.

An identical button to the one I had found in the hallway of my house.

I didn't touch it. I only saw it. It was confirmation that this passageway wasn't connected to my path by chance. It was part of the same network. And somewhere in that network, someone had begun to number and connect my world.

I continued walking. After a few meters, the corridor curved slightly, as if trying to hide what was coming. The lamp's light just reached around the corner. There, in the shadows, I saw the next mirror.

This time bigger. Cleaner.

And next to it was a door, not a wallpapered one, but a real wooden door, old, with a metal plate whose surface had a matte sheen. A number was engraved on the plate.

17.

Naturally.

I felt my stomach clench, not from fear, but from a kind of exhausted rage. The number wasn't just a room. It was a knot, a signal, a kind of repetition that wears down the mind. Repetition is a form of hypnosis.

I stepped closer to the door. In the mirror beside it, I saw myself, lamp in hand, face tense. Behind me in the mirror... nothing. Just the hallway. No coat. No umbrella. No shadow.

That was suspicious. Nothing here is never simply nothing.

I heard the dripping again, the same sound I'd noticed on the stairs. Now it was louder. It was coming from behind door number 17. And each drop sounded heavy, as if it were falling from a liquid thicker than water.

I didn't put my ear to the door. I placed the palm of my hand on the metal of the panel. It was cold. And yet it vibrated slightly with every drop, as if the space behind it were sending not just sound, but pressure.

I pulled out the key. The metal one, the rusty one, the one with the 17 on it. I held it to the lock.

Then I hesitated.

Mary had written: The metal key is not for this door.

But there were many doors that bore 17. Perhaps that was precisely the trap: that at some point you no longer know which rule applies to which door. And then you simply do something because you get tired. Tiredness is the most important ally of evil.

I still didn't put the key in. Instead, I took the bone key out of my pocket. It was still warm, and that warmth now felt like a hand wanting to guide me. But perhaps I could use that hand without belonging to it.

I held the bone key to the lock.

He wasn't a good fit.

Not even close. The slot was too narrow, the lock too new. A modern mechanism. Bone keys are for old doors, for old secrets. This door was old in its material, but new in its intent.

I put the bone key back.

Then I pulled the leather folder, the floor plans, out of my bag. It had become damp, as if the corridor had given it water. I leafed through it by the lamplight, found the sheet with Whitechapel marked, then the one with the lunatic asylum, then the one with the Mason house. And there was another sheet I hadn't noticed before, because I'd thought it was a stain.

It showed a narrow passage.

Two mirrors.

A door with 17.

And next to the door, on the wall, a small symbol: a circle, unfinished.

I shone the light on the wall next to the door. There, where the wallpaper wasn't there down here, where there was only stone. And sure enough: there was a line of gray dust, barely visible, but unmistakable. An unfinished circle, just like the one on the mirror in the hotel room.

The circle was not closed.

Not finished.

I understood what he wanted: He wanted me to complete it. I was to draw the line myself. I was to end the ritual myself. Just as he wanted me to write.

I pulled out the small bottle and held it over the line of ash. One drop would be enough to destroy it. One drop would be enough to test whether the circle really holds anything.

But before I let the drop fall, I heard a movement in the mirror next to the door.

Not in the aisle. In the mirror.

A dark outline slid past my reflection. Not a complete body, more of a shadow moving too close to the glass. And then, at the same moment, I heard a sound behind the door that wasn't dripping.

A quiet, stifled sob.

A woman's voice.

Not loud. Not clear. But human. And enough to make my blood run cold, because hope and danger sound the same here.

Mary, I thought.

The sobbing started again. And this time I heard a word, broken off, as if spoken through fabric:

...Hels...

My name, half-swallowed.

I closed my eyes for a moment, not to calm myself, but to remind myself why I still make decisions at all. I opened them again and looked in the mirror, just briefly, at the edge.

The shadow behind me was now more distinct. A coat that didn't quite fit in the mirror. An umbrella whose tip touched the glass.

No typing. Just contact.

As if he were waiting for me to complete the circle.

I lifted the vial, not as a threat but as a tool, and let a single drop fall precisely onto the unfinished line of ash.

It hissed.

The ash receded as if it had burned itself. The circle became even more incomplete. And at the very moment the line reacted, the sobbing behind the door abruptly ceased.

Silence.

Too abrupt. Too clean.

The air in the hallway grew colder. The lamp flickered. And in the mirror by the door, I saw my own reflection momentarily out of sync with me. As if it had reacted a breath too late.

Then the door handle moved.

From the inside.

Slow.

It was as if someone inside wanted to open the door, but only if I was really supposed to see it.

The handle lowered a millimeter, then another. Not abruptly, not frantically. Slowly, as if a hand inside were studying the movement to make it appear perfectly human. And that's precisely what made it inhuman. Humans open doors to go through them. This opening was a performance.

I stood still. I didn't step closer. I didn't step back. I kept my body still and my thoughts awake. The drop from the vial had damaged the ash line, silenced the sobbing. That meant: the line wasn't decoration. It was conduction. And behind the door wasn't just a room, but a reaction.

In the mirror by the door, I saw my face, and for a heartbeat, I had the feeling that the eyes in it weren't quite mine. A tiny offset, just as Mary had described. The mirror isn't a mirror. It's a second surface that stores answers.

The handle continued to move. A soft click came from the lock, as if a bolt were giving way. Then the door opened a crack.

Not a breath of air escaped. No smell. Not even a drip. It was as if the space beyond was holding the air, giving me nothing but the invitation.

I raised the lamp higher and shone it through the gap.

Darkness. But not ordinary darkness. It was a darkness that didn't swallow the light, but rejected it. The beam of light stood as if against a wall, even though there was no wall. As if something invisible began right behind the door and said: This far, no further.

And yet... on the floor, just inside the door crack, I saw something shiny.

A thin strip, damp.

Blood.

Fresh. The smell of iron hit my nose again, this time so strongly that it couldn't just be a memory anymore. A metallic taste settled on my tongue.

I leaned forward slightly, not inside, just enough to get a better look at the stripe. It stretched inwards from the crack, as if something had been scraped inside. Or someone.

In the mirror by the door, the shadow behind me slid closer. The umbrella touched the glass. No tapping. Just pressure. And suddenly I understood that the mirror wasn't just watching. It was urging me on.

I didn't take out the album, I didn't pick up the notebook, I didn't write anything. Instead, I pulled the metal key with the number 17 from my pocket and held it up in the air so the lamp made it gleam. A ridiculous act, a part of me thought. A piece of metal against a space that doesn't obey the laws of physics.

But the key responded.

He got hot. Not warm. Hot, as if he'd been held in a flame. I didn't drop him, but the heat bit into my skin.

The space behind the door reacted as well. The gap widened ever so slightly, as if the door itself had recognized the key. As if the lock had demanded not just metal, but consent.

I cursed softly, not out of moral conviction, but out of pain. And in that moment I heard it again: not a sob, not a voice, but a single breath. Shallow, weak, human.

He came from inside.

I said quietly: Mary?

No answer. Just a second, even weaker breath. Like someone struggling just to be there.

If it was a deception, it was cruel. If it wasn't, it was urgent. And the trap lies precisely between these two possibilities: you are forced to pit your humanity against your caution.

I took my other hand and placed it not on the handle, but on the door frame, so I wouldn't feel like I was "opening" the door. I pushed the door open a little further with my forearm. The gap became wide enough for me to hold the lamp inside.

The light again met that invisible boundary. But this time, as I held the key closer to the crack, the light flickered, as if it briefly passed through. A flickering strip that momentarily revealed the ground beyond.

And what I saw was enough.

A room, low-ceilinged and damp. Stone walls. A floor that glistened as if it were wet. And in the middle, on the floor, lay something bright that was moving.

One hand.

A woman's hand, thin, dirty, fingers spread. It twitched once, as if reaching for something. For air. For help. For a word.

I took half a step forward, unintentionally. Instinct had won.

In the mirror next to the door, I saw the shadow behind me also take a step. Not like a person. Like a wave.

I paused. I forced my body back into control. I said softly, as if speaking to my hand in the room: Mary, if it's you, move two fingers.

The hand didn't twitch immediately. Then, slowly, two fingers moved. The index and middle fingers. A faint, absurdly clear sign.

My heart pounded. That was no accident. That was a response. And if it was an illusion, then one that fit too perfectly. But the movement was too weak, too clumsy to be feigned. It was real. Or it was fueled by real pain.

I took a deep breath. Iron. Earth. Moisture.

I said: I'm coming.

And the moment I uttered that sentence, something happened in the hallway.

The mirror next to the door made a soft, barely audible crackling sound, like glass moving. Not breaking. Breathing. And the dark outline in it became clearer. The umbrella lifted in the mirror, as if it were about to open.

I had no time.

I held the hot key against the gap and pushed it into the lock before I could convince myself again that caution would suffice. The key turned, and this time it wasn't easy. It was like turning through viscous liquid. Resistance. Then a give, like a bone cracking.

The invisible border behind the door flickered.

For a moment she was gone.

The lamp's light flooded the room, and I saw Mary completely: She lay on the floor, half on her side, her hair disheveled, her face pale, her lips chapped. On her neck, beneath her jaw, were the two puncture wounds, dark, surrounded by a gray shadow, as if something had seeped into her skin there. Her eyes were open, but glassy. And yet she saw me.

Her lips moved, and this time I heard it not just in my head, but really, as a scratchy, faint sound:

Don't write...

Then the border flickered again.

The light was cut off, as if someone had drawn a curtain. The room became dark again, the hand once more a bright spot in the crack.

And in the mirror next to the door, I heard for the first time again the sound that I now fear more than screams:

Tap.

Once.

Then one more time.

It's as if someone is counting down the seconds I have left before the door belongs to me again. Or to him.

I grabbed the door with my free hand, flung it open wider, and stepped inside before the mirror could steal my courage.

The air behind it was immediately different. Heavier, colder. And the smell of iron was so strong it almost became sweet.

Behind me, in the crack, I saw the corridor for a moment. The mirror. And the dark outline in it, pushing forward as if it wanted to follow me.

I slammed the door.

Not cautious. Not polite. With all his might.

The sound echoed through the room like a gunshot.

And in the sudden darkness, before my lamp was burning steadily again, I heard a soft, contented whisper directly behind me, very close, as if someone had already been in the room before I entered it:

Now you are no longer alone.

The visit to the madhouse

The whisper was so close I couldn't mistake it for the room itself. It wasn't an echo, no acoustic illusion. It was breath that needed no lungs. For a moment I stood still, because every movement in the darkness becomes a signature: Here I am. Here I truly am.

The lamp in my hand flickered, as if afraid of what it might reveal. Then it settled, and the yellowish cone of light cut into the damp blackness. The room was lower than I'd expected, the ceiling so close overhead that the thought of collapse immediately caught in the back of my mind. Stone walls, glistening with dampness, as if the place had been breathing for years without ever exhaling. The floor was slippery, and not just from water. The streak of blood ran across the stone like a thin, red argument.

Mary lay a few steps away from me. Now, in the light, she seemed smaller, more vulnerable, and yet more alive than anything I had seen in the past few hours. Her eyes followed the lamplight as if it were the last thing she could cling to. As I moved closer, she raised her hand a finger's width, and that tiny sign was stronger than any cry for help.

I knelt beside her, keeping my eyes on the room. The smell of iron was no longer a warning, but a reality. Her skin was cold, but not dead. I placed my fingers on her neck, gently, and felt a faint pulse, shallow, hesitant, as if it had to remember that it was allowed to beat.

Her lips moved. I leaned closer so I could hear her without forcing her to speak.

"Don't... write...", she breathed. And then, barely more than air: "He... takes... that."

I swallowed hard, realizing she wasn't just talking about the diary. Not just about ink. She was talking about something deeper. About trying to keep one's head.

Behind me, somewhere in the darkness, came a faint sound, like fabric brushing against stone. Not a step. More like a glide. And again that feeling: not alone. Not in the human sense.

I forced myself not to jerk my head around. Instead, I slowly directed the lamp's beam into the corners, probing the room like a doctor examining a wound. Nothing moved in the light. But light isn't truth here. Light is merely an offering.

I slid my arm under Mary's shoulders and lifted her. She was lighter than she should have been, as if not only blood but weight had been drained from her. She groaned softly, not a cry of pain, more a sound that said: I'm still here, but only just.

When I helped her up, I saw the puncture marks on her neck more clearly. Two small, dark dots, and around them a gray shadow, like ash under the skin. It wasn't just a wound. It was a mark.

I pressed Mary close to me so she wouldn't slip away and went back with her to the door I had just slammed shut. The metal key in my pocket felt hot, as if it were annoyed by my closeness to her. Or by my decision.

I put my hand on the door. Cold. I pushed.

She did not give in.

I pressed harder.

Nothing.

A humorless, matter-of-fact nothingness, like a wall. A space that asserts: You are in here because you are meant to be here.

The whispering came again, right next to my ear, without a mouth in sight. Not a sentence, just a sound, as if someone were trying a name without saying it. I felt Mary twitch in my arm.

"There," she whispered, barely audible. "Not the door. The mirror."

I looked around. On the opposite wall, half in shadow, there was indeed a mirror. No elegant frame, just a piece of glass in crude brackets, as if it had been hastily attached. The surface wasn't clear. It looked as if a thin film lay upon it, something like breath that never dries.

I approached her, step by step, Mary pressed close to me, and with each movement the air grew thicker. This wasn't a feeling. This was physics behaving erratically.

I stopped in front of the mirror. In the glass, I saw both of us. Me, pale in the lamplight, tension etched on my face. Mary in my arms, her eyes half-open. Behind us in the mirror—and here I had to force myself not to panic—the room was different. Deeper. Longer. As if the mirror weren't reflecting, but continuing on.

And there, in this sequel, was something dark.

Not quite a body. More like a coat hanging without a person in it. And next to it, an umbrella, its tip resting on the ground.

No typing. Just presence.

Mary raised her hand and touched the glass with two fingers. Her fingers left no imprint. But at the point where she touched the glass, the film receded, as if the glass had briefly reacted to her touch.

I held the lamp closer to the surface. The light wasn't reflected properly in the mirror. It was absorbed. And in this absorption, I saw a fine line stretching across the glass.

Ash.

An unfinished circle, right on the mirror's surface, just like the one I'd seen upstairs in the hotel room. Down here it was clearer, rougher, as if someone had lacked patience. A break on the left, an open space that cries out: Finish me.

I pulled the small bottle from my pocket. Not because I believed in miracles, but because I had by now seen that some substances here speak a language that the fog respects. I let a drop fall onto the glass at the open spot in the ash circle.

The hiss wasn't loud, but it was decisive. The ash receded, the circle became unusable. And in the reflection, the dark figure twitched as if I had torn a fiber from its body.

I seized the moment. I pressed Mary even closer to me and pressed my free hand against the mirror, not in the middle, but at the point where the ash had just reacted.

The glass gave way.

Not like glass, which breaks. Like water, which briefly resists and then yields. My hand sank in, cold, damp, as if I were reaching into a very old puddle. My arm followed, and for a terrible moment I thought: If I let go now, the mirror will lose me.

Mary groaned, and that sound saved me because it drew me back to the only purpose that matters: getting her out.

I pulled her in front of me, pushed her body towards the glass, and the glass accepted her as if it were made for her. Her shoulders disappeared, her head, then she was halfway through, and I felt how the air on the other side was different: colder, clearer, less iron.

Behind me came a soft, angry rustling, and this time I actually heard a typing sound, short and sharp, as if someone had lost patience.

I pushed off, let the mirror take me, and the moment was like a fall without a fall: a second in which the body doesn't know which way is up. Then I was standing on the other side.

Another corridor. Similarly narrow, similarly damp, but not the same. My lamp was still on. Mary was half in my arms, and I pulled her away from the mirror because I sensed that one shouldn't stand too long against such surfaces.

Behind us, the glass bulged as if something were pressing against it. A dark shape rose to the surface, and I saw the umbrella handle like a shadow behind water. Then, abruptly, the glass returned to normal. Still. Dead.

Mary's breathing became shallower, but she was breathing. She looked at me, and there was something in her eyes that hung between gratitude and warning.

"He's following," she whispered.

I nodded because I didn't know if nodding would help, but I knew I didn't have time to argue with her.

We walked down the corridor. It didn't lead back upstairs to the hotel, but sideways, deeper into a network of passageways, as if a second London had been built beneath it, without streets, only connections. After a few minutes, we reached a staircase, rough and steep, leading upwards. Here, the smell was no longer of iron, but of damp coal, of the city. A good smell, if you've learned that the smell of a city means freedom.

Upstairs was a door, old and heavy. I pushed it open, and cold night air hit us like a slap in the face. Fog. Of course. But outside, in the fog, at least there was the possibility of moving around without a wall claiming ownership.

I hailed the first carriage I heard before I saw it. The driver cursed when he saw Mary, pale and half-conscious, but I only said two words, and they still carried weight in this city: Hospital. Asylum.

He stared at me as if I had made a mistake.

I leaned closer and said softly: The house for those who whisper. The man's name is Renfield.

At that name, his expression changed. He shrank. More cautious. He nodded, as if he understood that it was better not to ask why.

I lifted Mary in, sat down beside her, held her head so it wouldn't hit the wall, and as the carriage started moving, I felt that tapping again, very distant, not in the carriage, not on the road, more in the rhythm of the city itself. As if somewhere an umbrella were marking the seconds until I arrived.

The asylum stood on the edge of the orderly streets, where London pretends to have no dark corners. A stone building, clean, austere, with windows set too high to see out of. A lamp burned in front of the entrance, its light harsh, as if to forbid any shadows.

I paid the coachman double and carried Mary inside. An orderly came, took her from me, and asked no questions, because he'd learned in this place that questions are sometimes more dangerous than answers. I said Mary's name, and the orderly wrote it down, with a routine that infuriated me, because here, routine means: another body, another night.

Then I gave my name.

The nurse paused briefly, as if he had already heard it, without knowing from where. Perhaps it was already written somewhere in a book I hadn't yet seen.

I was led into a hallway that smelled of disinfectant but still didn't seem clean. Doors to the left and right; behind some I could hear murmuring, behind others only silence. And over everything hung that feeling you never shake in places like this: that the walls know more than the people.

A doctor approached me, his hands clasped behind his back, his face tired from too many nights. He asked what was wrong, and I said: Renfield.

The doctor blinked. Then he looked at me more closely, as if trying to categorize me. Finally, he said: "This man is talking an unusually large amount today."

I replied: He always does that when he thinks someone is listening.

The doctor nodded slowly, as if it were a remark one only understands later. Then he led me to a door at the end of the corridor. Behind this door, it was silent.

Too quiet.

He placed his hand on the key ring, hesitated for a moment, and said quietly: "When you go in, don't let his words guide you. He's... contagious."

I thought of the word "write." Of whispering. Of circles.

I said: I'm already infected.

The doctor turned the key in the lock.

The door opened a crack.

And from the darkness of the room inside came a voice immediately, as if it had been waiting all along, hoarse, joyful, exhausted with enthusiasm:

He's coming. He's coming. I told you so. He's coming.

The voice came from the darkness like a hand grabbing your shoulder at the wrong moment. It wasn't loud, but it was full. Full of a joy you only hear in places where joy has nothing to do with happiness anymore. The doctor held the door open as if afraid it would otherwise be snatched from his grasp.

I entered.

The room smelled of cold sweat, of soap that had been used too often, and of that sour smell that develops when a person lives in a cell long enough for the air to take over their thoughts. A narrow bed, a chair, a table, a bare lightbulb whose light was too harsh to be comforting. A bucket stood in the corner. There were scratch marks on the walls, as if someone had tried to write through stone.

Renfield sat on the bed, knees drawn up, hands clenched around his shins. His head bobbed slightly, as if he were inwardly following a song no one else hears. He was thinner than I had imagined, but his eyes were too large for his face. Eyes that could no longer distinguish between what was happening outside and what was happening inside.

He looked at me, and for a moment there was something like recognition. Not me as a person, but rather me as a signal.

He's coming, he said again, and this time it sounded almost tender. He's coming. He's coming through the doors that aren't there. Through the pictures that don't reflect. Through the footsteps that don't walk.

I stopped a step away. The doctor didn't close the door behind me, but I still heard the faint click of the lock, as if the building itself had decided it was better if we didn't share this scene with the world.

I said: Renfield.

He laughed briefly, a dry sound. Names. They're like keys, aren't they? You put them in and then they turn by themselves.

I kept my gaze steady. I said: Mary Harker is here. She was brought in a little while ago.

His smile didn't fade, but it changed, as if I'd introduced a different theme into his song. Mary... yes. She writes. She has written. She has fed the fog.

I felt my stomach clench. I said: Who took them?

Renfield inclined his head as if listening. Then he raised his hands and held them up to his face as if reading invisible writing on them. Nobody took her, he whispered. She left. People always leave when they think they have a choice. And he... he loves choices.

I took a half step closer, not aggressively, just enough so he could no longer treat me like part of the wallpaper. I said: I want to know where he put it.

Renfield curled his lips as if he could taste the word. Laid down. Oh, how tidy you are. As if it were all just furniture.

His gaze slid past me, to the door, to the narrow gap between the wood and the frame. He stared there as if it were a stage.

He's out there, Renfield said softly. He's listening. He's waiting. He's counting. He's always counting.

I wanted to answer, but at that moment the lightbulb flickered once, very briefly, as if someone had sliced the air. A tiny moment of darkness, then light again. Renfield didn't flinch. The doctor outside in the corridor audibly inhaled, an involuntary sound, as if he had just understood that technology here doesn't always remain technology.

Renfield smiled. "Did you see that?" he asked. "No, of course not. You didn't see it. You felt it."

I said: Renfield, listen.

He put a finger to his lips. Not to stop me. To educate me. Listening isn't enough, he whispered. You also have to... agree.

I suddenly felt that word again in my head, the one that had been haunting me for hours, like a fly that just wouldn't die. Write. It was weak, almost polite, as if it wanted to behave itself here in the madhouse. And that's precisely what made it worse.

I didn't sit down. I stayed standing. I asked: When did he first touch you?

Renfield blinked slowly. Touched. That word, as if he hadn't used it in years. Then he grinned, and it wasn't a friendly grin. It was the kind of grin you have when you possess a truth that hurts others.

He never touched me, he said. He only showed me where I was already open.

I paused briefly. Open wounds. Cracks. Detours. I said: And how does he show it?

Renfield reached out his hand, not towards me, but towards the table. On the table lay a piece of paper. A notepad I hadn't noticed before because it was so innocuous. Renfield picked it up between his thumb and forefinger, held it up, and I saw: it was blank. Not a word.

He said: Do you see?

I said: There's nothing there.

Renfield laughed, a hoarse croak. Exactly! Exactly. Nothing is the best. Nothing is a perfect beginning. You can write anything on nothing.

He held the blank sheet of paper closer to his face, as if he were reading. Then he whispered in a voice that suddenly wasn't quite his own: He'll come if you invite him.

I felt a cold pressure on the back of my neck, as if someone had entered the room behind me. Not the doctor. Something that didn't require a step.

I forced myself not to look at the door. I asked: What do you want from me, Renfield?

Renfield lowered the paper and looked at me with a seriousness that was foreign to his face. "I don't want you to pretend you're different," he said. "You're already in the book. You're already in the album. You're already in the mirrors. You're already a picture someone is looking at."

I said: Where is he?

Renfield raised his head slightly, as if proud of the question. Then he said: In the margin.

I felt the air in the room change. Not dramatically, but noticeably, like a draft coming through a poorly closing window frame. The lightbulb flickered again, this time for longer. The light became thin, then thick again. The shadow on the wall behind Renfield grew briefly, as if making way for someone.

I didn't look directly at it. I looked at the edge of my field of vision, at the corner of the room, where the wall meets the ceiling.

And there I saw a line.

Grey. Thin. Dust.

Ash.

An unfinished circle, drawn on the wall as if someone had drawn it with a finger. Within the gap in the circle was a small, dark dot, as if something had been placed there.

The tip of an umbrella.

Renfield whispered: If you close the circle, he will come. If you break the circle, he will stay. That's the fun of it.

My heart pounded for a moment. I thought of Mary, her ragged breathing, her warning. Don't write. Don't be alone. And I suddenly understood what this room was: not a cell, not a hospital room, but a demonstration room. A place where he shows how easily people can be persuaded to complete things they haven't even started.

I said calmly, as calmly as possible: Renfield, listen to me. Mary is alive. She's here. I need you to protect her.

Renfield laughed again, but this time it was broken. Protect them, he repeated. You want to protect them by putting them in a house full of locks? Locks are only for people, Mr. van Helsing. He... he is not a person.

At that moment, the doctor knocked on the door outside. A short, nervous knock. "Mr. van Helsing? Are you alright?"

Renfield flinched as if stung. "Order," he whispered. He likes that word. Order is his coat. Order is his umbrella.

The light flickered a third time, and this time it wasn't just a flicker. It was as if the bulb briefly exhaled. A shadow flitted across the floor, even though no one was moving.

Renfield stared past me, at the spot between me and the door, and his face suddenly turned pale, as if for a moment he had seen something he usually only hears.

He whispered: He is here.

I stopped. I said: Then tell him to show himself.

Renfield shook his head, slowly, almost sadly. He never shows himself, he said. He lets you show him.

And in my mind, quietly, patiently, as if it had only been waiting for this sentence, the word that could not be banished was there again:

Write.

The word stood within me like a clean stamp. Write. So still that it could disguise itself as a thought of its own. And therein lay its ingenuity: it didn't have to shout to win. It only had to wait until I convinced myself that a sentence was the solution.

Renfield continued staring past me, towards what should have been only air between me and the door. His breathing quickened, his hands gripping the blank sheet of paper as if he could hold on to it. The doctor outside knocked again, this time more firmly. Mr. van Helsing? Should I—

I raised my hand, not towards the door, but in the direction of the doctor, a silent signal: wait. It was less about authority than instinct. A second person in the room complicates things. And he loves complexity.

I said to Renfield calmly: You are afraid.

Renfield laughed, but the sound was barely laughter anymore. Fear, he repeated, as if it were an old word that no longer suited him. No. Fear is... when you believe you can die. I no longer believe in dying. I believe in... change.

Change, I thought. Masks. Messenger. Mirror.

I saw the line of ash on the wall at the edge of my vision. An unfinished circle. The tip of the umbrella in fracture. A small, dark dot. It was waiting for that old human habit: to finish something. To close a circle, to end a sentence, to round off a story.

I pulled the bottle out of my pocket.

Renfield flinched, as if he had expected me to complete the circle. I held the vial not over the circle, but over the blank sheet of paper in his hand.

Renfield blinked. "What are you doing?" he whispered.

I said: I don't write. I delete.

I dropped a drop onto the paper.

It hissed. The paper immediately curled at the spot, as if it had a burning skin. Renfield let out a small sound—startled, angry, relieved, all at once. The blank sheet was no longer blank. It was damaged. And therefore unusable for what he intended to do with it. Unusable for an invitation.

In that same instant, the lightbulb flickered harshly. A brief interruption, as if someone had pinched the air in the room. The shadow on the wall jumped. And I felt a pull in my chest, as if someone had briefly pressed on my ribs from the inside.

Renfield didn't shout. He just grinned, wide-eyed. "He doesn't like this," he whispered, almost enthusiastically. "Oh, he doesn't like this at all."

I didn't turn to the line of ash. I turned to the room, as if it were an audience. I said loudly enough that even the walls must have heard: I don't write for him. And I don't finish what he starts.

Renfield chuckled softly, then coughed as if trying to get something out of his throat that shouldn't be there. He doubled over briefly, and when he raised his head again, his vision was suddenly clearer. A heartbeat of humanity. So fleeting that it slipped away again immediately.

She was in room seventeen, Renfield said, and this time it didn't sound like a song. In the house with the wrong windows. But now she is... where people don't look for her.

I said: Where?

Renfield raised his hand and pointed at the wall. Not at the circle, but just to the side, at a seemingly inconspicuous spot, a place where the wallpaper was slightly damaged, as if someone had often leaned against the wall there.

"There's a staircase," he whispered. "Behind the wallpaper. But not the one you've already found. There's always a second one. One that only the sick can see."

I felt a pattern fall into place. The floor plans. Renfield. The symbol with the cross. The glass door. Everything led to this building, to this place officially called "healing" but in reality "storage".

The doctor outside knocked again, this time with noticeable concern. Mr. van Helsing, I—

Renfield whirled around, his face contorted, and he snarled at the door: Hush! Hush! He hears through wood! He hears through breath!

The doctor remained silent. I only heard him swallowing through the crack.

I said to Renfield: Help me. Show me the second staircase.

Renfield looked at me, and in his eyes was a brief, almost childlike desire: to be important. Then he nodded slowly. "But you must promise something," he whispered. "Promises are circles."

I said: No promises.

He grimaced as if I had taken away a piece of candy. Then he said: Then just... listen.

He leaned forward as far as the shackles of his own fear allowed and whispered: If you find the stairs, don't count the steps. Count the mirrors. If there are more mirrors than steps, you're no longer in the house.

A sentence straight out of a nightmare. And yet it sounded like experience, not fantasy.

I nodded curtly, without making it too emphatically. Then I stepped to the door, opened it a crack, and saw the doctor standing in the hallway, pale, his hand half-raised, as if he had been banging on an invisible wall the whole time.

I said: Take Mary to a room without a mirror. Immediately.

The doctor blinked as if I'd asked him to move the stars. Without a mirror? We have—

I interrupted him. Remove them. Cover them. Turn them to the wall. Anything. And no one is to write in this room. No report. No log. Nothing.

He wanted to ask a question; I could see it in his eyes. But in this place, you quickly learn that some questions are only there to feed your own fear. He finally nodded once and left.

I closed the door again, not firmly, just until it clicked into place. Renfield breathed faster, as if he had perceived the doctor as a risk.

I said: The second staircase.

Renfield didn't stand up. He couldn't. But he raised his hand and tapped his fingernail three times against the spot on the wall he had previously pointed to. Three short taps. Not loud. And yet, in the room, it sounded like a ritual.

When his nail touched the plaster for the third time, something responded.

No sound.

A feeling as if the wall were giving way for a moment. As if a cavity were opening up behind it that wasn't there before.

The cinder line in the corner began to tremble.

Not strong, but distinct. The unfinished circle was alive, as if it had received blood. And the small dark point in the break—the tip of the umbrella—pressed minimally into the space, as if the boundary had softened.

Renfield whispered: Now. Now, before he realizes you're not playing.

I took out the vial, went to the line of ash, and didn't let a single drop fall. I squirted. A short, sharp jet directly onto the break, onto the tip of the umbrella.

It hissed loudly. The smell stung the nostrils. The dark spot retreated as if in pain. The circle wasn't closed; it was damaged, frayed.

Renfield laughed, a mad, triumphant sound. Oh, that... that's what he felt.

The light from the bulb flickered, then stabilized. For a moment, the room was just room again. Stone, bed, person.

I went to the spot on the wall where Renfield had knocked. I placed my palm on it. Cold. But beneath the cold was movement. A breath of air snaking through a tiny crack. A place where the wall wasn't really a wall.

I found the seam in the plaster, a fine line, and pressed. A piece of wallpaper that didn't belong there at all came loose slightly. Underneath was wood. A panel, like in a hotel. A door in the wall.

I pulled on it, and the panel gave way.

A dark shaft beyond. A staircase, steeper than the first, narrower, as if built for people who couldn't scream. And somewhere below, very faintly, I heard another sound that made the skin on my neck stretch:

Tap.

Not close. Not far. Exactly in between, where you don't know if it's coming or if you're going there.

Renfield whispered, and there was something like admiration in his voice: Go. And if you see him... don't see him. Just see what he touches.

I nodded, not because I believed him, but because I didn't have time to check. I stepped into the shaft, lamp first.

Behind me, Renfield suddenly said, loud enough for the room to hear: He can open doors, but he can't keep names!

I froze for a heartbeat. Was that a help? Or a call? Or both?

Then I heard footsteps in the hallway outside. Hurried footsteps. Nurses. Voices. The doctor was calling for someone. Mary.

And at the same moment, as if the place were reacting to the word "name", I heard a soft, very polite scratching sound in the lock of the cell door.

Only once.

As a sign that he had also heard.

I went downstairs.

The coffin in the cellar

The staircase behind Renfield's wallpaper was narrower than any I had encountered before. The shaft received the lamp like a stranger's eye and reluctantly passed the light on. The steps were steep, uneven, and with each step the wood didn't creak, but sighed, as if remembering how many people had descended them without returning. I held the lamp in front of me, and yet a patch of darkness always remained just beyond the beam, like a dog that doesn't need to bark to announce its presence.

Tap.

I no longer heard it as a sound, but as a rhythm within my body. It came from somewhere below, unclear, unlocatable. It was as if the staircase itself were counting how many steps I had left before it swallowed me up.

Renfield had said: Count the mirrors. If there are more mirrors than steps, you're no longer in the house.

I didn't count the steps. I forced myself not to. The temptation was there, but that's precisely why it was there. Instead, I scanned the walls, the edges, anything that didn't seem to belong to the staircase. And after just a few meters, I saw the first mirror.

It hung on the left wall, crooked, without a frame, as if someone had hastily affixed it. It reflected my lamplight, but the reflection was too bright, too sharp. No layer of dust, no distortion. A mirror that looked fresh in a shaft that smelled old. That was wrong.

I continued walking. After the next bend, the second mirror. Larger. Clearer. Again frameless. Two mirrors. Two steps? I didn't know because I didn't want to count. And this very not knowing was like an open wound in my mind.

Tap again. Once. Then pause. Like a polite tap.

The air grew colder as I descended. Not the cold of a cellar, but a cold that thins the breath, as if rationing oxygen. The smell of iron was faint here, but present. And beneath it was another smell, one I knew only from letters and from Whitechapel: earth, old, damp, like from a grave.

After the third mirror—yes, I was certain it was the third because the spacing between them had a rhythmic quality—the stairs ended on a small platform. In front of me was a heavy wooden door with a metal bolt that looked like it was made for hands, not keys. There was no sign on the door. No number. Just a small patch of gray dust on the frame.

Ash.

I held the lamp closer. The ash stain wasn't accidental. It was like a mark. Like a fingerprint.

I placed my hand on the bolt. It was cold. I lifted it slowly. It didn't squeak. It was too light. As if the door had been oiled so it could open silently when you least expect it.

I pressed.

The door gave way.

A smell hit me, briefly throwing me back to my childhood, to memories of churches, of cold crypts, of stone that smells of people who haven't spoken for centuries. Mustiness. Wax. And again that metallic iron, more distinct, but not fresh. Old.

I entered.

The room was larger than the shaft. A brick-lined cellar, the ceiling low but wide. The lamplight illuminated shelves on the walls, old bottles, crates, tools. But all of that was just a backdrop. Because in the middle of the room stood he.

A coffin.

Not just any coffin. A dark wooden box, large, heavy, with metal fittings that absorbed the lamplight. The lid was closed, but not quite. A barely visible gap ran along one side, as if someone hadn't pressed it shut properly—or as if the coffin itself had opened it.

I stopped. I didn't come any closer. Coffins are promises. They promise peace. And in this story, I had learned that peace is the best mask.

Tap.

No longer on the stairs. Now in the room. Very quietly, from somewhere behind me, perhaps from the door, perhaps from the shadow. I didn't turn. I looked at the edge, as best I could, while I focused on the coffin.

Next to the coffin lay something on the floor: a circle of grey dust, incomplete, as always. A circle that didn't encircle the coffin, but merely touched it, as if the coffin were part of a larger ritual one prefers not to see.

I walked slowly around the circle without entering it. The vial was in my hand. Not because I believed it would solve everything, but because it gave me a sense of action. Sometimes a person needs a gesture to avoid becoming a mere figure.

As I got closer, I smelled it more clearly: earth, iron, and something sweet that reminded me again of room 17. Perfume. Or the memory of perfume. A smell that doesn't belong in a basement.

I shone my light on the ground next to the coffin. There was a trail. Not much blood, more greasy, as if someone had run a wet hand across the stone. And in that trail, half-dried, lay a small object.

A hairband.

Grey fabric.

I knew it. It was the tape that had been lying on the chair in Room 17. It wasn't just a prop. It was Mary's trace. And if it was here, then she had either been here or she was meant to be here.

I picked up the hairband with two fingers. It was damp. Not from water. From something sticky. And when I held it closer to the light, I saw dark stains on the inside.

Blood.

I felt the anger rising within me again, hot, clear. I forced it down. Anger makes you careless. And careless here is synonymous with: swallowed.

A noise came from the coffin.

Not a knock. A soft scraping. Wood on wood. As if something inside was pressing against the lid. Not panicky. Testing. Patient.

I froze.

Then I heard a voice. Not loud. Not clear. But human enough that I couldn't ignore it.

Abraham..., it whispered from the crack.

I stood there, lamp up, hairband in hand, and I knew: This is the trap. Exactly like this. A voice that knows my name. A voice that pulls me in.

I forced myself not to answer. Not to give him the sentence he needed.

The scraping in the coffin intensified. The crack opened a tiny bit, just enough for a sliver of darkness to flicker out from within, like breath.

The voice whispered again: Not... alone...

I almost laughed because it was Mary's line. And because, coming from a coffin, it was so wrong that it hurt. But I didn't laugh. I let the lamp illuminate the crack.

Inside I saw nothing. Only darkness. And yet I had the feeling that something was looking at me.

Tap.

Right next to me now.

I felt it before I heard it: the tip of the umbrella on stone, a gentle contact. No violence. Just the presence of a point marking the scene, like a pencil on paper.

I looked at the edge, at the shadow next to the shelf. There stood the umbrella. Upright. Without a hand.

And next to him, barely visible, a black coat hung in the air, as if it were attached to an invisible hook.

No face. No body.

Just the things.

I remembered Renfield's saying: Just look at what he touches.

And I understood: The coffin is not just a coffin. It is a door. A door that lures me with a voice that doesn't belong there.

I lifted the bottle. My hand wasn't trembling. For the first time in a long time, it wasn't trembling. I said, loud enough for the room to hear, but without pathos: I'm not opening it.

The scraping in the coffin stopped.

The silence that followed was so pure that it sounded like applause.

The silence lingered, as if waiting to see if I would correct myself. Some silence isn't the absence of sound, but a question posed without words. The coffin stood there, the gap like a thin, dark smile. The umbrella stood upright in the shadows, the coat beside it like a suggestion. It was as if someone had set up the main props and then stepped back to see if the actor understood his scene.

I didn't let the bottle drop. I held it steady, because stillness here wasn't a feeling, but a posture. The hairband in my other hand suddenly felt heavy, as if Mary's blood had given it weight.

I didn't say, "Who's in there?" I didn't say, "Show yourself." Such phrases are fodder. Instead, I slowly crouched down so that I was at eye level with the coffin's opening, without approaching the circle of ashes. I wanted to see, not open it.

The scent of earth emanated more intensely from within, as if the darkness there possessed its own breath. It wasn't a musty cellar smell. It was a grave. And beneath it, a faint hint of something sweet, something other than earth. Like perfume on a shroud.

I shone a light carefully into the gap.

Nothing. But nothing is rarely just nothing.

I slowly moved the light along the edge, searching for a reflection, a piece of fabric, a hand. And then I saw something inside that made me flinch briefly despite all my caution: a bright area. Not large. A piece of skin? A piece of paper? It shimmered faintly.

I moved the lamp ever so slightly, and the surface disappeared. That was a sign. Not of absence, but of angles. Of the edge. Of what is only visible when you don't look directly at it.

I didn't focus my gaze on the crack, but on the edge of the lid, keeping the interior in the corner of my eye. Right where the cone of light refracted, I saw it again: a piece of white. A strip that looked like paper.

A letter.

A letter in the coffin. Of course.

I felt something inside me tense up, not fear, but rather the realization that this story always revolves around the same thing: writing. Letters. Diaries. Albums. All paper, all an invitation.

I didn't put my hand inside. I left the letter where it was. Whoever takes something from a coffin has already accepted that the coffin has something to give. And giving is never free in this world.

Tap, again, very quietly. The umbrella in the shade touched the ground, as if to say: Good. You hear.

I placed the lamp on the floor so that it illuminated the coffin from below, casting long shadows on the ceiling. Then I pulled the leather folder containing the floor plans from my bag. The paper was damp, but legible. I opened to the page marked by Renfield. The cross. The asylum. I looked for a basement room. For a staircase. For a "coffin."

Nothing was clearly labeled. But at the edge of the floor plan, where "RENFIELD" had previously been written, there was a small addition I had overlooked: a small sketch, barely more than a rectangle. Next to it, an unfinished line, like a circle. And below it, two words, in the same elegant handwriting that had written the other instructions.

CONTAINER. WITNESS.

I shivered inside. The coffin wasn't just a container. It was a witness. An object that had seen something, or held something in place so that it could be seen.

I looked back at the coffin. If it was a witness, of what? Of Mary? Of me? Of the man in the black coat? Or of something deeper in the web?

Mary's hairband was still stuck to my fingers. I carefully placed it on the floor next to the lamp, so that it lay in the light. A human object as a counterpoint to all the ritualized things. Then I pulled out the bone key.

It was warm. Too warm. And when I held it against the wood of the coffin, I felt a vibration, so subtle you only feel it when you're expecting it. The key reacted to the coffin as if it were a door.

I pulled it back, held it against the metal fitting. The vibration intensified. It was as if the key were detecting something invisible. A mechanism that isn't mechanical.

I remembered Renfield's warning: Look what it touches. And I saw: The umbrella wasn't in the shade by chance. It was positioned precisely where the shadow of the coffin was deepest. Where the edge of the lid drew a line into the room. It wasn't touching the coffin, but it was touching its shadow.

I looked up, searching for the coat. It was still hanging there, motionless. But at the bottom of the coat, a thread came loose, as if it were moving, without wind. And I understood: The coat wasn't there to frighten me. It was there to hold something in place. To put something in position.

I took a step back. The circle of ash on the ground was incomplete, but the gap pointed in my direction. As if someone had left it open so that I could complete the missing part with my body. I deliberately didn't step into that gap.

I said quietly, more to myself than to anyone else: I am not the missing piece.

Then I heard the voice from the coffin again.

Not "Abraham." This time something different. A word that didn't sound like a lure, but like a clue.

Window.

The word came so faintly that it could have been mistaken for a creak in the wood. But I understood it because it fit the floor plan. WINDOW had been marked in red. The house of closed windows. A chapter still ahead of us, and yet it already drew me in like a magnet. Everything was connected, even the sequence, even the future.

The voice whispered again: Window... open...

I felt the trap becoming more refined. He wasn't just luring me with Mary. He was luring me with the table of contents of my own path, with the promise that if I just went a little further, I would understand the structure. And structure is a drug for people like me.

I didn't bend down to the coffin, I bent down to the ground, to the ashes. I didn't let a second drop from the flask fall onto the line of ashes, but onto the dark spot in the shadow, where the tip of the umbrella touched the ground.

The drop hit the stone.

It didn't hiss.

The floor was dry. But at that same moment, I heard a soft, barely audible crackling, as if wood in a coffin were reacting. The gap changed slightly, becoming narrower. As if the drop hadn't hit the screen, but the connection.

The typing stopped.

The room felt emptier for the length of a heartbeat. Not safe, but less oppressive.

I used that heartbeat as a spring in my step, went to the shelves, and searched without searching. My hands glided over boxes, bottles, dust. I found an old crowbar, rusty. A tool, banal, human. I took it.

Not to break open the coffin.

To break down something else: the idea that I can only react.

I went to the wall opposite the door, where the plaster was dampest. There, just above the floor, I saw a spot that was different: a clean, straight cut in the stone, as if someone had once bricked up an opening. A small crack that didn't match the wall.

A second door, hidden like wallpaper.

I positioned the crowbar and pushed. The stone didn't give way immediately. Then, with a soft, reluctant crack, a piece of plaster came loose. Behind it was wood. And behind that, a cavity.

A narrow tunnel. Another passage. Another connection.

I held the lamp up and shone it inside.

The corridor smelled of cold air, of the city. It wasn't the smell of a grave. It was the smell of an exit. Or some other trap that smells of freedom.

There was a scraping sound coming from the coffin behind me.

No longer patient. No longer probing.

Angry.

The lid lifted ever so slightly, as if something inside were rising up. And at the same moment, I felt the temperature in the room drop, as if someone had blown out the world's candle.

I didn't turn around. I walked towards the tunnel.

Mary wasn't here, I thought. Not really. Only her trace. His game.

I walked into the corridor, the lamp in front, and behind me I heard a noise that made the skin on the back of my neck feel tight:

An umbrella that opens.

The opening of the umbrella wasn't an ordinary sound. It wasn't the swift stretching of fabric over ribs. It sounded more like something shedding its skin. A dry crack, a gentle tear, then that dull, final click. As if the air itself had decided to take on a form.

I stepped into the tunnel, shrinking myself down as small as possible without stumbling. The passage was low, the walls rough, and the floor damp, not from water alone, but from the kind of dampness that comes from stones that had long concealed something. The lamp was my only point of civilization, and the light from it suddenly seemed ridiculous, as if I had tried to negotiate a storm with a candle.

A draft of air came from behind me, cold, and it smelled of ash.

Not earth. Not iron. Ash, dry, aggressive. As if something that hadn't been on fire in the cellar suddenly produced smoke.

I walked faster, without running. Running is a promise to fear. I didn't want to make a promise.

The tunnel curved after a few meters. I shone my light around the corner and saw that it continued, narrow as a throat. And on the wall, right at eye level, hung a piece of mirror. A small, oval piece of glass, as if broken off from a hand mirror, held in place with a clamp. It was completely out of place, and that was precisely why it was there.

I didn't stop. I didn't look directly at it. I let it slip by the side and kept walking. But out of the corner of my eye, I saw that my reflection wasn't complete. The shoulders were there, the lamp, the face – but something was missing behind me, something that should have been.

The shadow.

In the mirror fragment, there was a dark spot behind my head, like a second neck that didn't belong to me. And this spot grew the further I walked.

I remembered Renfield's saying: "If there are more mirrors than steps, you're no longer in the house." I didn't know if I was still in the house. I only knew that here there were always more mirrors than anyone needed.

Another piece of mirror appeared, then a third. Not arranged regularly, but positioned in such a way that they act like traps: you only see them when you've already passed them, and then you wonder what they saw.

The typing started again.

Not behind me, not in front of me. Everywhere. As if the umbrella fabric no longer muffled the sound, but multiplied it. Once, then twice, then a third beat, faster, as if someone were growing impatient.

I gripped the lamp tighter and felt my wrist ache. The lamp wasn't just light; it was also weight. And weight is an advantage when you think of it as a weapon.

The tunnel ended abruptly in front of me at a small door, low, almost like a hatch. It was made of metal, with a bolt. No lock. No key. Just a simple lever that looked as if it were meant to be opened from the outside.

I placed my hand on the lever, hesitated for a heartbeat – not out of indecisiveness, but because I wanted to choose the moment. Choosing moments is the only thing left when the place dictates the path.

I moved.

The hatch opened outwards, and a blast of cold night air hit me, so fresh it almost hurt. There was no corridor beyond, no further passage. Beyond it was a narrow alley, wet, dark, somewhere behind the asylum, where the buildings show their backs. Rain had made the stone shiny, the fog hung low, but it was still outside. Outside, at least, you have sky above you, even if you can't see it.

I climbed out, pulled the hatch shut behind me, and pushed back the bolt. Metal clicked. A small noise that gave me ridiculously little sense of security. But it was a conclusion. A period.

For a moment, there was silence.

Then I heard it: no typing, no scratching.

A soft rustling sound, as if fabric were moving in a confined space. Behind the metal flap. In the tunnel. As if the open umbrella wanted to spread out inside, but couldn't find enough room.

I took a step back and raised the lamp. Outside it was more useless; the light was lost in the fog. Nevertheless, I held it like a torch, as if fire dictated rules here.

I looked around. To the left, the back wall of the asylum, gray, high, with a barred window. To the right, a narrow passage that might lead to the street. Behind me, a wall that wasn't easy to climb. London was there again, but it was the London of back alleys, not the London of wide streets.

And then I smelled it.

Iron.

Again. Fresh.

I turned my head slowly and looked at the floor of the alley.

A trail of blood.

Not much. A few drops leading towards the passage. Too fresh to be old. Too clear to be accidental. And I knew: This wasn't a sacrifice I made. This was a trail laid for me to follow.

I could have turned around. I could have gone back to the entrance, gotten help, doctors, nurses, police. All the things you would do in a normal world.

But this world had just shown me that order is a facade. The man with the umbrella writes his own records.

I followed the trail of blood.

The passage led into a small courtyard, and there stood a carriage. Black, without a lantern, as if it disliked the light. The coachman sat high, motionless, his hat pulled low. As I approached, he didn't even raise his head. He waited as if I were already part of the route.

I stopped. My breath steamed in the mist.

I said: I'm not driving.

The coachman did not answer. Instead, the curtain inside the coach lifted a crack, as if a hand had pulled it from the inside.

I looked inside.

On the seat lay an object: a small, brown notebook. Worn. Rounded at the edges.

Mary's Diary.

But I had it in the hotel, in my hands, in my coat. And yet it lay here as if it had just been put down. That was impossible. Or it was the kind of possible that you only understand when you stop believing in linear paths.

Next to the diary lay a letter. Yellowish paper. Dark ink. The seal was broken, as if someone had opened it for me.

I didn't take the letter immediately. I just leaned closer to read what was written on the front.

Not my name.

Mary Harker.

And below, in the same elegant handwriting:

Return.

I felt my throat tighten. Give it back. To whom? To Mary? To him? To the net?

The coachman finally said something, quietly, without looking at me: You have another hour before the bell rings in the fog.

Bell in the fog. Another knot, another place already waiting for me in the sequence. Everything was pulling.

I looked up at the barred window of the asylum. Behind the glass, I saw nothing. No shadow. No face. Only the reflection of my lamplight. But at the edge of that reflection, just for a moment, there was movement. A dark outline, as if someone in the room behind the window were opening an umbrella.

I didn't look directly at it. I only saw what the edge gave me.

I reached for the diary.

Not because I wanted to. Because I had to.

When my fingers touched the cover, it was warm. Humanly warm, as if Mary had just held it. And in that moment, I no longer smelled only iron. I smelled perfume. The old, faint perfume that surrounded Mary.

I took the diary and the letter.

The coachman nodded, as if I had made the right choice. The carriage door stood open, even though no one had opened it.

I got in.

And as the carriage started moving, I heard behind us, from the direction of the tunnel, a sound that was barely discernible in the fog, but clear enough to know that it would not end:

Tap.

Once.

Then twice.

And then, like a final line under a chapter, a quiet, satisfied click.

It was as if a door somewhere had decided that it now knew me.

A Bite at Dawn

The carriage smelled of old leather and cold rain, but underneath it lay something that wouldn't let me go: Mary's perfume, faint, like a thought one doesn't want to finish. I held her diary on my knees, the letter on top, and felt the warmth of the cover seep through the fabric of my coat, as if the book weren't just paper, but a living object clinging to me.

The coachman drove without a lantern. In the fog, this was less a risk than a statement: We don't need your light. The wheels rolled, and every time they ran over a cobblestone, I involuntarily thought of the tapping of the umbrella. The sounds began to blend together. London itself sounded as if it were being counted.

I didn't open the letter immediately. Letters in this story were never just messages. They were doors. And you don't open doors in the middle of a carriage if you don't know who's sitting next to you, even if the seat looks empty. I simply held the envelope up to the faint light filtering through the window.

The paper was thin. Inside, I could see a dark line, like a drawing. Or a word written so large that it showed through.

I hesitated. Then I broke the rest of the seal and pulled out the sheet.

Not a long text. Just one sentence, in the elegant script that had become like a fingerprint in my mind:

Return it to her before she texts you.

I read the sentence again. And as I read it, I felt that quiet urge within me, which had long since become a background noise: Write. It wasn't loud, but it was there, like a dripping tap that you eventually stop hearing, until suddenly it fills the entire night.

Bring it back to her, Mary.

Before it writes to you. The diary wasn't just content. It was activity. It wrote. Or it wanted to write. Through me.

I opened Mary's diary, not to the front, but somewhere in the middle, because I knew that the middle often reveals more than the beginning. The paper rustled, and that rustling sounded too loud in the carriage. Too vivid.

The page wasn't blank. Mary had written, but her handwriting was different than before. Not hurried, not desperate. Smooth. Calm. As if someone had guided her hand or soothed her fear.

I read:

He likes the morning.

Below, one line further down:

Because then he can pretend he's just a shadow.

I was freezing. Not because of the cold. Because of the precision. This wasn't a diary entry. This was a warning.

I turned the page. The next page contained only one word.

Dawn.

And below it, a small circle, unfinished.

Always the same patterns. Always the same terms, like motifs in a song that you can't get out of your head.

The carriage slowed. I felt it curve, then become bumpier, as if leaving the paved road. The driver said nothing, but I heard his hand on the reins, a dry crack as he braked the horse.

We stopped.

I looked out.

Fog. A quay? I smelled water, foul, salty. And coal. Maybe by the river. Maybe somewhere where workers arrive in the morning, before the city truly awakens. Dawn hadn't yet broken, but it hung in the air like a promise. The gray had brightened, not with light, but with anticipation.

The coachman opened the hatch without turning around. They're here.

Where? I asked.

He replied: Where it will soon be light.

I got out. The ground beneath my shoes was wet, and the sound of my footsteps was different here, hollow, as if the fog were reflecting them back. I held the diary tightly, the letter in my pocket. I had the feeling that if I let go of the book, it would find its own way.

Contours emerged from the fog: stakes, crates, ropes. A campsite by the water. And further back, a low building with a roof that faded into the gray. A lantern hung by the door, unlit. As if someone had decided that light wasn't needed here.

The smell of iron returned, fresh, sharp. And with it, that inner tension that says: Something has happened here. Or is about to happen.

I walked towards the building. The door wasn't locked. Of course not. Doors are rarely locked in this story. They're only sometimes convinced.

I entered.

Inside it was cold. A storage room, empty except for a few crates. And in the middle stood a chair. A single chair, as if someone had placed it there like a marker. On the chair lay a piece of cloth.

A grey scarf.

Mary's scarf.

I stepped closer, and at that moment I heard a noise behind me that I immediately recognized, although it didn't belong here:

Tap.

Once, then a pause. Not on stone. On wood. Directly behind me, as if someone had placed the umbrella on the ground to give me time to turn around.

I didn't do it immediately. I looked at the scarf first. Underneath it lay something small, glistening in the dim light.

A watch glass. Or a small locket. I didn't take it. I just observed.

The smell of iron was now so strong that I knew: blood is here. Fresh.

I slowly turned around.

There was no one in the doorway. No coat. No man. No umbrella.

But on the floor, directly in the beam of my lamp, lay a trail of blood. Thin. Fresh. It stretched from the entrance to the chair, as if someone had deliberately placed it there.

And beside the track, right where the first drop had fallen, lay a small piece of paper, neatly folded.

I picked it up.

The handwriting was Mary's. But the words were too calm.

If you're reading this, it's almost morning.

I felt my pulse quicken.

The note continued:

He doesn't come at night. He comes at first light, because then he can claim to be just a human being.

Then:

Give me back the diary. It's heavy in my hands, but deadly in yours.

I heard my own breathing. I saw the scarf, the chair, the trail of blood. And I understood: Mary had been here. Perhaps only briefly. Perhaps under duress. But she had written. Or someone had written through her.

And somewhere outside, the gray began to lighten. Not a sunrise, just a thin fading of the blackness. Dawn is not light. It is the idea of light.

I heard the tapping again, this time not behind me, but above, on the roof. A soft settling, as if someone were walking up there, without any weight.

I raised my head.

And the moment I looked up, I felt it on my neck.

A brief, cold pressure, right under the jaw.

Like two needles.

The pressure under my jaw was so precise that for a moment it felt like a doctor's touch. Two points, cold, barely painful—and precisely for that reason dangerous. Pain is an alarm. This touch was a marker. I froze, not out of fear, but because my body instinctively understood: if I flinch now, the marker will become an injury.

The air smelled of iron and damp wood. The warehouse was silent, but the silence suddenly had weight, as if someone had hung it from the ceiling. I heard no breathing behind me. No rustling. No footsteps on the floor. Only my own pulse, pounding in my ears, and above it, almost politely, the soft tapping on the roof—as if someone up there was counting the seconds it would take for me to realize that I had already been touched.

I forced my lips apart without moving my head. My voice came out quieter than I wanted.

Who...?

No answer sentence. Just a whisper, close to the ear, as if the air itself were speaking:

Return it.

The sentence wasn't loud. It wasn't even clearly a voice. It was a form of pressure that transformed into a word. And I understood immediately what it meant. The diary on my knees in the carriage. The warning in the letter. Mary's note: deadly in your hands.

Return it.

My fingers clenched around the piece of paper I had just read. It rustled, and the rustling was too loud in the room, as if the paper were an instrument. The cold pressure under my jaw remained, two points that didn't deepen but didn't lessen either.

I did the only thing left to do to avoid becoming an object: I gave the moment a form.

Slowly I lifted the lamp, not high, not abruptly, just enough so that the beam of light moved across the wall, over the boxes, the chair, the scarf. I wasn't shining it backwards. I was shining it where shadows reside. In corners. Under edges. To the places where a body isn't standing, but where a gaze might be waiting.

The pressure on my throat eased. Not completely. It became lighter, as if the point, whatever it was, had withdrawn and tested me. As if I had passed a test without knowing which answers were allowed.

I slowly raised my free hand and felt with my fingertips the spot under my jaw. A wet patch. Warm. And then the smell, immediate: fresh blood, metallic, alive. The first real pain came only now, a slight burning sensation that was more of an insult than an injury.

A bite.

Not deep. Not fatal – not yet. More like a signature stroke.

I closed my eyes for a heartbeat because I felt something stirring inside me, an ancient, animalistic urge to strike immediately, to dominate the room instantly. But this room could not be dominated. It was built to set me in motion.

When I opened my eyes again, the scarf was still lying on the chair. The locket beneath it glimmered faintly. The trail of blood on the floor shimmered in the lamplight. And the note in my hand suddenly felt not like a message, but like a piece of evidence.

The typing on the roof stopped.

Silence.

Too smooth.

I turned to the chair because the chair was the focal point. The scarf was folded carefully, not carelessly. Mary's scarf, like a part of her, so I wouldn't forget that she truly existed. I lifted it, felt the coolness of the fabric. It smelled of mist, of damp hair, of something that had once been warm.

Beneath the scarf lay the locket. It wasn't a watch crystal, but a thin, oval metal case, slightly tarnished. I didn't open it immediately. I simply held it in my hand. An object too personal to have been left lying there by chance.

I heard something outside.

Not footsteps. The water. A soft gurgling at the quay. And another sound, further away: the first movement of the city, a wagon wheel, a shout, muffled by the fog. Dawn creeping in uninvited.

I opened the locket.

Inside was a small photograph, yellowed, black and white. Mary, younger, smiling, and next to her a man whose face should have been so familiar that it sent a jolt through me: not Jonathan, not someone from the asylum. I didn't recognize him—and yet he seemed as if I'd seen him a hundred times before in London. That was the worst part. A face that defies capture because it deliberately resides in mediocrity.

Beneath the photograph was a tiny strip of paper, folded like a tongue held in the mouth.

I pulled it out and unfolded it.

Just three words, in Mary's handwriting, but so neat that they didn't seem to have been written under duress. Or perhaps precisely because of that:

Not in the light.

I swallowed. Not in the light. He comes in the first light, the note had said. He then claims to be just a man. And Mary wrote: not in the light. Perhaps she meant: Don't trust the morning. Or she meant: Don't hide from the night, but from the lie of the day.

I put the strip back into the locket, closed it, and felt my fingers tremble. Not from weakness, but because my body was reacting to the two marks on my neck, as if it had suddenly understood that something had been written inside me.

Write.

The word was there again, gentle, patient, like a hand on the shoulder. I clenched my teeth. I didn't want to write. I wanted to act. But action was precisely what drove him.

I pulled Mary's diary from my coat pocket. It was still warm. I had carried it with me the whole time, as if it were a heart. I opened it, not to just any page, but to where I had previously read "Dawn." The page was there, the unfinished circle beneath it.

And now there was something new there.

A fresh line.

Not by me. My hand had never been on that side. And yet a short line ran through the circle, as if someone had begun to close it.

I ran my finger over it. The ink was still slightly damp.

My stomach churned. The book was writing. Not metaphorically. It was leaving its mark as I carried it. It wasn't just dangerous in my hands; it was actively present in my vicinity. It turned my presence into an invitation.

Outside, the gray lightened. It was only a subtle difference, but the room seemed to react to it. The smell of iron became sharper, as if blood meant more when it became lighter.

I heard a faint noise at the entrance. Not a creaking of the door, more of a gentle scraping, as if fabric were rubbing against the wood.

The umbrella.

Not visible, but present, because the sound lay in my memory like a scar.

I didn't look at the door. I looked at the floor. The trail of blood that had led from the entrance to the chair was gaining new drops. Fresh. As if someone were leaving without me seeing them. And these drops formed a line—not by chance, but deliberately—out of the storage room.

A trail that was supposed to lure me away.

I snapped the diary shut. Quickly, decisively. I tucked it under my arm as if it were a weapon, even though it was a wound. I took the scarf and draped it over my hand, pressing it briefly against the bite on my neck. The fabric instantly took on a color. Iron. Warm. Human. And in that warmth lay the real threat: that I felt alive while something inside me was asserting its claim.

I stepped to the entrance and looked out.

Fog. The quay. The pilings. And above the water, a brightness that didn't come from the sun, but from the moment just before, when the sky pretends to be innocent.

There was nobody to be seen out there.

But on one of the posts, very close to the water, lay something bright. A sheet of paper, as if it had strayed there. And next to it, neatly upright, a black object that gleamed dully in the dim light.

A closed umbrella.

Alone.

Like a courteous gift.

I stopped in the doorway and felt the impulse growing within me to go out, to take the thing, to throw it away, to break it. But I had learned that things that are broken only return in a different form in this story.

Dawn was approaching. And the bite on my neck burned more intensely now, as if my skin understood that the day was beginning. That something could now more easily claim to be human.

I took a deep breath, tasted iron, and knew: If I wanted to give Mary back the diary, I first had to stop it from writing me any further. And if I wanted to stop it from writing me, I had to move – but not along its path.

I took a step out into the fog.

The fog outside was colder than the storeroom, and yet it felt freer because it had no walls to whisper in my ear. The air tasted of water and coal, and beneath it lay that metallic iron, which I now not only smelled but carried within me. The scarf around my neck was damp, the blood slowly seeping into it, and I could feel the skin pulsing around the two points, as if someone had installed a small clock there.

I stepped away from the doorframe, just far enough to escape the darkness. The gray of morning wasn't yet light, but it made things harder, more distinct. It gave the quay contours. The pilings edges. And it gave me the illusion that I could see what was happening in front of me.

The umbrella stood upright next to the post where the paper lay. It was closed, the fabric strap neatly wrapped around it. It looked like something someone had forgotten. That was precisely the insult: that it was disguising itself as forgetfulness.

I didn't walk directly towards him. I walked in an arc, keeping him within sight. And as I walked, I felt the bite on my neck burn, more intensely, as if my blood were reacting to the proximity. Not to the screen itself, but to what it signified: connection. Possession. Invitation.

As I approached the post, I heard the water gently lapping against the wood. A steady, unperturbed sound. Water knows no stories. Water remains water. I envied it for a moment.

The paper on the post wasn't held in place by the wind. It lay there as if someone had deliberately placed it there. Not a single drop of rain had soaked it, even though the stone was wet. A piece of paper that was too clean in an environment that was too dirty.

I picked it up.

The handwriting was not elegant. It was rough, as if quickly drawn with a pencil. No delicacy. No playfulness.

DON'T COME BACK.

Below, smaller:

HE IS IN THE LIGHT.

I stared at the words. They matched Mary's locket: Not in the light. And they matched what the note in the storeroom had said: He comes in the first light because then he can claim to be just a human being.

Don't come back. Back where? To the madhouse. To Mary. To the orderly paths.

I felt my throat tighten. Mary was in the asylum, in a room without mirrors, if the doctor had done as I said. And I had the diary with me. I should give it back to her. But if he was in the light, then the way back through what London now called morning was exactly what he wanted.

The umbrella beside me remained silent. No tapping. No sound. As if it respected my thoughts while guiding them.

I kept my eyes glued to the umbrella. I saw that the fabric strap around the handle had shifted slightly, as if someone had just tightened it. And there, between the strap and the handle, was a small, thin object.

A feather.

Not from a bird. A quill pen, fine, old-fashioned, with a metal tip. It was tucked into the ribbon as if it were an accessory deliberately placed there.

"Write," it said inside me, gently and terribly.

I raised my hand, not to take the feather, but to touch the umbrella's handle with two fingers, just briefly, as one might test a hot stove. My finger touched the handle, and immediately I felt it: a coldness that didn't come from temperature. A coldness that was order.

And with this coldness came an image.

Not before my eyes, but behind my forehead. A corridor in the asylum. White walls. A door. And Mary's room. I saw her lying on the bed, pale, her eyes half-open. A nurse stood beside the bed. He was writing something on a clipboard. A report. A protocol.

I had said: Nobody should write.

And yet he wrote.

In the picture, a shadow slid across the wall, even though no lamp flickered. A narrow, dark stripe, like the edge of a coat. The orderly raised his head, irritated. Then he lowered it again and continued writing. As if he were being forced to. Or as if he wanted to.

I yanked my fingers away from the umbrella handle as if it had burned me. The bite on my throat throbbed more intensely, and I felt that the throbbing wasn't just my heart, but an answer.

He was in the light. Not just outside. Inside. In protocols. In routine. In every hand that holds a pen.

I exhaled sharply and felt the fog embrace me. Suddenly, the fog was no longer just an obstacle. It was protection. The fog obscures vision. And vision is its ally in the morning, when it wants to play human.

I tucked the note away without crumpling it. Paper is too important here to be insulted. Then I gripped Mary's diary more firmly under my arm and took a step away from the post.

At that moment I heard a noise behind me.

Not the typing. Not the opening of the screen.

A cough.

A human cough, harsh, as if someone had inhaled too much coal. I turned my head, slowly.

A man stood in the fog. A worker, one might think. Cap, coat, broad shoulders. He wasn't holding an umbrella. His hands were in his pockets. He looked like someone going to work in the morning. A face one could easily forget.

But as he came closer, I saw his eyes.

Too calm. Too clear. Too patient.

He stopped, not three steps away. Morning mist clung to his coat, as if he had just stepped out of the water without getting wet.

He said: They are bleeding.

I pressed the scarf tighter against my neck. I said: A scratch.

He didn't smile. He just inclined his head, as if considering my word. Then he said: A scratch doesn't write.

My stomach clenched. He was here. Not as a shadow. As a person.

He took a step forward, and I smelled him. Not perfume. Not earth. Something else. Cold metal. Ash. And behind it, a delicate sweetness, like a promise.

"Give it to me," he said calmly.

I said: No.

He looked at me, and there was no anger in his gaze. Only the certain knowledge that he had many paths.

Then he said: They'll give it anyway. Either with their hand or with their head. I prefer the hand. It's more polite.

I held the diary tightly. I felt the warmth of the cover. And in that warmth, there was suddenly something I hadn't noticed before: a slight twitch, as if the book were reacting. As if it had its voice. As if it were urging me to let it go.

"Write," whispered a voice inside me, but it now sounded almost like myself.

I took a step back, not from the man, but toward the fog, because fog provides cover. The man didn't follow immediately. He gave me space, and that space was the real threat. Space is where you allow yourself to make mistakes.

I said: What are you?

He answered as if he had heard the question many times before and been amused each time: I am the one you describe when you are not looking.

Then he raised his hand and pointed not at me, but at the diary.

"It's already open," he said quietly. "They just don't realize it yet."

I felt the blood running into my fingers. I looked at the diary under my arm.

The cover was slightly open.

Not much. But enough for a page to peek out. And on that page, visible in the first gray morning light, was a sentence, freshly written.

Not from Mary.

Not from me.

A sentence that struck a chord with me because it sounded like a fact:

You're going to the mental asylum now.

I looked back at the man. His eyes were still calm.

He said: You see? Mornings are so convenient. You don't have to threaten anymore. You just have to read.

The bite burned in my throat, and I understood: the bite wasn't just blood. It was ink.

I didn't turn around to escape. I turned sideways, into the fog, and walked away, because I knew that staying put here was the same as signing up.

And as I disappeared into the fog, I heard behind me, very quietly, as if it were just a sound from the quay:

Tap. Once. Then silence.

The map with the red cross

The fog enveloped me as if it had been expecting me. After a few steps, the alley behind me was nothing more than a gray thought, the sound of the water a dull murmur, and even the man with the calm eyes became something one could imagine. But I didn't imagine anything. I could still feel him in the way the air was heavier in places, as if it were encircling a body. And in my throat, the small wound throbbed, as if clinging to the morning and declaring: I am now part of you.

I didn't walk quickly. I forced myself not to. Rushing in the fog makes noise, and noises here are like signatures. Instead, I kept my head slightly bowed and let the world pass by at the edges: lanterns that pierced through the gray like tired eyes; the dull gleam of wet stones; the shadows of crates and posts that looked like people waiting until you got closer.

The diary under my arm felt heavier. Not physically heavier, but like something that accumulates more meaning the longer you carry it. I could feel the cover rubbing against the inside of my coat, as if impatient. And I knew, without looking, that the page with the sentence was still sticking out slightly. You're going to the asylum now. An order in ink, phrased so politely it came across as good advice.

I turned onto another street, not towards the asylum, but away from it. Not out of spite, but out of necessity. When he was in the light, the direct route was a stage. I needed a corner, a back door, a place where the morning couldn't so easily pretend to be innocent.

The fog thinned in places, revealing more of the city. A man pushed a cart, cursing softly. Two women stood in a doorway, their aprons damp, their eyes tired. No one really looked at me, and that was the only good thing about London in the morning: everyone is so busy trying to stay alive that they don't ask how others manage it.

I felt the scarf cling to my neck. The blood wasn't fresh anymore, but it was there, leaving a thin line on my skin that reminded me of the two spots. Ink, I'd thought. And now, walking, it actually felt as if someone hadn't just bitten me, but written. As if something inside me was preparing a sentence that wasn't mine.

I stopped at the next lamppost and briefly pulled the scarf away to let air reach the wound. The bite stung, and I smelled the iron so strongly again that I felt nauseous for a moment. I pressed the scarf back on and forced myself not to gag. Gagging is a sign of weakness. Weakness is malleable.

I had to take the diary to Mary. I knew that. But I had to take it in such a way that it didn't finish writing me beforehand.

A door stood ajar. A shop, perhaps a print shop, perhaps a stationer's. The sign above the door was only vaguely visible in the fog, but I could see stacks of paper, inkwells, envelopes in the window. A place full of writing materials. A place full of danger. And yet I was drawn inside, because I sensed that something I needed might be there: not words, but another kind of language. Map. Path. Sign.

I entered.

Inside, the air was warmer, dry, and smelled of paper, glue, and dusty ink. A man stood behind a counter, his glasses perched low on his nose, his fingers black with printer's ink. He looked up, his eyes restless. They were irritated. That was reassuring. Irritable people are still genuine.

"What can I get you?" he asked.

I didn't put the diary on the counter. I held it tight, as if it would otherwise start talking of its own accord. I said: A map of London. One that shows the side streets.

The man blinked, scrutinizing my coat, the damp scarf, my gaze. "You don't look like someone who wants to go for a walk," he said.

I replied: I don't want to go for a walk. I want to arrive without being seen.

He snorted softly, pulled open a drawer, and took out a folded piece of paper. A city map, already used, the edges softened. He laid it down, and as the paper touched the counter, I felt that pull inside me again. Write. As if the shop itself had a voice.

I forced my hands to stay still. I said: Do you also have... anything marked?

The man raised an eyebrow. Marked paper? That's rarely a good sign around here.

I took a few coins out of my pocket and laid them down. Not too many. Enough to show he was serious, but not so many that he started making things up. He didn't take the money right away. He just looked at me. Then he reached under the counter, pulled out a flat folder, and placed it next to the plan.

He didn't open it. He just pushed it towards me.

I asked: What is this?

He said: A map that isn't for sale. It comes from people who would rather not be listed in books. Sometimes police officers bring it. Sometimes people running away from police officers.

I swallowed. I opened the folder.

Inside was a map, neatly drawn, not printed. A hand-drawn map. Not all of London, just a part of it: streets, alleys, backyards, underground passages, as if someone had mapped the city not from above, but from below. And on this map was a symbol that immediately stood out from everything else.

A red cross.

The cross wasn't large. It was precise, applied with a thin brush, as if the paint were expensive. It wasn't on a well-known building, not on a church, not on a hospital. It lay on a spot that was drawn on the paper only as an empty rectangle, without a name.

I looked up. Where did you get that?

The man shrugged. From someone who didn't come back, he said. He left it here and said: If someone with blood on their neck asks for directions, give them this.

My fingers got cold.

I said nothing. I stared at the red cross as if it were staring back at me. A red cross is usually a symbol of help. Here it was a target.

I asked: What is there?

The man leaned forward slightly. His voice trailed off. "There's an entrance," he said. "Not like in normal houses. An entrance that won't let you in when you think you want to. It lets you in when you're already inside."

That wasn't a sentence that came from a printing press. It was a sentence from the fog. I felt everything inside me resist, and at the same time I knew: This map is no coincidence. It is exactly what the story wants me to do.

I folded the card, very slowly, very carefully. Paper crackles when you're nervous. I didn't want her to hear my nervousness.

The man looked at my hands. Then at the scarf. Then he said: When you go to the Red Cross, don't walk straight ahead. Walk as if you have time. And if you feel someone walking behind you, don't stop. Just stop... less.

I nodded, even though I didn't know how to stay less. Perhaps he meant: at the edge. Perhaps he meant: in the fog.

I paid, but didn't take the usual map. Just the one with the red cross. A single sheet of paper that suddenly felt heavier than any coffin.

When I stepped back outside, the gray was lighter. Not friendly, just lighter. Dawn hadn't redeemed the city, it had merely made it visible. And visibility was its domain.

I set off, the map in my coat pocket, my diary under my arm, my scarf around my neck. I didn't take the main roads. I took the narrow ones, the damp ones, the ones where the houses stand so close together that the sky is just a thin strip. I didn't follow the red cross in my mind, but the feeling that I was heading towards a place that refused to be found.

After a while, I stopped, not because I was lost, but because something was changing. The sounds around me became muffled. The fog thickened, even though the morning was getting brighter. And in this contradiction, I recognized the day's signature: something that doesn't adhere to the weather.

I briefly pulled out the map, just a glance, no long study. The red dot was closer now, according to my sense of direction. Two more turns. One more backyard.

I put the card away again.

Then I heard it.

No typing. No scratching. Another sound I now dread just as much: the gentle rustling of paper, as if someone were turning a page very close by.

I stopped, without actually stopping. I merely slowed my movement. The fog in front of me was empty.

And yet I knew: Someone is reading.

Not the map.

Me.

I kept walking, and with each step it felt like I was crossing an invisible line. As if the city at this point was no longer a city, but a map marked in red ink. And when I turned into the backyard that corresponded to the cross on the map, I saw it.

No door. No sign. Just a brick wall.

But in the middle of the wall, just above eye level, a red cross was painted. Freshly done. As if someone had just put it there so I wouldn't be standing in the wrong place.

And directly below it, scratched into the mortar, was a single word.

Give.

The word in the mortar wasn't large. It wasn't beautiful either. It was roughly carved, as if someone had used a knife and made no effort to smooth the edges. And that's precisely why it seemed so final. Give. No subject. No object. Just an imperative so naked it looked like a law of nature.

I stood in the courtyard, the fog hanging between the walls like a wet cloth, and the red cross on the wall looked not like paint, but like a wound. It was too cold. No rain had washed it away, even though everything around me was wet. The city obeyed different rules here.

I didn't take the map out again. I knew where I was. The cross wasn't for orientation; it was confirmation. And confirmation, in this story, is a dangerous gift.

I held Mary's diary under my arm. I felt its warmth against my ribs, as if it were trying to comfort me. That made me suspicious. Things that comfort are often things that make you weak.

"Give," it said.

I said quietly, more to myself than to the wall: I'm giving nothing.

The sentence sounded small in the courtyard. The fog swallowed it and didn't return it. No echo. No voice. That didn't make it better. It only made it more concentrated.

I stepped closer to the wall. The brick was old, the mortar crumbling. But in one spot, directly beneath the cross, the stone was cleaner, as if it had been touched often. A gleaming streak, not from water. From hands.

I reached out and ran my fingertips over the stone. Cold. Rough. And then I felt an edge, a seam, fine, precise. A piece of wall that wasn't really wall.

A door disguised as a wall.

Naturally.

I leaned forward, searching for a handle, a hole, a lock. Nothing. Only the seam. Only the command.

Give.

I thought of the letter: Return it to her before it writes to you. I thought of Mary's note: Deadly in your hands. I thought of the sentence that had appeared in the diary while I was carrying it: You're going to the madhouse now. And I thought of the man on the quay who had said with the calm of a clerk: Mornings are so convenient. All you have to do is read.

If I "give" the diary now, to whom am I giving it? Mary? Or to the internet? And if I don't give it, what then? If I keep it, it continues to write. If I give it away, it opens a door that may never close again.

I placed my palm against the wall. I pressed down.

Nothing.

I pressed harder.

Still nothing.

Then, very quietly, a sound came from the stone, as if something inside was holding its breath. Not a crack. More like a click, not a mechanical one. A decision.

And suddenly there was a slit in the wall, where before there had only been mortar. A narrow slit, just wide enough for paper.

A letter slot.

I stared at it. This wasn't a door for people. This was a door for writing.

Give.

I didn't immediately take out Mary's diary. I took out the letter I'd received in the carriage and held it to the slot. The letter was thin. It fit. I pushed it in a little way.

The slit closed around the paper like lips. Not tightly, but noticeably. As if the wall could taste it.

I pulled the letter out again. The slot remained open.

So she wanted something different.

Not words. Not warnings.

The book.

I felt a sting on my neck, as if the wound were reacting, as if someone had my pulse on a string. I pressed the scarf harder against it. There wasn't much blood, but enough to remind me that I was marked.

I took the diary in both hands and held it in front of the slot.

The book responded.

The pages rustled, even though there was no wind. The cover vibrated slightly, as if it had its own little excitement. And in my mind it was there again, not as a word, but as a pull. Write. Give. Go. All in the same tone of voice, so friendly that you forget it's not coming from a friend.

I forced my hands to stay still. I said, loud enough for the walls to hear: I'm giving it to her, not to you.

Then I slid the diary into the slot.

It didn't fit.

Too wide. Too thick. The wall wasn't built for books. It was built for leaves. For pages. For things you could tear out.

Naturally.

They didn't give the book. They gave what was in it. They gave the page. They gave the text. And suddenly I understood: The bite on the neck, the demand to write, the shop full of paper – it all led here, to a letter slot in a wall. A mouth that devours ink.

I clutched the diary and felt resistance forming within me, not only against him, but against the logic of this world. I pulled out the vial, opened it, and let a tiny drop fall onto the edge of the slot.

It hissed.

The crack flinched. The mortar around it discolored slightly, as if it had been burned. The crack became smaller, more reluctant.

I had hurt him.

A faint sound came from inside the wall. Not a scream. Not a whisper. The rustling of paper, faster, more impatient. As if someone inside was frantically flipping through pages.

And then I heard something that, despite everything, made me fall silent.

Mary's voice.

Not from the yard, not from outside. From the wall.

Abraham... she whispered, and it didn't sound forced. It sounded thin, exhausted, like someone who had been in a room with no air for too long. Don't give... the page...

I felt my throat tighten. The voice was so close, so human, that it struck me right in the flesh. And at the same time, I knew: This is exactly how it begins. Exactly like this. A voice in stone that compels you to move your hand.

I said, quietly, angrily: Mary, if it's you, tell me something he doesn't know.

Silence.

Then, faintly: The locket... do not open... in the light...

I froze. Only Mary knew. I had seen it. I had done it. Or could he know? He reads. But does he read everything? Does he also read what isn't written down? The locket was an object, not a text. And Mary's warning inside was on paper, yes, but I had seen it, not written it.

My head hurt from all that wrestling.

Mary's voice whispered again: The slit... is not the entrance... It is the bait...

I pressed my forehead against the cold stone, as if I could feel through the material whether she was there. I smelled nothing but damp mortar. No perfume. No iron. Only stone.

I pulled the map with the red cross out of my pocket and held it up to the light as if it were evidence. The red cross on it was identical. And on the map, directly below the cross, was a small mark I had overlooked before: a tiny, unfinished circle with an arrow next to it—not pointing towards the wall, but towards the right side of the courtyard.

I turned my head and looked over there.

There was a drain grate on the ground, half in the fog, half in the shadows. A gully, covered in rust. Nothing special. Precisely because of that, it was special.

I went over, knelt down, and shone the lamp on the grate. The rust was old, but in one spot it was shinier, as if someone had recently touched it. And next to that spot lay a thin strip of gray dust.

Ash.

A circle? No. Just a line. A clue.

I placed my fingers on the grid and pulled.

It was heavy. It was stuck. But it gave way, and as it lifted, a smell wafted towards me that immediately pulled me back into the cellar scenes: cold earth. Damp stones. And underneath, very faintly, iron.

A shaft led downwards. Dark. Narrow. And down there, in the darkness, I saw something that both attracted and warned me: a piece of mirror reflecting the light from my lamp.

Mary's voice whispered weakly from the wall: Not... the slit... the shaft...

I closed my eyes briefly and exhaled. I had a choice, and that was the worst part, because he loves choices.

The slot wanted sides. The shaft wanted people.

And somewhere above us, dawn continued to creep into the sky as if it were just weather, while I stood in the yard negotiating with a wall.

I put the diary back under my arm, gripped the lamp more tightly, and placed my foot on the first edge of the shaft.

Then I heard a faint noise behind me in the courtyard, so small that it was more of a gesture than a sound.

Tap.

Once.

And I knew: He knows that I found the other door.

The typing behind me wasn't loud enough to sound like an attack. It was loud enough to sound like agreement. As if someone had said: Good. That's right. And that's precisely why it was poison.

I paused, my foot already on the edge of the shaft, the lamp in my hand, the diary under my arm like a dangerous child that mustn't be let go. The courtyard was silent, but this silence wasn't empty. It was tense. The fog hung between the walls, pretending to be mere dampness, while in truth it obscured the stage.

I descended.

The shaft was narrow, the first step slippery, the stone cold and damp. I pushed the lamp down in front of me, and the light scanned the walls: old bricks, black stains, traces of water that had been running here for years. The smell of earth intensified, and the fine metallic whiff of iron crept out from beneath it like an animal you can't see but can smell.

After three steps – I wasn't consciously counting, I only knew because my body sensed the distance – I saw the piece of mirror clearly. It was embedded in the wall, not large, but smooth. As if someone had deliberately placed it so that you inevitably see it when descending.

I forced myself not to stare. I ignored it and moved on. But out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that the mirror wasn't just reflecting me. It was reflecting the courtyard above me. And in the courtyard, in the mirror, was something I hadn't seen up above.

A black coat.

Not being worn. Upright, as if it were hanging. And below it, like a dot, the tip of an umbrella.

The coat in the mirror didn't move. But the umbrella tapped.

I didn't really hear it down here. I saw it. And my body did the rest: it turned the image into a sound.

I went deeper.

The shaft ended at the bottom in a low tunnel that led to the right. The floor was damp but passable. I crouched down, held the lamp in front of me, and pressed the diary tightly against my side. The walls were so close that the fabric of my shoulder brushed against them. The sound of the fabric on stone was unpleasant. It sounded like writing.

The tunnel only ran for a few meters before opening into a small room. Not a cellar like before, but more of a closet, low-ceilinged, with a rounded ceiling as if constructed from an old drainage system. In the center stood a table. Not a proper table, more like a stone slab resting on two bricks. And on this slab lay something that, bathed in the lamplight, immediately became the focal point.

A map.

Not the card from the printer. A different one. Thick paper, heavy, clean, as if someone had just laid it out. On it was a red cross, larger than before, as if the message had been written for someone who usually overlooks things. Next to the cross was a small circle, unfinished.

And right next to the map was a knife.

A small knife with a dark handle, neatly placed, as if on a set table. A tool that can not only cut, but also lets you choose what you cut.

I stood at the entrance to the chamber. I didn't go in right away. I smelled the air. Earth. Iron. And now, clearly: wax. As if a candle had recently been burned here.

I looked at the walls. And there they were: reflective patches. Not large mirrors, but small pieces of glass, embedded in the wall, like scales. Two. Three. Maybe more if you turned your head. And I thought of Renfield's warning, although down here it sounded like a curse: If there are more mirrors than steps, you're no longer in the house.

I was no longer sure if I was actually still in London or just in a model of London that someone had made for me to walk in.

I took a step into the chamber.

Nothing happened instantly. No flickering. No whispering. No pressure. That made me nervous. Instantly, at least, meant honestly. Delay meant planning.

I went to the table. I didn't pick up the card. I looked at it.

She didn't show streets. She showed connections. Arrows, lines, nodes. Like a network diagram. And at one of the nodes was a red cross. This cross was marked with a word, in the elegant script I had come to recognize as his.

GIFT.

In addition, an arrow points to another marker:

RETURN.

And upon returning, it said:

MADHOUSE.

I felt my stomach clench. He had already mapped out the path. And he had given it words. He wanted me not only to walk, but to understand that I exist on a map. That I am a character.

I thought of Mary in the asylum, in a room without a mirror, if it had worked out. I thought of the orderly in my picture, writing. I thought of the morning, which is practical.

Then I saw the knife.

It was positioned so that the handle pointed towards me. An offer. Take it. Use it. And suddenly I understood: The knife wasn't for fighting. It was for paper.

Cut one side. Tear it out. Give it away.

Give.

I heard Mary's voice again in the wall, but there was no voice from the wall down here. Down here was only the memory of her words: Don't give... the side...

I placed my hand on the diary under my arm. The cover vibrated slightly, as if impatient. It was too warm, too alive. It wanted to be opened. It wanted me to see what it had already written.

And I felt the bite throbbing on my neck, as if it had developed a rhythm. Not my heart. Something else. An ink that stays warm.

I pulled out the diary and placed it on the stone slab, next to the map, but far enough away from the knife that it wouldn't look like I'd made up my mind. I opened the cover just a crack.

The pages moved by themselves.

Nothing dramatic. No wind. No invisible finger. Just this light, unnatural turning of the pages, as if the paper were breathing. It opened to a side I hadn't chosen.

I saw the sentence that was written there. Fresh. Black. Calm.

YOU PROVIDE THIS PAGE.

Below it was an incomplete circle, and in the gap of the circle was a small red cross.

I swallowed. I looked up at the small pieces of mirror in the wall. In one of them, I saw myself standing at the table, the diary open. Behind me, in the mirror, wasn't the room. Behind me was a corridor. White. Clinic white. Asylum white. And at the end of this corridor stood the man in the black coat.

Not as a shadow. Clear. Hands still. Umbrella closed.

He didn't type.

He waited.

I wasn't looking directly at him. I was looking at the edge of the frame, and yet I felt my gaze want to cling to him. Like the mind searching for a point to hold onto when everything else is floating.

Then I noticed something in the reflection of the hallway: a door. There was a number on this door.

17.

Over and over again. Always the same number, as if it didn't mean a room, but a state of being.

I forced myself to look away—not away from the mirror, but away from the center. I looked at my hands. At the diary. At the page it wanted.

I took the knife.

Slowly. Without haste. So that it looked like a decision. That was precisely what was dangerous. But I didn't need the knife to cut the side.

I needed it to cut something else: the connection that the book is currently establishing.

I didn't hold the blade over the paper. I held it over my scarf, where it had absorbed blood. I cut off a small piece of fabric, a red, damp piece that smelled of iron. I laid this piece of fabric on its side, right on the red cross that the book had drawn.

The blood soaked the paper.

The circle on the page contracted, as if reacting. The ink suddenly seemed thinner, as if afraid of real blood. For a heartbeat, it was as if the book hesitated.

I used my heartbeat as a cue and slammed the diary shut.

Not gently. Firmly. With a dull thud that resonated loudly in the small room. I pressed the cover down with both hands, as if I could silence the book that way.

At that same moment, the light from my lamp flickered.

Not from electricity, not from air. As if the flame were briefly breathing.

And from the pieces of mirror on the wall came a quiet, angry sound. Not a word. A crackling, like glass moving. As if the mirrors were protesting.

The typing was back. Not in the room, but in my head, as if the bite on my neck had taken it over. Once. Then a pause.

I took the card with the red cross and didn't tear it. I folded it so the cross was on the inside. Hidden. Not because I thought it would help, but because it made me feel better about not leaving the symbols lying around openly like bait.

Then I stepped back, away from the table, away from the mirrors, and went to the tunnel.

Behind me, in one of the mirrored fragments, I saw the man in the coat tilt his head slightly, as if amused. And inside, I no longer heard "write," but something new, quieter, but just as dangerous:

You learn.

I climbed the shaft, step by step, without counting, my gaze fixed on the edge, my lamp firmly on the shaft. When I reached the courtyard again at the top, the dawn was brighter, and the red cross on the wall now looked as if it had always been there.

The letter slot was still there. Open. Hungry.

I walked past without giving him anything.

And as I left the courtyard, I realized that I was no longer just carrying a card, but also something heavier: a decision I hadn't fully thought through.

Mary needed the diary. But the diary needed me.

I had to separate the two before morning finally became day.

The train to Whitby

The courtyard with the red cross remained behind me like a stain on my retina, one that cannot be blinked away. I didn't walk quickly, but I walked resolutely, with my diary under my arm and the map deep in my coat pocket, folded so that the cross was on the inside, as if the paper were ashamed. The fog had thinned, but that didn't make the city any friendlier. It only made it more precise. Every cobblestone had edges again. Every puddle reflected something one didn't want to see.

I paused briefly at the next corner and pressed the scarf against my neck. The bite stung. Not like a wound healing, but like a small, impatient reminder etched into my skin. I didn't want to look. Looking means confirming. Confirming means: yes, you're there.

In a shop window, I saw my reflection, distorted in the glass. The scarf, the pale skin, the gaze. And for a moment, just a split second, a dark line slipped into the reflection behind my shoulder, the hem of a coat that didn't belong to me. I didn't turn my head. I kept walking as if I hadn't seen anything. By then, that was my only form of courage: to pretend that the impossible wasn't impressive.

I had to return the diary to Mary. But every step toward the asylum felt like stepping onto a stage already set up in the morning light. He was in the light, the note had said. He is in the light. And I had seen the image, the orderly with the clipboard, the hand writing because it had to.

So I took the detour. Not one that would save me, but one that would give me time to choose my next move myself.

A station clock emerged from the haze, mounted high on a corner, its white face so clean it seemed almost unbelievable. The hands pointed to just before six. Dawn had turned into morning, and with it, into routine. Men would now go to work, women would open doors, newspapers would be delivered, and no one would notice if a shadow disturbed the order, because order loves shadows.

I turned onto a wider street. Horse-drawn carriages, a milk truck, a policeman leaning against a lamppost, staring into the fog as if he hadn't slept. I felt his gaze on me briefly, then away again. I was just a man in a scarf. London is full of men in scarves. That's precisely the danger: you can disappear here without even realizing you're disappearing.

The map in my pocket pressed against my ribs. I briefly pulled it out in a doorway, just a glance, no long study. The red cross wasn't the only thing on the map. Thin lines radiated from the cross, like veins. One of them ended at a word I had previously overlooked, perhaps because I hadn't wanted to see it.

Whitby.

It wasn't prominently displayed. It was small, at the edge, as if it were a footnote. But the word hit me like a blow, because it suddenly made everything clear. Whitby was coast, wind, sea. Whitby was distance. And distance is sometimes the only medicine you get before the doctor enters the room.

I put the card back in my pocket and felt the scarf around my neck become heavy. As if the bite had reacted to the word. As if something inside me liked the name.

I headed towards the train station.

The first station I reached was already awake. Wisps of steam hung between the arches of the hall, the smell of coal burned in my nostrils, and the metallic squeal of wheels on rails sounded like a language that never lies: steel always speaks the truth, even when people drown it out. Workers pushed carts, a conductor called out a departure time, somewhere a child cried, and the sounds were so ordinary they were almost comforting.

Almost.

For as I walked through the crowd, I felt that rustling again, which by now told me more than any voice. Paper turning over. Not loud, not direct. More like a movement in the air, as if someone near me had been reading something.

I held the diary tighter. I didn't open it. I knew it would open if I let it. And I knew the pages would speak if I listened.

There was a queue at the counter. I joined the line, my gaze fixed ahead, my eyes wide awake. A man in front of me was talking about the weather, a woman behind me was holding a basket of eggs and smelled of damp wool. I could have lost myself in this normalcy, if my throat hadn't been burning like a seal.

When I finally reached the counter, the official looked up. A small man with tired skin and a voice that sounded like he was repeating sentences.

Where?

I said: Whitby.

The word hung between us for a moment, perfectly normal, a travel destination like any other. And yet, I sensed a shift in the air. The official didn't hesitate. He reached for a stack of cards, handed me a ticket, and quoted a price. I paid. Routine. Smooth.

Then, instead of putting his hand back, he held it a fraction too long at the edge of the window, as if he wanted to say something more. His eyes glanced briefly at my scarf, then back at me.

"You should cover that up," he said quietly. "Not out of compassion. Out of caution."

I said: It's just a scratch.

He nodded, as if he had expected precisely that answer. Then he pushed the ticket a little closer to me and said even more quietly: The train to Whitby... isn't leaving from platform three today.

I blinked. The display board behind him showed platform three. Clearly and distinctly.

"Why?" I asked.

The official barely shrugged. Change, he said. And then, as if he hated himself for speaking at all: Go to platform five. And don't look in the windows when the train arrives.

I felt my stomach clench. I wanted to press him, to force him to explain. But explanations are rarely helpful here. They're often just another way to commit.

I took the ticket, gave a curt nod, and left.

Platform five was further back, where fewer people were standing. The fog seemed to be pushing into the hall, as if it wanted to join the departure. I stood against the wall, not directly on the platform, but slightly offset, so that I would see the train's arrival at the side, not head-on.

"Not in the windows," the man had said.

I heard a distant rumble. Then a whistle. Then the heavy, rolling sound of a train shoving into the hall like an animal too big for its pen. Clouds of steam rolled across the platform, and in them the outlines of the carriages were visible, dark green, glistening wet. People moved forward, suitcases were lifted, voices grew louder.

I stayed where I was.

The train came to a stop. Doors opened. A conductor jumped down, shouted something that disappeared in the steam. And then, very briefly, I saw something in one of the windows, even though I didn't want to. Not directly. In the corner.

A face.

Not that of a traveler. Too pale, too still. It wasn't looking out to see where it was. It was looking out as if counting who was there. And in the pane, in the reflection, I saw for a heartbeat the outline of an umbrella, even though no one was carrying one.

I looked away, forcing myself not to reveal my knees. The bite on my neck throbbed. The diary under my arm grew warm, as if it had welcomed the train.

I went to the carriage indicated on my ticket and boarded. The corridor smelled of coal, old fabric, and damp wood—a smell that seemed to come from another time. There was no one in my compartment. That was good. Being alone is dangerous, but so are witnesses. I had learned that sometimes you can only choose between two kinds of danger.

I sat by the window, but not directly in front of it. I left the curtain half-drawn so I could see out without using the glass as a mirror. I placed the diary on the seat next to me, not on the table. On a table, it lies like an invitation. On a seat, it lies like luggage.

The train jerked slightly. A pull, a tension, then the movement. Slowly it began to move, and the hall glided past, the people becoming shadows, the steam clouds white noise.

As we left the station, the light outside grew brighter. The first real daylight, thin and gray, but unmistakable. And in that light, I saw my own reflection in the window glass become more pronounced, even though the curtain was half-closed.

I forced myself not to look inside.

The diary rustled beside me.

I hadn't touched it. It rustled nonetheless, softly, as if a page were moving by itself. I kept my hands still, but I felt the urge in my fingers to open it, to check if it had written again. This urge wasn't curiosity. It was control. And control is precisely what you take away by offering it.

I exhaled slowly and stared at the fabric of the seat, at the pattern, at the small, meaningless stains. I listened to the rhythm of the wheels. A steady beat that would almost have been calming, if I hadn't known that rhythms here aren't neutral.

Then, very quietly, as if it were coming from the upholstery or the wood of the wall, I heard a noise that did not belong to the train.

Tap.

Once.

Not on the platform. Not on a roof. Not in a courtyard.

Outside in the corridor, in front of my compartment, it sounded as if someone were testing the ground with the tip of an umbrella to see if it would hold.

The tapping in the aisle outside was so quiet it could almost blend in with the train's rhythm. Almost. It lacked the metallic hardness of the wheels, the honest regularity of the rails. It was more cautious, as if someone were testing whether the world beneath the top would give way. I kept my gaze fixed on the seat pattern, waiting for the moment my body would make the mistake of turning around.

The tapping sound came a second time. Then silence.

The train continued on, the landscape outside becoming gray stripes, hedges, solitary trees standing in the morning like witnesses unwilling to testify. The compartment smelled of damp fabric and the bitter breath of coal, seeping through every crack. I heard voices in the corridor, distant, muffled, the gentle scraping of suitcases, the murmur of a conductor. All normal. And therein lay the danger: normality is the best disguise.

The diary rustled again beside me. Not loudly. Just that quiet, dry rubbing of paper moving without being moved. I kept my hands on my knees, forcing myself not to react. Those who try to control lose. Control is the bait.

A shadow fell across the gap under the compartment door, as if someone had been standing right in front of it. I only saw the darker line, not the feet. Then the shadow moved on. No sound of footsteps, just the light, even gliding, as if someone weren't quite touching the floor.

I exhaled slowly. The scarf around my neck was now only damp, no longer warm. The burning sensation from the bite hadn't disappeared, it had changed. It was no longer pain, more of an itchy pressure, as if the skin there was learning something it should never have learned.

Outside, the entrance to a tunnel flickered past, a black semicircle, and for a moment the compartment darkened. In the darkness, I saw my reflection in the window glass more intensely, more clearly, as if the darkness were transforming the glass into a mirror. I wasn't staring. I only saw the outline of my own head against the gray. And at the edge of that outline was something that didn't belong to me: a thin, straight line, as if a rod were standing behind me.

The train plunged into the tunnel. The sounds grew narrower, muffled. The clacking of the wheels sounded like a heart too large for the chest. The curtain at the window vibrated slightly, and suddenly there was nothing to see in the glass but darkness.

Then I heard it again, very close.

Tap.

Not out in the corridor. Right by my compartment door. Just once, as if someone had briefly touched it with a point to check if it was still there.

I could have jumped up. I could have flung open the door. I didn't. I stayed seated, and I realized how hard it is to stay seated when your body wants to scream: Do something!

The tunnel ended. Light returned, thin, gray. The air pressure eased. And at the same time, I heard a new sound in the compartment that immediately chilled me: a soft scratching.

Not at the door. Not at the window.

From the seat next to me.

I didn't look immediately. I turned my head only slightly, so that the seat was in the corner of my eye. Mary's diary lay there, closed, and yet the cover moved, ever so slightly, as if something were pressing against it. A tiny scraping of paper against leather.

The book wanted to open.

I placed my palm flat on the cover. Not to open it, but to calm it, like placing a hand on a trembling animal. The warmth beneath it was unnatural. The book felt as if it contained blood.

At that moment there was a knock on the compartment door. A normal knock. Knuckles on wood. Three times, friendly.

The voice of a conductor: Tickets, please.

I pulled my hand away from the diary as if it had caught me doing something one shouldn't. I opened the door just a crack. The conductor stood in the aisle, a lantern in his hand, his uniform clean, his stubble neat. A face one has seen a thousand times. His eyes were tired, but not steady. Rather cautious.

"Ticket," he said.

I handed it to him.

He took it, held it briefly in the light of his lantern, checked the date, destination, compartment number. Routine. Then his hand lingered on the ticket for a moment too long. His fingers held the paper as if he wanted to feel whether it was really paper.

"Whitby," he murmured. His gaze rose to my scarf. Then to my eyes. Then back to the ticket.

"Everything alright, sir?" he asked, and the question was so neutral it sounded like a formality. But there was a tiny deviation in his tone. Not sympathy. Warning.

I said: Yes.

He nodded, as if he'd been expecting that very answer. Then he leaned a touch closer, so his voice wasn't meant for the aisle. Are you traveling alone?

I kept my gaze on his lantern, not on his eyes. I said: Yes.

The conductor swallowed. Then he said, even more quietly: "Then don't close the door completely. And if someone asks if you're writing... say no."

My stomach clenched. I said: Who would ask that?

The conductor blinked as if I'd said the wrong thing. Then he straightened up, became a man of routine again, and said in a normal voice: Have a pleasant journey.

He gave me back the ticket and continued walking. His footsteps suddenly sounded heavier, as if they were deliberately being made heavier to drown out something else.

I didn't close the compartment door completely. I just left it ajar, leaving a thin gap. A gap isn't security. But a gap is a decision against the final click of a lock.

I sat down again. The train moved on, and outside fields passed by, now brighter. More sky. Less fog. The daylight wasn't friendly, but it was open. And openness is dangerous when someone wants to play human in the light.

The diary beneath my hand vibrated again, as if it heard something I couldn't. I felt that rustling from within, the impatient turning of pages. I pressed the cover shut more firmly, not with force, just with pressure. A thought surfaced in my mind that didn't want to be mine: Open it. See what's inside. You need to know what's coming next.

That's the trick, I thought. Not the writing. The desire to know.

Someone walked past in the corridor outside. I heard the fabric of a coat, a soft brush. Then a brief pause in front of my compartment. No knock. Not a word. Just that moment when the air outside the door grew heavier.

I looked through the crack in the door.

There was nothing but a dark stripe, as if someone were standing right in front of the door, so close that you could only see their coat. No face. No hands. Just fabric, black, matte.

Then the stripe moved on. Silently.

My throat suddenly burned more intensely. I reached under my scarf and touched my skin. It was warm. Too warm. And when I withdrew my fingers, there was a dark mark on the tip. Not much. A tiny dot of blood, fresh. As if the bite had decided to remember something on the train.

I wiped the stain off the scarf and forced myself not to stare at my fingers. Fingers bearing blood want to write. Nonsense, I thought. And yet it was precisely this nonsense that took root in my mind, because it sounded like a rule.

The train whistled. An announcement was shouted, I only caught fragments. Some stop. Some name. People in the aisle stood up, doors opened and closed. The carriage filled with movement. Movement is cover, but also opportunity. In movement, you can get closer without it being noticed.

My compartment door was suddenly opened a little wider. Not much. Just enough to turn the gap into an opening.

I looked.

A woman stood there. Perhaps in her late twenties, perhaps older, hard to tell in the train light. She wore a dark coat and a hat that shaded her face. Her hands were empty. No bag, no suitcase. That alone was unusual. Traveling without luggage means: you don't intend to stay.

"Excuse me," she said. "Is this seat free?"

Her voice was calm, but not politely calm. More like controlled calm, like someone who carefully chooses each sentence beforehand.

I said: I think so, yes.

She entered without waiting for my permission and sat down opposite me. Her coat smelled of wet wool and something sweet that was immediately uncomfortably familiar. Not Mary's perfume, but from the same family of scents, as if they shared the same origin.

She didn't look out the window. She looked at my hands. Then at my scarf. Then at the seat next to me.

On the diary.

I subtly pulled it closer to me, as if it were just a piece of luggage that one shouldn't leave in the way.

The woman didn't smile. She said: You are hurt.

I didn't answer immediately. Then I said: A scratch.

She nodded, as if she had heard the word before. Then she asked, quite casually, as if asking for the time: Are you writing?

My stomach clenched because the conductor had used that exact word. I heard his warning like a nail in my head: If someone asks if you're writing... say no.

I said: No.

The woman kept her gaze on me, too long, as if testing whether the "no" was a statement or a defensive line. Then she leaned back and finally looked out the window.

Outside, the landscape lay open. Fields, small houses, a few sheep like bright dots. Everything normal. All light. And yet I felt as if something had just become lodged in the compartment, something that wouldn't leave, even though the train was moving.

After a moment, the woman said quietly, almost absentmindedly: Whitby is a good place for beginnings.

I said nothing.

She continued: And a good place for returns.

My fingers pressed into the fabric of my trousers. I felt the edge of the card in my pocket. I felt the diary like a heart that wasn't mine.

The woman turned her head toward me, and the moment her eyes met the light, I saw that they weren't still like the man's on the quay. Her eyes were alert. Too alert. As if they weren't just seeing, but reading.

She said: You shouldn't carry the book with you. Otherwise, it will carry you.

The train rattled on, the light outside became clearer, and in the windowpane, at the edge of my vision, I saw for a heartbeat behind the woman's reflection a dark line that did not match her coat.

A staff.

A top.

And I knew: The typing was no longer just outside in the corridor. It had arrived in the compartment, without the door being opened.

I didn't look at the woman. I looked at the small gap between the curtain and the windowpane, at what was passing by outside: fields, fences, a solitary tree that curled into a line as it moved. Movement is honest. People aren't always.

The woman sat opposite me, her hands in her lap, her coat smooth as if it held no dust, no thread, no history. Her hat was positioned so that only the lower part of her face was clearly visible: her mouth, which did not smile, her jawline, which seemed too rigid for someone asking if she wrote.

She had said: You shouldn't carry the book with you. Otherwise, it will carry you.

It sounded like advice, but it was a statement claiming ownership. Anyone who speaks such things is already too close.

I didn't ask, "Who are you?" Names are like keys here. You insert them, and then something turns that you didn't intend to turn. Instead, I said, "You know the book."

The woman didn't look at me immediately. She let the sentence hang in the air, as if testing its weight. Then she replied: I know what books do when you feed them.

I felt my throat tighten. The bite burned again, not painfully, more like a gentle heat spreading. I held the scarf loosely enough to breathe, tightly enough not to feel it.

She continued, quite calmly: You're not the first to travel with it. And not the first to think you can bring it back.

I said: To whom?

The woman raised her eyebrows slightly, as if I had said something naive. "To her," she said, and I knew she meant Mary, without her saying her name. Names are circles.

I felt the diary beside me, like an impatient animal. I had pulled it closer, but that only helped physically. It still lay in the room as if it were a third traveler, ready to jump up at any moment.

The train went over a switch, a short jolt, metal on metal, and in that jolt I suddenly heard, quite clearly, a noise that did not belong to the rails.

Tap.

Once.

Not in the hallway. Not outside. Behind me. Right by the window, as if someone had placed the tip of an umbrella against the glass. I didn't look. I only saw the reflection in the glass change slightly, as if a dark spot appeared next to my reflection.

The woman noticed my tension. She said softly: If you can hear it, it's already here.

I said: And what if I don't hear it?

She replied: Then write it anyway.

A sentence like a knife that you don't see until it's about to cut.

I exhaled slowly. I didn't want her to smell my fear. Fear is a scent. Some people sense it before you even know it yourself.

I said: Why are you here?

She didn't smile. She said: To prevent you from doing something stupid.

I almost heard myself laughing because "stupid" is a broad term in this story. I asked: And what would be considered stupid?

She gestured with a barely perceptible glance at the diary. "The page," she said. "Tear out the page. Give him the page. That's the easy way. He likes easy ways."

I remembered the chamber beneath the red cross. The letter slot that demanded pages. The knife, positioned for my hand to grasp. And the diary, its page open like a tongue saying: You give this page.

I said: Then there is another way.

The woman nodded slightly, as if she had been waiting for just that. "There's always another way," she said. "But the other way requires you to do something. And people are bad at that."

I didn't ask: Don't do what? I already knew. Don't write. Don't finish. Don't confirm.

At that moment, the compartment door opened without knocking.

Not far. Just a crack. Just enough for cold air from the passageway to get in.

I didn't look at the door. I looked at the floor, at the shadow that crept into the compartment. A narrow strip of darkness, too smooth, too uniform.

A voice came from the crack, friendly, as if asking for tickets: Excuse me. Do you have—

She paused. A tiny moment in which you can hear that the sentence had a different plan.

The woman opposite me raised her head. Her gaze went to the door, and for the first time I saw something in her face that wasn't control. It was aversion. Perhaps fear. Perhaps both.

The voice in the crack then said, as if suddenly certain that it was allowed to be there: Are you writing?

That word again. That exact question again. As if it were the code that opens doors.

I immediately said: No.

The woman said "No" at the same time.

Two votes, one no. It almost sounded like a protective circle because it happened simultaneously.

The compartment door remained open for a moment. I heard no breathing. No rustling of fabric. Only the sensation that someone was standing there, weightless, without warmth. Then the door closed again, slowly, without a hand being visible. The lock didn't click. It merely ajar.

The woman exhaled audibly for the first time. She said softly: Good.

I asked: Who was that?

She didn't answer directly. She said: He uses what's customary here. Conductors. Ladies. Questions. When he's in the spotlight, he doesn't need shadows. Form is enough for him.

I looked out the window, not into the glass, but through the crack next to the curtain. The landscape was brighter, the colors clearer. The train was now traveling through open countryside. Less fog. Better visibility.

More danger.

The woman leaned forward slightly. Her tone remained calm, but now it was harsher. "Listen," she said. "In Whitby, they'll show you things. They'll tell you it's just chance. A letter lying there. A door that's open. An invitation with no return address. You know the pattern. It's stronger there because the sea carries everything."

She paused, as if choosing whether to actually say the next sentence. Then she said: When you get there, don't go to the city first. Go to the monastery first. To the ruins. Where the wind carries the words away before they can take root.

Monastery. Ruins. Wind. Whitby. I felt something inside me begin to fall into place, as if I'd received an instruction not found in the diary. This was dangerous because I longed for such instructions. But it was also necessary because, without instructions, I'm just a page in his book.

I asked: And Mary?

The woman glanced briefly at my scarf. Then she said: Mary is still in London. But the book—she gestured to the diary without looking at it—the book isn't bound to London. It's bound to you. And to what has already been opened within you.

I felt the bite on my neck burn, as if it had reacted to those words. A small pain, like an approving nod from the wound.

The train rattled on. An announcement called out the next stop. I didn't catch the name, but I heard people in the aisle getting up, pulling suitcases, opening doors. Movement, again. Cover, again. Opportunity, again.

The woman also stood up. So suddenly, as if she had received an inner command. She smoothed her coat, didn't reach for anything because she had nothing, and said: I'm getting out here.

I blinked. Why? Whitby is—

She didn't interrupt me; she simply didn't let me finish my sentence by already heading for the door. In the doorway, she turned around once more and said: "If you feel someone walking behind you in Whitby, don't turn around. Just turn... differently."

Then she was gone, her footsteps in the hallway disappearing among other footsteps, and only now did I realize how much her presence had simultaneously calmed and unsettled me. A person as a counterweight. Or a person as another lever.

The compartment door stood open for a moment, and in the crack I saw the corridor. People. Suitcases. No coat. No umbrella.

But at the end of the corridor, far away, where the light was flatter, stood something black, small, almost invisible, like a dot in the eye.

A closed umbrella, upright, as if waiting for someone to pick it up.

I didn't close the door. I left the crack. I sat down again, placed my hand on the diary, and felt its warmth, as if it were glad I was alone.

I pressed my hand harder against it, not brutally, just firmly. I said softly, without pathos, as if I were teaching an animal: No.

Outside, the sky grew brighter. Whitby drew closer. And as the train passed through the light, I heard within me, very quietly, not as a word, but rather as a thought writing itself:

You'll still arrive.

The room with the scratch marks

Whitby didn't greet me with a welcome, but with wind. Not a friendly sea breeze that kisses your cheeks red, but a wind that tests whether you're sturdily built enough to stand still. As the train rolled to a stop, the first thing I noticed wasn't the sea, but the way the light was different here. London morning light pretends to be clean, when in truth it's only bright enough to make the dirt more visible. Up here on the coast, the light was thinner, brighter, and at the same time more alien, as if it came from a different source. It settled on things without possessing them.

I got off the train without turning around, even though I had the urge to scan the platform behind me. That urge had become a familiar enemy. I kept my gaze straight ahead, letting the world at the edges of the platform do its work: travelers with bags, a conductor calling out, a dog sniffing at the ground as if the platform were a book to be read. I felt the diary under my arm like a warm, restless muscle. The scarf was still stuck to my neck, and the area beneath it throbbed as if growing stronger in this wind. Not because the wound was worse, but because something inside me recognized the shore.

I left the train station, not heading towards the city center, not where there are signs and proper paths. The woman's words from the train weighed heavily on my mind: first to the ruins, where the wind carries away words. I had no desire to follow strangers' instructions. And yet, it was the only instruction that didn't feel like a command written in ink.

The path up was steeper than I'd expected. Whitby isn't flat and forgiving. Whitby is a place that forces you to listen to your breath. I climbed the steps that clung to the hillside, not counting, not even in my head. I only counted the mirrors, as Renfield had said, and up here there weren't any. Only windows, gleaming grey in the early morning, and puddles that reflected the skylight as if to prove it truly existed.

When I reached the ruins, they stood there like teeth from which a mouth had been torn out. Remnants of walls, arches, stone resisting time. The wind whistled through the empty window openings, and this whistling sound wasn't romantic, but practical: it made any whisper impossible. Words spoken here are blown away immediately, before they can take root. It was the first place in hours where I felt I wasn't immediately read.

I didn't sit down. I remained standing, gripping the diary tighter, and didn't open it. I had learned that every opening is an offering. Instead, I pulled out the map with the red cross, just briefly, sheltered from the wind in the shadow of a wall. The paper wanted to flutter, and I held it tight, as if it were a bird trying to take flight. The red cross on this map hadn't just been a destination, but a knot. From Whitby, a thin line led to a point labeled with a single word: Room. No name, no address, just Room. As if someone had decided that places here were no longer places, but states of being.

I put the map away again and headed down the slope, this time towards the town. The houses grew closer together, the alleys narrower. Seagulls screeched, and their screeching sounded like laughter. A sound you can only tolerate if you believe it's harmless. The sea lay somewhere to my right, hidden by houses and wisps of fog. I smelled salt and seaweed, and underneath it all, in tiny, unwelcome doses: iron. I didn't know if I was actually smelling it or if my body had come to produce the scent as if it were an expectation.

I found an inn without looking for it. It was there, as if the town had placed it there for me. A sign hung crookedly above the door, the letters faded. Inside, it smelled of wood, tea, and wet coats. A woman behind the bar looked up, her gaze not curious, but weary. She didn't ask questions, as London has learned to do. Coastal towns learn it too. Too many strangers, too many stories.

"One room," I said.

She examined my scarf. Her eyes lingered on it a fraction too long, then moved on, as if she didn't want to know what she had just seen. She reached for a key rack, took a key, and placed it down.

Second floor, she said. Hallway on the left. Last door. Not pretty, but dry.

Not nice, I thought. Dry. Words meant to sound like sympathy, but in reality just routine. I took the key. It was cold.

As I climbed the stairs, I felt the diary under my arm warming again, as if it were pleased by the movement. I said nothing. One doesn't talk to things that answer.

The hallway on the second floor was narrow, the wood creaking softly. Doors to the left and right, all closed. I walked to the last door. The key fit immediately. A satisfying click. I pushed the door open.

The room was small. A bed, a chair, a table, a washstand. A window overlooking an alley where the wind carried the scent of the sea. Everything ordinary. And yet I immediately sensed that something was wrong. Not because anything was visibly wrong, but because the room felt as if it had been waiting for someone for too long.

I placed the lamp, which I was still carrying with me, on the table, even though it was daytime. Habit. Perhaps also an attempt to give the room my own focal point. Then I didn't put the diary on the table. I laid it on the bed, on the blanket, as if it were a coat. Something you take off to be able to breathe.

I went to the window and pulled the curtain open a little. The glass reflected me faintly, and I forced myself not to look in it. It was harder here because the light was stronger. In the light, every piece of glass becomes a mirror if you let it.

When I turned around again, my gaze fell on the wall next to the bed.

The wallpaper was old, faded, and damaged in one spot. Not from water, not from wear and tear. From scratches.

They were deep. Several lines, parallel, irregular, as if someone had torn into the wallpaper and the plaster beneath with fingernails or something sharper. A desperate pattern. Not random. And the longer I looked, the more I realized that the scratches weren't chaotic. They had rhythm. They formed almost—almost—a shape.

A circle.

Unfinished.

I moved closer, not too close, just enough to see the lines more clearly. The wallpaper was torn there, and underneath the plaster was darkly discolored, as if it had been touched again and again until dirt and perhaps blood had worked their way into it. In the break in the circle, where it wasn't closed, was a small dot. Not a hole, not a nail. A dark stain, as if ash had been rubbed in there.

I felt cold, even though the wind outside was warm enough to make seagulls fly.

I heard nothing. No typing. No whispering. Only my own breathing.

And that was precisely what was worse, because it meant: The room no longer needs sounds. It already has traces.

I sat down on the chair, not because I was tired, but because I didn't want to stand in a room covered in scratches like a victim. Sitting gives you the illusion that you control how high the fear rises. I pulled the scarf away slightly at my neck, just for a moment to check what the wound looked like. Two small dots. Dark red. The edges slightly swollen. Nothing dramatic. And yet, beneath it, I felt a tingling sensation, as if something not made of flesh was spreading.

I dropped the scarf again and reached for the diary on the bed.

I didn't open it right away. I just put my hand on it. Warm. Too warm.

Then I opened it quickly, before I could talk myself out of it again. When you have to do something dangerous, hesitation is sometimes more dangerous than the act itself.

The pages lay still. No turning of their own accord. No rustling. As if the book had suddenly become polite in this room.

I turned to a blank page.

It was no longer empty.

In the middle was a single sentence, fresh, clean, as if someone had just written it:

You have arrived.

My throat tightened. I wasn't looking at the sentence; I was looking at the ink. It glistened slightly, as if it were still wet. And I knew: no one but me was here. No one physically present. And yet, someone had written in this room. Or something had written through me as I climbed the stairs.

I tore my gaze away from the side and looked back at the wall with the scratch marks.

The unfinished circle there suddenly no longer looked like an old trace, but like an open task.

I held my breath.

Then I heard it, very quietly, so quietly that it could have been a creaking of the house.

Tap.

Once.

Not in the aisle. Not on the roof.

Directly behind the wallpaper.

The tapping behind the wallpaper wasn't loud enough to pass as a sound. It was loud enough to pass as a message. A single tapping, as if someone were testing with a point against the inside of the wall whether I was listening. I remained seated because jumping up is what you do in stories when you're scared. I didn't want the room to read my fear as movement.

I slowly closed the diary. Not because I thought it would bring closure, but because the open book on the bed looked like a mouth waiting for more words. I moved it away slightly so it wasn't directly between me and the wall. Sometimes it helps to separate things, even if you know that distance is just an idea.

The tapping didn't return. Instead, I heard something else, much fainter: a gentle rubbing, as if someone were dragging paper across a stone. And the bite in my throat began to tingle, as if answering.

I stood up slowly. No haste. No anger. I went to the wall and held the lamp—the lamp I still used in daylight as if it were a religious symbol—close to the scratch marks. The circle wasn't clean, but it was clearly intentional. Fingernails, I thought. Or something that mimics fingernails.

The dark spot lay in the gap of the circle, where it wasn't closed. I didn't touch it directly. I simply held the lamp so that the light crossed it at an angle. The surface wasn't just dirty. It was powdery. Ash.

Like in a hotel. Like in a madhouse. Like everywhere else.

I pulled out the small bottle. The rim of the glass clinked softly as I opened it. The sound was too loud in this room. It was as if the room itself immediately raised its head.

I didn't let a drop fall. Not yet. I wanted to know first if this ash served the same function as the others. Boundary. Invitation. Guidance.

I didn't press my ear to the wall. I simply held my breath and listened. Behind the wallpaper, it wasn't silent. Not really. There was a quiet, steady sound, like the sea, but not so open, not so vast. More like water flowing in a pipe. An internal murmur.

A hidden pipe. A shaft. A connection.

The thought cast the entire room in a different light: it wasn't just a guesthouse room. It was a node. A point on a map called "room" because it didn't need an address. You find it when you want to be found.

I let my gaze wander across the room, forcing myself to see things as things, not as meanings. Bed. Chair. Table. Washbasin. Window.

Mirror.

The mirror hung above the washstand, small, oval, with a thin frame. A harmless object in any room. Here, it was an enemy.

I didn't go directly to him, but I positioned myself so that he was at the edge of the mirror. In the mirror's surface, I saw myself: my pale face, the scarf, the lamp. Behind me was the bed, on which the diary lay. And in the mirror's surface, slightly distorted, I saw something that wasn't there in my real room.

A shadow at the foot of the bed.

Not like a normal blackout, but like a form. A cloak without a body.

I didn't move. I didn't breathe more deeply. I kept the image at the edge of the frame and checked whether it changed. The shadow in the mirror didn't move. That was worse. Movement betrays intention. Stillness is possession.

I slowly turned around towards the bed.

No shadow there. Only the ceiling, smooth, and the diary like a dark stain.

I turned slightly towards the mirror again. The shadow in the mirror was still there.

The room is lying. Or the mirror is telling a different truth. And I've long known which of the two possibilities is more dangerous: the truth that isn't in the world, but exists in a glass.

I went to the sink and took a towel. Rough, smelling of soap. I threw it over the mirror.

The room immediately felt different. Not safe. But less observed. As if one eyelid had been closed.

The typing behind the wallpaper started again. Once. Then a second time, faster. Impatiently. The room didn't like it when you covered your eyes.

I went back to the wall with the scratch marks. I knelt down and ran my fingertips just over the wallpaper, without touching the ash. The plaster underneath felt different in one spot. Not hollow, but less solid. A seam. A line.

A door.

Naturally.

But this time it wasn't a door opened with a key. It was a door opened with a circle. With a completion. With a sacrifice that doesn't have to be blood, but often becomes blood.

I pulled the card with the red cross from my pocket and held it next to the scratch marks, just for comparison. The red cross on the paper was clean. The circle on the wall was desperate. And yet they spoke the same language.

I looked more closely: at the bottom edge of the scratch circle, almost hidden in the lines, was a small notch, like a tiny letter. I shone the light closer.

It wasn't a letter. It was a number.

17.

Of course. Again and again. A knot that cannot be untied because it repeats itself.

I felt anger rising. Not loud. Not explosive. More like cold. I said quietly: Enough.

And I let a drop from the vial fall onto the ashes in the break in the circle.

It hissed. The ash contracted as if in pain. The dark stain brightened, as if it were burning. And at that same moment, I heard a noise behind the wallpaper that immediately made me stand upright.

A latch. A click. A yielding.

Not the door to the room. The door in the wall.

The wallpaper in front of me bulged slightly, as if something behind it was pressing against it. Then, very slowly, a narrow panel slid to the side. Wood, covered with wallpaper, just like in the hotel. A repetition that simultaneously comforted and frightened me. As if saying: You see? You've seen this before.

Behind the panel was darkness. A narrow shaft, and inside it a staircase leading downwards. Damp steps. A smell of earth.

And the rushing sound I had heard before was now clear: water flowing somewhere below. Not the sea. Pipes. Conduits. An old network.

I held the lamp in the shaft and saw something glittering on the wall of the shaft.

A piece of mirror.

Naturally.

Renfield's warning crept into my mind. Count mirrors. Not steps.

I placed my foot on the first step, carefully, without counting. My gaze remained fixed on the edge. I saw the mirror in the shaft, and in it I saw the room behind me. The chair. The table. The bed.

And the diary was lying on the bed.

But the diary wasn't still in the mirror. It was open. And on the open page, something was moving, as if a hand were writing.

I turned sharply around.

The real diary lay closed. Silent.

I turned back towards the shaft.

The reflection continued to show the open book.

And I understood: I no longer had to open the book. The mirror opens it for me. The mirror turns possibilities into facts.

I swallowed, took the second step, then the third, and went downstairs, because I knew that upstairs in the room I would eventually just be the man holding onto a wall and hoping that a towel over a mirror would be enough.

Below, in the darkness, the sound of rushing water awaited. And the feeling that the day outside was growing brighter as I descended into a net that knows no tomorrow.

The staircase was narrow, damp, and smelled of a time that must never see the light of day. My lamp cut a yellow cone through the shaft, and yet the darkness clung to everything like a second skin. I walked slowly, my gaze not on the steps, but on the pieces of mirror that sat at irregular intervals in the walls, like eyes planted in stone.

The first mirror showed the room above me: the bed, the chair, the door. All familiar. But down here, the familiarity offered no comfort, but rather proof that the shaft led not only downwards, but inwards. I didn't look directly into the second mirror, but at the edge I saw a movement, as if the door of the room were opening a crack in the reflection.

I stopped, without actually stopping. My body just slowed down. Then I kept walking because I knew: if I stayed upstairs in the room, I'd be near the book. If I stayed down here, I'd be near the mirrors. Both are bad. But at least moving is my own mistake, not someone else's.

The sound of rushing water grew louder. Not like the sea, more like a constant, patient flow, carving its way somewhere beneath the city. It sounded as if Whitby existed again below the surface, a shadowy version of itself. And I couldn't help thinking of London, of the network of tunnels that had led me from the hotel to the asylum. Perhaps all cities are like this. Perhaps they all have their own subterranean script.

The steps ended in a low hallway. Brick, glistening with dampness, the floor uneven. Pipes ran along the ceiling, and water trickled from a single pipe into a puddle at regular intervals. The dripping had a different rhythm than the tapping. More honest. And yet, I was learning by then that honest rhythms could also be used.

I went into the corridor. The corridor led to the left and to the right. Both sides were dark. Both sides smelled of earth. On the left wall, just above the floor, I saw a thin line of gray dust.

Ash.

A clue. A direction. Like a chalk drawing for someone who isn't allowed to count the steps.

I followed the ash trail to the left.

After a few meters, I came to a point where the passage narrowed and the rushing of the pipes grew louder. Here, the water wasn't just standing in puddles. Here, it flowed in a narrow channel along the wall, as if the drain had been designed so that it would never completely disappear. And there, above this channel, something hung from a hook.

A coat.

Black.

Not worn. Just hanging, as if it were out to dry. The fabric didn't shine. It absorbed the light. And even though I knew that fabric hung on hooks in damp basements, this coat didn't feel like an object. It felt like a gesture.

I stood still. I didn't move any closer. I just shone my light. The coat didn't move. No wind down here. Just water.

Next to the coat, a piece of mirror was set into the wall. Larger than the others. Clearer. And in the mirror I didn't see myself. I saw a hallway.

Not the corridor I was standing in. A hallway made of white stone, brighter than anything down here, as if it were lit from within. And at the end of this hallway was a door with a number on it.

17.

It was as if the city beneath the city were holding the same number up to my nose like a finger and saying: You still haven't understood.

I felt my throat burn. The bite throbbed like a tiny heartbeat. I felt the spot under the scarf and sensed a slight swelling. Warm. And suddenly there was a thought, not made up of words, but of a direction: return it. Mary. Asylum. Hallway. Door 17.

I thought the diary was upstairs in the room. But then I felt it. Warm against my side. I looked down.

I was still carrying it under my arm.

Of course. It had never been gone. I had it in my hand, on the stairs, in the shaft. I hadn't left it behind. And yet the mirror had shown me that it lay open at the top. The mirror had created a second version, one that doesn't lie, but expands. Perhaps the book was in two places at once. Perhaps a single mirror is enough for it to double itself.

I gripped the cover tighter. The thought was disgusting because it was taking on plausible forms. A world in which things copy themselves via mirrors is a world in which you're never sure whether you truly have something with you or whether it merely has you with it.

I walked past the coat without touching it. Touching implies consent. I left the coat hanging at the hem and continued on. The corridor led to a door. Not wood. Metal. A heavy, low metal door, with a bolt. There was no sign on the door, no number. But a small red cross was engraved in the metal. Not painted. Pressed in. As if it had been hammered into the metal.

The card with the red cross suddenly burned like an idea in my pocket. I pulled it out, held it up to the lamp, and there, next to the cross, was indeed a small addition I hadn't noticed before: a row of three dots drawn like a staircase. Next to it was a word:

SCRATCH MARKS.

So this door was the point the map referred to. The room wasn't the destination. It was merely the entrance. The shaft was the passage. And this door was—what? The room beyond? The truth? Or just the next backdrop?

I placed my hand on the bar. Cold. Damp. I pulled.

The bar did not give way.

I pulled harder.

Nothing.

Again, this matter-of-fact nothingness that says: You have no access. Not like this.

I looked around. Next to the door, in the brickwork, was a small slot. Not a letter slot, more like a recess for something thin. I shone a light inside. The recess was filled with gray dust.

Ash.

And next to it, carved into the stone, was another word.

Give.

Naturally.

The cutout was for a page. For paper. For text. For a gift.

I felt cold sweat trickle down my back. The bite on my neck throbbed. And in my mind, the word "write" was no longer just a whisper. It was an impulse that made my fingers tingle, as if they had a memory of their own.

I pulled out the diary. I didn't open it. I just held it up to the door, as if showing an animal a piece of meat to see if it would react. And it did.

The cover vibrated. The edges of the pages crackled. As if the book knew it was needed down here.

I swallowed, didn't take the knife. I didn't have one. But perhaps I didn't need one. Because when I ran my thumb along the edge of the pages, I felt that one page was already loose. As if someone had pre-loosened it. As if the book itself had decided which page it wanted to reveal.

I opened the diary.

On the page was a sentence, freshly written:

YOU ARE THE MESSENGER.

I stared at it. The sentence was wrong. Not grammatically, but fundamentally. It wanted to define me. It wanted to reduce me to a function.

A small red cross was painted underneath. And next to it, an unfinished circle.

I tore my gaze away, looked at the recess in the wall, and knew: If I put this page in there, the door will open. And if the door opens, something will happen that I can't control. But if I don't, I'll stay down here, with the coat, the mirrors, the sound of the water, and the book that already calls me "Messenger."

I thought of Mary. Not as a symbol. As a person. Her cold skin in the cellar room. Her weak breathing. Her warning: don't write. And I thought of the possibility that she was in London, in a mental asylum, lying in a room right now, while someone wrote reports in her name.

I took a deep breath, tasting damp earth and iron.

Then I did something that wasn't on the website.

I didn't tear out the loose page. I opened the diary to a different page. A page that wasn't yet written on—or at least shouldn't be. I found a spot where the paper was blank, and I placed my blood-dampened scarf end on it, right in the center. The blood soaked into the fibers, leaving a stain.

Not a word. Not a sentence. Just blood.

I tore this page out.

The noise was loud in the small corridor. Tearing paper sounds like a scream when no one else is screaming.

I held the page with the blood in my hand, and I immediately felt the bite on my neck burn more intensely, as if it were protesting. As if the book were annoyed that I wasn't giving it the page it had chosen.

I put the bloody side into the recess.

The ash within it hissed softly, as if it had recognized the page. Not the words, not the ink—the blood.

The metal door vibrated. A deep, slow tremor, as if a mechanism behind it were awakening that did not consist of gears.

Then the bolt gave way.

Very slowly, he moved to the side by himself, as if an invisible hand were pulling him.

The door opened a crack.

And darkness did not emerge from the crack.

Light came out of the crack.

Bright, white light, clinical, like from a corridor I'd seen before—reflected in the mirror. And into that light I heard a voice, quiet, familiar, exhausted, as if coming from very close by:

Abraham...?

Mary.

Or the memory of her.

I stood before the door, diary in hand, blood on my neck, light before me, and knew: Now begins the space where morning always is.

The priest who remained silent

The light behind the crack in the door was too white, too clean, as if it had never passed through dust, never been touched by breath. It was reminiscent of hospitals, of corridors where people speak more softly because they believe loudness might provoke death. The contrast with the damp brick passage was brutal. Down here, it smelled of earth and old pipes, of the patient flow of water. Up there, it smelled of nothing. Odorlessness is a form of threat.

The voice had said my name. Not loudly. Not insistently. More as if someone were checking whether I was really there, whether I had really allowed myself to be lured down. It sounded like Mary, and that was precisely what made it dangerous. Mary's voice had become, in the last few hours, a tool that could be hung on any wall at will, like a coat.

I didn't step through the door immediately. I kept my hand on the metal, feeling the cold, and I felt the diary in my other hand like a living piece of warmth. The bite on my throat burned as if the light behind the door had touched it, even though stone, metal, and a gap still separated us. I thought of the bloody page I had slipped into the recess. Blood as a key. Blood as a signature. The thought disgusted me, and yet it was true: Down here, things open up when you give something of yourself away.

I leaned forward slightly, just enough to see the space behind me without revealing my body.

It wasn't a room. It was a hallway.

A hallway of white stone or white-painted brick, so smooth that it didn't gleam in the lamplight but reflected it dully. There were no pipes on the ceiling, no cobwebs. It looked as if it had just been built, and at the same time felt old, like an idea that had always been there. The floor was dry. That alone was suspicious.

There was a door on the wall further ahead. On it: 17.

Naturally.

It was as if someone were laying out a map and repeatedly tapping the same knot with their finger until you realized you were already caught in it. The hallway was quiet. Too quiet. No footsteps. Not a drop of rain. No wind. Just that sterile light and the number that felt like a hook.

I took a step closer to the gap without crossing it. My lamp looked almost laughable down here, a small yellow cone against a white wall so bright it absorbed the light while simultaneously pretending not to need it. I raised the lamp higher and shone it on the edge of door 17. Something glittered there, briefly, a faint reflection.

Glass.

A small viewing window, like the ones you see on hospital doors. An eye that works from both sides.

I could have looked inside. I didn't. Glass is a mirror when it wants to be. And here, every glass wanted to be.

Instead, I pointed the lamp at the floor in the hallway. There was a line, barely visible, like a trace someone had drawn with a damp cloth. It led from door 17 back in my direction. And right where the hallway opened into the shaft, there was a tiny gray rim.

Ash.

The trail wasn't a coincidence. Someone wanted me to realize: You're not the first one standing here. You're just the next.

The voice came again, a little closer, and now it sounded weaker, as if it were coming from the hallway itself, not from a mouth.

Abraham... please...

The "please" was the worst part. Asking is human nature. It's what's meant to persuade when threats aren't enough. Asking gives the victim the feeling of having a choice, but the act of asking itself is already the perpetrator's decision about which mask to wear today.

I closed my eyes briefly and forced myself to think of something mundane: the weight of the key, the smell of printer's ink in London, the wind high in the ruins. Something that doesn't belong in this corridor. Because if I concentrate solely on Mary now, the word "Mary" will become a rope, something to pull me on.

I opened my eyes again and stepped through the crack in the door.

The air changed instantly. It was as if I were stepping from a cellar into a different state. The temperature wasn't higher, it wasn't lower. It was neutral. And neutrality here is never truly neutral. It's constructed.

My shoes made no sound on the floor. No crunching, no clacking. The hallway swallowed my footsteps. That felt wrong. Sounds are evidence. A place that swallows them doesn't want evidence.

The metal door behind me remained ajar. A crack. I didn't turn around to check if it closed. Checking is a ritual here. Rituals are not my friends.

I walked slowly toward door 17. With every movement, I felt the bite on my neck more intensely, as if the hallway were reading it. I held the diary tightly to my side, as if it might otherwise start talking. Part of me wanted to leave it behind, drop it down the shaft, lose it somewhere. But that was an illusion. You don't lose something like that. You're only lost by it.

I stopped just before door number 17. The viewing window was small, but I felt its presence like a gaze. I didn't look inside. Instead, I shone my light on the handle.

Not a normal door handle. A handle that was too smooth. And around the handle, almost invisible, a thin circle of gray dust, as if someone had applied ash with a finger. Unfinished. A small break, right where the handle ends.

A request: Complete me.

I exhaled slowly. The hallway smelled of nothing, but my thoughts reeked of ash. I pulled the vial from my pocket, held it in my hand, and left it closed. Not again. Not here. The vial had become too much of a key. I didn't want this place deciding which of my tools it would accept.

I placed my hand on door number 17, not on the handle. The wood—or whatever it was—felt cool, but not damp. There was minimal resistance, like a surface that pretends to be solid but actually yields if you touch it long enough.

And then I heard a noise behind the door.

Don't breathe. Don't sob.

A soft scraping sound.

It sounds like something is scratching on the inside of the door.

The scratch marks, I thought. The room upstairs. The circle on the wallpaper. Everything was an echo, repeating itself in different rooms.

I pulled my hand back. For a moment, I wondered if I should even open the door. Mary had warned me not to open it in the light. And this light was so bright it almost looked blue. Not morning light. Hospital light. A light that wants to see everything.

Out there, in the real Whitby, it must have gotten lighter by now. People would be getting up, opening doors, preparing boats. Down here, time had stood still, as if someone had locked it in a glass bell jar. And time that stands still rarely stands still for you.

I heard footsteps in the hallway.

Not mine. Behind me.

Very quietly, as if they weren't made of shoes, but of fabric touching the ground.

I didn't turn immediately. I simply let my gaze drift back along the edge of the room, as far as one can see back along the edge without moving one's head. In the white corridor behind me was a figure, or rather a form, that didn't belong there.

A man in a black priest's robe.

A collar, white, clean. A face that seemed too pale in the light, as if it had never seen the sun. He stood still, his hands folded in front of him, like priests when they want to offer comfort. But his gaze offered no comfort. He was observing, as if gauging how much I had already understood.

I couldn't see the umbrella. But I felt it, the way you feel something you've heard too often.

The priest said nothing.

I waited. Part of me wanted to speak to him, to force him to react, to make the mask slip. But I didn't. I remembered the title on the card: GIFT. Return. Asylum. Words too weighty to utter lightly.

Finally, I just said: Where is she?

The priest did not move his lips. He did not nod. He made no gesture. He remained silent.

And in that silence lay an answer worse than any word: that he is not here to explain. He is here to bear witness.

I turned my gaze back to door 17. The scraping behind it briefly intensified, then fell silent. As if whatever was behind it had also been listening.

The priest behind me took a step closer. No sound. And I felt on my neck, right at the spot of the bite, a breath of cool air, as if someone were exhaling very close by, without having any breath.

The priest remained silent.

Door number 17 was waiting in front of me.

And I suddenly understood that this isn't a place where you open a door to save someone. It's a place where you open a door to show how far you're willing to go before you no longer recognize yourself.

I placed my hand on the doorknob without pressing it, and felt my fingers tremble slightly, not from fear, but from resistance. And as I stood there, between the silent priest at my back and the scratching door in front of me, the diary rustled at my side, very quietly, like a page already coming loose.

The rustling of the diary was the only sound in the hallway that dared to be real. It didn't sound like wind. It didn't sound like water. It sounded like paper moving because it wanted to move. And that's precisely what made it the loudest thing down here, because the hallway swallowed footsteps, swallowed breath, even swallowed the crunching of fear.

My hand rested on the handle of door number 17. The circle of ash around the handle was incomplete, the break positioned so that my thumb rested precisely there. As if I had been placed in a position where I could close the circle with my skin without even realizing it.

I withdrew my hand.

Not abruptly. Just a finger's width. Enough to show that I understand what he wants. And enough to signal to the hallway: I'm not blindly doing what you've prepared.

The priest stood behind me. I couldn't see him directly, but I felt his presence like a shadow that needs no light. He said nothing. He wouldn't say anything. His silence wasn't emptiness. It was a method.

I asked again, more quietly: Where is she?

The priest didn't move. He made no reply, no gesture. Instead, he slowly raised a hand—not as a nod, more as a hint—and pointed to the diary at my side.

A priest pointing at a book. A picture so old it would almost be banal if it weren't standing in a hallway that absorbs all sound.

I pulled out the diary. I didn't open it immediately. I just held it up in the light of the hallway, and in that light the leather of the cover looked dull, as if it had lost all its luster. Perhaps it had lost it along the way. Perhaps luster was something you leave behind down here.

The bite on my neck throbbed, as if reacting to the book. I pulled the scarf tighter and felt how the blood in it had long since dried into a dark stain. The stain was small, but it felt like a seal, not just on fabric, but on me.

I opened the diary.

Not on just any page. The pages found their own place. There was no dramatic turning of the pages, no storm. Just a quiet opening, as if the book knew exactly which page was the right one.

There it was, a single word, large, clear, fresh:

CONFESSION.

Among them is an unfinished circle, and in the gap a red cross.

I stared at it, and immediately the next connection formed in my mind: The priest. The title. Silence. Confession. A space that hears nothing except what one says voluntarily.

I looked up at the priest.

His face was too smooth in the clinical light. Too little shadow in the wrinkles. His eyes were bright, but not lively. More like glass, letting light through without holding it.

He slowly raised his hand and placed his index finger to his lips.

The sign was so clear it would have been ridiculous if it weren't so threatening. Silence. Not speaking. Not confessing. Not giving him what he wants.

And at the same time, the book showed: **CONFESSION**. As if it were pulling me in two directions: the priest commands silence, the book demands speaking. Both are control. Both are his game.

I closed the diary again. Not out of spite, but to free my hands. I tucked it back under my arm and looked again at door 17.

The scraping behind it started again. This time not irregularly. Rhythmically. Three short scratches, a pause, three short scratches. As if someone were tapping, but not with knuckles. With nails.

An SOS, I thought. Or a pattern designed to sound like one, so that I would interpret it as a cry for help.

I turned my head slightly towards the priest, just enough to see him out of the corner of my eye. He stood still. His hands were folded again. He was silent.

But his fingers were moving.

Very light. As if they were counting something.

Three. Pause. Three.

Told.

I felt my throat go dry. Not from fear, but from the realization that even distress signals aren't free here. You can use the same signals to rescue and capture.

I had to find out if Mary really was behind door 17. Not by hearing. Not by asking. Through something he couldn't easily use.

I didn't go any closer to the door. I walked past it.

The corridor was longer than he had seen from the metal door. Behind door 17 were more doors, all closed, all white, all unnamed. Only door 17 bore the number. As if it were the only thing that mattered.

At the end of the corridor was a small window. Not a view outside, but a view into another room. A kind of guard window. Behind it, I saw a room that looked like a chapel: pews, an altar, a cross. A real cross, not painted red, but made of wood. And in front of it stood a person.

A real person. Warm enough to cast a shadow.

One priest. Another.

He knelt, his hands crossed over his chest, his lips moving as if in prayer. His black skirt was faded, his hair gray. He looked like someone who had grown old without realizing it. And as I

watched him, I immediately sensed: This man isn't just a backdrop. He is a lung. A heart. A real force.

I stepped closer to the window, cautiously, and didn't knock. I never knocked. I just raised my hand and placed it against the glass, as if warmth could pass through.

The kneeling priest raised his head. His eyes met the window, met me. He wasn't startled. He seemed rather sad, as if he had been expecting me. He stood up slowly, walked to the window, and I saw his lips form a word I didn't hear. The corridor was completely silent. But I could read because the light was too bright:

Go.

He raised his index finger and made a small movement, not backward, not forward, but downward. As if he were saying: not this door. Not this hallway. Down below.

The priest behind me—the silent one—was still standing there. I felt him closer, as if the corridor made him quieter, but closer. I didn't turn around.

The real priest behind the glass raised both hands, as if making a confession or asking for forgiveness. Then he pointed to his mouth and shook his head. He cannot speak. Or he is not allowed to.

He pointed to his ear, then to the hallway, then shook his head again. Hearing isn't safe here.

Then he reached down at his collar and pulled out something hanging from a chain: a small silver cross. He held it up and showed it to me. Then he turned it over.

There was something etched on the back. A number.

17.

I shivered inside. Even his cross bears this number. As if he, too, had been marked.

The real priest suddenly opened his mouth wide and silently formed a sentence. I could read his lips, but only fragments:

... not ... her ...

Then he placed his palm on the glass, directly opposite mine.

His hand was trembling.

At that moment, the silent priest behind me made a movement. Not a step. More like a glide. I felt a breath of cold air on my throat, right at the bite site, and the burning sensation there turned into a sharp, stabbing pain for a heartbeat. As if someone were twisting a wound.

I clenched my hand into a fist, not against him, but against the pain. And I understood: He wants me to confess. He wants me to talk. Or he wants me to remain silent. It doesn't matter. The main thing is that I do something he can use as a ritual.

I turned away from the window and went back towards door 17. Not because I trusted her, but because I needed to see what she would do to me. Sometimes you have to touch the trap to understand its shape.

I stopped in front of door number 17.

The scraping behind it had now ceased. As if the thing behind it had realized that I wasn't obeying immediately.

The silent priest stood a few steps behind me. I felt him like a shadow on my back.

I didn't say "Mary." I didn't say "Please." I simply said, clearly and quietly: If you are Mary, say something only she knows.

Silence.

Then, faintly, very close behind the door, came a whisper that hit me like a thin nail:

The locket... not... in the light...

The sentence that Mary had given me.

I closed my eyes briefly.

And when I opened it again, I noticed that the circle of ash around the handle had changed. The break had become smaller, as if someone had closed it a little further from the inside with an invisible finger.

The door was working on itself.

And I stood before it, feeling the corridor make my breath thin, while the priest behind me remained silent, and the diary at my side grew warm like a judgment.

The break in the circle of ash around the doorknob had shrunk, as if the door had realized it couldn't wait forever. Circles here don't close only through hands. They close through time. And time in this hallway was a viscous, obedient substance, molding itself to an external will.

I no longer kept my hand over the door handle. I held it next to the circle, deliberately outside the line. It was a small gesture, but small gestures are sometimes the only thing left when you're in a room that wants to impose larger gestures on you.

The silent priest behind me said nothing. He would say nothing. His presence pressed against my back like cold air. I didn't perceive him as a person, but as a function: control. Confession. Silence. He was a shield without words.

Behind door number 17, all was quiet. No more scraping, no more scratching, no more rhythmic knocking. Just the knowledge that something was there—or that something was supposed to be there. And the voice that could whisper the right sentence at the right moment, so that I would believe it was Mary.

I thought of the other priest behind the glass. His trembling hand. His silent warning. Not her. Down below. And the number 17 on the back of his cross. He was marked, but he wasn't blank. That made him both a dangerous ally and a potential lure.

I had to make a decision, but not the one the hallway offered me.

I pulled the vial from my pocket. The rim of the glass was cold. I didn't open it immediately. I just held it in my hand, as if I were putting the weight of a real object against this clinical nothingness.

Then I took a deep breath. The hallway smelled of nothing. And precisely because of that, my own breath suddenly smelled of everything: of iron, of coal, of the sea. I was the only source of smell here. I was the only proof that I was still human.

I said quietly, without pathos: If you want to draw me into the circle, you have to come closer.

The sentence was a risk. Sentences are always a risk here. But it wasn't the kind of sentence that completes a ritual. It was a challenge, not an invitation.

Nothing happened immediately. No flickering lights. No rustling. No anger. That was typical. He rarely reacts immediately. He waits until you've written yourself hoarse in the silence.

The bite on my neck burned again, more intensely, as if the wound had heard the sentence. I pressed the scarf against it, briefly feeling my pulse. Rapid. But still mine.

Then I heard a sound, so subtle it was more of a sensation: a light gliding of fabric across the floor. The silent priest had moved.

I didn't turn around. I only saw out of the corner of my eye how his shadow—if you could call it that—was drawing nearer. And in that moment, I understood something that simultaneously relieved and frightened me: He doesn't want me to open the door. He wants me to do it myself. He wants me to lead myself to the handle. His hands remain clean.

So I had to get his hands dirty.

I slowly turned around and looked directly at the priest for the first time.

His face was too still. Not the stillness of a person at peace. The stillness of a picture. His eyes were open, but they felt empty, as if something else were looking through them. He was a step closer than before, without me hearing any footsteps. The collar was immaculate. The coat hung straight. Not a trace of dust, not a crease to betray a life lived.

I raised the vial and held it between us, like holding something in front of an animal's nose to see if it would back away. The priest didn't react. Not a blink, not a movement.

I said: Are you for real?

He remained silent.

Naturally.

I made the mistake of not asking again. Questions go in circles. Instead, I raised my hand with the vial and let a tiny drop fall onto the floor, right between his shoes and mine.

The drop hit the white ground.

It hissed.

A small, aggressive noise that suddenly sounded like a gunshot in the otherwise silent hallway. The floor at that spot discolored slightly, as if it had been burned.

The priest didn't flinch. But something in his face changed. Not expression, more tension. As if a mechanism had momentarily jammed.

And then I heard it: a barely audible, very human gasp.

Not from him. From the hallway itself, like a breath behind the walls. As if the hallway were in pain.

The priest slowly raised his hand. Not to bless. Not to silence. He raised it as if he wanted to touch me.

I didn't back down. I let him come closer.

When his fingertips touched my scarf, right where he'd bitten, a cold, sharp, clean pain shot through my throat. I clenched my teeth, forcing myself to be silent. Sounds here are confessions.

The priest held his fingers there a moment too long, as if testing how deep the bite was. Then he withdrew his hand.

There was a tiny dark spot on his fingertips.

My blood.

The priest stared at the stain, and in that stare, for the first time, there was something like a reaction. Not disgust. Interest. As if he had just received an ink he could use.

I said: Now you're involved.

The priest raised his head. His lips parted slightly.

For the first time, I thought he was going to speak.

He didn't. Instead, I heard a soft click behind me, at door 17.

I turned my head and saw that the handle had moved. Not because of my hand. Because of something inside. The circle of ash around the handle had closed further, almost completely. Only a thin crack remained. And from that crack came Mary's voice again, this time clearer, more urgent:

Abraham... quickly...

I felt my body want to react immediately. Quickly. The word is a lever. It presses on everything inside you: guilt, fear, hope.

I forced myself not to be fast.

I walked back to the door at a normal pace and stopped in front of it. My hand remained next to the handle, not on it.

I said calmly: Mary, when you get there, knock three times. Now.

Silence.

Then, behind the door, three short scratches. Pause. Three short scratches.

The same pattern.

"That's not proof," I thought. "That's a trick. A trick designed precisely to make you want to take it as proof."

I looked up at the viewing window in the door, and this time I made no excuses. I took a half step to the side, so that my reflection in the glass wasn't in the center, and looked inside.

Behind the glass was a room. White. Small. A bed. A chair. And someone was lying on the bed.

Mary.

Or a woman who resembled Mary enough for my body to believe it instantly. Her hair lay dark on the pillow, her face pale, her eyes half-open. Her lips moved as if she were speaking.

But her gaze wasn't directed at me. It was slightly off-center, as if she weren't seeing me, but something behind me.

I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

Slowly, very slowly, I raised my gaze a little upwards in the viewing window, to where what was in the hallway behind me might be reflected in the glass.

And I saw it in the glass.

Not the priest.

Not me.

An umbrella.

Open.

Black.

He was so close behind me that he darkened the light in the glass.

I didn't turn around. I didn't move. I left the image in the glass as if it were a painting that shouldn't be disturbed. Because if I turn around now, I'll be confirming him. I'll be giving him my face.

Instead, I spoke into the hallway without moving: You want me to open the door.

No answer. Only the faint crackling of umbrella struts, as if it were slightly readjusting itself.

I said: Then open it yourself.

The silence stretched.

Then I heard the silent priest take a step behind me. Finally, a sound. A very quiet, but real sound. As if he had gained weight for a moment.

I understood: The priest is the hand that can open the door without me opening it. He has my blood. He is complicit. And he is, whether he likes it or not, a tool.

I took a step to the side, away from the doorknob, and gave the priest a clear path to the door. It was an invitation to him, not to me. And when he opens the door, the circle is not closed by my hand.

The priest glided to the door. His hand rose to the handle. The circle of ash around the handle seemed to glow for a heartbeat, not really, but rather as if the white of the hallway accentuated it.

His fingers touched the door handle.

At that moment, my throat hissed, as if the wound were briefly reopening. Pain. Warmth. A drop of blood trickled under the scarf.

The priest paused. His hand trembled slightly.

Then he pressed down.

The handle gave way. The door opened.

A stream of white light poured out, so bright I had to blink. And with the light came a smell that immediately turned my stomach: iron. Fresh. Strong. Blood.

I took a step forward, the lamp uselessly in my hand, and looked into the room.

The bed was there. The chair was there.

But Mary wasn't lying on the bed.

A coffin lid lay on the bed.

Wood. Dark. And on it, scratched with fresh marks, was a sentence, raw, as if written with nails:

CONFESSION.

The priest next to me remained silent.

And somewhere behind us, in the hallway, I no longer heard the typing as a sound, but as a final signal, as if someone had ended a scene.

Once.

Then silence.

The trail of blood at the quay

The word on the wood was raw, as if a person had torn it in a panic, and yet it was clean enough to betray intent. Confession. Not as a plea, not as a command, but as a claim of possession. I stood in the doorway, the lamp in my hand like a ridiculous toy, and watched the white room present itself as a clinic while simultaneously smelling of fresh iron, of blood that had just decided to be warm.

The priest beside me remained silent. His silence was no longer merely a method, but complicity. He had turned the handle. He had closed the circle, without knowing if he wanted to. And with that, he had given the hallway what it demanded: an action that was not mine, yet clung to me like smoke.

I took a step into the room, just far enough to test whether the floor would accept me. No sound. That was the first sign. A room that swallows footsteps doesn't want you to remember how you entered. The coffin lid lay on the bed like a body part, severed but still meaningful. The scratch marks on it were fresh, and in some of the grooves there was a dark sheen, as if something liquid had briefly filled the lines before congealing.

I held the lamp closer. It was almost ineffective here, but its yellow hue was my only color against this clinical white. The wooden lid wasn't perfectly clean. A tiny thread of fabric clung to the edge. Gray. Like a scrap of scarf. Or a piece of wallpaper. Or something deliberately designed to look like a scrap.

I didn't touch it.

In the back of the room stood a chair. On the chair lay a book. Not Mary's diary, but a thin, blank notebook, the kind used for minutes. The paper inside was white, and the whiteness here was a threat. I saw it only briefly, and already I felt the impulse in my fingers to reach for it. To write. To confess. To record. The hallway had set up a scene for me in which every object pointed to the same point.

I turned my head slightly back towards the door. The priest was still standing there, as if he'd been nailed to the threshold. His face was paler now, as if the light had stolen the last vestige of shadow. I could still see the tiny dark stain on his fingertips, my blood, as if he were wearing it like a host.

I said quietly: That's not Mary.

The priest remained silent. Of course.

I moved closer to the bed and leaned over the coffin lid without touching it. The smell of iron rose, not from the wood, but from the room itself. As if the air were bleeding. I held my breath for a moment and listened.

Nothing.

No scratching. No whispering. Not a breath behind the white. Only the kind of silence you find in churches just before someone speaks the first words.

I sat up and looked at the small peephole in the door through which I had seen Mary earlier. Now it reflected only light. No face. No bed. As if the hallway had decided to reclaim the image once it had served its purpose.

I took a step back, heading towards the hallway again. And the moment I crossed the threshold, I felt it on my neck: a sharp prick, not like a new bite, but like a pin pressing on an old wound to check if it was still there. I pressed my hand against the scarf, and my fingers became damp.

Blood. Fresh again.

The priest next to me didn't move. But I noticed something new: his shoulders were slightly lowered, as if the tension had briefly drained from him. As if the room had used him and now let him go.

I looked down the corridor. The white light hung motionless, the doors slid past each other like teeth. And at the end, behind the guardroom window, I could still see the other priest. He was no longer at the glass. He was still standing in the room, and his hand was holding something up. A cross, yes. But below it, on the floor, he was pointing to a dark spot that I could barely make out from here: a hatch, a grate, an opening. Down below. Just as he had shown it before.

I didn't nod at him. Nodding means agreement. I did something else: I turned away and walked off as if I had chosen the direction myself.

The silent priest didn't follow. Or he followed in such a way that I didn't hear him. I went back to the metal door I had come through. The corridor remained silent, as if it didn't want to stop me. That was the worst part: a corridor that lets you go rarely lets you go to save you.

The brick passageway immediately smelled of earth and water again. The change was so abrupt that I felt briefly dizzy, as if I had changed air like a room. I climbed up the shaft, the lamp in front of me, the pieces of mirror in the frame. In one mirror, I saw the white corridor once more, small as a picture in a frame. Door number 17 stood open. There was no priest in the doorway. Only something black, hanging like a point in the light.

When I arrived upstairs in the inn room, a gust of wind hit me, pushing through the crack in the window. The wallpaper, scratched, hung there like irritated skin. The towel over the mirror had slipped, as if someone had tried to breathe underneath it. And Mary's diary still lay

on the bed, closed, warm, as if it had never been gone, as if it had been waiting for me all along, like a dog that can't decide whether to love you or eat you.

I didn't pack it up. I left it there.

Not out of courage. Out of necessity. I couldn't simultaneously save myself and carry this book onward when it had already called me "messenger" in the hallway. When it was already describing me with every step.

I went to the table, took the map with the red cross out of my pocket, and didn't tear it. I unfolded it one last time, searching for a symbol other than a cross, a destination other than Door 17. There was a line along the edge, which I had previously only seen as a connection. Now I saw the small addition: a point by the water, marked with a line, not a cross. Next to it was only one word, like a cold breath:

Kai.

It's as if someone decided that all stories must end or begin at water, because water both leaves traces and blurs them.

I pocketed the card, grabbed my coat, pulled my scarf tighter, and left the room without looking back. The hallway smelled of tea and damp wood. Downstairs in the bar, I heard voices, laughter—the kind you use on the coast like a knife against the cold. The landlady looked up but said nothing, because coastal towns teach you that questions only bring trouble.

Outside, the wind whipped against my face. Whitby was awake now. The sky was bright, not blue, more of a thin, cold white that made everything visible. People were crossing the road, a boy carrying a basket, seagulls squawking as if delighted by anyone who thought today was just an ordinary day.

I headed towards the water.

With every step, the smell of the sea intensified. Salt, seaweed, wet ropes. And underneath it all, that metallic sound again, which had by now lodged itself in my nose like a second tongue. Iron. Blood.

As I reached the quay, I saw it immediately, even before I had fully reached the quay wall: a dark streak on the wet stones, not caused by rain. A trace, thin, irregular, as if someone had tried to erase it, but not thoroughly enough. The trace led between crates, past a bollard blackened with salt, to a spot where the water lapped softly.

I stopped and let the wind tear my breath apart so that it wouldn't betray me.

The bloodstain was fresh. It still had a slight sheen. And in one of the drops lying at the edge of the trail, the bright daylight was reflected like in an eye.

I didn't bend down. I didn't come any closer. I just looked where it led.

To the place where a single black object stood on the quay, as if someone had forgotten it there.

A closed umbrella.

Upright.

So calm, as if he were just part of the harbor regulations.

And right next to it, on a box, lay a small booklet. Thin. White.

Empty enough to write anything in.

The umbrella stood there as if someone had set it down to briefly free both hands. This normality was the real insult. A black umbrella on the quay is nothing special—except that I could no longer see it as an object. It was a question. A parenthesis. A punctuation mark in a story that wasn't mine.

The thin notebook lay open on the box beside it. Not wide open, just enough so the wind couldn't immediately turn the first page. The pages were white, but the whiteness had something unpleasant about it here by the water, as if it were fresh, as if it didn't yet know what words it would bear. I stopped, two steps too far away to pick it up, and just close enough to hate myself for it.

The trail of blood led to this point, as if the blood itself had decided to end here. I looked at the drops more closely. Some were smaller, as if someone had tried to walk slowly. Others were larger, as if they had stumbled or had to stop for a moment. And where the trail passed the box, there was a wider stain, as if someone had placed their hand on it.

A hand that is bleeding. Or a hand that is spreading blood.

I raised the lamp—despite the daylight, as always—and let the beam sweep across the stain. The blood was dark red, fresh, not completely clotted. And beneath it, in the wet stone, I saw scratch marks. Small lines, as if someone had scraped the stone with a ring or a nail. No message. Just unease. A body struggling against the ground.

I took a deep breath and smelled salt, seaweed, and the bitter whiff of coal from a nearby chimney. The wind carried voices—dockworkers, a shout, a laugh. Everyday sounds. And it was precisely this ordinariness that made me nervous, because it's so easy to hide here if you're willing to look human.

I didn't go directly to the umbrella. I walked in an arc, keeping it within the edge. The trick was: do no more than necessary. See no more than necessary. And yet see enough to avoid being blind.

As I passed the box, I saw that the notebook was not empty.

On the first page was a sentence, neatly written, in the elegant handwriting that I now recognized like a smell:

WRITE WHAT YOU SEE.

Below, in a second line, smaller:

AND THEN YOU FIND THEM.

I felt my stomach clench. He had even placed paper on the quay. He had constructed the scene so that every normal human behavior—reading, reaching, taking notes—became a ritual. And he had chosen the bait to be deeply enticing: Mary.

I had to force myself not to read any further. I'd seen the sentence. That was enough. Every additional glance would be another clue.

I didn't put my hand on the notebook. I didn't touch the umbrella. Instead, I looked at the water.

The sea lapped calmly against the quay wall, as if it had no knowledge of my hallway, my mirrors, my circles. The water was grey-green, and small patches of foam floated on its surface. Further out lay a boat, a cutter, and beyond it only a horizon, so pale today that it almost disappeared.

And yet there was something in the water, close to the quay, something dark that didn't move like a piece of seaweed. It was too regular. Too round.

A barrel?

I stepped closer to the edge, cautiously, and looked down. The dark thing was indeed a barrel, half-submerged, tied to a rope. It swayed slightly with the waves. An ordinary barrel. Until I saw that something was hanging from it that didn't belong to the barrel.

A piece of fabric.

Gray.

Like a scrap of scarf. Or like a coat lining. It fluttered in the water, not quite submerged, as if it wanted to be seen.

I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. Substance in water is rarely just substance. Substance in water is often what remains.

Behind me I heard footsteps. Human footsteps. Heavy, uneven, like boots on wet stone. I didn't turn immediately. I let my gaze wander along the edge of the screen, over the box, the notebook, the umbrella. Nothing moved. No typing. No rustling. Only the wind.

The footsteps came closer, stopping a few meters behind me.

A rough voice said: You're looking down there as if you've lost something.

I turned my head slowly.

A dockworker stood there, broad-shouldered, hands in his pockets, cap pulled low, face weathered. His eyes weren't steady like the man's on the London quay. They were alert, wary, and looked as if they'd seen more than they cared to admit. A real man. A real body. For a moment, that was reassuring.

I said: I'm just looking.

He spat to the side, the wind carried it away. "You're not from around here," he said. That was not in question.

I said: No.

He nodded as if he already knew. Then his gaze fell on me, lingering on my scarf. He pretended not to notice, but he had. Everyone notices blood on the neck, even if it's just a dark stain.

He said more quietly: Someone was here this morning. Searching. Not like a fisherman. More like... like a gentleman who thinks he can order anything he wants.

I felt my pulse. A man. An umbrella. A hand spreading blood.

I asked: Did he speak?

The worker laughed briefly, without joy. He didn't speak. He just looked. And if he wanted something, he simply pointed. At things. At people. As if we all belonged.

He nodded at the umbrella. It was here too. Standing there just like now. I wanted to kick it away, but somehow... my boots wouldn't budge.

I looked back at the screen. Still closed, upright. As if it could hear me.

I asked: Did he bring someone with him?

The worker rubbed his beard. A girl, he said finally. Or a woman. Hard to tell in the morning mist. She was pale. Didn't scream. That was the worst part. No scream. Just... as if she had no breath left for such a thing.

My throat tightened. Mary? Or someone else? Whitby was full of women. But history wasn't generous. It repeats what works.

I asked, and I hated myself for it, because the question could be a ritual: Where to?

The worker shrugged. "Down there," he said, pointing to the section of the quay where a small ladder led into the water, half-embedded in the stone. "Some people call that the old access. They used to lower barrels down there. Now only rats go down it."

I looked at the ladder. It was wet, slippery, and it didn't just lead into the water. It led to a narrow opening in the quay wall, half-hidden by seaweed. A hole large enough for a person to crawl through. Down below.

Always down.

I heard the rustling of paper behind me. Not loud. But it was immediately there in my mind because I knew where it had to come from: the notebook, the open page, the prompt to write.

The worker suddenly said, as if he himself were afraid of what he was saying: If you go down there, don't take anything you can't get rid of.

I gave a curt nod.

He gestured as if he were leaving, but remained standing for another moment. And then he said: And if you see something there... don't write it down. Some things are better left in your mind until you die.

He turned away and left, his boots heavy, real, reassuring.

I stood alone again on the quay, with the umbrella, the notebook, and the trail of blood. The sea lapped calmly, as if uninvolved. And yet there was something in the water, a barrel with a gray rag, like a waving hand.

I stepped up to the ladder. I didn't grab it immediately. I just looked down into the opening.

Dark. Damp. A scent of seaweed and earth. And underneath it all, that faint hint of iron, so faint it was more of a memory than a smell.

I didn't turn around to look at the notebook. I left it there. I left the phrase "Write what you see" behind me like a dog that barks because it senses you're leaving.

I placed my foot on the first rung of the ladder.

And behind me, very quietly, as if an object on wet stone were just briefly testing its balance, I heard:

Tap.

Once.

The tapping behind me was like a finger on the back, not hard enough to shove, but distinct enough to say: I'm here. I continued descending without turning around, forcing myself to treat the sound as sound, not speech. The ladder was slippery, the rungs cold, and the stone of the quay wall felt damp, like skin. The wind above diminished as I descended, and the sound of the sea transformed into a dull, muffled roar, as if a door had closed behind the world.

Below, just above the waterline, was the opening in the wall. It was larger than it had appeared from above, but still low enough to force me to crawl. Seaweed hung from the edges, and water dripped from above. I held the lamp in front of me and watched as the light briefly illuminated the green of the seaweed before disappearing into the darkness.

I crawled inside.

The first meter was narrow, the air heavy, salty, cold. The ground wasn't stone, but a mixture of gravel and slimy algae. I held the lamp up so it wouldn't sink, and with my free arm in front of me, I felt where to sit. The sound of my movement was muffled, as if the hole were swallowing everything. Just like the hallway. Places that swallow sounds don't want any traces.

After a few meters, the passageway became higher. I was able to stand up straight, slightly stooped. The light revealed brick walls, old, mottled with shell limestone, as if the sea had eroded them. Water flowed in a channel at the edge, and there was a smell of seaweed, of putrid salt, and of a dull sweetness that immediately reminded me of something I didn't want to say.

Blood.

Not fresh like up by the quay. Older. Mixed with water. A smell that lingers long after the water has receded.

I continued walking, slowly, the lamp in front of me. The corridor curved, then again. The sound of the sea faded into the distance, and instead I heard another rushing sound, more steady: water in pipes. Again, that underground network, trying to connect cities as if they all shared the same core.

I saw scratch marks on the wall.

Not like in the room. These were deeper, wilder, as if someone had tried not just to leave a message, but to tear themselves from the stone. And yet, in the turmoil, I recognized the pattern again: a circle, unfinished. Again and again the same half-ring, saying: Something is missing here. Here you can close it.

I forced myself not to run my finger over it. Touch is a dialogue. I didn't want the stone to know my warmth.

Further ahead, something was lying on the ground.

A piece of fabric.

Gray.

I stopped. I shone my light on it. It was a scrap of scarf, frayed, wet, heavy with water. And when I saw it, I felt a brief burning sensation in my throat, as if my own scarf were reacting to it. A connection that isn't logical, but is there instantly.

I stepped closer and didn't pick up the fabric. I only looked at it.

The fabric smelled of the sea—and underneath, of perfume. Faint. Just as faint as Mary's scent had been in the carriage. My heart beat faster, and I hated my heart for being so easily manipulated.

Next to the remnant of the scarf lay something else, half submerged in water.

A small metal case.

A medallion.

My stomach clenched. The locket I'd opened in London. The locket that had warned Mary: not in the light. I didn't know if it was the same one, or just a replica, a prop someone had put

in the scene because it looked good. But when I saw it, I felt the same resistance, the same desire not to touch it.

I bent down, slowly, and lifted it with two fingers, as if it were hot. It was cold. Wet. And heavier than I remembered. A tiny red stain clung to the edge.

Blood.

I didn't put it in my pocket. I just held it up to the lamplight so I could see the surface. There was a notch on the back. Not deep. A number.

17.

Naturally.

The network was everywhere.

I swallowed, and at that moment I heard a noise behind me.

Do not type.

A drop. No, two. Then a soft splash, as if someone were walking slowly, very slowly, so as not to make waves. Footsteps in the shallow water of the channel. Someone was following me, but not hastily. Haste is human. These steps were controlled.

I stood still, holding the medallion in my hand, the lamp slightly higher.

And then I heard something that briefly took my breath away: a soft, stifled whimper.

Not from the aisle behind me. Further ahead, somewhere in the darkness. A sound that didn't sound staged because it was too faint to serve any dramatic purpose. It sounded like a person who didn't have enough breath to scream properly.

Mary? Or someone who is supposed to sound like her? The question was like a blade.

I forced myself not to rush ahead immediately. I forced myself to keep a cool head. Those who rush ahead will be led.

I didn't turn all the way around, just enough to see who was behind me. I left the lamp in front of me so the light wouldn't act as a mirror.

At the edge of the passage, I saw a dark figure, deep in the corridor, not close enough to make out a face. But I saw the outline of a cloak. And I saw something in the figure's hand that looked like a thin rod.

A closed umbrella.

He was there.

And he was close enough that I thought I could feel the air around him being colder.

The whimpering at the front grew louder for a moment, then stopped as if someone had put their hand over a mouth. Immediately afterward, I heard another sound: a soft scraping on stone, three short strokes, a pause, three short strokes.

The pattern.

The code.

He plays with cries for help like others play with coins.

I gripped the locket tighter. And I realized that right now I had to do something that wasn't part of his plan. Not run. Not confess. Not write.

I dropped the medallion.

It splashed into the water of the gutter, and the sound was small, but it was a different sound than anything before. No ritual. No tapping. No scratching. A random, human error. And that was precisely the trick: it wasn't an error. It was my signal to myself that I didn't have to keep everything he put in front of me.

The figure behind me paused for a moment. The footsteps stopped.

I seized the moment. I didn't walk faster, I just moved forward more decisively, toward the broken whimper. The passage narrowed, then widened again. My lamp shone on a niche in the wall, and there I saw a door. Not made of wood, but of metal, like an old maintenance door. There was no cross, no number on the metal. Only scratch marks. Many. And in them, barely visible, that semicircle again.

I stepped closer. The door was ajar, not locked. As if someone had left it open for me.

Air emerged from the crack. Warmer. More humane.

And a scent that froze me instantly: perfume. Mary's scent, faint but unmistakable. And iron, fresh.

I placed my hand on the door, didn't hesitate long because hesitation here is just another ritual, and pushed it open.

The space behind it was small, low, like a chamber. A chain hung on the wall. And hanging from it, half-slumped, was a figure.

A woman.

Pale. Her hair was dark and damp. Her head was tilted to the side. Her lips were slightly parted, as if she had just breathed.

I took a step inside, and at that moment she slowly raised her head.

Her eyes were open.

And they looked at me.

Not over the edge. Not off the mark.

She whispered, so quietly that I could hardly hear it, but I could read it on her mouth:

Abraham...

I felt my body want to move forward, felt hope grab me like a hand. And at the same time, I saw it because the light from my lamp was at an angle:

There were two small, dark spots on her neck, directly below her jaw.

A bite.

The portrait that changed

She didn't hang like a person who had fainted. She hung like something that had been hanging that way for far too long, as if the room had grown accustomed to it. The chain was old, greenish from the salt, and it was fastened in such a way that it not only held but also proclaimed: Here is someone on display. The lamp in my hand made the damp skin on her neck glisten, and the two dark spots beneath her jaw didn't look like wounds but like punctuation marks. Two points that say: The rest of the sentence is missing.

Even when she whispered my name, it gripped me. Not in my head. In my gut, my chest, my hands. The body recognizes sound before the mind processes it. And Mary's sound—or what I had by then accepted as Mary's sound—was like a hand reaching out of a dark shaft.

I approached slowly, holding the lamp so it wouldn't shine in her face. Her eyes were open but dull, as if they were seeing not light, but memory. Her lips trembled, and she breathed shallowly, like someone unsure whether breathing was allowed.

I didn't say her name. Names are circles. Circles close too quickly.

Instead, I whispered: Tell me something that nobody here knows.

She swallowed. The movement lifted the bite marks slightly, and a thin, dark ring of blood glistened there, as if it had just decided to become visible. She whispered: The scarf... in the carriage... you held it too tightly.

My throat tightened. I had. Not consciously, but I did. A detail, too small for a backdrop, too insignificant to be a lie. And yet it was just a detail. He had long since shown me how well he could imitate details.

I raised my hand, not touching her face, not her wound, but only the fabric at her shoulder, to feel if there was warmth. Warm enough. Human enough. Trembling. Fear, real or feigned.

Behind me, in the corridor, it was silent. Not a single tap. Not a footstep in the water. This silence was like a thin knife: it said that I was being watched, without anyone needing to show themselves.

I looked at the chain. It was secured with a hook, old but not complicated. My fingers found the clasp, and when I released it, metal squeaked softly. A sound far too loud in the shaft. The woman flinched and clung to my hand, not tightly, more helplessly. Her weight sank into my arms, and in that moment I smelled it unmistakably: perfume, salt, iron. And beneath it, something else, very faint, sweet, as if the air had tried for a moment to soothe me. A false sweetness.

I didn't press her to me. Closeness is also a circle. I simply held her so she wouldn't fall and led her from the chamber into the corridor. The lamp swung, casting shadows on the walls, and the scratch marks there looked as if they were moving. The semicircle was everywhere, as if someone had practiced handwriting in stone.

She stumbled once. I caught her. Her fingers briefly brushed against my scarf, and immediately the bite on my neck burned more intensely, as if my wound recognized hers. A response in the flesh.

She whispered: Not... back... not to the hallway...

I said: I'm not going back. Not there.

Whether I believed it was another question. But statements carry weight. Sometimes you have to say something to be able to take the next step.

We continued walking, away from the point where the sea breathed in. I held onto the wall because the ground was slippery. And because I wanted to feel the wall, to be sure it was real. Stone is more honest than air.

Then I heard it.

Do not type.

Paper.

A soft, dry rustling sound that didn't belong down here. And it didn't come from my hand. I wasn't carrying any paper. I wasn't carrying any notebook. I had left it up on the quay.

And yet, there was a rustling sound.

The woman in my arms froze. Her breathing became shallow. She looked past me into the darkness, as if she saw something there that I wasn't allowed to see.

I said: What is it?

She whispered almost inaudibly: He... makes you think you're faster.

Then the rustling grew closer, and with it a sound that resembled a friendly click. As if someone were closing a lid. As if someone were putting something away neatly.

I pulled the woman closer, not out of tenderness, but to move her. We didn't find the ladder right away. The corridors curved in a way that felt the same. I felt the city beneath the city trying to turn me, like a hand turning a screw, until you no longer know which way is up.

Then I saw the dim light from above. The small, cool breeze creeping through the entrance. The ladder. The hole in the quay wall.

I climbed first, pulling her behind me, step by step. She was lighter than she should have been, and that made me suspicious. Either she was exhausted—or she'd never truly been here. Whether you're light when you're barely alive, or when you barely exist, feels very similar in your arms.

As we emerged onto the quay, the wind hit us like a slap in the face. The world was bright. Too bright. I blinked, and in that brief blindness, I had the feeling that a shadow was sitting in the hole behind us, just waiting for me to see again.

The umbrella was no longer there.

The booklet was no longer on the box either.

The bloodstain was still there, but it was smudged, as if someone had wiped it with a wet hand. Not thoroughly. Just enough to make it look like an accident.

The dockworker was nowhere to be seen.

I led the woman away from the quay, not to the main street, not to the people, but to one of the narrow paths that climb up between the houses. I wanted height. Height provides a view, and a view is the opposite of underground passages.

She stumbled again. I pulled her into a doorway so she wouldn't collapse in the street. Her head rested briefly against the wall, and at that moment I noticed that her gaze wasn't on me, but on something behind my shoulder.

I slowly turned around.

A portrait hung in the window opposite.

A framed picture, old, slightly crooked, the kind you see in inns or old houses when they want to show guests that history resides there. The man in the portrait wore a dark coat. Not a priest's cassock, not a uniform coat. A coat painted in such a way that it showed more fabric than body. The face was pale, the eyes dark, the lips too thin. And although it was only paint, the portrait had this unsettling precision that says: Someone knew him. Or someone painted him from memory, after living in it for too long.

I only glanced at it briefly and was about to turn away again.

Then I realized that something was wrong.

The man's hand was visible in the picture. He was holding something that at first glance looked like a walking stick. But now, on second glance, I saw the tip.

An umbrella.

Closed.

I frowned, unsure if he'd been there before. Perhaps he'd always been there, and I'd simply overlooked him. Perhaps I'd been conditioned to see umbrellas everywhere, so now I was projecting him onto them.

I looked more closely.

Beneath the umbrella handle, where the fingers grip it, was a small stain. Dark red. Painted so finely that it could be mistaken for a shadow detail.

Blood.

My stomach clenched. A portrait with blood details is not a normal portrait. A portrait with blood details is a message.

The woman next to me let out a soft sound, barely more than air. I looked at her. Her eyes were wide, and she whispered: Don't... look...

I looked back at the portrait, even though I didn't want to. The picture was behind glass. Glass reflects. And in that glass, I saw more than just the man in the picture.

I saw myself.

And behind me, reflected in the glass, stood a dark figure that was not on the street.

A man, a shadow, a coat.

I turned around abruptly.

The street was empty.

Only wind, bright stones, and the cries of seagulls.

I turned back to the portrait.

The reflection behind me was gone.

But something was different.

The hand in the picture – I swear, although swearing is dangerous here – the hand in the picture was positioned differently. The fingers were gripping the handle more firmly. And the tip of the umbrella was no longer pointing downwards.

She pointed to the side.

Right to where I was standing.

I took a step back, and the woman beside me gasped softly. The portrait didn't move like a living thing, not visibly. It changed like something being repainted without anyone painting. A detail, an angle, a shadow shifting because it can.

I looked at the bottom edge of the frame. There, where dust collects, a small strip of paper was wedged in, as if someone had just pushed it in. A thin piece of paper, vibrating slightly in the breeze.

I pulled it out without thinking, because the moment drove me.

The note contained only one sentence:

WRITE WHAT YOU DON'T WANT TO SEE.

I felt the bite on my neck make itself known, as if the wound recognized the word "write" like a dog recognizes its name. And I realized that the portrait wasn't just observing me. It was controlling me. It wanted me to escape my fear into language. Into confession. Into text.

The woman clung to my arm and whispered: He takes pictures... so you'll believe him...

I held the note tightly, looked once more into the glass of the portrait, and for a heartbeat I saw not myself in the mirror, but the white hallway light. Door 17. The coffin lid. The word confession.

Then it was gone.

Just one picture.

An image that changed.

The slip of paper in my hand suddenly felt heavy, as if paper in this story had the weight of lead. Write what you don't want to see. It was a plea so cleverly worded that it could have masqueraded as self-help. As if saying: Speak it out, and it will lose its power. But I knew by then that speaking it out here was the same as inviting it in. And inviting it in is a circle that closes.

I didn't crumple the note. Crumpling makes noise and is a form of anger he likes to use. I simply folded it and put it in my coat pocket without reading it further, because I'd already read it enough. Words don't need to be repeated to have an effect.

The woman next to me—I still refused to say her name until I was sure she even had one—leaned against the doorway wall, trembling. Not dramatically. A quiet, uncontrollable trembling. The wind came in gusts through the alley, and each time it passed, it seemed to pass through her as well, as if her body were cracking.

I said quietly: Can you go?

She nodded, but her nod was more of a reflex than a decision. Her hand held my arm, not out of affection, but out of necessity. She whispered: Not back to the inn... up there... that room...

I heard the word "room," and something inside me tensed. The room with the scratch marks, the towel over the mirror, the shaft behind the wallpaper, the hallway spreading like a white disease. She spoke of it as if it were a place that clings to you if you stay there too long.

I didn't answer with "yes" or "no". I simply said: We need a place without pictures.

She looked at me, and for a moment there was something like understanding in her eyes – or like recognition. Then she whispered: A church.

I immediately thought of the priest behind the glass, the cross with the number 17 on the back, its silent warning. Church doesn't mean safety. Church just means different rules. But different rules are sometimes the only respite you get.

We moved out of the doorway. I didn't lead her along the main street, but through narrow lanes where houses stand close together, where windows are small, and people tend to look at their feet rather than at strangers' faces. The wind was weaker here, and yet I felt the light following me. Not the sun. Light as a state of being. As a stage.

I kept my eyes away from windows because window glass was my enemy these days. But that was easier said than done. Whitby was full of glass, full of little mirrors in everyday life, full of shop windows in which you catch a glimpse of yourself, even unintentionally.

And everywhere – I noticed it with growing anger – there were pictures hanging.

Not just portraits, but also advertisements, drawings, and displays with photographs. As if the city itself had decided that it wanted to tell a story today.

On one corner hung a poster depicting a man with an umbrella, an advertisement for some shop. An ordinary man, an ordinary umbrella – and yet my gaze lingered on it like a hook, because I no longer knew whether I saw umbrellas everywhere or whether he was putting them everywhere.

I forced myself to keep walking.

The woman stumbled again, and I caught her. Her skin was cold, her fingers damp. She smelled of the sea and blood. And underneath it all was that faint trace of perfume, faint enough to be real. A lie often smells too strong because it wants to prove itself. This perfume wasn't trying to prove anything. It was simply there, like a remnant of life.

We reached a small church nestled among houses, not large, not ornate. The door stood half open, as if they weren't afraid of someone coming in. Or as if they were too afraid to close it.

Inside it was darker, but not dark enough to be comforting. It was the subdued light of a place that doesn't care for corners. Candles flickered, and the scent of wax hung in the air, warm and aged. I stepped inside, and immediately I realized: there are mirrors here, but they have different names. Here they are called altar, cross, holy image. Images that don't reflect, but look.

The woman sank onto a bench. Her shoulders slumped, and she stared at the floor as if afraid that even the wood was asking her questions.

I stopped and looked around. Pictures of saints, Stations of the Cross, small painted scenes hung on the walls. I felt my stomach clench. Pictures. Pictures everywhere. Only different ones.

At the far end of the church stood a priest. A real one, I thought immediately. Not because I can prove it, but because he moved like someone who was tired. He wasn't wearing a pristine cassock. His robes were worn. His hair was gray. And when he saw us, he didn't immediately approach us. He stood still, as if considering whether he was getting himself involved with us in something he could no longer control.

I went to him. Not hastily. Haste is a ritual here. I stopped two steps in front of him, enough distance so that no pressure to get close would arise.

I said: We need help.

The priest looked at me first, then at the woman on the bench. His gaze lingered on her neck, even though he pretended not to look. He saw the bite marks. He saw the blood. And there was no shock in his eyes. Only weariness. As if he'd seen it before. Here. In Whitby. Perhaps often enough.

He said quietly: Sit down.

I didn't. I said: Not here in front.

The priest raised his eyebrows, not out of defiance, but out of understanding. He nodded and pointed to a small door to the side of the altar. Sacristy. A room with fewer pictures and more dust.

We went inside. The woman stood up with difficulty and followed us as if she were being carried, not walking, even though I didn't touch her. The sacristy was small, smelling of wood, old fabrics, and wax. A single picture hung on the wall: a portrait of an old priest, painted darkly, as if it were disappearing into itself. I looked away.

The priest closed the door behind us. The click was soft, not final. He sat down on a chair and looked at me.

He didn't ask for names. That was the first thing that made me sit up and take notice. Names are dangerous here. Maybe he knew that. Maybe he'd learned that sometimes you can help better if you don't have to name everything.

He said: She comes out of the water.

I didn't answer immediately. The woman on the bench—now on a stool—swallowed. Her gaze briefly lifted to me, as if checking whether I would confirm it.

I said: Yes.

The priest nodded, as if he had been expecting precisely this confirmation. Then he said: And you have a book.

My blood turned cold.

I said: No.

He looked at me, for a long time, without judgment, and I realized that his gaze wasn't like that of the man on the quay. Not calm in the sense of cold. Calm in the sense that he was carrying things and yet still present.

He said: The book isn't here. But it is with you. Like the smell of someone who comes out of a fire.

I felt the bite on my neck burn, as if he had heard the word "book." I instinctively grabbed for my scarf. The priest noticed the movement.

He said quietly: Show me.

I didn't pull out the diary. It wasn't there. And yet I knew he didn't mean I should show it to him physically. He meant: Show me what it did to you.

The woman suddenly whispered, so quietly that it could have been mistaken for the wind: Don't confess...

The priest heard it. He looked at her, and in his gaze there was something like pity, but also a stern calm. He said: I do not require a confession. Confession is between you and God.

I almost laughed, bitterly. God had received little attention in the last few hours. But I kept my mouth shut.

The priest continued: I demand truth. And truth is sometimes just a sentence that isn't written down.

He stood up and went to a shelf, pulled out a bottle—not wine, more like something clear, strong-smelling, perhaps alcohol—and a small piece of cloth. He came back, knelt in front of the woman, and examined her neck. He didn't touch the bite marks directly. He only held the piece of cloth close, dabbing gently, as if afraid of arousing the wound.

The woman flinched and groaned softly.

The priest said: This is fresh. But not new. That means it wants to stay.

I said: What can be done?

He looked at me. And now, for the first time, there was something in his face that wasn't just tiredness. It was a decision.

He said: You can't take it out of her by shouting at it. You can't drive it out by writing. It feeds on both. You can only... break the mirror in which it sees itself.

I felt my stomach clench. Mirrors. Pictures. Portraits. Glass. The priest didn't say "mirror" as a metaphorical word. He said it like a tool.

He went to the wall and took down the only picture in the sacristy. The portrait of the old priest. He turned it over. There was no wood behind it.

There was a mirror behind it.

A small, recessed mirror, old, stained. As if the portrait had only been a cover.

The priest looked at me and said: This mirror was here before I came. It was here because someone wanted me to see myself. I covered it up. But it's still there.

The woman on the stool began to tremble more intensely. She whispered: No...

I stared at the mirror hidden behind a portrait and felt something inside me tense up. The portrait by the window outside had changed. Pictures move when they are mirrors. And here, in the sacristy, there was a mirror behind a portrait. A hidden eye.

The priest raised his hand as if to place something upon it. Then he paused, as if realizing that even touching is a ritual.

He said quietly: If you look at him, he will look at you.

I thought of the hallway. Door 17. The coffin lid. Confession. And I thought of the note: Write what you don't want to see.

Here it was different. Here the request was not to write, but to look. Or to refuse.

I took a step closer to the mirror without looking in it, and suddenly felt a change in the air behind me, as if someone had moved the door of the sacristy slightly.

The door handle made no sound.

But I knew: Someone was there.

Not inside.

Outside.

Waiting.

And I understood that the portrait outside wasn't just a message, but a signpost. It had brought me here. To a mirror hidden behind a portrait, so that I would finally do what it wanted: look at myself and thereby open up what was already scratched inside me.

The air in the sacristy was suddenly too still, as if the room itself had decided to listen. The candle flame in the next room didn't flicker, but I felt its movement, as if the light were beating with a heartbeat. Behind us, at the door, there was no sound—and that was precisely the proof that something was there. Things that make no noise when they move don't want to be recognized as things.

The priest held the picture in his hands as if it had grown heavier since he had shown it the mirror. The woman on the stool trembled, her breath coming in gasps, each exhale sounding as if she were losing herself in it. I stood before the mirror without looking into it and felt my throat burning, as if the bite were a second eye desperately wanting to see.

The priest said softly: If he is here, then he will try to catch you through himself.

I didn't ask how he knew. Questions are time, and time here is a door that closes by itself. I simply said: What am I supposed to do?

The priest glanced briefly at the door, then back at me. He said: Don't look. Don't describe. Don't confess. Just act.

He went to a small cupboard, pulled out a bowl containing water—holy water, I presumed, or simply water called that to give it more significance. He placed the bowl on the table next to the mirror. The water was dark in the shadows. A silent circle, waiting for a hand.

The woman whispered, barely audible: He... is in pictures...

The priest nodded, as if she had voiced something he had carried within himself for years. Then he said to me: "If you break the mirror, it will be angry. But anger is better than a smile. At least anger is honest."

I felt a bitter sense of humor rising within me. Honesty as solace. It was a pitiful form of hope, but on this night—which had disguised itself as day—it was perhaps the only one.

I didn't look in the mirror. I only looked at the frame, at the stains, at the edge. The mirror was old, it had small cracks, but it was still intact. And that was precisely the problem: intact means open. Intended means: ready to reflect.

I lifted the lamp and held it so that its light didn't fall directly on the glass, but rather sideways onto the frame. At the periphery of my vision, I saw movement on the mirror's surface, even though I wasn't looking into it. A dark shadow gathering there, as if someone were approaching from within.

I forced myself not to react. Reaction is an invitation.

Then I heard quiet, calm typing behind me.

Once.

Not in the corridor, not on the quay. Right by the sacristy door, as if someone were very gently checking with the tip of an umbrella whether it was really closed.

The woman on the stool let out a sound that was half sob, half choke. The priest placed a hand on her shoulder, calmly, firmly. He said to her, softly, not to comfort her, but to instruct her: Breathe. Don't think. Just breathe.

The typing came a second time. A little louder.

I felt my body want to look for the door. I didn't. I stayed in front of the mirror. If I turn around, I'll make it the center of my attention. And it loves centers.

The priest whispered: Now.

He wasn't referring to the door. He was referring to the mirror.

I had no hammer. No stone. I only had my lamp, a rough metal body with glass. A tool that makes light. And light is its domain. But glass is glass, and glass can break.

I lifted the lamp and hit the mirror with the metal rim.

The first impact made a sound that was much louder in my head than in the room. A sharp crack. The mirror developed a long crack, from the top left to the bottom right, like lightning breaking across a frozen lake. The surface trembled as if it had briefly come to life.

At that moment, the air changed.

Not like wind. Like a start. As if something that lived in the mirror suddenly had no more room.

I hit him a second time.

The glass continued to shatter, shards flew off, clattering into the bowl of water, and the water splashed. A few drops hit my hand, cold, and I felt the sharp burn on the bite mark on my throat, as if the water were causing pain there. Maybe it was just water. Maybe it was what you make of it.

The woman didn't scream. She only pressed her hands to her ears, as if the sound of the breaking mirror were creeping into her head.

The priest suddenly spoke—not to me, not to the woman—but into the room. A prayer? No. More like a sentence that sounded like a command, only in a language not meant for humans. He didn't speak loudly, but the syllables carried weight. And as he spoke, I heard something behind the door that chilled me to the bone: a soft, joyless laugh. Brief. Then silence.

I hit him a third time.

The mirror gave way. The glass broke into larger pieces, the surface peeled away like a shell, and there was no wall behind the mirror.

There was a cavity behind the mirror.

A narrow, dark shaft, and inside it something that looked like a rolled-up piece of canvas. A picture, rolled up. A portrait that hadn't yet been hung. Or a portrait that had been hidden.

I didn't take it out immediately. I shone a light inside.

Something glittered in the darkness. Not glass. Metal.

A frame. And attached to the frame was a small sign, like the kind used at exhibitions. On it, written in black ink, was:

THE MAN IN THE BLACK COAT.

I felt my stomach churn. Not because the name surprised me. Because it had been written down here. As if it were no longer just a shadow, but a work of art. An object. Something you can hang up and look at. And as soon as you look at something, it belongs to the world.

The priest saw it too. His face hardened. He said quietly: They kept it here. Like a relic.

The sacristy door moved.

Inaudible. But I saw the shadow under the door change. It widened. As if someone were approaching.

Then, very quietly, a voice came from outside, gentle, friendly, as if someone were inviting someone for tea:

Open up.

The priest didn't answer. He approached the door without opening it and placed his palm against it, as if a palm could hold wood. His lips moved, but I heard no words. Perhaps he was praying. Perhaps he was counting. Perhaps he was simply trying to ground himself.

I was still standing in front of the broken mirror, lamp in hand, looking into the hollow space. The rolled-up picture was there, as if waiting to be unfurled. A portrait that no longer needed to change because it wasn't yet visible. And I knew that was precisely the next trick: Unfurl it. Look at it. Then it would be there.

The woman on the stool whispered, barely audible: Don't... open...

The voice outside said again: Open up.

The word wasn't a request. It was a habit. As if he'd grown accustomed to doors opening.

I didn't take the rolled-up picture. I did something else. I reached into the hollow space, found the label, tore it off, and crumpled it in my fist without looking. The name had to go. Names are anchors. Without a name, something is less secure.

The priest looked at me, briefly, and for the first time there was something like agreement in his gaze.

Then he said, quietly, briefly: Behind the altar there is an exit. An old door. Not many people know about it.

The voice outside didn't laugh. It was silent. And that silence was more dangerous because it sounded like he was thinking.

I gently grasped the woman's arm. She was light, too light, but she stood up. Her legs trembled, yet she walked. The priest took the bowl of water and poured the rest over the broken shards of mirror, as if drowning them.

We moved towards the small door behind the altar, which the priest opened. Beyond it was a narrow, dark passage with steps leading outside. A blast of air hit us, a cold wind, a real wind that smelled of the sea. Sometimes freedom feels like nothing but cold.

As we entered the corridor, I heard the first real sound behind us at the sacristy door: a soft creak, as if wood were yielding under pressure. Not force. Patience.

The priest closed the door behind us and bolted it. The bolt clicked – a real sound, a real mechanism. And in that real sound lay a small comfort: not everything down here is magic. Some things are still wood and metal.

We climbed the steps, out into the wind.

And when I reached the top, bathed in the bright Whitby light, I realized my hand was still clutching the crumpled nameplate. I opened my fist and didn't look. I dropped the ball of paper and stomped on it until it turned to mush in the wet stone.

Behind us, somewhere in the church, I heard a dull thud, as if something heavy was falling over.

And then – so quiet that it might only have been my head – a tapping sound, far away, as if an umbrella were testing on stone whether the world outside would still hold it.

The Ball of Masks

The wind outside was cold enough to clear thoughts, but not strong enough to carry them away. Whitby lay before us like a postcard handled with wet fingers: bright, salty, slightly blurred. People went about their business as if what was happening in the cellars and shafts were another city altogether. Perhaps it was. Perhaps every city is two cities, and you live your life on the upper one until the lower one decides to make itself known.

The priest didn't lead us through the main entrance, but through a narrow courtyard behind the church, where old stones were moss-covered and the wind gathered in the corners. The woman walked between us, her shoulders hunched as if to hide her neck, but the two marks there weren't just wounds. They were a sign that every shadow could read.

I kept close to the walls. Not out of fear of people, but out of aversion to glass. The windows of the houses stood in rows, and each one was a mirror if you looked at it the wrong way. The priest walked ahead, without haste, as if this were a normal stroll after a service. I envied him this ability to wear normality like a cloak without suffocating under it.

He led us into a small building behind the church, a kind of storage room that smelled of old books, dust, and wax. There were no pictures on the walls, only shelves and boxes. He closed the door and stood for a moment, his hand still on the bolt, as if listening to see if the typing had followed us.

The woman sank into a chair that seemed to have come from another century. Her breathing was shallow. She didn't look at me, but past me, as if she considered the air behind my shoulder more dangerous than me.

The priest said softly: You must get away from the corridors. Away from places that close in.

I replied: And where to?

He hesitated. Then he looked at the woman, and there was something in his gaze that I interpreted as guilt, although I couldn't prove it. He said: The ball is tonight.

The word hung in the air, ridiculous alongside blood, mirrors, and shafts. Ball. I thought of music, of clothes, of laughter. Things you don't hear in cellars. And that's precisely why it fit. Nothing conceals a knife better than the sound of a violin.

I said: What kind of ball?

The priest took a set of keys from his pocket and placed them on the table as if offering proof. He said, "The Masked Ball. A charity event. The better people pretend to be better by giving to others. They love their costumes. They love not being recognized."

The woman raised her head. Her voice was barely more than a whisper: He... loves masks.

The priest nodded slowly. Yes, he said. That's why it's dangerous. But also... useful.

I heard the sentence from the booklet on the quay in my head, as if it were still hanging somewhere among the stones: Write what you see. And then you will find them. Everything here is always a suggestion. A suggestion that pushes you in a direction until you believe it is your own path.

I said: Why should we go there?

The priest sat down as if suddenly weighed down by decades of experience. He briefly rubbed his temples and said: "Because he will be there without being noticed. And because you can be there without being noticed. For the first time, his rules are not the only ones."

I thought of the white corridor, of door 17, of the way silence functioned there. A ball would be the opposite. Noise, light, people. And yet I knew: light is its domain. People are its camouflage. A ball is a place where you can disappear into the crowd or be impaled on it like a butterfly.

The woman pressed her hand to her throat, as if the movement would control the pain. She whispered: I can't...

The priest stood up, went to a shelf, and pulled out a small box. He opened it. Inside were masks. Not shiny, not operatic ones. Simple, light-colored masks, made of fabric or paper, the kind you quickly tie to forget yourself. He placed one on the table, then a second.

I looked at her, and my bite burned as if it had recognized the word "masks" like a dog recognizes its owner.

The priest said: If you go without a mask, you'll be the only one without one. That's more noticeable than blood.

I wanted to disagree, but I knew he was right. In a world full of disguises, a bare face is a provocation.

He turned to the woman. "It's harder for you," he said. "Your neck. We'll see."

She whispered: Then they should see it.

The priest looked at her for a long time. Then he said: No. You are not to see her. Not as a victim. Not as a symbol. As someone else.

He reached for a scarf in a box—not mine, an old, dark, coarse piece of fabric—and handed it to her. She took it hesitantly, wrapped it around her neck, and for a moment she looked like any other woman who dislikes the coastal wind.

I said: And what do we want there?

The priest didn't answer immediately. He went to the door, opened it a crack, looked out, and closed it again. Then he said: Someone from the ball prayed here this morning. Not out of faith. Out of fear. He gave me something.

He pulled a piece of paper from his inside pocket. Not a notebook, not a diary. A folded envelope, heavier than it looked. He placed it on the table and slid it toward me as if it were hot.

I didn't open it right away. Envelopes are traps. You pick them up, and suddenly you're holding something that's holding you.

The priest said: He didn't say anything about it. He just looked at me as if I needed to understand.

The woman stared at the envelope as if it were breathing. She whispered: Don't open it...

I looked at her. Her eyes were alert, too alert for someone who had just been dragged from a shaft. And yet there was fear there, real fear, not feigned. I decided against the reflex.

I opened the envelope.

There was no message inside. Not a single sentence. No beautiful Hitchcockian letter with blood and threats. It was something else: a small, flat card made of thick paper. A mask symbol was embossed on the front. On the back was an address and a time. And below that, in neat handwriting, a single name:

Abraham van Helsing.

I felt the room grow colder. Not from wind. From meaning.

The priest said softly: He wrote your name so that you would know he meant you.

The woman whispered: He invited you.

I held the card tightly, my fingers tingling as if the bite mark on his neck wanted to creep across the skin into my hand. This wasn't just an invitation. This was proof: He could put names on paper without me being around. He could get me into a social setting and still remain polite.

I said: Who did this?

The priest replied: A servant. He lowered his eyes as if he were afraid to look at me. And when I asked who it was from... he opened his mouth but said nothing. He couldn't. Or he wasn't allowed to.

A servant who cannot speak. A masked ball. A man playing the role of a human being in the light. Everything came together like a mechanism that you only understand once it's running.

I said: If we go there, we go into his light.

The priest nodded. Yes. But sometimes, he said, you have to go into the light to see how he moves. Shadows only frighten you. Light gives you patterns.

The woman stood up, swayed briefly, then regained her balance at the table. She looked at me, and for a moment there was something in her gaze that disturbed me more than her bite: anticipation. As if she knew I was going to leave. As if she knew that the ball wasn't optional, but rather the next room on the map.

I said: If this is a trap—

The priest didn't interrupt me; he merely finished the thought with a calmer one: "Then at least it's a trap with music. And with witnesses. He doesn't like witnesses if they don't write down anything."

I thought of the blank notebook on the quay. Of the invitation to write down what one sees. A ball is a place full of witnesses, and yet no one sees what they don't want to see.

I picked up the mask from the table. It was light, cheap, and smelled of dust. I held it briefly in front of my face without putting it on, and felt something inside me resist it. Not out of vanity. Out of the feeling that a mask is another face, and other faces are doors.

Then we heard a noise outside.

Do not type.

A soft knock on the outer door of the small building. Three times. Normal. Human.

The priest froze. The woman pulled her scarf higher.

I held the mask in my hand like a ridiculous weapon.

The knocking came again. Three times.

Then, very quietly, a voice, friendly, like a messenger delivering packages:

The invitation is valid until sunset.

I felt my throat burn, as if the bite had heard the words and nodded.

The priest said nothing. He didn't open the door.

The voice outside added, as if it were a service notice: And please... no writing.

Then the person left. No footsteps were heard, only the feeling that the air changed when someone who didn't need the air departed.

We stood there, in the room without pictures, with masks on the table, a card with my name on it, and the certainty that the ball was not just an event, but a stage that had been set up for me.

I looked at the woman, and she whispered, as if warning herself: Masks... make you forget who you are.

I said quietly: Or they show who you really are.

And that sentence contained precisely the kind of danger that one only recognizes once the music has already started playing.

The day dragged on, as if Whitby himself were hesitant to release the evening. The sky remained pale, and the light had that cold clarity that reveals everything and forgives nothing. We didn't wait idly, but we moved as if we were in a room made of glass. Every decision could be reflected. Every movement could be doubled.

The priest led us back through back passages to a small house attached to the church, a kind of living quarters that smelled of tea, wood, and old sermons. There was a table without a mirror, walls without pictures, and a stove that burned more out of habit than for warmth. He put the kettle on, as if tea were a ritual to be contrasted with other rituals. It was almost touching. And that was precisely what made it dangerous, because touch is a gap through which something can see.

The woman—I still didn't call her by name, and she didn't call me by name, as if we both understood that names here are like threads—sat near the stove, her scarf pulled up, her hands hidden in her sleeves. Sometimes she looked at me, but never for long. Her gaze was like that of someone afraid to focus, because focus is a magnet.

The priest brought a small bowl of water and dabbed the bite marks again, this time a little more firmly. The woman flinched and swallowed a sound. She had that kind of pain that doesn't scream, but rather settles deep in the bones.

He said quietly: They will be watching for that tonight.

She asked, in a thin voice: Who?

The priest replied: All of them. But one in particular.

I felt my throat burn, as if I'd heard the bite again. I pulled the scarf tighter. It was ridiculous how often a piece of fabric had become a shield in those hours.

The priest placed three things on the table: the masks, the invitation card, and a small wooden box. He opened the box, and inside lay an old, simple metal cross, not shiny, rather matte, as if it had seen too much to still be decorative.

He said: This isn't against everything. Nothing is against everything. But it reminds you what you're going for.

I didn't take it immediately. I looked at it. There were small nicks in the corners, as if someone had tried to scratch it. The woman saw them too and involuntarily pulled her scarf up higher.

The priest noticed it and said: Many have tried to destroy it. They have not succeeded. Perhaps because it is only metal. Perhaps because it is more than that. Decide for yourself.

I finally took it. It was cool, heavier than it looked, and it didn't calm me down. It only made me more alert. Things that calm are often things that numb.

Then he took out a small bottle, clear contents. Not holy water. Alcohol. He handed it to me.

He said: Not for courage. For cleansing. When you touch something you shouldn't have touched.

I nodded curtly. I had by now understood that physical contact here constituted a contract.

Outside it grew darker, slowly, almost imperceptibly. The seagulls squawked less, as if even the sky were preparing for a performance. At some point, the priest looked up at the clock—not a clock on the wall, but a small pocket watch he pulled from his pocket—and said: It is time.

The three of us walked through the streets. Whitby had that evening light now, which softens everything. Softness isn't good. Softness makes edges disappear. Edges provide orientation.

I carried the mask in my pocket, not on my face. Not yet. I didn't want it already on me before I even saw the place. The woman carried her mask in her hand, holding it tightly as if it were both a piece of salvation and a piece of poison. The priest went without a mask. That was his privilege. Priests always wear their masks while on duty.

The house where the ball was held was larger than anything around it, an old manor with a front garden too tidy for the coast. Windows glowed warmly, and music drifted out, muffled by the glass. Violins, piano, a rhythm so polished it was almost offensive.

At the entrance stood servants. Black suits, white gloves. They removed coats, smiled politely, and there was nothing in their eyes. Not empty—more absent. As if they weren't fully present, but only present enough to perform their functions.

I thought of the servant who had brought the invitation and couldn't speak. There were many servants here, many mouths, many lips. How many of them could truly speak?

We entered.

The foyer was bright, warm, filled with voices, perfume, the smell of champagne. Masks everywhere. Half-faces, painted eyes, feathers, fabric, glitter. People laughed as if no one had ever been afraid. The laughter was too loud, too confident. It sounded like a noise made to crush silence.

I put on my mask. The fabric was cool against my skin. The world changed instantly. Not through sight—I could still see—but through the feeling that I had just pushed myself away.

A part of me receded, and a figure took its place. That was the point. And the point was dangerous.

The woman also put on her mask. Her eyes looked larger, darker behind it. She pulled her scarf up even higher, so that her neck was completely hidden. She was now one of many. And yet I sensed: she is not invisible. She is marked, whether you see it or not.

The priest remained at the side, unmasked, as if he were a foreign element. I briefly wondered if that was wise. Then I remembered: He's visible anyway. Priests are visible in every room, even when they're silent.

We mingled with the crowd.

I overheard conversations about the weather, about ships, about donations. Words that were smooth, without any rough edges. And amidst these smooth words, there was the occasional laugh that came too late, as if someone had missed the right moment. Small disturbances. Small cracks in the facade.

Portraits hung on the walls. Of course. The house was a museum of itself. Old men with stiff collars, women with pale faces, children who never grow up. And in many of these portraits—I noticed it, against my will—there was a dark screen somewhere. Sometimes just a shadow. Sometimes a handle. Sometimes a point.

I forced myself not to look too long. Portraits change. I've experienced it. And if they change here, in the middle of the ball, in the middle of the laughter, no one will shout. They'll just say the light is strange.

A servant came by with a tray. Glasses, a light drink. I didn't take one. Alcohol is a veil, and I don't need an additional one. The woman didn't take one either. Neither did the priest. In a room full of drinks, we stood out because of it.

I was just about to signal to the priest that we should move when I noticed that someone was already watching us.

Not the priest. Not the woman.

A man stood at the far end of the hall, near a door leading to an adjoining room. He, too, wore a mask, but it was simpler than the others. Black. No shine, no ornamentation. Just a smooth, dark surface that made the face look like a hole.

He stood still. He didn't dance. He didn't drink. He didn't talk.

And he wasn't holding an umbrella.

That would have been too easy.

Instead, he held a small notebook.

White paper. Thin. Like the booklet on the quay.

He leafed through it slowly, page by page, as if he were reading. And I knew, without being able to prove it: He wasn't reading the notebook. He was reading the room. He was reading the people. He was reading me.

I felt the bite burning on my neck, as if he had felt my gaze.

The woman next to me paused. Her hand unconsciously reached for my sleeve. She whispered, barely audibly, behind her mask: He's here.

I didn't say who. It was clear.

The man in the black mask raised his head. His gaze met mine. Not briefly. Not accidentally. Directly, as if he were pulling me out of the crowd like a thread.

Then he made a small gesture with the notebook. Not a waving invitation. More of a hint: Come.

I pretended not to have seen it. I turned slightly, gently took the woman by the arm, and led her a few steps to the side, as if simply making room. The priest remained at the edge, his face open, his eyes alert.

The man in the black mask didn't move. He waited. Patiently. Like a host who knows that guests will eventually arrive.

I didn't want to move. And at the same time, I knew: if I didn't leave, he would come closer. And when he comes closer, he comes closer in the light, amidst witnesses, amidst music, and then there is no escape, only a scene unfolds.

I looked for a way out without turning my head, without being conspicuous. Doors. Windows. Stairs. A side room with less light. A corner.

The music changed. A waltz began, softer, more rounded. Circles. Circles again and again.

The crowd began to dance. Masks twirled, bodies spun. The room became a rotating tableau in which one could easily lose oneself.

And it was precisely in this rotating image that I saw it.

A portrait on the wall had changed. Not drastically. Just a detail. A shadow that had suddenly shifted.

The man in the picture – an old sailor – had previously been holding a pipe. Now he was holding something else. A handle. Dark. Curved.

An umbrella handle.

I felt my breath catch briefly.

The man with the black mask at the back of the hall turned to the next page in his notebook.

And I suddenly knew that the notebook was not empty.

It was filled – with us.

The dancers became a moving curtain. That was the only advantage of a waltz: it turns people into circles, and circles offer cover as long as you don't become the center. I let myself drift with the crowd without dancing, just enough to make it look like I was following a movement, not a decision. The woman stayed close to me, her fingers on my sleeve, a small, firm grip that speaks louder than words. The priest kept to the sidelines, like a man who has learned that sometimes the sidelines are the only place where you can still see.

The man in the black mask remained at the far end of the hall, silent, the booklet in his hand. He didn't move because he didn't have to. People came to him, even if they didn't know it. That's how patience works: you don't force anything. You simply ensure that the space does the work.

I looked for an adjoining room. A door, half-open, in a niche where two servants stood like statues. Beyond it, I saw subdued light, fewer voices, less music. A drawing-room, perhaps. Or a library. Places where paper likes to reside.

I led the woman there without explaining anything to her. Explanations turn a step into a story, and stories are its sustenance. We glided between dancing couples, masks brushed against masks, feathers touched shoulders. I smelled perfume, warm breath, champagne, and underneath it all—again and again—that subtle metallic scent, as if someone in that house used blood as a spice.

I paused for a heartbeat at the door to the next room. Not out of hesitation, but to check if the door was within the man's line of sight with the notebook. I didn't look directly at him. I only checked if his dark mark in the crowd was still in the same place. It was. And I sensed, without having to see it, that his gaze was still directed in my direction.

We entered the next room.

It was a library.

Naturally.

Shelves reaching to the ceiling, dark wood, leather armchairs, heavy curtains. The smell here was different: dust, leather, old ink. A smell that signified not only books, but also secrets. In a room full of masks, a library is the place where you take off your mask to be alone. And that's precisely why it's dangerous.

The music was now just a muffled thumping, like a heart through a wall. Only a few people were in the room. Two men whispering. A woman in a golden mask pulled a book from the shelf without opening it, as if the act of pulling it out was itself a pose. And a servant by the window, standing so still he seemed more like a piece of furniture.

I led the woman to one of the armchairs, not in the middle, but near a bookshelf where there was shade. She sat down heavily, as if her body were only now realizing how exhausted it was. Her eyes wandered over the books, and I saw them linger on a shelf where small, flat booklets lay, not bound, only stapled.

Her voice was barely audible: Not... paper...

I nodded, even though she might not have seen me. I was standing in such a way that my body partially obscured the view of the notebooks. It was ridiculous, but sometimes ridiculous is the only thing you can say against something so big that you can only make small gestures.

The library door didn't close. It remained slightly ajar. And through that crack came not only music. Through that crack came a breath of cool air, as if someone in the hallway outside had opened an umbrella.

I looked towards the door.

Not directly. Edge. Shadow.

A figure stood in the doorway.

Black mask. White notebook.

He had been faster than I wanted. Or he was never far away. Perhaps he was already in the room before I came in, just in a place you can't see.

He entered without haste, as if he had been invited. And of course he had been invited. The invitation was my name on paper.

The people in the library didn't notice him right away. Or they pretended not to. The ball had taught them that masks are everything. That you don't ask who someone is if you don't want to be recognized yourself.

The man in the black mask stopped a few steps away from us. The book in his hand was open. He didn't turn the pages. He simply held it as if it were a Bible he was about to read. Then he raised his head.

His voice was calm, friendly, cultured. A tone befitting a host, a gentleman. The tone was the most dangerous part, because it polished the blade.

"Abraham van Helsing," he said. So formally, as if he were introducing me. "I am pleased that you have accepted my invitation."

I didn't reply. Sentences are traps.

He made a small gesture towards the woman. And you have a companion. How... thoughtful.

The woman next to me pulled her scarf up higher, as if fabric had suddenly become armor. She said nothing. Her eyes stared at the notebook as if it were a weapon.

The man in the black mask wasn't smiling—you couldn't see it under the mask, but you could hear it. He said: Don't worry. Nothing will be demanded tonight. Just... seen.

I felt my throat burn. He had said the word "seen," and the bite responded like a dog hearing its name.

Finally, I said quietly: What do you want?

He closed the notebook. The sound was small, but in the room it sounded like a final line. He said: I want you to understand that you're not in the wrong house. You're in the right one.

He took a step closer. The air around him seemed cooler. I heard no typing. No umbrella. No struts. Just the kind of presence that doesn't need to be moved.

He said: You are looking for Mary. You are looking for truth. You are looking for a way out of a story you didn't write. That is... honorable.

I said: Where is she?

He raised his head slightly, as if adjusting a collar. He said: In images, Abraham. In memories. In mirrors. In everything you look away from.

The woman gasped softly, and I felt her arm tighten its grip on my sleeve.

The man continued: But there is a simple way to make them whole again.

He placed the notebook on a small table nearby, as if it were a gift. He opened it with two fingers, as if he didn't want to soil the paper. On the first page was a blank line. And below it, a sentence, neatly written:

WRITE YOUR NAME.

I felt myself getting cold. The simplest circle of all: a name on paper.

The man said: That's all. Nothing more. No confession. No admission. Just her name. And she will... find her way back.

The priest had said: Truth is sometimes just a sentence that isn't written down. And now here stood a man, acting like a courteous host, offering me salvation in the form of writing.

I didn't go to the notebook. I remained standing.

I said: And what do you charge for that?

The man laughed softly. He said: Finally, the right question.

He raised his hand and pointed at my neck without touching it. At the scarf. At the spot underneath it.

He said: Just what you're already wearing. A small piece of you. A drop. A sign. You understand things like that.

I felt the bite burn, as if it had been flattered.

The woman suddenly whispered, roughly: No...

The man turned his head slightly towards her. He said gently: You don't have to speak. You only have to... remember.

And as he said this, I noticed something that frightened me almost more than the notebook: The woman next to me began to look at the paper as if she were being drawn into it. Her fingers left my sleeve and hovered in the air for a moment, as if reaching for a pen that didn't yet exist.

I took her hand firmly, not brutally. Firmly enough to stop her. Firmly enough to tell her: You're still here.

She flinched as if I'd jolted her from a dream. Her eyes met mine, and in them was fear, real and sharp. She whispered: It's pulling... into my hand...

The man in the black mask looked at us like a teacher observing his students. He said: You see? It's not evil. It's... natural. People want to name things. People want to hold on to them.

I said: And you want me to do it for you.

He inclined his head as if to compliment me. "I want you to do it for yourself," he said. "Then it will be yours."

The moment he said "heard," I saw something on the wall out of the corner of my eye.

A portrait.

A small, unassuming portrait, perhaps otherwise just decorative. I hadn't noticed it when I entered. It showed a woman. Young. Pale. A locket around her neck.

Mary.

Not in a photograph, but in a painting. Painted, but the features were too precise, too familiar. And the impossible thing was: the painting was fresh. The colors still seemed vibrant. As if someone had painted it today.

I felt my body gasp for air. The image was a trap. One built on hope.

The man said quietly: You see them. Good.

And then – I swear, although swearing is unpleasant here – the portrait changed.

Not the whole face. Just the eyes.

They were no longer staring into the void.

They looked at me.

And in her eyes was fear. Not painted. Real fear.

The woman next to me let out a sound, a stifled cry. She whispered: That's her...

The man in the black mask said calmly: Write her name. And she emerges from the picture. From the wall. From history.

I felt my fingers want to twitch. My gaze want to be drawn to the notebook. I felt the world suddenly say to me: One word, Abraham. Just one word.

And it was precisely there, in that temptation, that I understood how he builds it: He makes salvation cheap so that you will buy it.

I took a step towards the notebook.

Not to write.

To close it.

I slammed it shut, hard, so that dust flew out of the cover. The noise was loud enough that a few heads in the room turned towards us.

The man with the black mask paused.

For the first time, I sensed something like irritation in him. Not anger. Not yet. But a brief, unexpected hesitation, as if I had touched a point in the mechanism that wasn't meant for it.

I said quietly, so that only he could hear: I don't write.

He replied just as quietly: Then she will remain in the picture.

I looked at the portrait. Mary's eyes—those painted eyes—seemed as if they were blinking. A tiny change in the light. Maybe it was just my head. Maybe the room.

I said: Then I'll get them out another way.

The man with the black mask kept his gaze on me. And I heard, very faintly, not from his mouth, but somewhere in the house, as if it were coming from the walls:

Tap.

Once.

It was as if the umbrella remembered that it still existed.

An invitation without a sender

The booklet snapped shut, and the dust rising from its cover looked like a small, dirty mist in the warm lamplight of the library. In a room filled with carefully applied perfumes and polished courtesies, dust was suddenly scandalous. A few heads turned. Masks glittered. Laughter died for a fraction of a second, as if someone had touched the wrong string on a violin.

The man in the black mask didn't move immediately. That brief pause was the first thing I perceived as genuine about him. Not his voice, not his words, not the way he pronounced my

name, as if it were part of the act. But that tiny hesitation, as if I had taken away a reflex from him.

Then he lowered his gaze to the closed notebook, as if regretting it. And when he looked up again, his composure was restored, polished like a glass into which no one can see.

"Then she'll stay in the picture," he said quietly.

He didn't phrase it as a threat. He phrased it like a statement of fact. Like a weather report. And that's precisely what made it so dangerous, because it didn't sound like violence, but like inevitability.

I didn't look at the portrait. Not directly. I felt it more like you feel an open window. A picture looking at you pulls at your back. It was impossible not to know that there on the wall hung a painted face that could use my fear like a lamp.

The woman next to me—scarf pulled up, mask on her face—inhaled sharply. I noticed her hand again seeking purchase on my sleeve. Not firmly. Just as if she were afraid that without this contact she would collapse into the papery smell of the room and become one herself.

In the background I heard footsteps. Ordinary footsteps. A servant moved from one shelf to another, as if sorting books, although no one was sorting books here. A soft clinking of glasses came through the half-open door to the dance hall. The waltz continued, smooth and polite, as if it were the heart of an animal that didn't care who was dying in the next room.

The man with the black mask said: You want to get them out some other way?

I didn't reply immediately. You can't give him any words. Words are ammunition.

I finally said: If you think I only have two options – to win or lose – then you underestimate me.

He tilted his head slightly, as if I had amused him. Perhaps I really did. Perhaps that was his pleasure: people who resist because they believe resistance is original.

He said: Resistance is a form of participation, Abraham.

There was something possessive in the way he said my name. Not loud. Not rough. Like a host holding you by the collar as he opens the door.

I felt my throat burn. The bite wasn't just a wound in this house. It was a measuring instrument. It reacted to proximity, to gaze, to words. And it was reacting now.

I wanted to leave the library. Not escape. Just change the scene. In a Hitchcock film, the most dangerous place isn't where the gun is, but where you think you see it. Here, I saw too much.

I took the woman by the forearm and led her to the door, as if it were a polite retreat from a conversation that had become tedious. No rush. Haste smells.

The man in the black mask didn't make a move to stop us. That was remarkable. He let us go as if he were certain that leaving was just another way of staying with him.

As we stepped through the door into the dance hall, the noise hit us: music, voices, laughter, the rustling of fabrics, the click of heels. Everything was in motion. Everything was a circle. And in these circles, one could hide if one knew how to disappear into them without being noticed.

I stayed close to the wall, leading the woman along as if we were just two more masks looking for space. The priest still stood at the edge, unmasked, his face like a foreign sign among all the disguises. His gaze met mine for a moment, and in that gaze there was no question, only a silent warning: do not stop.

I didn't nod. I just gave him the direction with a quick glance to the right, towards the cloakroom.

Where coats hang and names are written on small cards, every person is momentarily exposed. A ball that loves masks is naked the moment someone wears your coat.

We moved in that direction, weaving between dancing couples. The woman tripped once over the hem of a dress, caught herself, and I heard panic in her breath. I gave her arm a quick squeeze, as if I were just helping her keep her balance. In truth, it was an order: stay here, stay with me.

At the cloakroom, a servant removed a coat. His hands were so white inside the gloves that they looked like non-human tools. His lips smiled politely. His eyes weren't really looking.

I said: Our coats.

The servant didn't ask for names. He simply took a card, looked at a number, reached for a row of hooks, and pulled out two coats. He handed them to us as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

But when I picked up my coat, I immediately sensed that something was wrong.

He was heavier.

Not much. A few grams. Enough that a person wouldn't notice it if they haven't learned that small differences can have big implications.

I didn't put the coat on immediately. I just held it in my hand and felt an edge in the inside pocket. Paper. An envelope.

The servant continued to smile, as if he had given nothing but cloth. And that was precisely his role: to give things without giving.

I said: Thank you.

The servant nodded, and his head lowered a touch too far, as if apologizing for his very existence. Then he turned to the next guest.

We moved away a little, into a niche where a curtain cast a shadow and the music sounded more subdued. The priest stayed at the edge, observing, keeping his distance. Perhaps he knew that distance was the only form of protection available today.

I didn't remove the mask. I didn't open the envelope immediately. An envelope is a promise, and promises here are like doors.

The woman whispered behind her mask: What is this?

I pulled out the envelope. It was smooth, made of heavy paper, with no seal or coat of arms. And the most unsettling thing about it: it was completely blank. No address. No name. No return address. Nothing.

An invitation without a sender, I thought, and felt my throat burn, as if the bite had confirmed the thought.

I opened it.

Inside was a card, similar to the previous invitation, but simpler. No mask symbol. No embossing. Just paper.

It read, in the same neat handwriting as the booklet on the quay:

MIDNIGHT.

And below:

COME ALONE.

One line lower, smaller:

DON'T BRING THE BOOK. BRING YOUR FACE.

No place. No name. No clue. Just a time and a demand. And that one word that made my stomach churn: alone.

The woman stared at the map as if the paper could bite her. She whispered: This is a trap.

I said: Of course it's a trap.

She shook her head, the mask wobbling slightly. Her voice became rougher: Then don't go.

I heard the waltz swell. Couples twirled. Masks smiled. In a room so crowded, one could die without anyone noticing if the music was loud enough.

I put the card back in the envelope. I didn't want to see it anymore. Words continue to have an effect when you look at them.

I said quietly: He wants me to come alone because witnesses bother him. That means he expects me to bring witnesses.

The woman didn't understand at first. Then I noticed her gaze sharpen. She whispered: You want to make him show himself where he isn't... in control?

I looked towards the edge of the hall where the priest was standing. He was the only one without a mask. He was a witness who hadn't been invited. Perhaps that was precisely why he was important.

I said: Midnight isn't just a time. It's a place. It's the hour when houses sound different. When windows become mirrors as the light outside diminishes.

I felt my throat sting again, briefly, as if someone had touched the bite mark. Not painful. A memory.

The woman whispered: And what about her?

She meant Mary, and for the first time I let the name become clear in my mind without saying it, because I felt: if I say it out loud here in the ball, it will become music.

I said: The portrait in the library... he uses it like a leash. If I go alone, he pulls the leash. If I don't go, he still pulls it.

The woman pressed her lips together. I could barely see her swallowing under the mask. Then she said: He wants your face.

I nodded. And something inside me tightened because I knew what he meant. Face means unfiltered. No mask. No role. No distance. Face is consent.

A servant walked past us, carrying a tray. Glasses clinked softly. He didn't look at us. Or he pretended not to. And when he had passed, I noticed that there was still something in my coat pocket.

A second piece of paper.

I pulled it out. A small strip, like a torn-off label. It contained only a single word, handwritten, not in neat handwriting, but more hastily, as if someone had jotted it down quickly:

WINDOW.

I felt my stomach clench. Window. Child at the window – the next title flickered briefly in my mind, like a sign in the darkness. A clue that isn't just a direction, but a chapter that's already being opened.

I pocketed the strip without showing the woman I had it. Not because I didn't trust her. But because trust here is a luxury you earn, not take.

I looked out at the crowd again. The man in the black mask was no longer at the back of the hall. I didn't see him in the library, not at the edge, not among the dancers.

He had disappeared.

Or he was standing so close that I no longer recognized him as a figure, but only as the coldness in the air.

The music continued. The masks twirled. And I knew: This invitation without a return address wasn't just a piece of paper in my pocket. It was a clockwork mechanism already ticking.

Midnight was suddenly no longer just a word on paper, but a tension in the walls. I felt it already, hours too early, like sensing a thunderstorm before the clouds are visible. The ball went on, people laughed, drank, waltzed, as if moving to banish the fear from their bodies. But fear is patient. It waits until the music ends.

I held the envelope in my coat pocket as if it were a knife. Not because it could cut, but because it altered everything you did with it near it. Come alone. Bring your face. And that other word: window. A single word, enough to turn any pane of glass into a threat.

The woman stood beside me, her hand no longer on my sleeve, but on her own chest, as if checking if her heart was still there. Beneath her mask, her eyes glistened with moisture. She looked at me and whispered, "You are not going alone."

I didn't answer immediately. A "no" would be too easy, a "yes" too dangerous. I simply said: He wants me to believe I have a choice.

She whispered: And you don't believe it?

I glanced over her shoulder at the crowd. Masks. Glasses. Smiles. And along the edge of the dance floor, a row of windows, tall panes with curtains that stirred gently in the breeze. Beyond the curtains was night, not quite dark yet, more of a deep blue. And in that blue, every shadow could be a person.

I said: I believe he presents the choice to me in such a way that every decision belongs to him.

The priest remained within sight. He hardly moved, but his gaze was everywhere. He wasn't watching like a curious guest, but like a man waiting for a sound only he could hear. I didn't know if I could trust him. But I did know this: that night, he was the only one who wasn't pretending it was all just a game.

I walked towards him, slowly, so that it looked as if I were merely shifting my position to get a better view. The woman followed me, a step behind, like a shadowy figure who hadn't yet decided whether she was mine or his.

The priest looked at me, and I held his eyes for a moment. No mask. Nothing to hide. That was almost rude in that room.

I said quietly: I have a message.

He didn't ask: By whom. He only asked: What does it say?

I didn't pull out the envelope. I said the contents, but not word for word. Words are too precise. I said: Midnight. Alone. Window.

The priest didn't flinch, but I saw his fingers twitch briefly at the side of his cloak, as if suppressing a reflex. Then he said: He wants you out of the crowd.

I nodded.

The priest looked at the woman. He did not ask her name. He said: You must not be left alone tonight.

The woman pressed her lips together. She said roughly: I am not his property.

The priest replied: Not yet. And that's precisely the point.

I felt the bite burn on my neck, as if it interpreted the word "property" as consent. I pulled my scarf up higher, even though I wasn't wearing one to the ball. I felt only the reflex. The body reaches for protection, even if it's just an idea.

The priest said: When he writes "window," he doesn't just mean glass. He means view. He means that which stands between inside and outside.

I remembered the portrait that had changed, the mirrored surface that had reflected me, and the white hallway that swallowed footsteps. Everything had been between inside and outside. Always a transition, never a place.

I said: He wants my face.

The priest nodded. Without a mask, you're not just recognizable. Without a mask, you're... available.

The woman whispered: Then keep the mask on.

I shook my head. He wrote it, I said. If I come wearing a mask, he won't show himself. Or he'll show me what he wants to show me. He wants me to give him what I usually withhold.

The woman said: And what if you don't give it to her?

I looked at her. Her neck was veiled, but I felt the two dots beneath it as if they were in my own flesh. I said: Then he sees it differently.

A servant suddenly approached us, carrying a tray. His lips smiled. Yet there was something stiffer in his posture, as if he were forcing himself to appear human.

He said: I'm sorry. For you.

He didn't hand me a glass. He handed me a small box, dark, flat. A jewelry box, perhaps. In a ballroom, something like that is normal, a gesture, a gift. But I knew: nothing is normal when it's normal for me.

I didn't take it immediately. I looked at the servant.

His eyes flickered briefly, as if he were afraid to look back for too long. And then, just for a second, I saw it: a tiny, bright spot lay on his pupil, like a reflection. As if he weren't looking at me, but rather reflecting something in me.

I took the box.

It was warm. Not body temperature. Paper-warm. Ink-warm. Warm like a diary.

I didn't open it in the room. I didn't want him to see me open it. Opening something is an act. He loves acts.

I said to the servant: From whom?

The servant opened his mouth, and for a moment I thought he would speak. Then he closed it again. A soft click of teeth. Nothing came out. Not a sound. And I knew: he couldn't. Or he wasn't allowed to. A silent messenger. A function.

The servant bowed and left.

The woman stared at the box as if it were an animal. She whispered: Don't open it.

I put it in my coat pocket. I said: Not here.

The priest said: Not at all.

I looked at him. He was serious. Not entirely. But how do you live with something in your pocket that's warm, that's waiting? You live with it like a wound: you know you have it, and you try not to feel it constantly.

The ball continued. The waltz ended, there was applause, and a new piece began. A faster one. People laughed again, the tension eased a little, as if the music allowed them to forget themselves.

And it was precisely in this forgetting that I saw it.

A child was standing in one of the large windows at the edge of the hall.

Or something that looked like a child. Small, quiet, face half in shadow of the curtain. It wore no mask. It simply stood there, looking into the hall as if it were not invited, but expected.

My breath caught in my throat. The word "window" in my pocket felt hot. The bite on my neck stung as if someone had placed the tip of an umbrella directly on the wound.

The woman next to me noticed my rigidity. She followed my gaze. When she saw the child, she inhaled sharply and whispered: No...

The priest looked too. His face remained calm, but his eyes hardened. He said quietly: Don't go there.

Of course I wanted to go. Of course. A child at the window is an image that everyone automatically takes seriously. You go, you ask questions, you help. And that's precisely why it's a trap.

I stood still. I did nothing. I forced myself to simply observe without acting.

The child slowly raised its hand and placed it against the glass. The fingers were thin and pale. And in the glass, precisely where the hand lay, I saw something that wasn't in the room: a dark shape behind the child.

A coat.

And a point that lay against the glass.

Tap.

Once.

The music in the hall continued to play. Nobody heard it. Or nobody reacted.

The child turned its head slightly and looked directly at me. No smile. No tear. Just a look that was too old for a child.

Then the child's lips moved, and although I couldn't hear it, I could read:

Midnight.

And below it, with his free hand, the child wrote a word on the fogged glass with his finger, which immediately disappeared again, as if the glass hadn't wanted to keep it:

ALONE.

I felt my insides tighten. He hadn't just sent a card. He'd attached the word to a child, making it harder to ignore. Because when you ignore a child, you feel guilty. Guilt is their fuel.

The priest grabbed my arm, firmly, unmistakably. He said softly: Not now. Not here. He wants you to leave the hall so he can say you obeyed.

The woman whispered: Please...

I exhaled slowly, looked away from the window as if dropping a rope. The child was still standing there. Still. And I knew: If I didn't save it now, it would disappear. If I saved it, I would disappear.

I decided against acting reflexively.

We turned away from the window.

And at the very moment I turned away, I felt the box pulsing warmly in my coat pocket, as if it were telling me: You've made your decision. Now you pay.

We turned away from the window, and it was like breaking off a gaze that had already become too intense. It took effort not to look. It took even more effort to pretend it was nothing. I felt the coldness of the glass against my back, even though I was several steps away, as if the room itself had pushed the pane into me.

The box in my coat pocket wasn't really pulsating. No wood pulsates. No metal. But my body did, and it transmitted that rhythm to everything I touched. That was the insidious thing: you know things aren't alive, and yet you feel them alive because you yourself are living a story that animates things.

The priest held my arm firmly, not roughly, but clearly. He led us away from the center, away from the windows, away from places where glances become mirrors. We moved through the crowd as if through water. Masks brushed against us, fabric, perfume, laughter. People who had forgotten themselves so they wouldn't have to feel.

The woman walked close to me. Her breathing was rapid. Beneath her mask, I heard a faint tremor with each exhale. She no longer whispered. She had learned that words come back to her here.

We reached a corridor beyond the dance hall, where it was darker. Doors led to small parlors, dressing rooms, and staircases. A servant stood in a corner, his hands folded, his gaze lowered. He looked like a piece of furniture, deliberately placed there to decorate the corridor.

The priest stopped and listened for a moment. Then he said quietly to me: If you stay here until midnight, he will wear you down. If you leave before midnight, he will guide you. We need... a third way.

I looked at him. Third way. That sounded like hope. Hope is dangerous. And yet it was the only term that didn't reek of a trap.

I said: What do you suggest?

The priest nodded toward a staircase leading upstairs. Not the grand staircase everyone sees. A narrow servants' staircase, half-hidden behind a curtain. He said, "Upstairs. Attic. There's less glass there. And if he wants windows, we won't give him windows. We'll give him... a wall."

The woman shook her head as if she were losing her strength. She whispered: He'll find us anywhere.

The priest replied: He finds what we give him. Not everything that exists.

It sounded like a self-inflicted comfort. Perhaps it was just another liturgy. But liturgies keep people alive.

We climbed the narrow stairs. The wood creaked softly, finally a sound that wasn't muffled. I felt my body grip the creaking as if it were a rope. Sounds are evidence, I thought again. If it creaks, it's real. If it's real, maybe it can be broken.

The air grew cooler upstairs. The noise of the ball was now just a dull rumble below us. We came to a door, simple, unadorned, no brass handle, no sign. The priest produced a key—a real key, heavy, old—and unlocked it. I noticed his hand tremble briefly. Even priests aren't made of stone.

We entered a room that smelled of dust and old fabrics. An attic. Boxes, chests, furniture covered with sheets. And on the wall, in the dim light filtering through a small hatch, hung something that froze me instantly.

A large portrait.

Not one of the polite ancestral portraits below. This one was larger, darker, and it didn't hang like decoration. It hung like an altarpiece. It showed a man in a black coat. Not half-hidden, not accidentally in the background. He was the center. His face was pale, his eyes dark, his mouth too delicate. And in his hand, of course, he held an umbrella.

I felt the sharp burning sensation from the bite on my neck. The circle tightened.

The priest said softly: That's it.

The woman let out a stifled sound, and her hand reached for the scarf as if the fabric would save her neck.

I said: Why is this hanging here?

The priest replied: Because they worship him. Or because they fear him. Or both. Some people hang things up to try and control them. And then they're surprised when they come to life.

I didn't approach. I kept my distance. The portrait was behind glass. Glass reflects. Glass is an eye. And I could already see in the glass the possibility that it was looking back at me.

The priest went to the wall next to the portrait, felt around in the shadows, and found a small hook. He pulled it, and a cloth fell down, partially covering the picture. As if it were only shown occasionally. Perhaps only at the right time.

He said: We'll stay here until midnight. If he wants windows, he should know that we're upstairs where windows are few and far between. And if he wants your face, he won't get it, because you've given it to him in a picture.

I didn't understand immediately. Then I saw what the priest was holding in his hand.

A mask.

Not the simple cloth mask from the ball. A heavy, old leather mask, dark, like something out of a play. The inside was lined with fabric, and traces of old sweat clung to the edges. It smelled of people, of fear, of many faces.

The priest said: This mask belonged to the owner of the house. He gave it to me before he brought the invitation. He said it was... just a costume. But he was crying when he said it.

I felt something inside me tighten. Crying isn't part of a scene. Crying is what you do when the scene breaks.

I asked: What am I supposed to do with this?

The priest replied: You will put it on. Not in the hall. Not in front of people. Here. And when he comes and wants your face, he will see... this mask. A different face. A false victim. A wall.

The woman shook her head. Her voice was shaky: He still recognizes you.

The priest looked at her. Calmly. He said: Perhaps. But perhaps he doesn't recognize what he recognizes. Perhaps it's enough that he's uncertain for a moment.

Uncertainty. A tiny crack. That was all we had ever gotten.

The box in my bag suddenly grew hot, as if it had overheard the plan and was protesting. I pulled it out without thinking, driven by the heat. It lay in my hand, small, dark, smooth.

The woman immediately whispered: No.

The priest said: Put it away.

But I held it, and I felt it warm my palm like a wound. I opened it.

Inside there was no jewelry. No ring. No locket.

There was a small glass plate inside.

A piece of mirror.

And something was etched into this piece of mirror. Not a number. Not a cross. A word.

FACE.

I felt my breath catch in my throat. He had given me the piece of mirror so I could see my face in it. So I would give it to him. A small, portable surface, an eye you can slip into your pocket.

The priest stepped closer and took the box from my hand before I could react. He closed it and said softly, "This is his window. Not the one down there."

He placed the box on the floor, far away from us, as if distance would help. Maybe it does. Maybe not.

Outside, somewhere in the house, a clock struck.

Not loud. But clear enough to know that this was officially time.

Eleven.

One more hour.

The priest sat down on a chest, as if forcing himself to remain still. The woman crouched in a corner, her back against a box, her knees drawn up, as if she were a child hiding again.

I stood in front of the portrait, not too close, and felt my skin itch beneath the mask—my ball mask. I still had it on. I hadn't even taken it off. I only realized that now. As if I didn't dare show my face in a room full of mirrors, even if it was just an attic.

I removed the mask from the ball, slowly, and immediately the air felt colder on my skin. Exposure. The word from the card: Show your face.

The priest held out the heavy leather mask to me.

I hesitated. Just for a moment. Then I took her.

The leather was cold and felt like the inside of an old glove. I didn't put it on immediately. I held it in front of me and looked into the eyeholes, as if checking to see if anyone else was looking behind them.

And in that eyehole, in the darkness of the mask, I saw something that shouldn't have been there.

A mirror-like shine.

It's as if a small piece of glass is embedded inside. As if the mask itself had an eye.

I froze.

The priest saw it in my face. He didn't ask, he just said: What?

I lifted the mask slightly so he could see it. The priest leaned closer, and his breathing became audible.

He whispered: They've put a mirror in the mask.

The woman raised her head, her eyes wide. She whispered: Then it's not a wall.

And at that moment, in that very sentence, we heard it.

Do not type.

Not in the hallway.

Right by the small hatch in the attic, through which a strip of nightlight shone.

A gentle knock.

Once.

It's as if someone is testing whether the hatch can be opened using the tip of an umbrella.

Then a voice, friendly, close, as if he were standing right outside in the wind:

Midnight is coming.

The child at the window

The voice at the hatch was kind, and kindness in the darkness can be like a hand on your shoulder, only to turn you more firmly toward the abyss. The priest didn't respond with words. He responded with breath. A short inhale, so quiet it was barely audible, but in that attic it sounded like a bell tolling.

The woman in the corner pressed her knees harder to her chest, as if she could make herself smaller than what was expected of her. Her gaze wasn't fixed on the hatch, but on the portrait on the wall. It was as if she knew that the picture was just as much an entrance as any window. Perhaps even more so.

I held the heavy leather mask in my hand. Inside, the piece of mirror glittered—small, false, insidious. A mask meant to protect you, but simultaneously forcing you to see yourself. Or to let yourself be seen. I felt the bite on my neck burn at the thought, as if it had latched onto the idea.

The hatch fell silent. No knocking, no tapping. Only the certainty that someone was standing outside, someone who wasn't cold. Someone who wasn't coughing. Someone who wasn't pulling their coat tighter. Someone who was patient, because patience was their gift.

The priest finally whispered, barely more than air: Do not answer.

I didn't nod. Nodding would be agreement, even to silence. I simply remained silent.

Downstairs, somewhere in the house, the music continued. It sounded distant, muffled, as if it were in another life. The waltz had stopped. Now it was something faster, more cheerful. A dance where people laughed because they believed laughter was proof that they were safe.

Then came the typing.

Not at the hatch.

In the room itself.

Once, very quietly, as if a point were testing whether the wood would give way.

I didn't turn my head immediately. I just let my gaze wander, far enough to see the boxes at the edge. Dust. Cloths. An old mirror? No, just a glass plate on a chest, maybe an old display case. All potentially dangerous.

The typing started again, this time closer. Two short taps. Pause. Then two more.

No code. Just impatience.

The woman whispered: He's not outside...

The priest closed his eyes for a moment, as if he were praying, but I didn't think he was praying. I thought he was counting. Time, breath, steps. Things you can count when you have no other control.

I felt the air in the room grow colder. Not from wind. From the absence of warmth. As if someone were drawing the warmth out of the wood, out of the dust, out of my breath.

I slowly took a step back, away from the portrait, away from the hatch, closer to the center of the room, because I had learned that corners are traps. Corners are places where you reach an end. I didn't want an end.

At that step, I felt something hard under my shoe.

A small piece of paper.

I lifted my foot and shone the light down.

A strip, like a label. Fresh. Not dusty. As if someone had just laid it down. It contained only one word:

WINDOW.

The same word as before. But this time not as a hint, but as a command, lying like a knife in a windowless room.

The priest saw it without me having to point it out to him. He said softly: He wants you to go downstairs.

The woman whispered: The child...

The child at the window. The picture he had shown us downstairs in the hall. That small figure, looking too old, who had silently written midnight on the pane. A child is always a key. A child is always a debt.

I said: He will use the child.

The priest replied: He already has it.

Then we heard a noise from downstairs, coming from the ballroom, that didn't match the music.

No scream. No crash.

A quiet, collective gasp, as if an entire audience simultaneously realizes that something is wrong, but nobody wants to be the first to say so.

The woman sat up straight. Her eyes were wide. She whispered: Now.

The priest stood up. He went to the attic door, placed his hand on the bolt, hesitated for a moment, then pulled it back. The wood creaked softly. A real sound. A real risk.

We descended the narrow staircase, step by step, without running. Running makes stories unfold faster than you can control them. I still held the leather mask in my hand, and it felt as if it were growing heavier as we approached the ballroom, as if it were trying to remember my face.

Down in the corridor it was brighter. The sound of the ball was different. Not cheerful. Restless.

As we reached the door to the dance hall, I immediately saw that the room had changed.

Not through furniture. Not through light.

Through attention.

All heads were turned in one direction: towards the large windows at the edge.

The child was standing there.

No longer half-hidden. No longer a shadow behind a curtain. It stood in the middle of the window, small, silent, without a mask, its hands at its sides, as if being called upon.

The music was still playing, but it had become thinner, as if the musicians had suddenly forgotten how to play joyfully.

And behind the child, out in the night, I saw a shadow.

A coat.

And something that flashed briefly in the light from the window, as if glass were reflecting a point.

The child slowly raised its head and looked directly at me.

This time, the lips did not move to "Midnight".

This time they formed my name.

Abraham.

And all the masks around me continued to smile because they didn't understand that they were witnessing something, whether they wanted to or not.

As the child formed my name, nothing visibly changed in the room—and that was precisely what was so terrifying. The music remained thin and cheerful, the masks continued to smile, the glasses clinked on, as if it were all part of a program that no one was allowed to interrupt. Only the focus had shifted, like a spotlight suddenly shining on a spot that doesn't belong to the stage.

A few guests giggled nervously because they didn't know what to expect. A child without a mask in a room full of masks was a bad joke. A child calling someone by name was an embarrassment. And people like to resolve embarrassments by pretending they're part of a game.

A man wearing a golden mask clapped briefly, hesitantly, as if the child were a surprise addition. His companion followed suit, and the applause spread like a disease, thin, uncertain, but loud enough to reassure itself. Some laughed. Some drank. Some looked no longer at the

window, but at their own hands, because they sensed that something was wrong, and because nothing is so easily repressed as unease that cannot be named.

I stopped dead, as if someone had snagged a hook in my coat. The priest beside me said nothing, but I felt his body tense. The woman at my side stiffened, her scarf pulled high, her mask tight, and yet there was something exposed in her posture, as if the air had recognized her.

The child raised its hand and placed it back against the pane. Right where its fingers touched the edge of the glass, a milky mist formed, as if the child's breath were defying the cold of the night. Then the finger moved slowly, and a line appeared on the misted glass. Not a word. No message. A circle. Unfinished.

I felt the bite sting my neck, as if the wound were answering: Yes. Here. Right here.

The priest grabbed my arm, tighter than before. His grip wasn't comforting; it was a barrier. He whispered: Don't go there.

The child kept its finger on the glass and turned its head slightly to the side, as if listening. Then it lowered its hand, and its gaze passed me, not at the guests, not at the musicians, but at a door at the edge of the hall, half-hidden by a curtain. An inconspicuous door, probably leading to a corridor used only by servants.

People didn't notice this perspective. They only saw the child. They only saw the window. They only saw the image they were presented with. And images are convenient. Images don't demand action.

I exhaled slowly and freed myself from the priest's grasp not by jerking, but by patience. I said softly: If I don't go, he'll keep going.

The priest replied: If you go there, he will go on too. Only with you.

The woman whispered, so quietly that it was almost just a movement of her lips: He makes the way out of you.

I looked back at the child. It stood still, as if it had all the time in the world. And behind the glass, out in the night, lay that dark shadow of a cloak. I couldn't see it clearly, only as a presence. That was enough. Presence is the strongest form of threat because it doesn't need to explain.

Suddenly a servant stepped between the guests and the window, as if to politely lead the child away, as one leads a lost child without making a fuss. His gloves were white, his posture perfect. He bent down to the child, smiled, and said something I couldn't hear.

The child didn't look up at him. The child looked at me.

And there was no plea in that look. No fear. It was a look that expected something. Like a signal. Like the second half of a sentence that cannot be understood without it.

The servant placed his hand on the child's shoulder.

At that moment, something shifted in the atmosphere. Not abruptly, more like a fine crack in glass. The child didn't flinch. It didn't react. But the servant froze, as if he'd been burned. His smile remained, but it became false because it had lingered too long. He withdrew his hand, as if it had suddenly lost its weight. And I saw: there was a tiny dark stain on his glove.

Blood.

The servant looked at his hand as if it weren't his own. Then he raised his head, tried to make eye contact with someone, but couldn't find it, and his mouth opened as if he were about to shout. No sound came out.

The guests were still laughing, but the laughter was now fainter. A few people finally looked more closely. A woman wearing a feather mask whispered something. A man put down his glass as if it had suddenly become too heavy.

The priest said softly: Now you see it.

I said: You see it too late.

The child raised its hand again and this time wrote a word, slowly, clearly, as if it wanted to be sure I would read it. Not the crowd. Not the musicians. Me.

Door.

The finger brushed across the glass, and the breath formed the letters only briefly before they blurred again. But I had seen it. And I had seen where the child had been looking earlier: at the inconspicuous door at the edge.

I started moving. Not quickly. Just quickly enough to look like determination, not panic. The woman stayed by my side, even though I hadn't asked her to. The priest followed a step behind us, like a shadow that won't disappear because he had chosen to take responsibility.

We walked through the crowd. Some guests moved aside as if we were part of a choreographed routine they didn't want to disrupt. Others stared at us briefly, then looked away, because looking away is the easiest way to save yourself.

A servant stood at the door. Not the same one as at the window. This one held a tray, but it was empty, as if he were holding it only to hold something. He smiled. His eyes did not meet mine.

I stopped, one step in front of him. I said nothing. I just looked at his hands.

He understood. His fingers twitched slightly, and he stepped aside without speaking. The door beyond was unlocked.

When I touched the handle, the bite on my throat burned so intensely that I briefly blacked out. Not for long. Just a flicker. A warning: You're not just opening a door. You're opening a transition.

I pushed open the door.

Beyond it was a narrow corridor, dimly lit, with carpeting that muffled footsteps. Again that feeling: a room that devours evidence. At the end of the corridor hung a small window. Not large, more like a pane of glass in a door that led to another room.

And in this pane I saw a reflection that couldn't be right.

Not mine. Not the priest's. Not the woman's.

A child.

The child, who had just been standing by the large window in the hall, now stood behind this pane of glass, in a room I had not yet entered. It looked through the glass as if it had led us here, as if it had always been here.

The woman next to me let out a hoarse sound. No words. Just air, unsure how to behave.

The priest behind me said, barely audible: He can postpone it.

The child raised its hand from behind the pane and placed its fingers on the glass. Then it didn't tap. It didn't tap like the tip of an umbrella. It did something worse because it was so harmless: it waved. Slowly. Almost politely.

Then it turned its head to the side, as if someone were calling it. And I saw, in the mirrored glare of the glass, a second form behind the child: a long, dark silhouette that didn't step into the light, that only showed that it was there.

A shadow that has no reason to hurry.

Downstairs in the ballroom, the music started up again, louder, as if someone had decided to drown out the incident with sound. And while the waltz enveloped us from behind like a warm blanket, I stood before that door in the corridor, saw the child behind glass, and felt my body resist the only instinct it still honestly possessed: to save the child.

Because on that night, salvation was a word used against you.

I stood still in front of the door, and that was the only thing I could control at that moment. Not go in. Not turn around. Remain still while everything inside me wanted to move forward. The corridor smelled of carpet dust and polish, of an attempt to make wealth odorless. But beneath the polish lay something else, a fine metallic tinge, as if iron had seeped into the fibers.

The child behind the glass no longer waved. It simply stood there, hands at its sides, its gaze calm, too calm. A child who knows that adults must act eventually. And behind the child, reflected in the glass, remained the dark silhouette. No face. No detail. Only a coat and the suggestion of lace, unseen yet palpable.

The woman next to me whispered, barely audible: It's not... really.

I didn't reply. Not because I didn't hear her, but because I didn't want to say it out loud. As soon as you say something isn't real, the unreal is insulted and tries to prove that it works.

The priest stood close behind us. I could tell by the warmth of his breath, by the way he didn't move so as not to make any noise. He said softly: "When you open this door, you open another passage." And passages are his favorites.

I looked at the doorknob. Brass. Clean. The kind of doorknob touched dozens of times a day by servants. It gleamed so brightly that it showed a small, distorted reflection of my fingers. I pulled my hand back before I even laid it down. No mirror. Not here.

Instead, I leaned forward slightly and looked more closely at the pane. It wasn't clear. It had small imperfections, tiny ripples in the glass, as if it were old. That made it a better mirror. Old glasses lie more beautifully.

The child suddenly raised its finger and wrote on the glass again, this time not "door," but something smaller. The breath came from within, as if the child were breathing. And the letters appeared, tremulous, as if written by a cold hand:

M.

This is just the beginning.

Then, after a break:

A.

Then another break:

R.

The woman inhaled sharply. I felt her body tense up beside me, as if the name were tearing her throat open.

The priest said sharply, as quietly as possible: No.

The child continued writing:

Y.

The name was there, raw, without beauty, just letters in the fogged glass. And when the last letter was finished, my throat stung so badly that I had to briefly press my hand against the wound. The bite burned as if someone had just inflicted it.

I forced myself not to react to the name. Names are circles. And he had just closed it.

The dark silhouette behind the child moved minimally. Just a slight tilt, as if someone were turning their head slightly. And in the mirrored glare of the windowpane, I saw something that almost drove me mad: an umbrella handle, briefly illuminated, not as an object, but as a contour, a sign that it, too, was leaving its mark.

I had to do something that wasn't part of the picture. Not write, not open, not shout. Something else entirely.

I reached into my coat pocket and pulled out the small cross the priest had given me. Metal, matte, scratched. I didn't hold it like a weapon, more like proof that I could hold something other than paper or doorknobs in my hand.

I lifted it to the window without touching it, just close enough that the metal was reflected in the glass.

And in the reflection, something strange happened: The child's face—or what I saw as a face—seemed to flicker for a moment. Not like a film, more like water briefly losing its surface. The eyes emptied for the length of a heartbeat. Behind it, something appeared that was not a child: a smoother, too tranquil oval, like a mask.

The woman whispered: Do you see...?

I said quietly: Yes.

The priest let out a hard breath, as if relieved that I had seen it too. He said: It is an image. A moving image.

The child behind the glass suddenly pressed their palm against the pane. Right where my reflection was in the glass, a fine crack appeared. Not large. Just a thin, white thread, like a vein.

Glass that cracks without being struck is the worst. It means something is pressing from the inside.

The priest grabbed my arm. Now his grip was no longer just a restraint. It was a pull. He said: Away. Now.

But the crack in the glass grew. Not quickly. Inexorably. And I heard something that didn't come from outside, not from us, but from within the glass itself: a subtle crackling, like a clockwork mechanism skipping a beat.

Behind us, in the corridor, it grew colder. I felt it on the back of my neck, in my hair, which stood on end. The priest felt it too. He turned his head slightly, and there was suddenly something in his gaze that I hadn't seen before: genuine fear.

The woman also turned around, and I heard her panting softly.

I didn't turn around immediately. I didn't want to see it. Seeing is a vicious cycle. But my body isn't always wise. It turns when it senses something behind it.

I turned around.

The corridor behind us was no longer empty.

At the far end, where the door to the dance hall was, stood the man in the black mask. Not in the hall. Not to the music. Here, in the subdued light. He no longer held his notebook. He was wearing nothing.

That made him more dangerous.

He stood still and said kindly: You have chosen the wrong door.

I heard the music behind him through the door, bright and distant, as if it were another world. No one from the hall came here. No one saw him. No one would help.

The man took a step closer, his voice remaining polite: Open the door. Get what you want. And then give me what I want.

The woman next to me made a sound that wavered between sobbing and laughter, as if her body couldn't decide which sound was appropriate. She whispered: He wants your face...

The priest stood before us with an air of simplicity, without appearing heroic. He seemed more like someone who knew he might lose, yet stayed. He said softly to me: "No negotiating."

I looked again at the door with the glass pane. The child was still standing behind it. The letters MARY were in the glass, but the light was already fading. The crack was longer now. A transition was forming, not from a handle, but from the break itself.

I sensed that this was the moment when a Hitchcock protagonist realizes: the most dangerous room is not the dark one. It is the bright one, where you see everything and yet still don't understand what is real.

I raised the cross, not towards the man, but towards the disc. I didn't strike. I merely held it, as if making a decision.

The man in the black mask stopped and laughed softly, almost affectionately. He said: You are so brave if you believe metal can change history.

Then he did something that made my knees weak: he took off his black mask.

There was no monstrous face among them. No vampire teeth. No horror movie. There was a perfectly normal, pale face of a middle-aged man, well-groomed, with calm eyes and a mouth that was almost too polite. A face you could see on a train without giving it a second thought.

He said: You see? Nothing special. And yet you want to look away.

And as he said that, I felt it inside me: the impulse to give him my face, simply because he had shown his. The social reflex. The trap of politeness.

I forced myself not to react. I kept my gaze steady, without staring. And I said only one sentence, one that didn't negotiate:

You won't get it.

The man nodded slowly, as if he had been expecting exactly that answer.

And behind me, the glass of the pane creaked a little further, as if the child – the picture – were smiling from within.

The Bell in the Fog

The crack in the glass stretched like a thin vein, and the sound it made was so faint it could hardly be called a sound. More like a statement: I am coming. I am breaking. The child behind the pane stood still, but the stillness was no longer peace. It was pressure.

The unmasked man stopped at the end of the corridor. His face was so ordinary it was almost an insult. A man you'd greet in a library. A man who could stand unobtrusively by a window in a ballroom. And that was precisely why he was dangerous: he needed no teeth, no claws, no theatrical mask. He possessed the reflexes of humankind. Politeness. Reflection. Face to face.

"You won't get it," I had said. And I felt that sentence echoing inside me like a bell, even though no bell had rung yet.

The priest stood before us, his body a thin shield between us and the man. He had no weapon. Only his stubbornness. And sometimes stubbornness is the last thing you have left.

The woman next to me pressed her scarf up so high that only her eyes were visible. There was fear in them, yes. But also something else: anger. Anger at being used. Anger at having her throat marked and being expected to remain silent.

The man said kindly: You've come so far. Why so unpleasant now?

He took a step. The carpet swallowed him. No creak, no indication. A man who moves without leaving a trace is not a man. He is an idea contained within shoes.

Behind us, the glass crackled a little louder, as if the picture in the room had realized that it now had to share the stage.

The priest said softly: Not back to the disc. Not forward to him.

I understood. We needed a third way, again. And the corridor didn't offer many. Doors leading to side rooms. A staircase. A passageway. In houses like this, there are always ways for servants only. Ways the owners don't want to see.

I saw a small brass plaque on the wall next to us, barely visible: Service. An inconspicuous door that you'd overlook if you weren't interested in how the house breathes.

I gestured towards it. The priest understood without me saying a word. He nodded slightly. The woman followed my gaze and grew paler beneath her mask.

The man at the end of the hall smiled. He said: You think doors help you.

Then he raised his hand—without aggression—and pointed at the pane of glass behind us. The child who had written "MARY" also raised their hand, in sync, as if they were a marionette. The crack in the glass twitched, as if pointing at that finger.

The man said: This is the only door that matters.

I refused to be drawn into its center. I reached for the service door and pushed it open.

It was not locked.

Of course not.

We stepped inside, and immediately the air changed: less perfume, more grease, more smoke, more humid warmth. Kitchen. The smell of bread, meat, hot water. Sounds: pots, voices, a brief, startled gasp as three masked figures suddenly stumbled out of a corridor into the working world.

Two kitchen maids stood there, their hands full, their eyes wide. A cook, red-faced, held a knife as if it were his tool, and for a moment he looked as if he were going to point it at us.

The priest raised both hands in a calming gesture. He said: Please. No noise.

The cook stared at us, and in his gaze I saw something rarely seen in fine restaurants: stark reality. He asked gruffly: What the hell—

The priest cut him off, not unkindly, just urgently: Where is the exit?

The cook frowned, saw our masks, saw the woman's scarf, saw my neck, which I had unconsciously touched again, and his eyes flickered briefly. People notice blood. Always. He finally said: Behind the pantry. But there is—

A noise from the hallway.

No steps. No running.

A quiet, polite clearing of the throat.

The kitchen maids froze. The cook went paler. He lowered his knife a centimeter, as if struck by an invisible gaze.

I looked back towards the service door. The crack in the door revealed only darkness. No face. No shadow. And yet I knew: He was there. Or something of him.

The priest said quietly: No eye contact.

I led the woman by the arm, past tables, bread, steaming pots. The kitchen was a labyrinth of work. And work is sometimes a protection, because it leaves no time for drama.

We reached the pantry. A heavy door, smelling of cold air. The cook opened it as if he were suddenly part of our escape, whether he wanted to be or not. Inside it was cool, dark, shelves lined with jars, barrels, sacks. The smell of salt, vinegar, old potatoes. Not a single glass. Not a single portrait. Just provisions. I liked that. Provision is life. Provision is not history.

But at the far end of the pantry hung a bell.

A small bell, on a string, presumably for calling in the kitchen. A simple thing, brass, innocent. And yet, at the sight of it, I felt a pang in my throat. Bells are also signs. They call. They gather. They make a sound that cannot be taken back.

The woman saw the bell and whispered: Don't ring it.

The priest said: Nobody rings any bells here.

We continued on to the back door the cook had mentioned. It led into a narrow courtyard behind the house. Outside it was night, and the wind smelled of the sea and of the fog that was just beginning to envelop the city. The courtyard was empty, just garbage cans, crates, and a wet cobblestone floor. At the far end of the courtyard was a gate that led to a narrow alley.

We stepped outside.

The moment the door closed behind us, I heard the faint ringing of the bell from the pantry.

Not drawn by a hand, not visible. A single tone that vibrated briefly and then vanished into the mist, as if the mist had swallowed it. But bell tones don't disappear. They linger somewhere, in minds, in bones.

The priest stopped. His face was tense. He whispered: That wasn't good.

The woman turned abruptly towards the door, as if she wanted to go back, as if she wanted to stop the sound from spreading. I held her tight. Not back. Going back is always a circle.

The fog was already creeping into the courtyard, thin threads hanging between the crates. The lanterns on the wall glowed dimly, and the light immediately became soft, swallowed up.

Then we heard the bell again.

This time twice. Slowly. As if someone were searching for a rhythm.

And somewhere, from the direction of the house, came a voice, muffled through the walls, friendly as ever:

This is my song.

The priest said softly: He uses the bell like a heartbeat. He gives us a pace.

I felt the bite on my neck begin to throb at that pace, as if my body were adapting to the rhythm it dictated. And that was the real horror: not that it could ring bells, but that it found something in me that liked to listen.

We went into the alley, into the fog, away from the bell, away from the light and music. And after a few steps, I heard the third bell chime behind us, further away, but clear.

A reputation.

A sign.

It was as if the city itself were beginning to speak to him.

The fog was no longer weather. It was a state of being. It didn't just creep through the alleys, it crept into the senses, softening sounds and making distances seem like lies. Whitby, which had been so clear and sharp-edged by day, was now a town of cotton wool and shadows. The streetlights glowed like faint islands, and between them lay the void where anything can happen unseen.

We walked close together, not out of a sense of community, but because the fog obscures distance. Two steps apart and you're already alone. And alone was the word on the map. Alone was what he wanted.

Behind us lay the manor house, somewhere in the mist, and with it the music, the masks, the man without a mask. But the bell remained. Its sound was like a thread that clung to my throat. A thread that pulsed in time with the bite.

The priest walked in front. Not because he wanted to lead us, but because he took the direction upon himself like a burden. He stopped now and then, listening. I saw how he breathed, controlled, as if he wanted to prevent his fear from becoming a sound.

The woman walked between us, her scarf pulled up, her mask still on. I had long since taken my mask off without realizing it. Perhaps that was a mistake. Perhaps it was necessary. I felt the cold air on my skin and knew: my face was now shrouded in mist. Not visible, but accessible.

We heard the bell again, this time not from the pantry, but from somewhere farther away. A muffled sound, as if it came from another street. An echo that was impossible to pinpoint. The priest whispered: It's wandering.

The woman said, barely audibly: Bells don't move.

The priest replied: Not in houses. In stories, yes.

We continued walking. The alleyway opened onto a wider street. The fog lay lower here, and figures suddenly emerged from it: two men, swaying and laughing, probably drunk. They were no longer wearing masks, only flushed faces and the kind of merriment one acquires over an evening's drink. They barely noticed us, moved aside, yet still almost bumped into the woman. One of them mumbled an apology that sounded like a cough and disappeared back into the whiteness.

I immediately sensed the problem: witnesses. Involuntary witnesses. People who might later say: There were three of them, and one had his scarf pulled up so high that you couldn't see anything. People who might later not remember exactly what they saw. The fog helps to blur memories. And someone like him loves blurred memories because he can recreate them.

The priest led us faster, but not hastily. We reached a crossroads where the lamppost flickered as if afraid of its own flame. There he stopped and looked in both directions. The fog made every street look the same. Only sounds could distinguish them.

And that's exactly where we heard it: the ringing.

Not one note. Not two.

Three, slowly, like a shout. And with each note, the fog seemed to grow thicker, as if it were using the sound to take shape.

I asked quietly: Where does it come from?

The priest shook his head. He said: Don't search. Follow is his plan.

The woman whispered: But if we don't follow, he will lead us anyway.

She was right. That was the funny thing about threads: you can ignore them, but they stay. And when they're around your neck, ignoring them is just another form of suffocation.

We continued walking, away from the intersection, into a side street lined with small, old fishermen's cottages. The windows were dark. Or they appeared to be. In fog, you can never tell if a window is truly dark or merely reflecting the lamplight.

Then I saw it.

A light in a window. Small, warm, yellow. Not a lantern, not a street light. A candle, perhaps. A human light. And behind the light, a silhouette, small, silent.

A child.

I stopped, even though I didn't want to. My body stopped. Reflex. The priest noticed, turned, and saw where I was looking. His face hardened. The woman said only one word, hoarsely: No.

The child stood behind the window, hands on the glass, just like in the ballroom. The same posture. The same stillness. The same inappropriateness.

And then, slowly, the child raised its hand and placed its finger on the fogged glass, as if it were warm there, even though it was cold outside. It began to write.

Not "Mary".

Not "midnight".

Just a symbol.

A half circle.

The woman next to me groaned softly, as if the sight were physically affecting her. The priest grasped her arm, not roughly, just to make sure she didn't fall forward.

I couldn't tear my gaze away. The child hadn't finished drawing the circle. It left it unfinished. And it was precisely this incompleteness that drew me in. The human mind wants to complete circles. That's the trap.

I took a step toward the house before I even thought about it. The priest pulled me back. His grip was surprisingly strong. He whispered: No.

I said quietly: It's back again.

The priest replied: It was never gone.

The child behind the window raised its head and looked at us. And this time it wasn't silent. It opened its mouth and spoke. I couldn't hear it through the glass and fog. But I read the words on its lips.

Bell.

Then it pointed its finger – not at us – but in the direction of the church. Or rather, in the direction where the church must be in the fog. And while it was pointing, we actually heard the ringing again, this time clearer, closer, as if the sound had attached itself to the direction.

The woman whispered: He wants us back to the church.

The priest said: Or he wants us to believe it is the church.

I stared at the child. It stood like a signpost, a living marker. And I understood: This child is not a figure to be saved. It is a tool that allows you to be saved, only to capture you.

I averted my gaze, hard, almost violently, as if I had to command my own eyes. We continued walking in the direction the child had indicated, because any other path felt like blindly treading.

The fog thickened, and the ringing became clearer. One note, then a pause, then a second. It was no longer like a heartbeat. It was like a shout.

And then, between two chimes, I heard something else. No typing. No voice. A soft sob, somewhere in the fog, very close, perhaps only a few steps away.

The woman stopped. She whispered: That's a person.

The priest said: Or a role.

The sobbing grew louder, and I had to force myself not to run towards it. Because that's exactly what he wants: for you to react to sounds, to let yourself be led from sound to sound until you no longer know where you started.

We continued walking. The sobbing stayed behind us, or it disappeared into the mist, or it went with us. I couldn't say.

Then a tower appeared before us, grey stone against the white, as if the city were suddenly revealing a bone. A church. Or something disguised as a church.

The bell rang again.

This time directly above us.

And when I raised my head, I saw a small figure standing in the fog, high above, at the opening of the bell tower.

A child.

The tower stood there like a finger piercing the mist, yet it had softened under the white, as if the stone itself were trying to hide. The bell above us no longer rang like an instrument. It rang like a heart that refuses to stop, even though it has long since gone off-key.

The child stood at the top, by the bell window.

Not on the ground, not behind glass, not in a salon full of masks. High above, in the opening, where wind and sound are free. A small silhouette, silhouetted against the pale light, as if it had been placed there so that it could be seen.

The woman next to me let out a sound, half prayer, half anger. The priest stopped and said softly: Don't stare for too long.

I looked anyway. Not out of defiance, but because my gaze had become a part of my body that sometimes disobeyed. The child raised its hand.

And the bell did not ring.

Only the string was holding it together.

The string hung from the opening like a black thread in the fog. The child held it, and that image alone was enough to trigger the idea in my mind: a jerk, a sound, and everyone in the fog would know where to go.

The child didn't pull.

The bell rang anyway.

A deep, vibrating tone reverberated in my chest, as if I were being struck on the inside of my ribs. At the same moment, I felt the bite throb on my neck, as if it had latched on. As if my blood understood the tone.

The priest took a step forward, raised his head and shouted – not loudly, but clearly enough to penetrate the fog: Stop!

His voice sounded small beneath the tower. Like a person speaking to the weather.

The child tilted its head as if listening. And then, slowly, its lips formed words. I didn't hear them. But I could read them because I had conditioned myself to lip-read like other people read newspapers.

He is coming.

The priest whispered bitterly beside me: He is already here.

The church wasn't the church we had left. Or perhaps it was, and it wasn't anymore. Fog transforms places into new places. The portal was dark, and in the darkness lay something that seemed like movement. Not clear, just a pushing, as if someone inside was deciding whether to step out.

The woman pressed herself closer to me without realizing it. She whispered: Don't go in.

The priest said: Don't go out.

We stood in the small square in front of the church, surrounded by mist, as if we were on an island that had decided to swallow itself. The sound of the bell still vibrated in the stones. Then it became silent. Briefly. And that silence was worse because it was the pause in which you expect the next sound.

Then came the typing.

Not at the top of the tower. Not in the church.

Right behind us.

A gentle, polite tapping on stone, like the tip of an umbrella testing whether the ground is real.

I slowly turned around.

He stood there.

Not far. Not two meters. The man without a mask. Pale face, calm eyes, his mouth too friendly. And in his hand—now, finally, without hiding—the umbrella, closed, its tip resting on the pavement as if it were a walking stick.

He was in no hurry. Why should he be? The fog was his ally. The bell was his metronome. And we stood exactly where we should have stood: between door and square, between inside and outside.

He said calmly: You can hear them well, can't you?

I didn't answer. My throat was dry. The bite burned like a mouth of its own.

The man raised his umbrella slightly, as if making a conductor's gesture, and at that same moment the bell rang again, even though the child above hadn't pulled the cord. A sound that rolled through the fog like a command.

The woman gasped. The priest took a step to the side, positioning himself between the man and us. But it was ridiculous. You can't put yourself between a person and a story.

The man said: I wrote to you, Abraham. You wouldn't listen. I showed you. You wouldn't see. So... I'll let the city speak.

He pointed towards the church with his umbrella. And suddenly I saw what was standing by the portal in the fog.

Not one person.

Many.

Masked guests from the ball, like sleepwalkers. They stood in the mist, motionless, as if they had wandered there without knowing why. Some still held glasses. Some wore coats over their costumes. All gazed at the church, as if it were a television that couldn't be turned off.

The man said quietly: Witnesses. You wanted witnesses, didn't you?

The priest whispered: You are not witnesses. You are the audience.

The child at the top of the tower raised its hand and waved again. Slowly. Politely. Like a host saying: Please, come in.

The man took a step closer. His umbrella touched stone. He said: Give me your face, and I'll let her go.

He meant the masked people. He meant the woman. He might have meant Mary. Maybe everyone. He phrased it in such a way that "letting go" sounded like mercy.

I felt the social reflex within me, the reflex that says: He's offering something. You have to respond. You have to negotiate. You have to be polite.

And at the same time, I sensed the truth beneath: if I give him my face, I give him the last surface that belongs to me. The final boundary.

The priest whispered, directly into my ear: If you give it, he won't take less. He'll take more.

The woman whispered, her voice rough: He's already taken me. Don't let him take you.

The man finally smiled visibly, as if he were enjoying the scene. He lifted the umbrella handle, and for a moment I saw the back of the handle, where on other umbrellas there would be wood.

It had a small piece of glass embedded in it.

A mirror.

His umbrella was his window.

He said: Look.

And in that mirror, in the tiny glass, I saw something that took my breath away: Not my face. Not his.

Mary.

A pair of eyes, pale, full of fear, so close, as if trapped behind glass. The lips moved. I didn't read it as a word. I read it as a plea.

The man said gently: One step. Just one step. Then she'll come out.

The bell rang again, as if to underline the sentence. The fog swallowed everything except that sound, which vibrated through my body.

I raised my hand.

Not towards the umbrella. Not towards the man.

I lifted her to the tower and pointed at the child.

And I said loudly, for the first time loudly that night, so that all the masks could hear it:

This isn't real.

The masked figures at the entrance flinched as if the sentence had touched them. A few heads turned slightly. Not much. But enough to show: words can also cut.

The man without a mask remained calm. But his gaze became a touch colder.

He said: Really?

And above, in the bell window, the silhouette of the child tilted for a moment, as if it were flickering.

Only briefly.

Enough to show: I had hit the mark.

The last confession

The word "not real" still hung in the mist like a stone thrown into water, and the small ripples now ran through faces hidden behind masks. It wasn't a grand effect. No collective awakening, no dramatic retreat. Just tiny movements: a head turning slightly; a hand gripping the glass more tightly; a breath catching, suddenly remembering that it was one's own.

The child flickered in the bell-shaped window above. A barely perceptible tremor in its outline, as if a film strip had momentarily skipped. Then it stood still again. But the idea that it could flicker was poison in the scene. Once seen, it cannot be unseen.

The man without a mask held the umbrella steady, its tip resting on the stone, as if it were a walking stick. His face remained friendly, but the friendliness was now sharper, like a smile that no longer hides its teeth.

He said: You've raised your voice. I like that.

I said nothing. If I answer now, I'll turn his sentence into a dialogue. And dialogue is a stage that belongs to him. I kept my gaze on him without staring, and felt my throat burn, as if the wound were trying to drink in his voice.

The priest beside me shifted slightly, repositioning himself so that he was no longer just standing in front of me, but at a slight angle, as if he wanted to shield both me and the woman behind me. The woman stood still, her scarf pulled up, her mask on, and I noticed that her hands were trembling, not from the cold, but from the kind of decision no one wants to make.

The man lifted the umbrella handle slightly, so that the small mirror inside briefly caught the faint lantern light. For a moment, Mary's eyes flashed in it like a fish in water. Then he turned the handle away again, as if it were just a trick he performed to prove he had it.

He said gently: I showed you something you want. It is polite to respond to that.

Politeness. That word is in my head again. The reflex it triggers. You don't want to be impolite, even when you're in danger. You want to answer, explain, negotiate. And that's precisely where the stranglehold lies: language as a leash.

I forced myself to think about something else. About the church we had left. About the priest behind glass, silent. About the hidden mirrors. About what he had called "confession," as if it were a door.

The bell rang once, deeply, as if it were finishing a sentence.

The man without a mask said: It is time for the final confession, Abraham.

I felt it hit me. Not because the word "confession" is religious. But because it sounded final. Last. As if there were nothing left to take back. You don't write "last confessions." You speak them aloud because you believe that silence will follow.

The priest whispered, directly into my ear: No.

The man said: You can do it quietly. You can do it politely. You can even just think it. I'll still hear it.

And then, as if conducting a play, he raised the umbrella slightly. The tip tapped once on the stone.

At that same moment, the church door at the portal opened a crack. Without a hand, without a creak, as if the wood itself were breathing. Beyond it was darkness, thicker than the fog outside. And from this darkness came a smell that immediately threw me back into the white hallway: cold air, iron, and something sweet that was trying to be friendly.

The masked figures at the entrance moved as if on an invisible command. One step forward. Slowly. Not urgently. Sleepwalkers. A crowd walking towards the entrance of a cinema.

The woman next to me whispered: They're going in...

The man without a mask nodded, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He said: "They want to see it. Everyone wants to see a confession. It's the only way people can feel better about themselves without changing."

The priest took a half step forward. His voice was calm, but now I heard steel in it: Let her go.

The man glanced at him briefly, as if he had forgotten that priests can exist even when no one goes to confession. Then he said kindly: You are brave. But you are not invited.

The priest did not answer. He simply stood his ground.

The bell didn't ring. It was silent. And in that silence I heard something else: a soft, distant whisper, as if many voices were murmuring behind the church door. Or as if the fog itself were forming words.

The man without a mask said: I only want one confession. Just one. And then it's over.

I noticed the masked figures at the portal slightly turn their heads, as if they had heard the sentence and liked it. People like promises of an end. An end means that you don't have to feel anymore.

Finally, I said quietly: What should I confess?

The priest let out a sigh of disappointment. But I knew: sometimes you have to ask to hear what the trap sounds like. I wouldn't step into it. Not yet.

The man smiled. He said: Confess that you wanted her.

I felt the sentence sink into my gut. Not Mary. Not salvation. "She" as an idea. A possessive statement. He wanted me to confess that my motive wasn't duty, not love, not morality, but hunger.

The man said: Confess that you forced yourself into this story because you need someone who needs you.

I saw the woman beside me. She was trembling, yet her gaze was fixed on me, as if testing whether I was truly who I claimed to be. The priest looked at me, and the same question lay in his eyes.

The man continued gently: Confess that without this night you are just a man. And you want to be more than just a man.

The bell rang once, very quietly, as if it were applauding.

I felt the pressure he was exerting: not physical, but moral. Confession isn't just words. It's a self-image. If I confess that I wanted it, I make myself guilty, and guilt is a hook he can hang me on. And if I don't confess, he can say I'm cold, proud, incapable of the truth.

That's the beauty of confession: no matter how you answer, you reveal yourself.

The unmasked man lifted the umbrella handle again. Mary's eyes flashed within it. I saw something in them that almost broke me: a tiny, dark dot on her neck, precisely where the bite marks were. And I didn't know if I was seeing Mary or a copy that knew my hope perfectly.

The woman suddenly whispered, her voice breaking: He will force you to speak.

The priest said softly: Don't speak. Act.

Take action. But how do you take action against a man who rings bells and opens doors without touching them?

I looked up at the bell. The child was still standing there. Small, flickering. And I understood something that simultaneously comforted and frightened me: If it can flicker, then it is not solid. If it is not solid, it can be disturbed.

I raised my gaze to the tower and said, this time not loudly, but so that only the man could hear: Your stage has strings.

The man laughed softly. Then he raised the umbrella and pointed at me as if he were brandishing a pistol without drawing it.

He said: Then pull on one.

And behind the church door, in the darkness, I suddenly heard a sound I recognized immediately because it resides in my mind: the soft scratching of wood. Three puffs. Pause. Three puffs.

Confession.

The scratching behind the church door was worse than the ringing. The sound of bells is public. They belong to everyone. Scratching belongs to an individual. Scratching is the sound of a prisoner. Or an animal. Or a person who hasn't given up, even though they're already stuck in the wall.

Three moves. Pause. Three moves.

The man without the mask heard it too. He smiled as if pleased with his own performance. Then he looked at me, kindly, with that terrible normalcy, and said: You hear it. Good. This is the moment when you decide whether you're a good man or just pretending.

I felt like punching him in the face. Not out of courage. Out of disgust at the elegance of his trap. But punching would be a form of dialogue. Punching would be an act that makes him an opponent. He wants opponents. Opponents give him form.

The priest next to me took a deep breath, as if forcing himself not to speak. He didn't say a word. That was his way of fighting. Silence when silence is dangerous.

The woman stood still, but I felt her restlessness like electricity. Her scarf was pulled up, her mask was tight, and yet in that misty place in front of the church, she was the most vulnerable because she was marked. A mark on her skin. A stamp.

The masked figures at the doorway stood frozen, on the threshold. A few had already taken a step into the darkness, as if seeking the warmth of a movie theater. None of them seemed to find it odd that one would enter a church because a bell rang, even though one had just been at a ball. People readily follow transitions when someone else provides the reason.

The man lifted the umbrella handle again, and the mirror in it briefly caught a sliver of lamplight. Mary's eyes flickered in it. He held it so that I had to see it, but no one else. A private window in the public fog.

He said gently: Just say the name. And then tell the truth: that you want her. That you need her. That you are empty without her.

He presented it like a ladder: name, then motive, then surrender. Step by step, until you're at the top and believe you've ascended, when in fact you've only been hung higher.

I felt the bite throbbing on my neck. Not just pain. Anticipation. My body wanted to take the ladder. That was the most terrifying realization: it didn't just need my fear. It also needed my reflex to save me. This reflex is the greatest weakness of a person who considers themselves good.

The priest whispered now, almost inaudibly: Abraham... hear me.

I glanced at him briefly.

He said: Confession is not for him. Confession is for you. When you speak, you speak to God, not to him. And God hears even when you are silent.

That wasn't theological. That was strategic. He offered me a way out of the mold. He tried to free the word "confession" from its trappings. I felt gratitude, and I hated gratitude because it makes you weak.

The man without a mask laughed softly. He said: God? The fog is full of gods, priests. People build them when they are afraid.

Then he tapped the stone once with the tip of his umbrella.

The bell rang immediately. A deep tone, so close it made my teeth vibrate. And as the sound faded, something happened in the darkness of the church door: a soft groan, as if someone were gasping for air.

The woman gasped. She whispered: That's her...

I didn't know if she meant Mary or someone behind the door. But "she" was a word he threw at us like bread that night.

I took a step toward the portal. Not because I was following him, but because I wanted to see. Seeing is sometimes the only substitute for touching. The priest grabbed my arm, but this time I let go, gently. I said softly, "I'm not going in. I'm just looking."

The man without a mask said: Looking is enough.

I stopped at the edge of the threshold. The darkness beyond was thick. I let my eyes adjust. And then I saw something that shouldn't have been visible.

Inside the church, where the altar used to be, hung a white cloth. Like a curtain. Like a canvas. In front of it stood candles, many of them, and their light flickered, but it seemed as if it were swallowed by the cloth.

There was a shadow on the cloth.

Not projected like a theatrical backdrop. More like an imprint. A figure moving, slowly, like someone walking behind fabric. I saw a head, a shoulder, an arm rising. And then I heard the scratching again, this time not behind wood, but directly behind the cloth. Three strokes. Pause. Three strokes.

The masked figures at the portal stared inside like children at a puppet show. Some took a step further, even though they didn't want to. That was the power of movement in the dark: it draws you in.

The man without a mask behind me said: This is the confession. The last one. It reveals who you are.

I suddenly understood what he was doing. He had turned confession into a spectacle. He had turned the act of confession from the inside out. He wanted my truth not to be spoken, but seen. He wanted me to recognize myself in the cloth, in the shadow, in the image. And then I would speak, because I couldn't bear it any longer.

I felt the bite burn on my neck. A mirror. Another mirror, only this time a cloth. Soft glass.

The woman whispered beside me, almost childlike: There's someone in there.

I looked more closely. The shadow behind the cloth raised its head. And for a moment I saw something that made my stomach churn: two dark marks on the shadowy figure's neck. A bite, a mark. It wasn't Mary. It was someone who had been marked like Mary.

The priest said quietly: He is showing you that he can do it to anyone.

The man without a mask said: Or he'll show you that you can prevent it. In one sentence.

I could have screamed. I could have spat at him. But all of that would have been more acting.

I did something else.

I slowly knelt down and reached for a stone from the pavement. No grand gesture. No anger. Just a person picking something up. The stone was damp, cold, heavy. A real thing. Not paper. Not glass.

The priest saw it and understood immediately. He held his breath.

The woman saw it and was startled, because she thought I was going to break down the church door or hurt someone. She whispered: No—

I stood up again, the stone in my hand, and didn't go into the church. I went to the bell rope, which was attached to the outside of the tower, where it could be reached in an emergency. The cord hung along the stone, wet with fog. Everyone in the village knows where to ring a bell. He did too.

I grabbed the rope.

The man without a mask laughed softly. He said: Now you want to use my bell?

I said nothing. I didn't pull. I simply wrapped the rope around my hand so it wouldn't slip away. Then I lifted the stone.

The man stopped laughing. Not because he was afraid, but because he realized I was doing something that wasn't part of his polite choreography.

I didn't hit people.

I struck the metal piece on the rope, where it's guided, against the small bracket that controls the sound. A hard blow. Metal against stone. It cracked, an unpleasant sound, not a bell tone. A broken tone.

The rope didn't break, but the guide bent. The cord jumped out of its path.

And the bell no longer rang in rhythm.

She struck a wild, irregular note, as if she were stumbling. No metronome anymore. No command. No clear signal.

The masked figures at the entrance flinched. Some instinctively covered their ears. One man stumbled backward out of the church door as if the sound had gone straight to his head.

The man without a mask fell silent. His gaze hardened.

The priest whispered: Good.

I struck a second time. The guide snapped, and the rope suddenly hung slack. The bell fell silent. Not because it was finished, but because I had silenced it.

In the silence that followed, one suddenly heard other things: the sea in the distance, footsteps, breathing. The world returned because the metronome was gone.

The man said quietly, without friendliness: That was impolite.

I looked at him. And in that look, for the first time, there was no plea, no negotiation.

The only realization is: if I don't play by his rules, he'll have to find others.

Behind the cloth inside the church, the scratching stopped for a moment.

And in that pause, that tiny pause, I realized: I hadn't won. I had only cut a thread.

How many strings does a stage have?

The bell fell silent, and this silence was like the sudden end of music one hadn't consciously heard until it stopped. The fog remained. The portal remained. The man remained. But the pace was gone. The rhythm that had guided us like a hand on the neck was, for a moment, released.

The masked figures at the entrance stood there, uncertain, like people who realize mid-dance that the ground isn't solid. A few looked at each other as if they were individuals again for the first time, not part of a crowd. One—an older gentleman with a mask too large for his face—muttered something that was perhaps a prayer, or simply a curse. Two steps back. Then another. The audience suddenly didn't know where to stand when the conductor dropped his baton.

The unmasked man looked at me, and his face finally had something unpolished about it. It wasn't anger, not yet. It was resentment. Resentment that I hadn't accepted his politeness. That's the most vulnerable spot in such people: they believe form is power. When you break the form, they're briefly exposed.

"Rude," he had said.

I replied: Life is impolite.

The priest next to me drew a sharp breath, not because my statement was clever, but because it was risky. Every answer is a risk. But sometimes you have to set a sentence like a nail so that something doesn't slip.

The man raised the umbrella slowly, not like a weapon, but like a scepter. The mirror in the handle caught the lantern light, and Mary's eyes flashed in it. This time he held it longer, as if to say: You can break the pace, but you can't look away.

He said quietly: You think you've broken something. You've only... delayed confession.

Inside the church, behind the white cloth, the scratching returned. But different. Not in the same neat pattern. Faster. Angrier. As if someone were now truly trying to break through.

The woman next to me began to tremble visibly. She whispered: "There's someone real in there..."

The priest said: Yes.

That "yes" was like a stone. Not comforting. Heavy. He knew it. He probably always had: that behind all the images, mirrors, masks, there was eventually a real body. One that was suffering.

The man without the mask smiled again, thinly. He said: Of course someone is real. How else could it seem?

That was the sentence that made my stomach churn. Not because it was gruesome—I'd seen gruesomeness all night. But because he stated it as a matter of course. As if suffering were a prop, something one simply needed.

I looked towards the doorway. The crack was still there. Darkness beyond. Candles. The cloth. The scratching shadow. And I felt the reflex inside me again, stronger: in, get, save. That's exactly where he wanted me.

The priest whispered: When you go in, you don't go alone. Not without me.

The man without a mask heard it and said kindly: Oh, please. Take him with you. I love polyphony.

The woman swallowed. She said, her voice breaking: And me?

The man looked at her as if he were only now realizing she was a person. His eyes slid over her scarf, her neck, as if he knew exactly what lay beneath. He said: You have already been confessed. Your skin has spoken.

She flinched as if he had hit her.

I felt something inside me harden. Not courage. Hardness. A cold decision, not dramatic, but simply: no longer to act on his words.

I said to the priest: If we tear down the cloth, we will take away his image.

The priest nodded immediately, as if he had been waiting for me to say it. He said: And we give people something real to see.

The woman whispered: Real things frighten them.

I replied: Then let them be afraid. At least fear is real.

I stepped to the threshold, not into it, only to where the fog and darkness met. The unmasked man was still standing behind us, close enough that I felt his presence like a hand on the back of my neck. I ignored him.

Inside the church, the floor was cold. The smell of iron was stronger. Candles flickered, but their light was strange, as if it weren't illuminating the room, but only the cloth. Everything led to the cloth.

I walked towards the cloth.

The priest walked beside me. His breathing was calm, but I saw his hand hanging on his cross, as if clinging to the idea that something sacred could exist, even if this was just a performance.

The woman remained on the threshold. She didn't go in. She couldn't. Or she knew that going in there would only be another sign.

I reached the cloth. It hung on a pole, fastened with hooks. It was heavy, white, and it didn't smell of laundry. It smelled of cellar, of dampness. Of something that had been hidden for a long time.

The shadow moved behind the cloth. It was scratching, faster now. And I heard breathing, too. Real. Panicked. A person.

I reached for the fabric.

The moment before I pulled my arm, I heard the gentle tap of the umbrella tip on stone behind me. Very close.

The man without a mask said softly: This is the moment when you confess, Abraham. Not with words. With deeds. You will choose whom you save. And what you give in return.

I moved.

The fabric didn't tear; it fell heavily forward, like a curtain finally ending its scene. It crashed to the floor, and candles flickered wildly, some going out. The room darkened for a moment, then brightened again.

And there it was.

No shadow. No image.

A human.

A woman, tied to a pillar, her hands above her head, her skin pale, her lips blue with cold. Her neck was covered in small wounds, not just two marks. Many. As if someone had tried to make an alphabet out of her. Her eyes were open, but they didn't see properly. They looked right through us.

The masked figures at the portal gasped. A few let out short cries, real screams that immediately fell silent because nobody wants to know what they've just done in such a moment.

The priest immediately went to her and untied the knots with hands that suddenly stopped trembling. Practice. He was a priest again, not a spectator.

I stood there, staring at the woman, and a question screamed in my head: Is she Mary?

She looked like her. Or I wanted her to. The fog, the candles, the fear – everything made the resemblance greater. But then she raised her gaze for a moment and looked at me. And I recognized something that cannot be faked: not the face, but the recognition in the gaze.

She whispered, barely audible: Abraham...

My stomach sank. My throat burned. The bite responded like a sting.

Behind me I heard the quiet opening of an umbrella.

A sound that was so out of place in that room that it felt like a cut.

I slowly turned around.

The man stood at the entrance of the church. The umbrella was now open. Black. Large. A piece of night held over one's head. And inside, on the fabric of the umbrella, something was painted.

A portrait.

My portrait.

My face, pale, my eyes dark, my mouth too delicate. And on my neck, exactly where my scarf usually sits, two dark spots.

He already had my face.

He smiled and said: Confession over.

Chase through the alleys

The parasol stood open like a piece of night carried into the church, as if the darkness were no longer content with mere mist. On the inside, my face was painted, too precise, too serene, with those two marks on my neck that no longer looked like wounds, but like a seal. For a moment, I had the ludicrous feeling that I should apologize for seeing myself like that. Courtesy, even before one's own image. He knew which buttons to push.

Mary—the woman who had whispered my name—was no longer hanging. She lay half in the priest's arms, half on the cold stone floor. Her breathing was shallow, but it was there. Real. I saw her lips move as if she wanted to say something, but the sound was lost. Perhaps it was just air. Perhaps it was the last vestige of a voice he hadn't quite taken from her.

The masked figures at the entrance stood frozen, and finally, there was no longer a ball in their eyes. A few stared at Mary, as if they hadn't known that people really look like that when they suffer. Others stared at the open screen, at the portrait within, and I could tell from their faces that they didn't know which was worse: the reality on the ground or the image that fit all too well.

The man with the umbrella smiled as if he had just unveiled an art installation. Confession over, he had said. No cry of triumph. Just that one sentence, as if he were concluding one act and immediately beginning the next.

The priest lifted Mary a little higher, pulling her away from the pillar. He whispered something I couldn't hear, perhaps only her name. His hands were firm, practiced, as if he had carried too many bodies from too many rooms. Mary's head sank onto his shoulder, and her gaze lost me again, like a flickering light.

I stood still for a heartbeat, staring at the screen. My face in his screen. My face in his possession. This wasn't just mockery. This was an assertion: You are already part of the picture. You're just running around in it.

The man took a step back into the fog in front of the church. The umbrella remained open, as if protecting the portrait from the air. He said nothing more. He didn't need to. The picture said everything. It said: I know you. I have you. You cannot think your way out of this story.

The priest hissed, without taking his eyes off the exit: Out. Now.

The masked figures at the entrance moved apart, not out of courage, but because they suddenly no longer wanted to be in the way. Nobody wanted to be part of the scene if it turned violent. They had already seen enough to feel guilty, and guilt makes people incredibly quick to flee when they want to escape.

We moved. The priest carried Mary. I walked close beside him. The woman with the scarf—the one who had come out of the water, the one whose throat bore the same language as mine—also began to move, but not toward the exit. She paused for a moment, as if fighting something within herself. Then she followed. Her steps were short, uncertain, as if the ground beneath her no longer belonged to her.

As we reached the threshold, I felt the fog outside like a cold hand. It swallowed the church instantly the moment you stepped outside. The square where we had stood before was no longer the same. The lanterns were now just milky patches. The bell rope hung slack. No metronome. And that was precisely why it was more dangerous, because now you didn't know when the next note would come.

The man with the umbrella stood a few steps away, half in the fog, half in the lamplight. He didn't move. He was waiting. Or perhaps he had already left and I only saw his idea. In this fog, anything was possible.

The priest turned away from the open square, into one of the narrow lanes that crisscross Whitby like veins. He knew the town. Or he pretended to, which in a town shrouded in mist is often enough to avoid getting lost immediately. Mary hung heavily in his arms, and I saw his breathing quicken, not from fear, but from exertion. A body is weight. And weight is truth.

We hadn't taken ten steps when I heard typing behind us.

Not loud. Not intrusive.

Once.

Then a break.

Then one more time.

It didn't sound like someone was hunting us. It sounded like someone was counting us.

The woman with the scarf gasped softly, and I noticed she almost stumbled. I briefly took her arm, holding her upright. Her skin was cold, and for a moment her grip was tighter than mine, as if she were afraid she would melt into the mist if she felt no human touch.

We reached a crossroads of two narrow paths. The priest didn't hesitate. Left. He turned. I followed. The woman followed.

Behind us I heard the sound of the umbrella. Not the tapping. A soft rustling, as if fabric were moving. An open umbrella has its own voice. A voice you can't pinpoint because it hangs in the air.

The alley was narrow, the walls damp. Windows sat like blind eyes in the walls. A few were dark. One had light, dim, warm. I forced myself not to look. Windows are his word. Windows are his game.

Mary moaned softly. Just a sound. But it was the most human sound of the night. The priest didn't look down. He carried on, as if every glance back would be a delay that couldn't be bought.

Then something fell into the alley in front of us.

Not heavy. Just a soft sound, like fabric on wet stone.

The priest stopped abruptly. So did I. The woman behind me made a sound.

There was a mask on the floor.

Black. Smooth. Unadorned.

The mask that the man had worn in the ballroom before he took it off.

It lay right in the middle of the path, as if it had been deliberately placed there. An invitation. A provocation. A hint: I'm ahead of you.

The priest whispered: Don't touch.

I walked around the mask without touching it. But as I passed, I saw something white peeking out from under the mask.

Paper.

A strip, pulled out like a tongue.

I didn't bend down. I just looked down and read what was written. The letters were large, as if you had to read them while walking.

FASTER.

A single word that contains no information, only an order. And orders are what he'd been giving us all night, just packaged more attractively.

The priest exhaled a short, angry breath and continued walking. Going faster was difficult when carrying a body. But he tried. His footsteps grew heavier, louder. The fog swallowed them nonetheless.

Then came the sound of glass, somewhere to our right, from a window.

Not a loud crack. More of a soft cracking sound, as if a pane of glass had shattered. A sound that immediately brought to mind the crack in the corridor. Glass pressing from the inside.

The woman whispered: It's moving...

I knew what she meant. Not just the man. The city.

We turned a corner, and suddenly there was a wall of people. Not many, five or six, but enough to fill the alley. Masked. Ballgoers. Out of place here, in the fog, in the damp, cobbled vein of the city. They stood there as if they had been placed there. Their heads were slightly tilted, as if listening.

The priest stopped, gasping for breath. Mary moaned softly. I felt my pulse pound against the bite.

One of the masked men slowly raised his hand and pointed not at us, but at a side alley, narrow, darker, barely visible.

Not a word. Just a point.

Like a child. Like a guidepost.

I didn't know if it was help or a trap. And that was precisely his art: he blurred the line until you chose the trap yourself.

The priest glanced at me briefly, a silent question. He couldn't decide. He was carrying Mary. The decision lay with me.

And somewhere behind us, that quiet, polite tapping again, as if someone were saying: You have time. But not much.

The masked figures stood there like a wall, and it wasn't a wall of flesh, but of will. They weren't aggressive. They weren't carrying weapons. But their silence was a grip. In silence lies consent, when no one contradicts it. And here, no one contradicted it.

The priest was panting, Mary heavy in his arms, and I saw that his forearm was trembling. Not just from exertion, but because he knew that a single wrong step would turn Mary back into a stage set.

The woman with the scarf stood close behind me. I could feel her breathing, rapid, irregular. She whispered: You're... not right.

I believed her immediately. Not because I could prove it, but because I felt it myself: These people stood too still, too synchronized, as if they were characters placed in a scene. And yet they were real bodies. I smelled perfume. I saw damp hair. I saw small puffs of breath in the mist. Real bodies, but an alien rhythm.

One of the masked men pointed again into the side alley. A narrow opening between two houses, black as a seam in the fog. Help or trap. That's exactly the kind of decision he loves: You choose, and he still wins because you chose.

The priest whispered: Left or back is dead.

He didn't mean physically dead. He meant: back is the umbrella tip. Back is his portrait. Back is his pace. To the left was an unknown space, and unknown spaces are sometimes the only chance.

I nodded once, not in agreement with him, but in agreement with the movement. Movement is everything now.

I took a step towards the masked men, not aggressively, just firmly. I said loudly enough for them to hear: Step aside.

Nobody moved.

Then I said something I hadn't planned, but it came from the gut: She's real. Look at her.

I nodded my chin at Mary in the priest's arms. For a moment, and I swear I saw it, something flickered across the eyes of one of the masked figures. A brief flash of disgust. Or pity. A genuine emotion.

The priest took advantage of this tiny crack. He took a step forward, not towards the wall, but diagonally, towards where the side alley begins. I walked beside him, shoulder to shoulder. The woman followed.

And then something strange happened: The masked figures retreated. Not all of them. Just enough to create a narrow passage, just wide enough for the priest to get through with Mary when he turned around.

Not a word. No eye contact. Just a soundless retreat, like a curtain opening.

We slipped into the side alley.

It grew darker immediately. The fog was thicker here because the houses stood closer together and the streetlights were farther away. The sounds of the city faded away. The sound of our breathing was suddenly loud. Mary moaned again, a soft, broken sound that I wished I could have tucked into my coat, knowing that sounds tonight were like breadcrumbs.

The side alley was so narrow that I could touch the damp wall with my hand without stretching. The stones were cold and slippery. It smelled of algae and garbage, of water that never properly drains away. It was a place no one went willingly. That's precisely why it was useful now.

We walked faster. The priest pressed Mary closer to him, and I saw in his face the toughness of a man who had seen too much to be surprised now.

Behind us, I heard no more typing. No umbrella tip. Only fog.

And that was exactly the wrong thing to do. If he's hunting us, he'll let us hear it. If he won't let us hear him, he's closer than we think.

After a few meters, the alley didn't end in a street, but in a small courtyard. An inner courtyard, surrounded by houses. No direct escape. A barrel, a few crates, an old well. And on the opposite wall, a door.

A door that could lead to a back building. Or to a cellar. Or to a room built just for this night.

The door had no sign. No window. Just wood and an old handle.

I stopped immediately. Doors without windows are rare. And rare is suspicious here.

The priest stopped beside me. Mary was hanging heavily. His voice was rough: Open or closed?

The woman whispered: Not in...

I heard something in her tone that wasn't just fear. It was recognition. As if she'd seen doors like these before. Perhaps in Transylvania. Perhaps in an inn. Perhaps in a hallway that smelled of iron.

I stepped closer to the door without touching it. I shone the lamp—I still had it, though I hadn't consciously been holding it—across the wood. Something was scratched into the door. Not deep. Quick. Like a message scratched into wood because paper is too honest.

17.

The number hit me like a ton of bricks. Door 17. The hallway. The white corridor. The shaft behind the wallpaper. It all came flooding back.

The priest saw the number and whispered: No.

The woman let out a sound that resembled stifled laughter. She whispered: He's making circles.

Yes. He's making circles.

And that's precisely why I wasn't allowed to open that door. It was the perfect trap: a familiar number, a familiar feeling. A step back into the history that had almost swallowed us up.

I turned around, looking for another way out. Courtyard walls. Roof edges. A woodpile that might be high enough to climb. But with Mary? Impossible. With the woman? Maybe. But not everyone.

Then I heard it again.

Do not type.

A sound that was much worse in this courtyard because it could come from anywhere: a soft rustling of fabric.

An umbrella moving somewhere in the fog.

The priest turned abruptly. The woman gasped. I felt my throat burn.

A figure slowly emerged from the alley we had come through.

Not running. Not hunting.

Walking as if she had all the time in the world.

The man with the umbrella.

He was masked again. The black mask covered his face, and that made him a hole again, a figure. The umbrella was now closed, but the tip tapped the stone as he walked, ever so lightly, as if testing the world.

He stopped at the entrance to the courtyard, letting us feel the confinement, letting the walls speak.

He said politely: You are so hardworking. You always choose the right places.

I said nothing. Words would be like a leash again.

The man raised his umbrella slightly, as if to greet someone. Then he pointed to the door marked 17.

He said: Go inside. It's warm in there.

The priest whispered to me: If we go in there, we're dead.

The man heard it and chuckled softly. He said: "Dead is a big word. I prefer... silence."

And then he raised his free arm and pointed at Mary in the priest's arms.

He said: Put her down. You can't run with her.

It wasn't an order, it was a statement. He spoke the truth in order to use it like a blade.

Mary groaned again, as if she understood that she was the weight being shed.

I felt my mind racing for solutions. Walls. Roof. Door. Umbrella. No time.

Then I heard a faint noise behind us, from above. No wind. No bird.

A ringing of the bell.

Very faint, as if a small bell were ringing somewhere.

Not the church's large bell. Something small.

It's as if someone in a house above this yard is using a handbell to get attention.

The man with the umbrella froze for a tiny moment. Just a flicker in his posture.

And I knew: The ringing bothered him.

The small ringing above us was little more than a pinprick in the night, but it struck him in a place he disliked. I didn't see it in his face—the black mask made him look like a hole again—I saw it in his posture. A tiny pause. A break in civility. As if someone had played a wrong note in his score.

The priest heard it too. His eyes wandered upwards, to the dark rows of windows above the courtyard. The woman with the scarf was also staring up, and in her gaze was something I hadn't seen since the ball: hope that immediately turns back to fear, because here, hope always comes at a price.

The ringing came a second time. Two short, irregular notes, as if someone were improvising. Not a church bell. A small handbell, perhaps at a back door, perhaps in an apartment. A signal.

The man with the umbrella said quietly: That's not necessary.

His tone was friendly, but underneath it was something else: anger. Not loud. Just a thin thread of coldness.

I seized the moment he unintentionally gave us. I stepped closer to the woodpile at the edge of the yard. It wasn't high, but high enough to bring a person up to shoulder height. The wood was damp, but firm enough to grip. And above it, along the wall, ran a drainpipe. Old. Metal. A ladder, if you were desperate enough.

I looked at the priest. He understood immediately, without me having to speak. His eyes flickered: impossible with Mary. I didn't nod. I didn't offer a solution, I only offered direction.

The woman whispered: You want to go up...

I said quietly: We need to get out of the yard. Not through the door.

The man with the umbrella tapped once. He said: You want to play.

The ringing came a third time, now louder, as if the one above had realized it was working. Then I heard a voice from somewhere above us, muffled by mist and stone, but clear enough:

Here!

A human word. Not a whisper, not a polite tone. A real shout. That alone was like a blow to that night. Authenticity is a foreign element in his story.

The man without a mask – or with a mask, who knows anymore – raised his umbrella slightly, as if listening. Then he said, almost kindly: You shouldn't be so loud.

I sensed the coldness in that sentence. Not a threat, more like a promise.

The priest made the decision for us because he was the only one who truly held Mary. He stepped to the woodpile, turned so that Mary's weight was better distributed, and placed one

foot on the bottom crate. He groaned softly with exertion. Mary's head hung limply. Her lips moved. Not a sound.

I immediately jumped in, grabbed Mary's back, and supported her body so the priest wouldn't have to fight alone. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the man with the umbrella take a step, slowly, as if he were giving us time, so that things would get worse when he took it.

The woman stood still for a moment, frozen. Then she looked at Mary, looked at the priest, looked at me. And suddenly something rose within her that was stronger than fear: defiance. She stepped toward us and grabbed Mary's legs, lifting her up. There were three of us around Mary. Three bodies against one fate.

The ringing upstairs became faster. Four, five notes. A frantic pattern.

The man with the umbrella said calmly: Put them down. You'll only hurt yourselves.

I didn't answer him. I didn't speak. I worked.

The priest placed his second foot on a higher box, pulled himself up, and I pushed from below while the woman pressed Mary's legs upward. Mary's body moved like a sack. And yet she wasn't a sack. She was a human being. That was the difference. And that difference cut into us like guilt.

We managed to lay Mary on the woodpile, half on crates, half on beams. The priest climbed higher, grasped the drainpipe, and tested it. It held. The metal creaked, but it held.

Up above, somewhere at the edge of the wall, a hand appeared. A real hand, without a glove, reaching over the wall. Then a face. A man, perhaps thirty, unmasked, hair disheveled, eyes wide. He looked at us, saw Mary, and his face went white.

He shouted: Quick! Give them here!

The man with the umbrella stopped. He looked up. His mask revealed nothing, but his posture was different now. He hadn't planned this disruption. A stranger calling out. A hand offering help. A real body not part of his choreography.

He said quietly to the man above: That's not a good idea.

The man above shouted back without hesitation, with a kind of furious courage that only arises from ignorance: Piss off!

Such a statement carries weight tonight. It is not polite. It is non-negotiable. It is a wall.

The man with the umbrella took a step. His umbrella tapped. And immediately, in the corner of my vision, I saw something on the door marked 17: The handle moved. From the inside. Very slowly, as if someone inside was deciding whether to come out.

The woman gasped: There's something in there.

The priest whispered: Ignore it.

Ignoring a door opening is inhumane. But sometimes being inhumane is the only way to remain human.

I climbed up, grabbed Mary under the armpits, and pulled her towards me. The priest above reached for her, arms outstretched. The man on the wall grabbed her too. Three hands, four hands. Mary was pulled up, inch by inch.

Down below, I felt movement in the courtyard. Not many steps. One step. The man came closer.

The door marked 17 opened a crack.

Darkness beyond. Cold air. That sweet, irony smell that immediately tells you: This isn't a place for sleeping, this is for storage.

The man with the umbrella said calmly: You can't all leave.

That wasn't a threat, that was mathematics. And in horror, mathematics is always the truth: it only takes one person staying behind for the rest to keep going.

I saw the woman. She was still standing downstairs, next to the boxes. She looked up at me. In her eyes was a question she didn't want to say: Who?

I wanted to pull her up. I wanted to take her hand. I didn't want her to be left behind. And at the same time, I knew: if I reach out to her now, I'll lose Mary, lose the priest, lose control. Everything will collapse.

Mary was almost at the top. Her hand hung limply. The man at the top whispered: Just a little further...

The priest pulled, panting. The man on the wall pulled.

Downstairs, door number 17 creaked open further. A soft scratching sound, as if something were being dragged across stone.

The man with the umbrella stepped closer. Now he was only a few steps away from the woman.

And then the woman did something I hadn't expected.

She grabbed the black mask that had been lying at the entrance to the courtyard, picked it up, and hurled it with all her might against the umbrella.

Not against him. Against the umbrella.

The mask bounced off, but it struck the umbrella handle, and the small mirror inside it—that window—crashed. A fine network of cracks spread across the glass.

The man froze.

For the first time, really.

It was as if he had been hit in the eye.

He said quietly, without politeness: No.

The priest seized the moment and pulled Mary over the edge of the wall. Mary was above. Safe, for a breath.

I looked down. The woman was standing there, her hand still in the air, as if she had just crossed a line. The man with the umbrella stood in front of her, the umbrella slightly lowered, the mirror in the handle cracked, his eye injured.

Door number 17 behind them was now half open.

And out of the darkness behind came a small figure.

A child.

The key made of bones

The child stepped out of the half-open door as if from a slit in the world. Not running, not hesitating, simply appearing, as if it had always been there and only the lighting had changed. The courtyard seemed to narrow around this small figure. The fog pressed deeper, the light from the distant lantern became duller, as if suddenly afraid of revealing too much.

The man with the umbrella stood motionless, the handle slightly lowered. The crack in the small mirrored mesh shimmered dimly. It was only a tear. And yet the tear had struck him like a slap, because it was an eye, and eyes are everything tonight. His courtesy had vanished. What remained was a coldness that no longer adorned anything.

The woman below—the one with the scarf—stood a step in front of him, as if she had surprised herself. Her hand was still half-raised, as if she could undo the movement she had just made. But there are movements you can't undo. You can only decide what to do next.

I was hanging half over the wall, my fingers in cold stone, my heart pounding in my ears. Above, the priest was pulling Mary further onto the safer part of the wall, and the stranger who had called us held her with both arms as if carrying a fragile suitcase. Mary's head sank onto his shoulder, her breathing shallow, but present. A person, no longer just an image.

Down in the courtyard, the door with the number scraped like a mouth opening wider. The child stood in the doorway, head slightly tilted. It didn't look at the man with the umbrella. It didn't look at the woman. It looked up at me, as if it knew that my gaze was the lever it had to pull.

And then it raised its hand.

In its hand it held something small, light-colored, and incongruous.

No paper. No glass.

A key.

The key wasn't metal. It was matte, ivory-colored, and slightly curved. The lantern light didn't catch on it as it would on brass, but remained soft. I recognized it before my mind would accept it: bone. A key made of bone, so smooth as if it had been polished for a long time, and yet so distinct that it couldn't be mistaken for wood.

The woman below let out a sound that wasn't quite a scream. Her fingers instinctively gripped her throat, as if the mere existence of the key would unlock something in her skin.

The man with the umbrella said nothing. But I heard him inhale, slowly and deliberately, the way one inhales when taming anger so that it doesn't become ugly.

The child held the key up, like an offer. Like a reward. Like a prize.

His lips moved, and I could read them because I couldn't do otherwise:

Exchange.

The priest upstairs whispered harshly: Don't look. Don't react.

But the key was already in my mind. A bone fashioned to open doors. A shape fashioned from something living to fit something dead. A perverse thought put into practical form.

The man with the umbrella raised his head slightly, as if appreciating a scene. Then he said calmly to the woman below: Give it to me.

The woman didn't answer. She stared at the child as if it were a snake. Or a mirror.

The child took a step forward, out the door, into the yard, and I saw now that it wasn't barefoot, not ragged. It was wearing proper shoes. It didn't smell of the street, it smelled indoors. Of cellar. Of dust. Of the same sweet iron smell I had encountered in church.

The key hung between his fingers like a small, bright lie.

The man with the umbrella said softly: You saved her. Good. Now give me the key.

He spoke as if he had a right to it. As if this bone were his property, only briefly held by a child's hand.

The child turned its head towards him and smiled.

A child smiling is usually the beginning of relaxation. Here, it was the beginning of something even worse than fear: disgust.

The child said nothing aloud, but its lips formed two words that I could see almost more clearly than hear in the darkness:

Not you.

The man with the umbrella froze again for a fleeting moment. Not out of shock that a child was contradicting him, but because contradiction is rare in his world. He's used to things following orders. To people following orders. To children following orders.

The woman below used that second. She didn't jump away. She jumped forward.

She didn't reach for the umbrella. She reached for the key.

Her fingers gripped the bone, and for a breath, the key hung between her and the child like a rope. The woman pulled. The child held on tight. It was a brief, ridiculous struggle over something small—and precisely because of that, so intense, because suddenly everything depended on the little one.

I felt my throat burn, as if the bite had decided that this object was important.

The child wouldn't let go of the key. Instead, it did something strange: it let itself fall backward, back into the doorway, as if trying to pull the woman into the darkness. Not with force, but simply because there was more space behind the door than in the yard.

The woman staggered forward a step, the key still in her grip, and at that moment she was halfway inside the door.

The priest above uttered a sound, a sharp warning: No!

Too late. The door frame swallowed her up like an edge.

The man with the umbrella finally moved. Quickly, without appearing hasty. He reached out, not for the woman, but for the key. His fingers were only centimeters away.

I did the only thing I could without thinking: I let go of the wall.

Not quite. But enough.

I slid a little, clung to the edge, felt the cold stone scrape against my skin. Below was the courtyard, two meters perhaps, and the door, the umbrella, the woman. I wasn't in a position to rescue, but I was in a position to disturb.

I didn't shout. I didn't throw anything. I simply grabbed the drainpipe and slid down it as fast as I could until my shoes touched the woodpile. A hard impact, a pain in my knees that I would feel later, if there was a later. Then I jumped into the yard.

The man with the umbrella turned his head towards me. The crack in the mirrored mesh briefly caught the light. His gaze was no longer a gaze. It was a judgment.

I reached the door just as the woman with the scarf was finally pulled inside. Not torn, not dragged. Simply—gone, as if someone behind the door had taken a step back and she had followed.

And the key—

The key fell.

It slipped from the woman's fingers mid-movement, as if the bone itself had decided not to move. It clicked against stone, a dry sound, and rolled half a circle until its tip struck the doorstep.

A key left behind is either an invitation or a warning.

The man with the umbrella took a step towards him.

I stepped faster.

Our shoes touched the same patch of stone almost simultaneously. But I was closer to the threshold, I was closer to the key, and on a night like this, proximity decides.

I grabbed the key.

Bone is surprisingly warm after being held for a long time. It was as if I had grasped something living, even though it was dead. This warmth disgusted me, and at the same time, it gave me the feeling that I was holding something real. Not paper. Not glass. Not a picture.

The man with the umbrella paused. Then he said, very quietly, without any politeness: Give it here.

I said nothing. I didn't put the key away. I kept it visible because visibility is sometimes protection. If he takes it from me, he'll do it in front of me. And on this night, eyes are at least sometimes witnesses.

Behind me, the priest shouted from above: Abraham! Get out of the way!

Mary was upstairs. Safe, for the moment. But the woman downstairs was gone, behind the door, behind the number, behind the smell of iron.

The man with the umbrella lifted the handle slightly, and I saw the cracked mirror. An eye that no longer sees clearly. He said: You've already broken enough for me.

Then he smiled, thinly, and said the sentence that affected me more than any threat:

You want to save her.

He meant the woman. He meant Mary. He meant everyone who can be put on a leash with the word "she".

I felt the key in my hand suddenly become heavier. Not physically. Heavier in meaning.

The door behind me, the door marked 17, was now closed. Not slammed. Simply closed again, as if it had never been open. As if the swallowing was already over.

I stood in the courtyard, a piece of bone in my hand, facing the man with the umbrella, and I knew: This key doesn't just open doors. It unlocks decisions that cannot be undone.

The key lay in my hand like a lie disguised as a tool. Bone doesn't feel like metal. It has no coldness to warn you. It has a warmth to deceive you. As if it were saying: I belong to you. I

was once alive. And that's precisely what made it so repugnant, because I felt my body registering that warmth as something familiar.

The man with the umbrella stood opposite me, just a few steps away. The cracked mirror in the handle looked like an eye with a scar. His voice was no longer polite, no longer playful. It was flat. He said again: Give it here.

I said nothing. Not out of courage. Out of discipline. Words are his domain, and I wasn't going to give him an inch.

Behind me, atop the wall, the priest called my name again. His voice suddenly sounded less like a priest's and more like a man losing someone. Mary lay beside him, held by the stranger. I heard her breathing, a soft, raspy sound that carried in the courtyard like rustling paper.

The door marked 17 was closed. Too clean. Too commonplace. As if it had never been open. As if the woman had never disappeared through it. And that was the worst part, because it turned the moment into a dream. Dreams are harder to fight than facts.

I turned the key in my hand and looked at it more closely. The bit was finely carved, unnaturally precise. Not improvised. Not by a child. By someone who knows how to build doors and how to open them. In the middle was a small notch, like a mark. A tiny, unnecessary cut. An ornament. A point of grip. A reminder.

The man with the umbrella followed my gaze. He said softly: You hold the only thing in this city that he cannot imprison in glass or paper.

He had said "he." Not "I." Not "we." He distinguished between himself and someone else. That was new. Or he wanted me to think it was new.

I asked, even though I didn't want to: Who is "he".

The man smiled slightly. He said: You're fast. Unfortunately, not fast enough.

Then he took a step closer. His umbrella remained closed, but the tip tapped once on the stone, and I felt the tap like a blow to my throat. The bite responded immediately, burning, as if the sound had a direct line to my blood.

I forced myself not to back down. Taking a step back is always the beginning of an escape, and escape is a framework he loves.

Instead, I raised the key a little higher so he would have to see it. I said: If you want it, tell me where it is.

I meant the woman who had disappeared through the door. And the moment I said "she," I knew how stupid that was. I gave him the word he loves to use most.

The man nodded, as if he had been waiting for this. He said: She is where you imagine her to be.

No information. A sentence that throws you back into yourself. But he added something, quietly, almost as if it were pity: Behind the wallpaper.

I felt my stomach clench. The sentence was like a hook. Behind the wallpaper – the stairs, the noise in the hallway, the shaft, the cold. He pulled old scenes into this new situation, circling them again and again.

The priest above shouted: Abraham! Get out of here, now!

I heard him, but my body was already in the courtyard, and my head was in a corridor that smelled of iron.

The man with the umbrella said: You can get them. Really. The key is for that. You just have to... go inside.

He didn't point the umbrella at door number 17. He pointed at the wall next to it. At the stone. As if there were a passage there that I couldn't see.

I stared at the wall. Damp stone, moss, cracks. Nothing special. But on this night, "nothing special" is the most dangerous phrase.

The woman was gone. The key was there. And he stood before me like a man showing you a bridge and saying: Go.

The ringing from above had ceased. No more handbell. The helper on the wall was silent. Perhaps he had understood that sounds here served as lifelines. Mary breathed. That was all that remained real.

I said quietly: Why do you want him?

The man with the umbrella answered immediately, as if he had a prepared truth: Because he opens doors that you shouldn't open.

I sensed a chill in that sentence. Not because it threatened, but because it almost... protected. Or sounded that way. Perhaps that was the new trap: it becomes a warning so that I'm more likely to believe it.

I saw the crack in the mirrored mesh on the umbrella handle. The eye was injured. Perhaps he couldn't see me as clearly anymore. Perhaps that was my only advantage.

I picked up the key and did something he hadn't expected: I held it against door number 17, without touching it, just near the wood. I wanted to see if anything happened. If the key turned. If the door responded.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then I heard a soft click.

Not in the lock. The door had no visible lock. The clicking sound came from the wood itself, as if something behind the door was moving a mechanism.

The man with the umbrella said quietly: Do you see?

The door breathed. That's the only word for it. It breathed. The gap between the door and the frame became a touch darker, as if something behind it was pushing closer to the surface.

And then, from the crack, came a smell.

Not fog. Not sea.

A smell that immediately took me down to the cellar: wet wood, old stone, and that sweet iron smell, which is nothing other than blood that has been somewhere for too long.

I pulled the key away. The clicking stopped. The smell lingered for a moment, then it was gone again, as if the door had closed without moving.

The man, without a mask – or with a mask, it didn't matter – said: You felt it. The key belongs to the place. And the place belongs to him.

I said: Then the key is a leash.

The man smiled. He said: Everything is a rope. You just have to decide who pulls the other end.

Suddenly an image flashed through my mind: the woman behind the wallpaper, in a shaft that smelled of iron, and that key in my hand. He had taken it so that I would use the key. And the key would take me to a place he controlled.

But if I don't use the key, I let the woman die. Or disappear. And disappearing is sometimes worse, because there's no funeral.

I heard Mary make a soft noise upstairs. A word, barely more than air. I looked up. Her eyes were half-open. She was looking at me, and there was no plea in her gaze. Exhaustion. And something I hadn't expected: a warning.

She whispered, barely audible: Not... door...

The priest bent down to her, heard it, and his gaze shot towards me. He didn't shout. He simply said, like a knife thrown: Do you hear?

I heard.

Not a door.

Mary wasn't just a victim. She knew something. And if she could still warn others in that state, then that warning was the most valuable thing in the fog.

The man with the umbrella noticed the exchange. His posture tensed. He said: You'll do it anyway.

Not as a threat. As a prediction. As if he had already turned the page in his notebook.

I looked at the key. Bone, warm, smooth. A small thing that suddenly determined all paths. I felt that I no longer just had to decide whether to save the woman. I had to decide whether to believe the key.

And somewhere deep in the city, far away, a bell rang. Not the big one. A small one. A single note that sounded like a finger pointing: Now.

The single chime of a bell in the distance wasn't loud, but it was there, and because it didn't fit into our scene, it fit perfectly. That night, every sound was like a hand pulling at your collar. I didn't want to be pulled anymore. I wanted to pull myself.

Mary's warning – Don't... door... – hung in my mind like a splinter. A splinter is small, but it forces you to think of it with every movement. The key in my hand was a whole bone, and yet the splinter felt more important.

I looked towards door number 17. It stood there, motionless, harmless. Wood. A handle. A number. Everything so ordinary it screams. And I looked at the wall next to it, where the man with the umbrella had pointed. Damp stone. Moss. Cracks. Nothing.

Nothing is never just nothing on this night.

The man with the umbrella watched me. Not like a hunter, more like a man who knows that the animal will eventually fall into the trap because it sees no other way out. His voice was more controlled again, as if he had overcome his moment of irritation: You're looking for the right place. You already have it in your grasp.

I ignored the sentence. I forced myself to ask the question that didn't stem from panic: How do I use it without opening the door?

That was my third option.

I approached the wall, not the door. The man made no move to stop me. He didn't need to. He believed the wall was his guide.

I pressed the key against the stone.

Nothing.

I pressed harder, as if pressure would convince the world. Bone against stone. It felt wrong, like teeth clenching together. Then, ever so slightly, I felt a click. Inaudible, just a tiny vibration in the key, as if the bone had briefly said "yes."

The man with the umbrella held his breath. I could see it in his chest. For a moment, he wasn't cool. He was alert.

I moved the key minimally, as if I were turning it in an invisible lock.

The stone beneath my hand grew colder. Not just damp and cold. Icy. And right there, beneath the moss, a narrow crack appeared. Not a visible fissure, more of a line that suddenly made sense. A door in the wall. Not wood. Stone. A kind of door that one doesn't call a "door" because that would give one away.

Mary had said: Not the door.

Perhaps she meant: Not the obvious one.

Perhaps she meant: Don't call it that. Don't give him the word.

The priest upstairs didn't shout. He only looked. I saw his face change when he recognized the line in the stone. He whispered something I didn't understand, perhaps a prayer, perhaps a curse.

The woman had disappeared. This line of stones was perhaps the only place where she could still be reached. Or where one disappears for good.

I turned the key further. The crack in the stone darkened, as if gaining depth. And then—so quietly that it was more of a feeling than a sound—the stone surface opened a finger's width. A blast of cold air poured out. It smelled of damp earth, of cellar, and beneath it, that sweet, irony scent again.

The man with the umbrella said quietly: Very good.

I hated him for that praise. Praise is the worst form of control because it feels like recognition.

I left the key in the ignition. I took a half step back, without taking my eyes off the crack. Then I called up, not loudly, but clearly: Priest. Stay with Mary.

The priest called back, roughly: And you?

I said: I'll get them out.

The woman above—no, she wasn't above, she was gone—the woman who had disappeared, suddenly acquired a face in my mind. Not because I knew her so well, but because I knew: if I didn't give her a face, she would become a "she," and "she" would be its word. I forced myself to think of her as a person, not as a function.

The man with the umbrella took a step towards me. His umbrella tapped. He said: You are not going alone.

I held the key in the wall, didn't turn it any further, left the opening small. I said: Yes.

He smiled thinly. He said: You can say it. But you know how these stories go.

I looked at the handle of his umbrella. The cracked mirror was an eye that no longer saw clearly. Perhaps that was now my advantage. Perhaps it was just an illusion he was giving me.

I pulled the small cross from my pocket, held it in my left hand, the key in my right. Metal and bone. Two kinds of truth. I said, as calmly as I could: Stay back.

The man chuckled softly. He said: Your cross... your courage... all very fine. But I'm not here to stop you. I'm here to see what you confess when you're down.

That was his real game: He wanted me in the cellar. He wanted me buried in the earth. Away from witnesses, away from light. And he wanted me to do something there that would bind me.

I took a slow breath and stepped to the opening. The crack in the stone was only a finger's width wide, but I felt it would open wider if I turned the key. I turned it carefully, just a little bit.

The gap widened enough for a hand to fit through. Then an arm. Then a shoulder's width, if you squeezed. A passage that didn't invite, but demanded.

I pushed my way in.

The stone was cold against my back, damp. I smelled earth. I heard nothing above. No bell. No mist. Only my own breathing. A narrow shaft, a staircase leading down. Stone steps, narrow, smooth with use. Many have walked here. Not guests. Others.

I held the cross in front of me, not as a shield, but as a point of reference. In darkness, you need something familiar.

I didn't hear the man with the umbrella follow me immediately. No tapping. No rustling. He let me go. Of course. He wanted me to go.

After ten steps, maybe twenty, the air grew colder. Then, at the very bottom, I saw a faint strip of light. Not warm. Not yellow. More like gray. As if there were another window down there, one that didn't show the sky.

I called softly into the depths: Hello?

No echo. The walls absorbed everything. Of course.

Then I heard a noise.

No scratching.

A quiet sob, strained, like someone who forbids themselves from crying because otherwise they will lose air.

I continued walking.

At the bottom of the stairs, a low, damp passage opened up. The walls were stone. Not a wallpapered hallway. Not a white corridor. Something older. No one had tried to make it pretty.

And at the end of the corridor was a door.

Not wood. Iron.

There was a keyhole in the middle of the door.

Exactly the shape of a bone key.

Mary had said: Not the door.

I stood in front of it and felt the key in my hand become heavy, as if it were already being pulled into the hole.

Behind me, far above, very quietly, I heard the typing.

Not close.

But there.

He did come.

I closed my eyes for a moment, just one, and thought: If I open them now, I'll give him another scene.

And then I put the key in the lock.

The Castle of a Thousand Doors

The bone key slid into the keyhole as if it had always belonged there. Not without resistance, but with a kind of uncanny fit that revealed more than any sound: this door wasn't simply a door, it was a counterpart. A negative image that had been waiting for just this one form.

I turned the key slowly. Not because I wanted to be cautious, but because I needed to give the moment time to reveal itself. In movies, a door slams open. In real life, it rarely does. In real life, it's the quiet click that tells you you've just done something you can't take back.

It clicked.

A dry, small sound that seemed almost too clean in the damp corridor. Then a second click, deeper, as if an internal latch were springing back. A mechanism that wasn't improvised, but rather practiced.

Far above, behind me, I heard that tapping again. Not closer, but steady, as if it weren't rushing me, but accompanying me. A companion in no hurry, because it knows the stairs only lead down.

I placed my hand on the iron doorknob. It was cold and damp, as if the metal had carried the world's fog down here. I pressed down.

The door gave way, but not all at once. It opened a crack, and out of that crack came air that was different from the air in the hallway. Not just colder. Heavier. Dry and cold, like a room that hadn't been aired out in years, and yet somehow... inhabited. As if something down here was breathing, without lungs.

I pushed on.

The door opened into a room that made my brain stop for a heartbeat.

It wasn't a cellar. Not a vault. Not a chamber with chains, as one might imagine when feeling fear. It was a corridor.

And there were doors in this corridor.

Everywhere.

Left, right, front. Doors of different sizes, different colors, different ages. Some were painted in light colors, as if they came from a middle-class hallway. Some were dark and heavy, like from a manor house. Some had frosted glass windows. Others were solid, without any openings. One even had a door knocker shaped like a hand. Another had a small brass plaque with nothing written on it.

I stopped in the doorway. My breath grew loud in my ears. My gaze went from door to door, and each door seemed to look at me as if it were not wood, but a decision.

The corridor wasn't long, but it seemed endless because it branched off to the sides. Behind some doors there was light, dim, as if a lamp were burning. Behind others there was darkness. Behind still others I heard soft noises: a drip, a creak, a cough. Or was I imagining it? Down here you could imagine anything. That was the point.

I took a step inside, and the iron door behind me didn't close. It remained ajar, just enough for me to see the damp corridor beyond. I wanted it to stay open. An open door is a promise of return. Even if promises are rarely kept here.

I raised the cross in my left hand a little higher, not as a threat, more as a compass. Metal in the dark. An edge to hold onto. The bone key was still in the iron door. I left it there. Part of me wanted to take it back, but another part understood: if I pulled it out, maybe everything would close. Or something else would open. A key is a question you don't ask too often.

The typing behind me grew louder. Not much. Just enough so I knew: He's no longer at the top of the stairs. He's in the hallway behind the door. He's coming.

I didn't turn around immediately. I knew what I would see: the screen, the mask, or the normal face, which is even worse than a mask. I knew that turning around would be confirmation. I forced myself to look straight ahead.

In the middle of the doorway stood a small table. A simple table, like the kind you see in a hotel corridor. On it lay a notebook. White. Clean. The same size as before. And next to it: a pencil.

So banal it made me angry. All those doors, all that cold, and then office supplies. A person who truly intends evil should at least have the decency not to pretend it's just administration.

I walked to the table, slowly, my steps muffled on a floor that looked like stone but didn't quite sound like it. The corridor seemed to absorb sound. A place that doesn't like evidence.

The notebook was open. The first page was blank except for one sentence, in the same neat handwriting:

CHOOSE A DOOR.

Below, smaller:

AND CONFESS WHY.

I stared at those words, and I felt my throat burn, as if the bite had read the sentence. Choose. Confess. Over and over again. He turned decisions into religion.

I heard the typing right behind me, just a few steps away. Then the soft rustling of fabric. The umbrella.

His voice came, friendly, as if he were standing next to me in a drawing-room, not in a corridor made up of doors: You have arrived.

I didn't answer. I didn't look up. I picked up the pencil from the table.

The pencil was ordinary. Wood, graphite, a little worn. And that's precisely why it felt like a weapon. Not because it could kill. Because it could write.

I said quietly, without turning around: Where is she?

He didn't laugh. He simply said: Behind one of the doors. That's obvious.

I felt the answer almost make me want to strike. Obviously. As if it were a game where you just had to look closely. As if salvation were a matter of awareness, not power.

I asked: Which ones?

He replied: The one you would choose.

That wasn't just unhelpful. It was cruel, because it threw me back on myself. As if my character were the key. As if my morals would unlock a lock.

I turned around after all.

He stood a few steps behind me. No mask. His normal, pale face. The umbrella in his hand, closed, the tip on the ground. The cracked mirror in the handle shimmered dimly. His gaze was calm. He didn't seem like someone who had just abducted a woman. He seemed like someone having a conversation.

He said: You can save her. And you can save yourself in the process. Both are possible. But not without confession.

I held the pencil tightly, so tightly that my fingers hurt. I said: You won't get any words.

He nodded slowly, as if that were an interesting point. Then he pointed the umbrella at the doors. And the moment the tip moved, I heard a soft click from the corridor, as if a lock had opened somewhere.

Not one door. Several.

A few doors suddenly stood ajar, as if they'd been waiting to be pointed at. Behind one was a warm light, like candlelight. Behind another, I heard a soft whimper. Or was I imagining it? I didn't know. But my body reacted nonetheless. It pulled me, like a hand on my chin, toward the sound.

He said softly: This is the castle of a thousand doors. Each one leads to something you want. Or fear. Or both. And you will learn that wanting and fearing often use the same door.

I felt my breath quicken. I saw Mary's face before me, exhausted, warning. "Not the door," she had said. Perhaps she meant: "Don't open what he shows you." But here he shows everything.

I forced myself not to react to any noises. I didn't go to the door with the whimpering. I didn't go to the door with the light. I stayed by the table and just watched.

Then I noticed something on one of the doors, on the far left, almost inconspicuous. No sign, no window, just a dirty white paint job. And at the bottom edge, where the paint had chipped, I saw a small dark mark. Not big. Like a fingerprint. Or a line.

Blood.

My throat stung, as if it had seen the blood.

I didn't point it out. I didn't say anything. I just took a step in that direction.

The man behind me said softly: Interesting.

His tone was complimentary, and I hated him for it.

I stopped in front of the white door. It seemed ordinary. That's precisely what made it suspicious. In a corridor full of unusual doors, the most ordinary one is often the worst. I placed my hand on the handle.

He said behind me: Confession.

I closed my eyes for a heartbeat and thought: My confession is my silence.

Then I pressed the handle.

The handle gave way as if the door had been waiting for it. No resistance, no creaking, not even that slight hesitation that wood usually has when it's old. It opened too easily. And too easily here always means: prepared.

The white door swung inwards, and what lay behind it was not the cellar, not stone, not another corridor. It was a room.

A perfectly ordinary room, with wallpaper, a bed, a chair, a small table. It smelled of soap and cold tea. A room like you'd find in an inn. Or in a house that puts its guests on display without them realizing it.

A blanket lay neatly folded on the bed. A glass of water stood on the table, reflecting the dim light. And a mirror hung on the wall.

Of course, there was a mirror hanging there.

I stood in the doorway, not letting my gaze wander into the mirror. I forced myself to treat the mirror like a radiator: there, but unimportant. Except that mirrors are never unimportant. They are never merely objects. They are eyes.

The man behind me didn't enter the room. He stayed in the corridor, and his voice came from there, friendly, as if he were the host: Good choice.

I said nothing. I took a step into the room. The floor was wood, and for the first time in a long time, it creaked. A real sound. It was almost comforting, until I realized that creaking can also be a signal. Creaking means: You're here. You've made your decision.

I glanced at the bed. The blanket was too neat, as if it had been folded just for me. The glass of water was positioned too precisely, as if by chance. Everything was too tidy, too ready.

Then I heard a noise that didn't come from the corridor. Not from me. Not from above.

A soft breathing sound came from the corner of the room.

I turned my gaze, slowly, and saw something on the floor next to the cupboard: a figure, crouched down, its back against the wall, its knees drawn up, its hands on its neck, as if checking whether it was still there.

The woman with the scarf.

Except that she no longer had a scarf. Her mask lay beside her, broken. Her neck was exposed, and I saw the mark I didn't want to see: the two dark, sunken spots, surrounded by pale skin that looked as if she hadn't slept in years.

She lifted her head when she saw me. Her eyes were wide, alert, too alert. And I realized immediately: she wasn't just startled. She was changed. Not vampiric, not with teeth. With knowledge. With the knowledge you gain from being in a place you can't describe.

She whispered: Don't... look.

She wasn't referring to her neck. She was referring to the mirror.

I stopped. I didn't kneel beside her immediately. Every movement in this room was a decision, and decisions here are traps.

I said quietly: Can you go?

She shook her head, almost imperceptibly. Then she whispered: He hears... everything.

The man in the corridor didn't laugh. He simply said, as if continuing a conversation: "Oh, you found her. Very good."

I ignored him. I took two steps into the room, positioning myself just between the woman and the mirror. It was instinctive. A body wants to be caught between danger and victim. It rarely can actually be, but it wants to be.

The woman looked up at me. Her lips trembled. She said: It's... not just doors. It's... spaces that make you...

I asked: Where is Mary?

Her gaze flickered as if I had used the wrong word. Then she said: Behind... the right door. But... you mustn't... open it.

I felt everything inside me tense up. She said "right" and "don't open" in the same breath. These paradoxes are precisely his tool: right and wrong become so intertwined that you cut yourself when you breathe.

The man in the corridor said kindly: Of course he may open it. What are doors for otherwise?

I exhaled slowly, forcing myself to ignore the sentence. I didn't look in the mirror. I didn't look at the door. I only looked at the woman.

I said: What is the key?

She swallowed. Her fingers clutched a small shape that I hadn't seen at first because she was holding it so tightly. She opened her hand only slightly.

There was something light inside.

Not the bone key. Something smaller.

A splinter.

Bone, yes, but only a piece, as if broken off. With a notch, like a tooth.

She whispered: He... broke it. Inside me. He... said... a key must... share to... fit everywhere.

I felt cold. The key I had used might not have been complete. Maybe it never had been. Maybe it was part of something that is made of people.

I said quietly: You've got that piece out of you...?

She nodded. Tears welled up in her eyes, but they didn't fall. She whispered: It was... under the skin. He... thought it into it... there.

Thought. That was the worst part. Not cut, not stabbed. Thought. As if a thought could become material.

The man in the corridor said: She's so talented, isn't she? She can give birth to things without giving birth.

The woman flinched as if a cold finger had been placed on the back of her neck. She whispered to me: He wants you to confess. Not with words. With a look.

She raised her hand and pointed, trembling, at the mirror.

I immediately felt the pull within me. The reflex to look. Mirrors have a gravitational pull. And that night, it was its strongest.

I said, more to myself than to her: I'm not looking.

The man in the corridor replied gently: You will.

And then I heard it: a soft click behind me.

The door I had come through closed by itself.

Not all at once. Calmly. Politely. As if the room were saying: Now it's our turn.

I didn't turn around, but I knew. I felt the change in the air. The feeling that the way back had just been folded away.

The woman whispered: Now...

The man in the corridor said, through the closed door as if wood were no obstacle: Confession.

I went to the woman, knelt beside her without touching her, because I didn't know if touching was also a form of consent in this context. I said softly: Give me the splinter.

She hesitated. Then she placed the small piece of bone in my hand.

It was cold. Not warm like the key. Cold like something that was never alive, even though it was made of life.

The moment I held it, I heard something that was not in the room: a distant voice, muffled, as if behind many doors.

Mary.

She didn't say my name. She only said, clearly, brittlely, as if she were hanging by a rope:

Abraham... don't... look...

And I knew: She was somewhere here. Behind one of the thousand doors. And she knew that mirrors are the fastest shortcut to losing you.

The woman next to me whispered: He lets her speak so that you'll turn around.

And the splinter in my hand vibrated slightly, as if it had heard that. As if it were pointing in a certain direction.

Not to the mirror.

To the cupboard.

The old cupboard in the corner, next to which the woman had lain. Its door was slightly ajar, as if someone hadn't closed it completely.

A wardrobe is also a door. Just smaller.

I slowly stood up, holding the splinter like a needle, and went to the cupboard.

Behind me I felt the mirror like a burning hole in the room, wanting my face.

I forced myself not to look.

I reached for the cupboard door.

And at the very moment my fingers touched the wood, I heard a sound in the mirror – without looking: a soft breathing, very close, as if someone were standing right behind me.

The breathing behind me was too close to be coming from the woman on the ground, and too calm to be mine. It was the breathing of someone not exerting themselves. Someone with no reason to speed up.

I left my hand resting on the cupboard door without pulling. I remained still. If I turn around now, the mirror will get what it wants: my face reflected. And reflections are its favorite confessions.

The woman on the ground whispered: No.

A single word that went in like a nail in wood.

I said quietly, without moving: I can't see you.

The voice from the corridor – through the closed door – didn't answer immediately. Then, gently, as if it were nestling beside my ear: Yes. You feel me. That's enough.

I heard no rustling of fabric. No tapping of umbrella tip. That made it worse, because it meant: He doesn't need his props here. Down here, he's pure.

I felt the splinter in my hand. Cold, yet vibrating, as if it were pulling at something. Not a magnetic pull, more like a memory in the material saying: This way.

I opened the cupboard door a crack.

No clothes. No blankets. No wooden pole.

Beyond it was darkness, deeper than a cupboard. A darkness that didn't smell of wood, but of damp stone. A darkness that drew in air as if it were a mouth.

A wardrobe serving as a passageway.

Naturally.

I held the splinter in front of the opening, and immediately it vibrated more intensely, as if it had finally found its counterpart.

The breathing behind me was still there. And now, very faintly, another sound: the whisper-thin scraping of a shoe on wood. A step. Not close enough to touch me. Close enough to know: He's standing where the mirror would see me if I turned around.

He said softly: You're so proud of your eyes. You think that not seeing is a strength.

I didn't answer. I climbed into the closet.

The passage was narrow. I had to turn, shoulder first, back against wood, stomach against the edge. For a moment, I felt like the cupboard wouldn't let me through. Then it wasn't wood anymore. Then it was stone. Cold. Damp. Uneven.

I stood in a narrow passage, lower than the shaft I had come through. The air was thicker here. I heard dripping. And somewhere far away, I heard Mary's voice again, not as a word, more as a sound: a stifled sob.

Behind me was the cupboard. From this side, it didn't look like a cupboard, but like a small door in the stone, with a wooden frame. I didn't close it. I left it ajar. Open doors are promises. Sometimes you even need a false promise to keep from going crazy.

I didn't shine. I had no lamp down here. Only the dim, gray light that came from somewhere, as if through a crack. I held the cross in my left hand, the splinter in my right. Metal and bone, once again two compasses that don't match.

The splinter moved to the right.

I went to the right.

The passage led into another corridor. More doors. Not a thousand, but enough. Smaller doors, narrower, lower, as if built for children or for people who had been broken. Some were just wooden planks. Some had iron bands. One was just a curtain of coarse fabric that hung like skin.

I moved closer to the curtain door because the splinter vibrated most strongly there. But I stayed put. I had learned: the stronger the pull, the bigger the trap.

Instead, I looked at the ground. Stone slabs, uneven. And there, between two slabs, I saw something bright: a tiny piece of chalk. Or bone dust. A marking.

A small cross.

Not my cross. A drawn one.

I followed the marker. Another small cross a few steps further. Then another. Someone had left waymarkers here. Someone who didn't want you to get lost in the lock of doors. Someone who wasn't him.

I followed the crosses.

The corridor ended at a very old, dark wooden door. A number was carved into the door, deep and rough, as if it had been done with a knife.

13.

My throat stung. Numbers are circles, too. Seventeen had been a trap. Thirteen was... what? A superstition. A story. And he loves stories.

I didn't put my hand on the handle. I held the splinter close to the wood. It vibrated, but not wildly. More like a heart beating faster in one spot because it knows: Something's here.

I heard a noise behind the door.

Do not scratch.

A soft murmur. Words I didn't understand. As if someone were praying. Or confessing. Or calming themselves.

I leaned closer without touching the door and clearly heard a single word, as if it had pushed its way through the wood:

Abraham.

My fingers went cold. My mouth went dry.

Mary.

I didn't know if it was Mary. But it was her voice in my head. And my body reacted before my mind could correct it.

I pressed the handle.

The moment she gave in, I heard a soft, friendly breathing sound behind me, from the closet aisle.

He had followed me.

Invisible. Inaudible.

Only close by.

Door 13 opened a crack.

And behind it was light.

Warm, yellow, friendly. A living room light. A light that says: Everything is alright here.

And that's exactly why I was suddenly sure: This is not Mary.

This is a confession disguised as home.

I stood in the crack, my hand on the handle, the cross in my fist, the splinter burning cold.

And I knew: If I enter, I step into a picture. If I leave, I step into his breath.

I closed my eyes for a moment and did something he hadn't intended: I dropped the splinter.

It didn't clink. Bones don't clink. It only made a soft, dull sound on stone.

And at that same moment, the light behind the door changed.

It flickered.

Only briefly.

Enough.

I slammed the door shut again before my body could follow its survival reflex.

Behind me I heard a soft, disappointed sound. Not a word. Just an exhalation.

As if someone were saying: What a shame.

The Chamber of the Sleeping

When I slammed the door, it was as if I were cutting off the air supply to a dream. The warm living room light vanished instantly, as if it had never existed. All that remained was the damp hallway, the chalk crosses on the floor, the cold sweat on my back, and that breathing behind me—close, patient, offended in its stillness.

I didn't turn around. I'd learned that turning around here was a contract. Instead, I did something you wouldn't do in a nightmare: I walked away from whatever was calling me.

Without the splinter in my hand, I no longer had a vibrating compass. That was intentional. The splinter was a rope. I had dropped it to eliminate my own excuse of having been "pulled." Now, every direction was solely my fault.

I followed the chalk crosses, further down the corridor, away from door 13. The breathing behind me remained. No closer. No further. Like a shadow no longer bound to light.

The passage narrowed. The ceiling became lower. The stone became smoother, as if many hands had stroked it. And the deeper I went, the less it smelled of damp earth and the more of something unpleasant, yet instantly recognizable: stale air, skin, and that sweet, irony whiff that kept recurring like a refrain.

Then I saw the next marking: no longer a chalk cross, but a line scratched into the stone, like an arrow.

I followed her.

The silence down here wasn't empty. It was full. Full of quiet things: drops, a distant creak, a cough that was perhaps only an echo of my fear. And again and again, as a foundation: that calm breathing behind me.

Then the walk ended.

In front of me was a heavy door, larger than the others, made of dark wood with iron fittings. No number plate. No window. But in the middle of the door was a small round hole, like a peephole. Except there was no glass in it. Just blackness.

I stopped. The hole drew my gaze like an abyss. A circle. Unfinished, black, perfect. The kind of circle you want to close by looking into it.

Mary had said: don't look.

I didn't look inside.

Instead, I placed my hand on the wooden edge next to the hole. The wood was cold. And beneath it, I felt something that made my heart skip a beat: vibration.

Not from the key, not from the splitter.

From behind.

A soft, steady hum, like many breaths forming a rhythm. Not a bell. Something organic. Many people. Or many bodies.

I swallowed. I whispered, without knowing to whom: That's it.

Behind me, the breathing suddenly stopped.

A moment of absolute silence. Then a voice, right behind my ear, so close that I almost felt the words as a touch:

You are so close.

I froze. Not out of fear. From the knowledge that he could now decide whether to whisper in my ear or open my throat, and I would perceive both only as air until it was too late.

I said quietly: You don't need to lure me anymore. I'm already here.

He didn't laugh. He said calmly: You're here because you think you can wake her up.

"She." That word again. He picked it up like one picks up a knife that someone has left behind.

I gripped the cross tighter. Metal pressed into my palm. I said: I'm here because you use it.

He replied: No. You use them. You call it rescue, and it feels good.

His sentence was like a hand trying to reach inside my head. He wanted to make me guilty before I even opened the door. Guilt is his favorite key.

I ignored him as best I could and looked at the door. No lock visible. No keyhole. Just this round hole.

A peephole without glass. An eye without a lid.

I remembered the umbrella handle, the mirror. The mask with the mirror inside. The box with the piece of mirror. Again and again: eyes. Windows. Sight.

Perhaps this door couldn't be opened with bones. Perhaps it could be opened with a glance. Perhaps it was a trap for curiosity disguised as duty.

I took my hand off the wood, breathed out slowly, and said loudly enough for him to hear: I'm going to do it differently.

Then I knelt down, took a piece of chalk from the floor – I had seen it earlier, small, broken – and drew a cross on the wood under the hole.

Not pretty. Not exactly. Just unambiguous.

A sign that doesn't look. A sign that says: This is the boundary.

The voice behind me became quieter, almost tender: That's childish.

I replied: Maybe.

Then I did something that surprised even myself: I placed the cross I was holding directly under the hole, as if it were a bar. Metal against wood. A small, ridiculous obstacle. A symbol as a barrier.

And for a moment, nothing happened.

Then I heard a noise behind the door.

No more humming.

A collective inhalation, as if many chests were breathing in simultaneously. A chorus of bodies.

And immediately afterwards: a quiet, countless rustling, as if fabric were brushing against skin, as if people were turning over in their sleep.

The chamber was awake.

The voice behind me whispered: Now look.

I didn't see.

I put my ear to the wood next to the hole. Not looking inside. Just listening. Listening is also dangerous, but less directly than looking.

I heard a word from within, very faintly, as if it were being formed by many lips at once:

Abraham...

Not one voice. Many.

And there was something in this choir that made my stomach churn: they didn't sound like people calling for help. They sounded like people remembering a name they had murmured for a long time.

I stood up again, slowly.

I knew: Behind this door are not only victims. Behind this door are sleepers who respond to my name.

And somewhere in this castle of doors was Mary.

And he stood behind me, invisibly close, waiting for me to make the slightest mistake: to look into the black hole.

The murmuring behind the door was no longer just a sound. It was a pressure, a weight pressing against the wood. My name, heard in so many mouths, was no longer a cry for help. It was a ritual. As if it had been repeated often enough until it no longer sounded like me, but like a keyword that triggered something.

I stopped, my forehead almost touching the wood, without looking through the black hole. I forced my eyes to follow the grain, my scribbled chalk cross, the small metal cross beneath it, which suddenly seemed ridiculously small against a door that was clearly not made of wood, but of decision.

Behind me, he began to breathe again. Calmly. Patiently. He had briefly broken the silence so that his voice could have its effect, and now he gave it back as if he were being generous.

He whispered: You hear them. You can't ignore them.

I said quietly: I can't save her if I lose myself.

He didn't laugh. He said: You're right. So look.

The word "look" was like a finger tugging towards my eye. I felt the reflex: a quick glance into the hole, just for a moment, just to know. Curiosity disguised as a moral obligation. That was his hook.

I took a step back from the door, as if distance were a weapon. Distance, at the very least, is a pause. And pauses are rare here.

I scanned the floor with my eyes, searching for something real, something that wasn't a voice or a look. The chalk was there. The broken splinter lay further back, somewhere between door 13 and the closet aisle. Gone. I didn't want it back. I didn't want a vibrating leash.

Instead, I picked up the small metal cross from the floor and held it in my hand. It had grown cold, as if the door had drawn the warmth out of it. I pressed it into my palm so that the pain would keep me awake. Pain is proof that you are in your own body.

The murmuring behind the door grew louder, as if the step back had emboldened the voices. A collective whisper that rippled through the room. And within that whisper, I suddenly heard something concrete: a single word that stood out, as if someone were speaking it more clearly than the others.

Water.

I froze. The word didn't hit me because of its meaning, but because of the memory it evoked. The girl from the water. The scarf. The cold. Everything.

Then a second word, clearer:

Window.

And I felt my throat burn, as if the bite had heard the word and smiled.

The voice behind me said gently: They know your story.

I thought: Or you could give them my story.

I didn't know who was controlling the voices. Perhaps they were real sleepers. Perhaps they were just an echo, a tape recording in a castle. But the result was the same: the room wanted to draw me in, through words.

I stepped back further until my back was almost against the damp stone wall opposite. There, his breathing behind me was too close again. He moved without me hearing it. He was like mist: everywhere when he wanted to be.

Without turning around, I said: What is this?

He answered immediately, as if he had been waiting for it: A dormitory.

I said: For what?

He said: For longing.

The sentence was so smooth I wanted to tear it to pieces. Longing as a place. Longing as a chamber. He turned feelings into architecture.

I asked: Are they human?

He remained silent for one heartbeat too long. Then he said: It was you.

That sentence was like a piece of ice in my stomach. They were them. Or rather, they weren't anymore. What are they now? And why do they respond to my name?

Behind the door, I suddenly heard a different sound, not murmuring. A scraping, scratching sound, as if many fingers were simultaneously stroking stone. Not an attack, more of a pushing. Like people groping at a door in their sleep.

Then came a dull thud.

Not from the inside out, but rather like something heavy moving in the space behind it.

The voice behind me whispered, almost enthusiastically: They're awake.

I felt my body preparing to flee. But where does one flee to in a castle of doors? Every direction is a door. Every door is a choice. And behind some choices, he waits with a warm living room light.

I forced myself to think like a craftsman again, not like a victim. Doors. Mechanisms. What opens them? What closes them?

The door had no lock. No keyhole. Just the hole. Perhaps the hole is the mechanism. Perhaps it's a sensor. An eye that wants to be seen. Or one that sees you when you look inside.

I remembered something I had done in the hallway earlier: I had drawn a cross. I had placed the metal cross underneath it. And the chamber had reacted to it. Not to a glance, but to a sign. To the idea of a boundary.

Perhaps the hole isn't for looking at. Perhaps it's for closing. Perhaps it needs to be "blinded," like blinding a camera. An eye deprived of light.

I searched my coat pocket for anything round enough. Nothing. Just scraps of paper, dust, the remnants of the night.

My gaze fell on the pencil I'd unconsciously taken from the study. It was in my pocket, a banal reminder of the phrase "Choose a door." Office supplies in the hellish corridor.

I pulled out the pencil. Wood. Graphite. And then I saw the circle of the hole in the door.

A round cavity.

Not for viewing.

For filling.

I approached the door again, pencil in hand, and immediately felt the murmuring behind the wood swell. As if they sensed my approach.

The voice behind me grew quieter, warning or enticing – it was no longer distinguishable: Don't do it.

I ignored them. I placed the tip of the pencil at the edge of the hole and carefully probed inside, without looking into the darkness. I felt resistance. Not empty. A small edge. A mechanism.

I turned the pencil slightly, as if I were testing a lock.

And suddenly it clicked.

Not loud. But clear.

The murmuring behind the door stopped for a moment, as if many mouths had been simultaneously deprived of air. Then came another sound: a deep, collective exhalation. And the scraping and scratching ceased.

I held the pencil still.

The voice behind me whispered, no longer friendly: That is... outrageous.

Outrageous. Again with that language of politeness. He hated that I had blinded one eye without looking at it.

I continued to turn the pencil, carefully.

A second click.

Then the black hole in front of me didn't get brighter, but... duller. As if a lid were closing inside. As if the eye were growing an eyelid.

And the moment the hole became "blind," it became silent behind the door. No murmuring. No scratching. No chorus of breaths.

Just a single sound, very close to the wood:

A soft, sleepy sigh. As if someone had just stopped dreaming.

I pulled out the pencil.

The circle was no longer black. It was covered with something. Wood? Metal? It felt like a small disc that had slipped in front of the hole.

The voice behind me was cold: You took their eyes off them.

I said quietly: No. I took away their window.

And for the first time that night, I heard not only breathing behind me, but another sound: a sharp inhalation, like someone getting angry and not wanting to show it.

The room was silent. But I knew: silence is not victory. Silence is merely a pause in which he seeks a new path.

The silence beyond the door was so profound it felt wrong, like a room where all the clocks had suddenly stopped. I was still standing close to the wood, the pencil in my hand, as if I had committed a crime. Perhaps I had. Perhaps it is a crime to take someone's eyes, even if those eyes are no longer human.

He was behind me.

I didn't hear him leave. I only heard that he was closer now, because the air felt different. Colder. Thicker. As if a cloak had moved between me and the rest of the world.

He said quietly: You are destroying my order.

I didn't answer immediately. Order. The word was his altar. He called it order because chaos sounds ugly. I turned the pencil between my fingers, felt the wood, and finally said, without turning around: Your order needs my eyes. Then it isn't order. It's deception.

He didn't laugh. He was silent for a moment. Then he said: You think you're clever. You've only closed one window. There are thousands.

I looked at the door. The hole was now "blind," the small pane of glass in front of it dull. The door was still there. It hadn't disappeared, hadn't exploded, hadn't reacted dramatically. It was simply... silent. That was the unsettling part. Things that become silent are sometimes just preparing.

I took a step back, away from the door, away from the wood, as if distance would make me human again. At that moment, I heard, very faintly, a noise from inside the room.

No marbles.

Do not scratch.

A single, slow step.

Then one more.

Someone is still moving.

The disc in front of the hole vibrated, a tiny tremor, as if something behind it was pressing against the "lid".

I felt my neck tense. I had taken away their window, yes. But I had also taken away their sense of direction. When they were asleep, they were silent. Now, awake, without eyes, they move differently. Blindly.

Blindness is not stillness. Blindness is groping.

The man behind me whispered, satisfied: They're coming.

I forced myself not to run. Running would have been his pace again. I looked around, searching for the passageway, the chalk crosses, the arrows. And then I noticed something I

hadn't seen before: next to the large door was a small hatch in the stone, barely visible, like a maintenance compartment. A crack, a handle.

Another mechanism.

Naturally.

I went over, knelt down, and pulled on the handle. The flap gave way, heavy as if it hadn't been used in a long time. Behind it was a niche, and in that niche lay something that looked like a tool: a small metal wedge, and next to it a leather ring, old and worn.

I picked up the wedge. It was cold, heavy. A real thing. These days, that sort of thing almost calms me. Tools do what they do. They don't negotiate.

Behind the door I heard another footstep. Slow, shuffling, as if someone wasn't lifting their foot properly. Then a soft, collective breathing, very deep, like a room full of sleepers all taking a breath at once.

And then something happened that made my hair stand on end: a soft, rhythmic knocking from inside against the wood.

Not wild. Not panicky.

Testing.

It's as if many fingers are running along the edge of the door, trying to find out where it gives way.

The man behind me said: You took away their eye. Now they are looking for the mouth.

I didn't answer. I slid the wedge under the door, not under the edge—that would be too simple—but into a small gap between the door and the frame, where the wood expands and contracts most readily. I didn't hammer. I just pushed it in, slowly, until it was in place.

A wedge is a primitive thing. And primitive things are sometimes the only things that work in a world of mirrors.

The knocking from inside grew stronger. Not louder, but more frequent. It sounded like someone standing outside in the rain, knocking politely, believing someone would let them in. This politeness amidst the menace was the worst part. It was like his style in many fingers.

I stood up and finally turned around because I needed to know where he was. I did it deliberately, not reflexively. And I didn't look in a mirror, but at his normal, pale face.

He stood two steps behind me, without an umbrella, without a mask. Just him. His eyes were calm, but there was something in them now that I hadn't seen before: anger disguised as disappointment.

He said: You don't want to save her. You want to win.

I felt the sentence slide down my body like cold rain. It was good. It was cruel. It was designed to force me into a defensive monologue. To make me confess. I didn't give it one.

I simply said: Where is Mary really?

He smiled slightly. He said: You are close enough to hear her. You were close enough to almost see her. You just... refused.

I felt anger. Not hot. Cold. An anger that doesn't explode, but focuses. I looked past him, into the corridor, and suddenly realized: the corridor behind him wasn't the same anymore. Not because it had changed, but because I saw something new in it.

There were chalk crosses on the ground. Yes.

But between them lay something else now: a thin strip of white paper, like a tongue sticking out of a crack in the door.

I knew that. His notes. His words.

But this strip was a different color. Not pure white. More of a yellowish tinge. And it wasn't his smooth handwriting, but a shaky script, as if someone had written in the dark, with an unsteady hand.

I took a step towards him, my eyes on the paper, not on him.

He said quietly: Read it. You want proof, don't you?

I didn't kneel. I just bent down, took the strip of paper between two fingers, as if it were contaminated.

It contained only one sentence:

NO MORE DOOR. STAIRS.

The sentence was short, crude, and lacked all his elegance. That was important. Elegance is his language. This was someone else.

I looked up, back at him. His face remained calm, but I saw the slightest twitch around his mouth. He didn't like the paper. Not because it was paper, but because it wasn't his.

I asked, quietly: Who writes this?

He didn't answer immediately. Then he said: Someone who thinks he can help you.

I said: Can he?

He smiled thinly. He said: Help is also a door.

The knocking behind the chamber door suddenly became harsh. A dull thud, as if someone had fallen against the wood from the inside. The wedge creaked, but held.

I put the strip of paper in my pocket. Not as a trophy. As a guide. Stairs. Not a door.

I looked past him, searching the corridor for stairs. And there, further back where the corridor curves, I saw an opening in the wall, low, like the closet doorway, but wider. Behind it: steps leading down. Even deeper.

He followed my gaze. His voice was gentle, almost pitying: "You always want to go deeper. That's your mistake."

I replied: Perhaps it is my only way.

And without waiting for his approval – there was none – I walked past him, close enough that I could smell his coldness, and headed towards the steps.

Behind me, I could hear the sleepers' chamber working. Knocking, groping, pressure. Blind life searching for a way out.

The stairs lay in front of me.

And somewhere, deep down, I heard Mary's voice again, very faint, like a thread that doesn't break:

Abraham...

The Pact of Darkness

The steps leading down weren't built to be used. They were built to conceal something. Each step was narrow, irregular, smooth at the edges, as if fear had clung to them for years, grinding away the stone's contours. I walked slowly, not to be cautious, but because speed here always belongs to someone else. Behind me lay the sleeping chamber, with its blind groping against wood, the wedge that I hoped still held. Before me lay a depth where light doesn't become friendly, but only another kind of shadow.

Mary's voice wasn't really a sound. It was a feeling in the ear. A thread that cuts through stone, without any explanation of how. Abraham... The name didn't sound like a request. It sounded like a password, not meant to open a door, but to close a life.

I held my hand against the wall because the stone here was damp, and dampness, at least, was honest. No mirrors. No paper. No warm light. Just steps leading into a gray that wasn't daylight. More like a lamp burning somewhere down below, left unturned, now only illuminating the dust.

As I took the last step, the room suddenly opened up. Not large, but higher than the corridor. A vaulted space, its ceiling sloping gently upwards. A table stood in the center.

In such rooms, a table is never just a table. It's an altar, a workbench, an interrogation room. This table was made of dark wood, heavy, with edges that must have been touched by many

hands. On it lay no chain, no knife, no candle. There lay something worse, because it's so commonplace: paper.

Several sheets of paper, neatly aligned. Next to them, an inkwell. And a fountain pen.

I stopped and felt a brief burning sensation in my throat, as if the wound had detected the scent of ink. Ink is related to blood in some ways. It's a liquid that leaves traces and cannot be taken back.

There were no chairs. Whoever sits here, doesn't sit. Whoever signs here, signs standing up.

A shelf hung on the wall behind the table. It held jars, bottles, and narrow boxes. Not like a laboratory, more like a collection. Things you keep because you think they might be useful later. And that's the most convenient form of cruelty: everything becomes useful.

I moved closer without touching the papers. On the top sheet was a heading in a handwriting I now recognized. Smooth. Confident. Almost beautiful.

PACT.

Below, in smaller lines, were sentences that were too polite for what they meant. No threats, no insults. Just conditions. As if it were a contract between two business partners and not between a person and something that builds doors.

I didn't read everything. Reading is already a form of participation. But individual words jumped out at me because they were placed in such a way that my gaze almost automatically took them in: Face. Silence. Witness. Guilt. Sleep.

And then there it was, in one line, a name.

Mary.

Not as a person, but as a clause.

I felt my body jerk forward and forced myself to stop. "Don't touch," she had said. "Don't look." And yet, it was the same old game again: information used as bait to make you forget yourself.

A faint sound behind me made me freeze. Not a tap. Not a rustle. A step too soft for stone. As if someone were walking barefoot. Or as if the ground were absorbing sound.

I didn't turn around immediately. I was tired of turning around at the right moment, as if that were the only way to maintain control. Instead, I whispered into the room: Show yourself.

Mary's voice didn't come from above, not from the stairs. It came from within the vault itself, muffled, as if behind a wall or beneath a ceiling. This time it wasn't just my name. This time it was a sentence, fragmented, torn:

Don't sign...

The sentence was so weak that it shouldn't have reached me at all. And yet it did. Perhaps because it ran through the same thread as the name. Perhaps because someone let it through so that it would have a stronger impact.

A voice behind me said calmly: She is right.

The voice wasn't that of the man with the umbrella. It was deeper, older, without that polite smoothness. It sounded like someone who doesn't have to play because he doesn't have to explain the rules.

I turned around.

In the shadows at the edge of the vault stood a figure I couldn't immediately place. No coat, no umbrella. A simple, dark suit, as if he had come from another time. His face was partially obscured, but I could see enough: an older man, narrow cheeks, graying temples, eyes that were neither friendly nor unfriendly. Rather, tired. As if he had opened too many doors to still be surprised.

He took a step closer, and I saw something in his hand: a set of keys. Metal, simple. Not bone.

He said: If you sign, it will never again be more than a clause.

I asked, roughly: Who are you?

He looked at me as if the question was understandable but irrelevant. Then he said: The one who left you the chalk crosses.

My stomach clenched. Help is also a door, he had said. And now it stood before me, in the form of a man who knows how to survive down here.

I said: Where is she?

He didn't point to a door. He pointed to the floor. To a spot next to the table where the stone was darker, as if it were frequently damp. There I now saw a small metal eyelet, embedded in the stone, almost invisible.

One flap.

I went over, knelt down, and felt for the edge. The flap was cold. It had no handle, only a small indentation. I placed my fingernail against it and pulled. The stone gave way, and a narrow crack opened beneath it, from which air escaped. Warm air, stale, human.

And a smell: soap, cold tea – the room. And underneath it, blood.

Mary's voice was now clearer, coming directly from below, as if it were right under my knees: Abraham... please...

I swallowed, and my throat burned so intensely that I briefly went black. Not for long. Just a flicker. As if the wound were saying: This is the point at which you decide.

The older man said quietly: She is not alone.

I looked into the crack. Darkness. But I heard something other than Mary's breathing. A second breath. Heavier. A person, unconscious or playing dead. Perhaps the helper from above? Perhaps someone else entirely. In this castle, identity is a movable piece of furniture.

I said: How do I get them out of there?

The older man replied: Without the pact? With difficulty.

I straightened up and looked back at the table. The papers lay there, neatly arranged, ready. The fountain pen beside them suddenly seemed like a pistol placed in your hand so you would shoot yourself, but call it a "decision".

From the stairs behind me came a sound I knew all too well: the soft tap of an umbrella tip. Calm. Tactful. Like a man arriving on time for his appointment.

The older man raised his head. His eyes narrowed, and for a moment I saw genuine fear in him, which he quickly pushed aside. He whispered: He's coming.

I said: He's already everywhere.

The man shook his head. He said: Not him. The one with the umbrella is just the messenger.

The typing grew louder, closer. And then I heard the voice, friendly as always, as if it were standing at a front door:

Here we are.

I looked towards the stairs. In the dim light, the silhouette of the man with the umbrella appeared, slowly, without haste. The umbrella was closed. The handle barely reflected the light, the crack in the glass like a wounded eye. He remained standing at the top of the last step, as if he wanted to savor the scene from there.

He said: You found it. The paper. The flap. The myth. I'm proud.

My stomach churned at that word. Pride. Again, that praise, like a hand around my throat.

The older man stepped in front of the table, as if to block it, as if to prevent me from approaching the pen. He said calmly: He won't sign.

The man with the umbrella smiled. He said: Then she will sleep.

Mary's voice came from below, shaky: No...

I looked at the paper. At the pen. At the flap. At the stairs. Three paths, all wrong, just different.

And I realized that the pact isn't just on paper. The pact is the situation itself. The pact is: You only get it if you surrender yourself down here.

I didn't pick up the pen. Instead, I placed my hand on the paper and pushed it off the table.

Very slowly.

The leaves slid across the wood, fell onto the stone, a soft rustling sound, and suddenly the table no longer looked like a negotiating table. It looked like what it was: wood.

The man with the umbrella fell silent. His smile remained, but it narrowed.

The older man whispered: Good.

And from the hatch below us came Mary's voice, barely audible, but clear enough to break my heart:

Abraham... quickly...

The rustling of papers on stone had been the only loud noise in this vault, and when it ended, one immediately heard what truly mattered: breath. Mary's breath from below, shallow, human. A second breath, heavier, somewhere beside her. And above, at the foot of the stairs, the man with the umbrella—betrayed not by his breath, but by his bearing. He was calm personified, the calm of a man who doesn't believe anything can truly surprise him.

I stood at the table, my hand still on the wood, as if I needed to hold onto it to avoid slipping back into his story. The older man stood between me and the umbrella like a thin line of defiance. His eyes were fixed on the man, and there was something in his face I couldn't immediately interpret: not courage, more like weariness. As if he had experienced this moment before, only under different names.

The man with the umbrella looked at the papers on the ground, then he looked at me. His tone remained friendly, but I now heard the metal in it: You've become rude, Abraham. You make me work harder and harder.

I replied: Then work yourself to death.

A sentence that came out of my gut, and I immediately regretted it because it was another dialogue. But I also saw his gaze become a touch colder. Not hurt. Spurred on.

He said quietly: You don't understand. I'm not working. I'm just carrying out orders.

The older man raised the bunch of keys in his hand as if it were a symbol, not a tool. He said: "Who are you carrying out an order for?"

The man with the umbrella smiled, as if he had enjoyed the question. Then he simply said: For what doors want.

It sounded like poetry, and that's precisely why it was dangerous. In this vault, poetry is merely a disguise for mechanics.

Mary's voice from downstairs came again, a whisper: Please...

I immediately knelt down again by the hatch. Don't look, don't negotiate, act—that was the only sentence that still made sense. I felt my way into the opening with my fingers. The gap was too narrow for my shoulder, but large enough for my hand. I felt cold air, and then—hair.

Mary's hair, damp, sticky. Her forehead. Her cheek. She was directly beneath me, so close I could touch her, and yet separated by stone.

I whispered: I'm here.

Her fingers, weak, searched for my hand. She found it like a child in the dark. Her grip was barely perceptible, but it was deliberate. She was still there.

I asked, quietly: Can you move?

She whispered: Not... much. He... me... tightly...

"He" could mean anything, and I hated that word by then. But I understood: she was tied down or trapped. And I was on top of a table, not on an edge that could easily be broken.

The older man knelt down beside me without asking. He looked into the hatch, but not down; instead, he looked at the edge. He said: "The stone is just a cover. There's wood underneath. You can pry it open."

He pulled a small metal wedge from his pocket—almost like the one I'd used on the chamber. Maybe it was the same type. Maybe these kinds of helpers build their lives out of wedges.

He placed the wedge against the edge of the flap and pressed. The stone didn't give way immediately, but I heard a faint creak in the frame. Wood expands and contracts. Wood yields. Wood is honest when you apply pressure.

The man with the umbrella took a step deeper into the vault. His tapping was now close by. It was in the room. The tip of the umbrella clicked once against the stone. Like a punctuation mark.

He said: You're hurting yourselves. All you have to do is sign.

The older man growled: Shut your mouth.

The umbrella man laughed softly, and the laughter was so gentle it cut my nerves. He said: You've been down here so long that you've forgotten how confession works. Nobody confesses to be free. You confess to define who you are.

I tightened my fingers around Mary's hand. I felt her pulse throb faintly against my fingers. A real heart. A real rhythm. Not his bell. Not his metronome. Her heart was my new beat.

I said to the older man: Keep pushing.

He pressed. The wood creaked. The stone lifted a millimeter. Then two. Air rushed out more forcefully. Mary moaned softly, and I didn't know if it was pain or hope.

The man with the umbrella took another step closer. He said gently, "Abraham, do you hear her? She will hate you for saving her and destroying yourself in the process. People hate their rescuers because they blame them for their own guilt."

He phrased it so plausibly that it almost sounded like the truth. That's his art: he says things that are sometimes true, at moments when they are only meant to paralyze.

Mary whispered from below, barely audible, but sharp: Listen... don't...

That was her confession. Not the truth about herself, but the decision not to listen to him.

The older man lifted the stone further, and suddenly the hatch sprang open a little. Not enough to climb through, but enough to enlarge the opening. Now I could reach up to Mary's shoulder. I felt fabric. A rope. Yes. A rope around her upper arm, tight, cold.

I pulled on it. The rope didn't give.

The older man whispered: She is attached to something.

The man with the umbrella said: Of course. Order, remember?

I felt my patience snap. Not as a fit of anger, but as a focus. I didn't have time to discuss order. I had to cut the rope.

I felt for my belt. No knife. Nothing. I had never seen the knife in the velvet, never had it. And down here, I regretted every hour of my life I had spent walking without a blade.

The older man saw my gaze and pulled something from his jacket: a small, blunt pocketknife. Not large. Not elegant. A tool. He handed it to me without a word.

I took it, and at the same moment I heard the man with the umbrella inhale. Not sharply, more tensely.

He said quietly: Oh. That's new.

I ignored him. I pushed the knife into the opening, felt for the rope, and began to saw. The knife was blunt, and the rope was thick, but rope gives way if you're patient enough. Every movement was small, controlled. No drama. Just work.

Mary groaned as the fibers came loose. I whispered: Hold still.

She whispered: I... try...

The man with the umbrella stepped so close that I could smell him. Not perfume. Nothing special. Clean fabric. Soap. That was the worst part: he smelled like someone you trusted.

He said right behind me: If you cut, you'll cut yourself too.

I continued sawing.

The rope gave way. A jerk. Mary's arm was freed. She pulled her hand away and grabbed her neck, as if checking to see if it was still there.

I said: One less rope.

The older man pushed the hatch open further. The stone lifted, clearly now. The wood beneath it creaked, but still held. We would break it open. We would manage it. It suddenly felt possible, and that immediately made me suspicious, because "possible" rarely comes without a price on this night.

The man with the umbrella said, very calmly: The price is simple. Not signed, not spoken – so it will be physical.

He lifted the umbrella handle slightly, and although the mirror was cracked, it caught a sliver of light. In the rippled surface, I saw for a moment not my face, not Mary. I saw something else: a door moving. A door above. The chamber.

And I heard it, muffled, as if through many layers of stone: the knocking of the sleeping, now faster, stronger, no longer polite.

The wedge wouldn't last forever.

The older man whispered: He's calling her.

The man with the umbrella said gently: I'm not calling anyone. They're coming because you took their eye. Now they're seeking warmth.

My stomach clenched. I had blinded them. Now they were coming blind, groping, perhaps by sound, by breath. And we were making noises down here. We were breathing. We were sawing. We were warmth in the darkness.

Mary whispered from the hatch, panicked: They... are... here...

I asked: What do you mean?

Then I heard it.

Not at the top. Not by the stairs.

Very close.

A shuffling step in the passage behind the vault, where it was dark.

A second step.

And a quiet, blind sniffing, as if someone were testing the air.

The man with the umbrella smiled, as if he had been waiting for just that. He said: The Pact of Darkness is not signed. It is... worn.

And a figure appeared at the entrance to the vault.

Not the umbrella man.

A sleeping person.

Eyes open, blank. Hands in front of the body, groping. Slowly. Inexorably.

The sleeper stepped into the vault as if the room, not the man with the umbrella, had called to him. His face was pale, his eyes open, but they saw nothing. His pupils seemed too large, as if darkness had swallowed them whole. His hands groped ahead of him, slowly, searching, and in that slowness lay something inescapable. No haste. No anger. Only function.

He took a shuffling step and stopped as if listening. His head tilted slightly, like an animal sorting through sounds. Then came that soft sniffing, and I realized he wasn't looking for light. He was looking for warmth. For breath. For blood.

The older man next to me whispered: Don't touch.

As if I needed to be told. I was still kneeling by the hatch, Mary's arm just free, the knife blunt in my hand. The hatch was open wider than before, but not enough. Mary was still down there. Almost. That "almost" is the most dangerous state.

The man with the umbrella stood a few steps behind us, calm, content. He said softly: "You see? No paper. No pen. No words. It will still be a pact. If he touches you, you belong."

The sleeper took another step. His hands brushed the edge of the table, and he flinched slightly, as if burned. Then he ran his fingers over the wood, as if remembering what wood felt like. His lips moved, but no word came out. Just a whisper.

Mary whispered from the hatch, panicking: He... smells...

I felt my throat burning. As if the wound had been licked open.

The older man pushed the flap open harder, but the wood only creaked. He cursed softly, roughly, and I saw him adjust the wedge, driving it deeper into the joint. He wasn't a hero. He was a craftsman of survival.

The sleeping man suddenly turned his head directly in our direction.

Not because he sees us. Because he hears us.

Because Mary is breathing.

Because I breathe.

Because the wedge is creaking.

The man with the umbrella said gently: Don't breathe so loudly.

As if one could.

I held my breath, instinctively. For a moment, there was silence. The sleeper stopped, his hands in the air, feeling around. He sniffed. Then he took a tiny step, uncertain, as if momentarily disoriented.

But Mary down below was breathing again. Shallowly, desperately.

The sleeper reacted immediately. One step. Then another. Slowly, but now purposefully, like a needle moving towards a magnet.

The older man hissed: We can't get them out fast enough.

I looked at the table. At the blunt knife. At the papers on the floor. At the bottles on the shelf. None of it was helpful right now.

Then I saw something on the floor, near the table leg: a small, heavy iron chain that had previously looked like a shadow in the dim light. Not long. Perhaps for a lock. Or for a flap. Or for a hand.

I grabbed it without thinking. Iron was cold, rough, heavy enough to hurt.

The man with the umbrella watched me with a look so calm it almost seemed bored. He said: You want to hurt him?

I didn't reply. I didn't want to hurt anyone. I wanted to distract them.

The sleeper was now three steps away. His hands were already groping in our direction, as if he were feeling the air.

I got up.

The older man whispered: Abraham, no—

I ignored him. I didn't approach the sleeping man. I stepped sideways to cross his path without standing directly in front of him. If he's blind, you don't have to treat him like an adversary. You have to treat him like a machine: you deflect the sensor.

I didn't swing the chain at his head. I swung it at the floor. A hard blow against stone. Metal on stone, loud, ugly. The sound bounced around the vault like an animal.

The sleeper jerked as if he had been struck in the ear. He turned his head abruptly towards the source of the noise. His hands groped in the wrong direction.

I struck again, further away from the gap in the flap. I acoustically drew the sleeper away from Mary, like distracting a dog with a noise. It was cruel to treat him like that, but that night was full of cruel mechanisms.

The sleeper followed the sound. One shuffling step, towards the clanking of chains.

The man with the umbrella said quietly, approvingly: Creative.

The praise burned inside me like acid. I struck a third time, further to the left, to pull him further away. The sleeping man followed.

The older man seized the moment. He wedged the door, pushing with his whole body, and I finally heard the wood give way. A distinct crack. The hatch sprang open a little further.

Mary's head appeared in the crack, first just her hair, then her forehead, then her eyes, wide and shining. She wasn't looking up, she was just looking—and I realized immediately: she wasn't seeing the room. She was seeing fear. Fear that had been inside her for far too long.

I dropped the chain and knelt again, grasped Mary's shoulder, and pulled gently, not abruptly. Her body was heavy, as if the darkness had absorbed it.

The older man helped, pulling at her arm, which I had just cut free. Mary groaned, and I could feel her gasping for breath with every movement. But she came.

The sleeping man took another step, still in the direction where I had attached the chain. He was distracted, but not forever. Blindness is patient.

The man with the umbrella stepped closer, very calmly. He said: That's lovely. You're rescuing her. And you're taking her exactly where she's needed again.

I pulled Mary further out. Her upper body was out, then her hips. Something was still holding her down below. A foot was caught, or a piece of fabric. The older man cursed, pulled harder. Mary cried out softly, a short sound that was immediately choked back in her throat.

The sleeper reacted to the sound like an animal. He suddenly turned, searching with his hands, and began to grope in our direction.

Too fast. Too close.

The older man hissed: One more jerk!

I gripped Mary tighter and pulled.

She was released.

Her body slid out of the crack, heavy in my arms. She was lighter than she should be, as if the weight of life had been lifted from her. Her skin was cold. Her neck—I only caught a glimpse of it out of the corner of my eye, and I forced myself not to stare. Don't look, she had said. I looked at her face. At her eyes.

She whispered, barely audible: Not... he...

I didn't know if she meant the umbrella man or something else, but I understood the gist: don't listen, don't look, don't negotiate.

The sleeping man was now only two steps away. His hands groped in the air, and I realized he could now smell Mary. He sniffed, and his mouth opened slightly, as if he were tasting the air.

The older man pulled me backward, away from the sleeping man, toward the stairs. He said harshly: Run!

I picked Mary up as best I could and started to walk, not run, because running means stumbling, and stumbling means dropping Mary. But my steps got faster.

The man with the umbrella made no attempt to stop us. He simply stepped aside, like a host making room. He said kindly: You have chosen.

We reached the stairs.

Behind us I heard the sleeper scraping, faster now, impatiently. And from the direction of the sleeper's chamber—far above—I heard a dull crash. Wood giving way. The wedge up there had failed or been torn out. Blind life was flowing somewhere.

The older man whispered as we took the first steps: He wanted this. He wants you to wear them.

I gasped: Why?

The older man didn't answer. He just looked up, and there was something like resignation in his gaze.

Mary lifted her head slightly in my arms. Her lips moved, and this time it wasn't a warning. It was a confession, but not his. Hers.

She whispered: I... have... signed...

My heart sank as if someone had pulled the ground out from under me.

I wasn't staring at her neck. I was staring at her face, at her eyes, and I knew: The pact of darkness wasn't on the table. It was inside her.

And somewhere behind us, in the vault, I heard the man with the umbrella say quietly, almost contentedly:

Now it begins.

The knife in the velvet

Mary's sentence hung between us like a piece of ice that won't melt, no matter how warm you hold it in your hands.

I... have... signed...

The older man pulled me further up the steps, as if the word "signed" were just another weight to bear. Mary lay in my arms, too light for a living person, too heavy for a lie. Her breath brushed against my forearm, shallow, fragile, and each time she inhaled, I felt as if she were letting go of something that could never be returned.

The stairs wound upwards, and the stone was damp, smooth, as if it had seen many escapes and devoured them all equally. Behind us, I heard the rustling of sleepers, muffled but there, like an animal in the belly of a house. And somewhere deeper, in the vault, the soft tapping

was no longer audible. That was the worst part. If he no longer taps, it means he no longer needs to mark his location.

The older man whispered without turning around: Don't listen to the word. Listen to her pulse.

I pressed Mary's body closer to mine, as if I could stabilize her pulse with mine. I felt it at her wrist, faint, but there. A beat that wasn't his own. I clung to that rhythm because it was the only thing that didn't negotiate.

We reached the corridor with the chalk crosses. It was still there, but different. Not because the stone had changed, but because my perception had shifted: Every door we passed was now more than just a door. It was a place where Mary might have been before. It was a place where "signatures" are inscribed on bodies.

The older man didn't lead us back to the sleeping woman's chamber. He turned off before reaching it, into a narrow side passage so low I had to duck my head. The floor was drier here. The smell was different: not blood, more like dust, fabric, old wood. A smell like something from a closet. Or a theater prop room.

I gasped: Where to?

He replied: To where he hides things he doesn't want to show.

That made no sense, and that's precisely why I believed it. He always showed us what he wanted to show us. If there's a place he doesn't show us, then perhaps that's where the only freedom lies.

The corridor ended at a door that differed from the others because it didn't seem old or new. It seemed... deliberate. Dark wood, clean, no number, no handle. Just a narrow gap, as if the door weren't meant to be opened, but to slide.

The older man reached into his jacket and pulled something out. Not a key. Not a bone. A piece of fabric.

Black velvet.

He held the velvet strip in front of the door, and only now did I notice that there was a fine groove in the wood, into which one could place something. Like a groove. A guide.

He pushed the velvet into the groove.

There was no click. There was a sigh. As if the door were taking a short breath.

Then she slid a finger's width to the side.

I stared at the velvet. I said, "What is this?"

The older man didn't answer immediately. Then he said: A glove. A curtain. A muzzle. Call it what you will. It takes the sound out of the door.

I slowly understood: Velvet absorbs sound. Velvet makes footsteps quiet. Velvet makes blades silent when worn within it. Velvet is the material of secret things.

The door slid open further, silently, and behind it was a room so dark that the darkness didn't feel like absence, but like fabric. And in that darkness, there was a distinct smell: metal, oil, and something sweet that I had come to hate.

The older man whispered: In. Quickly. And no light.

I stepped inside, Mary in my arms. The room was low, and I immediately felt fabric hanging from the walls. Curtains. Velvet everywhere. Thick swathes that absorbed light and muffled sound. A room designed to keep everything out.

The door slid shut behind us, and I didn't hear it close. Only the feeling that the air had changed.

Mary stirred in my arms. She whispered, barely audibly: Knife...

The word wasn't chosen at random. It was like a reflex. As if she had heard it often enough to say it herself.

The older man led me a few steps forward, and then I felt something beneath my foot: wood, not stone. We were standing on a platform or an old floor. He knelt down and pulled a curtain aside, just a crack, just enough for me to see.

I saw her in the dim, grey light that came through a crack somewhere.

Knife.

Many.

Not chaotic, but orderly. Blades in rows. Some small, like scalpels. Some long, like kitchen knives. Some had ornate handles, as if they were gifts. And between the blades, as if the knife had a story to tell, lay things: a ring, a hairband, a watch. Souvenirs.

I felt my stomach churn. This wasn't an arsenal. This was a collection.

The older man said softly: This is his velvet. His silent tools.

I asked, hoarsely: Why?

The older man looked at Mary, then at me. He said: To sign pacts when paper isn't enough.

I carefully laid Mary on the wooden platform, not hard, as gently as possible. She was awake enough to sense that we were in another room, a room without echoes. Her eyes searched for my face.

She whispered: He's coming...

I heard nothing. No typing. No laughter. No murmuring. But that was precisely the wrong thing to do.

The older man reached into the collection and took out a knife.

Not the biggest. Not the most impressive.

A narrow dagger with a simple handle.

And he didn't pull it out of a wooden box, but out of a velvet cover.

The knife made no sound.

The older man held it out to me, not like a weapon, more like a decision.

He said: You want to break the pact? Then you need something that cuts without him hearing it.

Mary's breathing quickened. She whispered: Not... blood...

I saw the knife. I saw Mary. I saw the velvet that swallows everything, even fear.

And I understood: The knife in the velvet is not meant to kill him.

Its purpose is to separate something that it has joined together.

The knife lay in his hand as if it had never been anywhere but within that dark fabric. No reflections, no metallic glint, no sound. Just the narrow, matte blade, so unobtrusive that one almost forgets its purpose. That was precisely what made it dangerous: it didn't look like violence. It looked like necessity.

Mary lay on the pedestal, her eyes half-open, her lips dry. Her gaze was fixed on the knife, not out of greed, but out of a kind of panicked memory. As if she had seen the blade before, without being allowed to see it.

"Not... blood..." she had whispered.

The older man nodded slowly, as if he had been expecting the word. He knelt beside the pedestal, pulled one of the velvet panels aside, and let the soft light fall upon Mary's torso. He didn't touch her. He kept his distance, like a doctor who knows that touch here is more than just touch.

He said quietly: It's not about blood. It's about evidence.

Evidence. The word hit me hard. Everything here was evidence, and yet nothing was tangible. Doors, voices, smells, cold. Evidence that dissolves as soon as you try to grasp it.

I asked, hoarsely: What did she sign?

Mary swallowed. Her neck moved, and out of the corner of my eye I saw the dots there, but I forced myself not to look. I kept my gaze on her face. On her eyes, searching for me as if I were the last solid object in a room made of fabric.

She whispered: Not... on paper.

The older man raised the dagger slightly, as if to confirm this. He said: "Paper is for people who are afraid of fire. He uses velvet."

He reached behind him into a niche between the curtains. I hadn't even noticed there was a niche there because the fabric obscures every edge. He pulled out something that looked like a small book, but without a cover. Just a black velvet slipcover with a single seam along the edge.

He placed it on the pedestal next to Mary, as carefully as if it were a sleeping animal. Then he opened the envelope.

There were no pages inside. There were strips.

Strips of velvet, neatly cut, each as wide as a finger. On each strip were markings. Not painted, not printed. Sewn in. Dark thread on black fabric, so fine that it's only visible when the light hits it at an angle. Names, words, sometimes just a symbol. A cross, a circle, a number.

It was a register, except registers are usually sober. This one felt like an album.

The older man pulled out a strip of paper and held it up so I could see it. I read the name, and I felt cold because it was everywhere that night.

Mary.

The thread wasn't completely black. It had a dark reddish tinge, as if it had been dipped in something other than ink.

Mary groaned softly and turned her head away, as if the mere sight of it took her breath away.

The older man said: That's her signature. Not her handwriting. Her body.

My stomach sank. The velvet strip wasn't a memory. It was a bond. Something that exists even when you don't see it. Something you can touch. And if you can touch something, you can also lose it.

I asked: How do you break that?

The older man didn't answer immediately. He ran his finger just above the embroidered name without touching the thread. Then he said: You separate it.

He held the knife out to me. Now, so close that I could really see the blade: a fine line that didn't absorb light, but simply didn't reflect it back. As if it were already accustomed to separating things without leaving a trace.

Mary whispered: Not... inside me...

The older man nodded again. He said: Not into her. Into what clings to her.

He pulled the velvet strip with Mary's name onto the pedestal and stretched it between two fingers. Then he pointed to a spot in the thread, directly below the M. There was a tiny thickening there, as if the thread had a knot at that point.

He said: This is where the pressure is. If you cut, you're not cutting the name. You're cutting the knot.

I took the knife.

It was harder than it looked. Not in my hand, but in my mind. I noticed my pulse quickening, not from fear, but from the kind of responsibility you feel when you suddenly hold the tool that could change everything.

I placed the blade against the thread, just lightly, without pressing. Velvet even absorbs the trembling of my hand. The knife remained still, as if it had calmed itself.

The older man whispered: Slowly. If you go too deep, you'll take the whole strip. Then he'll notice it immediately.

I exhaled. I guided the blade not like a weapon, but like a needle. A small cut. Only at the knot.

The thread gave way.

No sound.

No blood spatter.

Just a tiny resistance that suddenly disappeared, as if someone had taken their finger off a switch.

At that moment, Mary gasped, as if her chest had just been opened up again. Her eyes widened. She looked at me, and in her gaze there was something I hadn't seen for hours: clarity. No fog, no stage set, just Mary.

Then the fear returned immediately, because clarity never lasts long here.

The older man pulled back the strip, examined it, and I saw that the thread hadn't simply been cut. It had come undone. The knot was open, and the name suddenly looked... less secure. As if it had lost its grip.

The older man said quietly: Good.

I wanted to ask if that was enough. If that broke the pact. But in that room I learned: questions are pauses. And pauses are invitations.

A noise was heard.

Not from Mary. Not from the older man.

From the door.

Or rather: from the place where the door had to be.

A silent glide, so gentle it was more like a change in air pressure. The velvet strips moved minimally, as if a cold breeze had brushed against them.

The older man froze. His eyes narrowed.

Mary whispered: He...

I didn't turn my head towards the door. I only saw the older man's gaze fixed on it, as if he saw something I wasn't supposed to see. And then I heard it: no tapping, no rustling of an umbrella.

A very quiet inhalation.

So close that it could no longer be located.

The older man whispered, his lips barely moving: He's already inside.

My hand gripped the knife. I suddenly realized how wrong it was to wait for sounds in a velvet room. Velvet is its home. Velvet is silence.

Mary struggled to her feet, sitting up on her elbows. She wasn't staring into the room; she was staring past me, somewhere into the darkness between the curtains. Her pupils dilated. She whispered, "Don't... look..."

Too late, I thought. Not because I had looked, but because I realized: He doesn't want us to see him at all. He only wants us to feel that he is there.

The older man took the velvet envelope from me, quickly shoved the strips back in as if hiding evidence. He grasped Mary's loose hand, gently pulling it upright. He said, "We have to get out."

I said: Where to? Every door is—

He interrupted me harshly: No door. That was the message.

Stairs.

I felt the paper in my pocket like a burning piece of truth. Stairs. Not a door. I looked down, saw a narrow crack in the floor between the velvet strips, one I hadn't noticed before. Wood, a joint, a metal handle, almost invisible.

A trapdoor.

Naturally.

The older man wedged the door, not to break, but to open it quietly. He lifted the flap, and beneath it was darkness that smelled not of blood, but of cold air. An escape route that wasn't called a "door".

Mary clung to my arm. Her fingers were ice-cold, but firm. She whispered, directly into my wrist: The knife... don't lose it...

I nodded without saying a word. I didn't put the blade away. I kept it hidden in the velvet of my hand, so it wouldn't shine.

Something moved behind the curtains. Not a step. Not a rustle. Just the feeling that the darkness was gaining a focal point.

And then, very quietly, as if someone were standing next to us and speaking into a normal conversation, the voice came.

Not loud. Not angry.

Just to be safe:

Nice work, Abraham.

My stomach tightened. He had noticed. Not because something cracked. Because something was no longer in its place.

The older man pushed Mary toward the opening. I held her, guided her down, carefully, step by step, because falling is the quickest pact one can make.

As Mary disappeared, I felt her breath behind me, closer, and the voice said, still friendly:

You think you've untied the thread. But velvet never forgets.

I was the last to go down, still holding the knife, and pulled the hatch shut above me as quietly as possible.

In the darkness below, I heard Mary's breath, my breath, the older man's breath.

And above, through the layer of velvet, I heard no typing.

Just a very quiet, contented exhalation.

The hatch above us closed silently, and for a moment I was sure that the silence now belonged to us. A ridiculous thought. Silence never belongs to a person fleeing. Silence is merely the fabric in which sounds later resonate more clearly.

We stood in a narrow shaft, barely wider than two shoulders. The floor was wood, old and dry, and the air smelled not of blood, but of dust and old linseed oil. A place that might once have been a warehouse. Or a space between stage sets, where the audience is never shown how thin the walls are.

Mary leaned against me, half-upright, and her weight was no longer that of a sack. She was still weak, but she was there. She held my sleeve like a child who doesn't want to get lost in the dark.

The older man went ahead, without light, as if he had the room in his mind. He didn't grope like the sleepers. He knew. Knowledge is the rarest tool here.

He whispered: Not a word. No names.

I wanted to protest because names are sometimes the only thing you can rely on, but I understood. Names are exclamation marks here. And if you say "Mary," the castle might answer.

We walked. Not quickly. Fast makes noise. We glided more, short steps, feet flat on the ground. The shaft led downwards, not via steps, but via a sloping ramp. The wood creaked softly, and each creak felt like a scream because the velvet above us had absorbed every sound, making even the smallest creak sound amplified.

Mary breathed in short gasps. I felt her warmth on my arm and thought: This is what sleepers seek. Warmth. Breath. Life. And when they are blind, they find that which lives most loudly.

The older man stopped and raised his hand. We froze. In the darkness, I heard nothing at first. Then it came, very quietly, from somewhere ahead:

A loop.

Not a shoe on stone. Something softer. Fabric over wood. Like someone dragging the hem of a coat behind them.

Mary's fingers dug into my sleeve. She whispered, barely audibly: He—

The older man put a finger to his lips, though he was barely visible. Then he pulled Mary and me a step to the side into a niche. A bulge in the shaft, little more than a hollow behind a wooden wall. We squeezed in, shoulder to shoulder, and I felt Mary's heart pounding against my forearm, faster now.

The grinding was getting closer. Slowly. Not like someone searching. Like something that has time.

I held my breath as long as I could. The knife was still in my hand. The blade wasn't visible, but I felt its pressure in my palm. A silent promise that something can be separated if necessary.

The older man whispered, right in my ear: If you stab, don't stab him. Stab the fabric.

I didn't understand at first. Then I realized: velvet. Curtains. Panels. Everything here is fabric. And fabric is its medium. If you damage fabric, you damage its silence.

The grinding was now happening directly in front of the niche. I felt it like a shadow, even though it was dark. The air became slightly colder, as if someone were standing in front of the niche, looking around without using their eyes.

Then his voice came.

Not from above, not through a door. Directly in front of us, muffled, as if he were speaking through fabric, and precisely for that reason so intimate:

You are like children hiding under the covers.

Mary flinched as if he had touched her.

I didn't move.

He continued gently: I only showed you the knife. You decided to use it yourselves.

A sentence that sounds like an accusation, yet feels like responsibility. He wanted me to feel guilty for cutting, even though I wanted to free Mary.

The older man next to me was silent. But I heard him exhale shallowly. Fear. Or anger. Maybe both.

Then I felt something at the edge of the niche: a touch on the fabric, as if someone were running two fingers over the boards where the niche was concealed by a hanging strip of fabric. A gentle caress. As if calming an animal.

I knew: He was standing there. Right in front of me. Maybe less than two handbreadths away. And I couldn't see him because there was fabric between us.

I remembered the older man's words. Stitch the fabric.

I lifted the knife slightly, so slowly that no draft was created. The blade touched the velvet in front of me. The velvet was thick, soft, and it absorbed the touch like a mouth that refuses to reveal anything.

I didn't stab wildly. I made a clean, small cut.

The velvet didn't tear loudly. But it gave way, and in that tiny moment when the fibers separated, I heard something that sounded like a thunderclap in that shaft: a gossamer, dry rip. And I felt the air change. As if the room had briefly lost a breath.

His voice broke off.

A tiny moment of silence.

Then I heard something I'd never heard before: a genuine, uncontrolled gasp, like someone who's surprised. Not acting. A reflex.

The older man seized the moment. He grabbed Mary and pulled her out of the niche, into the shaft. I followed, still holding the knife.

We did end up running after all. Not for long, just a few steps, enough to create some distance before he regained control.

There was no pursuit behind us in the classic sense. No racing. No typing. Just a sound that was worse because it was so quiet: a rustling of fabric, as if someone were very slowly closing a curtain.

And his voice, composed again, polite again, but now thinner:

That was unwise.

The shaft ended abruptly at a small wooden staircase, barely five steps, leading into another room. The older man took it without hesitation. It was colder upstairs. And I suddenly smelled something that wasn't dust.

Snow.

Not real snow, of course. But cold, clean air that tastes of the outdoors. An escape. Or another illusion.

We stepped through a crack into a narrow door – not a proper door, more like a loose wooden door – and suddenly found ourselves in a room that was completely different from the velvet hideaway: stone, cold, and through a crack in the wall, pale light shone in, looking like moonlight on white.

The older man whispered: He won't be able to keep up. Not here.

Mary leaned against the wall, slowly sliding down, exhausted. She looked at me, and in her gaze was the memory of the word she had spoken.

I... have... signed...

I knelt beside her and whispered: What exactly?

She shook her head weakly. Then she raised her hand and pointed at my neck.

Not on the wound.

To what lies behind it.

She whispered: You too.

A single sentence, so small, yet it changed everything. Not as a threat. As a warning. As a mirror without glass.

I felt the bite burn, as if it had been waiting for that sentence. As if something inside me was answering.

The older man looked at us, and there was no surprise in his face. Only that weary knowledge.

He said quietly: The pact is always looking for a second name.

I was still holding the knife. The blade was clean. No blood. Just the cut in the velvet, somewhere behind us, proof that silence can be broken.

Mary closed her eyes briefly, and when she opened them again, she said something that made my throat tighten:

If he asks... say nothing.

And from afar, through stone and air, I heard a sound that no longer belonged to the velvet.

A single tap.

Very far away.

But just enough to say:

I'm still here.

Fire in the snow

The room we stood in was so cold that our breath was not only visible, but heavy. It hung in the air like something you could touch if you dared. The pale light that filtered through the cracks wasn't candlelight, lantern light, or a friendly light. It was the light from outside, filtered, sharp, and it actually smelled of snow—that dry, clean cold you only smell when the world outside has turned white.

Mary sat against the wall, her knees drawn up, her hands close to her body as if trying to trap her warmth. Her eyes were open, but she wasn't looking into the room; rather, she was looking through it. As if she had learned that seeing here didn't protect, but bound.

The older man stood at the crack, his hand on the stone, listening. Not for footsteps, not for voices. He listened as if he wanted to hear whether the room itself betrayed us. In places like this, even the brickwork has an opinion.

The single tap, far away, was barely more than a thought. And yet it struck us as if it were right next to our ear. A polite gesture. A punctuation mark that says: The sentence isn't finished yet.

I was still holding the knife. The blade was invisible in the darkness of my hand, but I felt it with every movement. It was both comforting and repulsive. Comforting because it was real. Repulsive because it reminded me how quickly one reaches for tools on a night like this, to avoid becoming a tool oneself.

Mary whispered without looking up: If he asks... say nothing.

I nodded, even though she didn't need to see it. I understood the meaning. Not because words are magical, but because here, words become material. Words become doors. Names become keys. And sometimes silence is the only thing you have left.

The older man turned away from the crack and went to a small wooden door in the corner. I hadn't consciously noticed it before because wood down here seems like a lie. He placed his

hand on the frame, felt for an edge, and pressed. The door gave way, a finger's width, then stopped.

He whispered: They pushed them in.

I asked quietly: Who?

He looked at me, briefly, and there was something in his gaze that was both an answer and a warning. Then he said: Doors don't close by themselves here. People do. Or something that uses people.

Mary flinched at the word "people." As if it hurt to still believe in people.

The older man reached into his jacket, pulled out the small wedge, and placed it between the door and the frame. He pushed, slowly, without force. The wood creaked softly. The wedge worked, patiently. The wood gave way, millimeter by millimeter. The door opened, and cold air streamed in, so cold it almost tasted of metal.

There was no corridor outside. Outside there was... nothing that seemed to fit. A narrow passage, yes, but it didn't lead to any more doors, but rather to a staircase leading upstairs, and at the top of the stairs was a sliver of light, so white it almost hurt.

The older man looked at Mary. He said: Can you stand?

Mary nodded, but it was more a matter of will than ability. I didn't put the knife away. Instead, I offered her my arm. She grasped it, cold, firm. Her fingers were ice.

We walked. Slowly up the stairs. Every step was a risk, because a step is a sound, and sounds down here are invitations. But the air changed with each step. Less dusty. Less iron-sweet. More outdoors, more like the sea, more like that fresh cold that feels like truth.

At the top of the stairs was a hatch. No lock, no handle. Just a board you had to push up. The older man put his shoulder to it and pushed. The board moved, heavily, as if it hadn't budged in a long time. Then suddenly light streamed in, and for a moment it was as if the world above was about to overwhelm us.

We were outside.

Not on a street. Not at the harbor. In a small, open space behind the houses, where people store waste and stack crates, and where no one goes at night. The ground was covered with a thin layer of snow, not deep, but enough that every step left a track. White powder that forgets nothing.

The wind from the sea was sharp. It bit into the skin. It made every breath a testament.

I didn't look back at the hatch because I knew that all they would do was check if it closed again. Instead, I looked ahead.

And then I saw it.

A fire.

Not large, not blazing like a house fire. A concentrated, bright fire in a metal barrel, perhaps lit by a fisherman or a watchman for warmth. It stood a few meters away, half-protected by a wall. The flames were orange, the world around them blue-gray. Snow and fire, right next to each other. An impossibility that suddenly made perfect sense, because that night I had learned that the impossible is just another kind of door.

Mary's breathing quickened when she saw the fire. Not from fear. From relief. Warmth is a promise, even if it's dangerous.

The older man whispered: Not too close. Heat is a nuisance.

I understood immediately. The sleepers seek warmth. And he, the man with the umbrella, seeks scenes. Fire is a scene. Fire is a focal point. Fire casts shadows, and shadows are his game.

We stopped at the edge of the square, half-hidden by a wall. The older man looked around, quickly, deliberately. No tapping. No rustling. Only wind. And the crackling of the fire.

Then he said quietly, very specifically: We must break the mold.

I looked at the snow. Three lines of tracks, already visible: his, Mary's, mine. And these tracks led directly from the hatch here. A line. An invitation.

Mary whispered: He doesn't need any traces.

The older man nodded. He said: No. But they help him to be faster.

He pointed to the barrel with the fire. Then to a row of old crates standing nearby. Wood. Dry. Light.

I understood what he was planning before he did it, and I didn't like it. Fire as a distraction is easy. Fire as a weapon is ugly. But perhaps ugliness was necessary today.

The older man walked to the barrel, not directly, but in a wide arc to confuse the tracks. He picked up one of the crates and pushed it closer to the barrel so that the flames could lick the wood. He did it quickly and precisely. Without hesitation.

I asked, roughly: What are you doing?

He answered without looking at me: I'm giving him something to see that isn't you.

Mary stared at the flames. Her face went pale. She whispered: Fire... wakes him up.

I felt the bite on my neck burn, as if it were agreeing. As if the word "fire" had stirred something inside me that wasn't just pain, but anticipation.

The older man didn't light the fire intentionally. He simply let it do its work. The wood began to smoke. Then it crackled. The smoke rose, gray, and mingled with the wind. The snow around the barrel began to melt, forming small, dark puddles, and I thought: If you stand here, eventually you won't see any more tracks, just mud. Perhaps that was the idea. Perhaps mud was the only truth that consumes tracks.

Mary gripped my arm tighter. She said softly, very close: The pact... inside me... pulls... when it gets warm.

I swallowed. I looked at her, and for the first time I didn't ask "what exactly." I simply asked: Where are you headed?

She shook her head, tears welling in her eyes, but they didn't fall because the cold held them fast. She whispered: To him. Or to... the darkness.

The older man came back to us. The smoke grew thicker. The fire was spreading into the box, and now it was no longer just a barrel fire. It was a small blaze, controlled perhaps, but unpredictable. Light flickered across the snow, making the white surface seem alive, as if it were breathing.

And then I heard it.

Do not type.

No umbrella.

Something else: a soft crunching sound in the snow, far away, at the edge of the square. A sound that only occurs when someone is deliberately walking slowly.

I looked over, and in the pale light I recognized a figure. Not clear, just a silhouette. Hands slightly in front of the body. Head tilted. A sleeper. Blind, groping, and yet purposeful, because warmth has a direction.

Then a second silhouette, further to the left. And a third.

The smoke drifted towards them, and the flames reflected faintly in their open eyes, though they could not see. They did not come because they recognized us. They came because the fire called to them.

The older man whispered: Now.

He pointed to the right, to a narrow alley leading away from the square, down towards the sea. There was less snow there because the wind had swept it away. Fewer tracks. More darkness.

Mary gasped, and I felt her sway. I gripped her tighter, pulling her along. The older man walked ahead.

We moved, and behind us the fire we ourselves had fed grew. It crackled louder now. It was a vibrant noise that sounded like a scream in this still snowy night. And the sleepers followed the scream, slowly, blindly, inexorably.

As we reached the alley, I heard a very faint noise behind us that did not come from the fire.

A friendly exhalation.

As if someone would be satisfied that we lit up the stage for them.

The alley was narrow and windy, and the snow lay here not like a blanket, but like dust that had gathered in the corners. The wind from the sea swept away the tracks, but it also swept the smoke behind us, and smoke is a finger that shows where you are, no matter how carefully you walk.

Mary's weight hung from my arm. She tried to stand on her own two feet, but every other movement was more willpower than muscle. Her lips were blue, not from the pact, but from the cold. And yet I sensed that warmth was chasing her. The fire behind us wasn't just a distraction. It was a magnet for all that is blind.

The older man walked ahead, close to the wall of the building, as if he wanted to give up as little space as possible. He didn't turn around. He didn't trust that looking back would do him any good. He had learned that looking was just another way of getting pinned down.

I glanced back briefly, just out of the corner of my eye, nothing more. The barrel fire was no longer a barrel fire. The box was ablaze, flames licked upwards, and the snow around the barrel had turned to black slush. Silhouettes stood around the fire, four perhaps, five, their hands groping, their heads slightly bowed. Sleeping. They didn't seem like a crowd, more like individual instruments searching for the same note.

And in that light I saw something that didn't move like them.

At the edge of the square, where the shadow of the wall begins, stood a figure, very still.

A man.

No umbrella in sight, no typing. But his posture was too upright, too calm, to be asleep. He stood there as if contemplating the fire, not as a danger, but as a gift.

I looked away. I didn't want to be sure. Safety here is just the beginning of panic.

Mary whispered, barely audible: He... loves... flames.

The older man heard it and said, without turning around: Flames are mirrors.

The sentence hit me like a stab. Of course. Fire reflects. Not in glass, but in eyes. In wet stones. In windows. It creates tiny, living mirrors everywhere, multiplying the space. When it needs mirrors, fire is its best helper.

We reached the end of the alley. A steep staircase opened up before us, its steps smoothed by the salty wind. Below, I heard the sea, dark, impatient. The sound of water is usually soothing. Today it sounded like a threat, because water in this story is never just water.

The older man stopped and raised his hand. He listened. Then he whispered: Don't go down.

I looked at him. He wasn't pointing down, but at a side door, half-hidden, right next to the stairs. No sign. Just a narrow entrance, probably leading to a storage room or the cellar of a house.

I wanted to protest. Doors. Always doors. But he shook his head as if he had heard my thoughts.

He said: Not through. Just past. There's a corner there without snow. We have to break the track.

He pulled Mary and me into the shadow of the side door, where the house wall held back the wind. The floor here wasn't white, but black, dry. No footprints, just dust. I felt Mary press herself against the wall as if she were a second skin.

The older man knelt down and scooped up some dust. He took a handful and sprinkled it over our shoes, over our trouser legs. Soot. Dirt. He made us dirty, and I understood: snow is a sheet of paper. Dirt is an eraser. When we turn the white tracks into dark ones, the path becomes less clear.

Mary coughed softly as the dust hit her breath. I held her, pulled her closer, and her head briefly rested on my shoulder. At that moment, I felt the bite on my neck again, hot, as if irritated by the dust. Or as if something inside me was reacting to the smell of soot, like an animal catching the scent of fire.

The older man whispered: Now we're going out into the open air. Not too close to houses. No windows.

Window. That word again. We left the shade and didn't go down the stairs to the sea, but along a narrow path that ran along the edge of the cliffs. The wind was stronger here. It almost snatched the breath from our lungs. But it had one advantage: it dispersed the smoke, it dispersed sounds, it perhaps even dispersed smells.

Mary stumbled. I caught her. The older man paused briefly, helped without asking, and put Mary's arm around his shoulder for a few steps. Then he handed her back to me. He always kept us on the right path. Tonight, direction is the only form of hope.

We no longer heard the fire, only the sea. But that didn't mean it was over. It only meant the scene had changed.

Mary suddenly whispered: They're coming... not just to the fire.

I asked quietly: Where to then?

She shook her head, and tears welled up in her eyes, but the cold turned them to glass. She whispered: To that... that which is warm... inside you.

The sentence hit me like a blow. A warmth welled up inside me. I thought of the bite, the burning spot that sometimes pulsates as if it weren't a wound, but a second heart. A place one can find inside me if one is blind.

The older man heard it and said gruffly: He marked you.

I knew it. I'd just never heard it put so clearly. Marked. Not as a victim, but as a guidepost. A beacon you can't see, but can smell when you're asleep.

We reached a section where the path narrowed, the cliffs to the left, the sea to the right, and above us the houses loomed like dark boxes. Some windows were lit, warm. Small, inviting squares in the night.

I felt my body automatically look in that direction because light provides orientation. And I immediately forced myself to look away. No light. No windows. No mirrors.

That's when I heard it.

No crunching. No footsteps.

A quiet humming sound.

A sound that lingered in the wind, as if it weren't from there. A humming like a choir, very far away, but unmistakably human. Not a song. A steady tone, like synchronized breathing set to a rhythm.

Mary froze. She whispered: The chamber...

The older man stopped. His face turned gray. He said: They are outside.

The fire had not only lured her. It had awakened her, and now the chamber streamed into the city, blind and warmly searching.

And once they're outside, there are no safe spaces left. No doors, no velvet hiding places. Just wind. And cold.

Behind us, in the wind, I heard another sound, close enough to make the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end: a single crunch in the snow. Not quick. Not blind. A step that knows where it's going.

I didn't turn my head completely, just enough to see the silhouette in the corner of my eye.

The man with the umbrella.

Or someone who wears it.

He was far enough away that I couldn't see his face. But I saw the dark outline of a closed umbrella, and I saw that he wasn't holding it as protection from the wind, but like a walking stick. As if to indicate that he wasn't cold.

Mary whispered: Don't... go back...

The older man pulled us onward, faster now, because time was once again in his hands, not ours. He said: We must go where snow and fire meet.

I gasped: Why?

He replied: Because that's where he can see best. And if he can see best, maybe we can finally show him something.

A sentence that sounded like madness.

But on that night, madness was sometimes the only way to break out of a cycle.

The wind cut our faces as if offended that we were still breathing. Mary clung to my arm again, and I felt her body give way slightly with every step. Not just from weakness. As if something inside her was pulling her towards where it was warm. Towards where she was commanded.

The older man led us away from the windows, away from the houses, down into an area where the town was no longer pristine. Backyards, storage areas, narrow paths between low walls. The snow lay unevenly here, sometimes too thin, sometimes in small piles that the wind had pushed into corners. And everywhere there was the smell of smoke, because smoke behaves like a second layer of air in a coastal town.

The humming from afar—the breathing chorus of the sleeping—grew louder. Not closer in a spatial sense, but rather denser, as if the city itself were picking up this sound and carrying it on. It was as if Whitby had decided to become a musical instrument.

I said quietly to the older man: If you are blind, why this humming?

He answered without hesitation: So that they may find each other. So that they are not alone. Together they are one space.

A room. That word again. Doors were rooms, rooms were traps, and now people themselves were rooms. I felt my stomach churn.

Mary whispered, her lips dry: It... calms... her.

Calming. Humming as a soothing sound. A lullaby for the awake. I didn't want to know who taught it to them.

We reached a clearing less open than the one by the barrel fire, more of a courtyard between three buildings. In the center, there was still snow, untouched, smooth as a stage. On one side, something small was burning: a pile of wood, probably lit by someone to warm tools or to get rid of debris. It wasn't a controlled barrel fire. It was an open flame, low but lively. The snow around the fire melted and steamed, and the steam rose, swallowing the light for a few seconds.

Snow and fire, again. As if the city had only this motif left.

The older man stopped at the edge of the yard and pulled us behind a low wall. He whispered: Here.

I didn't spy, I felt. The fire was an eye. The snow was paper. And we were ink that didn't want to be seen.

Mary gasped. Her forehead was damp, not from snow, but from inner heat. The bite on my neck burned as well, as if an invisible thread had stretched between Mary and me and was now being pulled.

The older man looked at me. His gaze was harsh. He said: You will be questioned soon.

I swallowed. I knew it. When he looks his best, he asks. He forces you to define yourself.

Mary whispered: Say... nothing...

I nodded. But silence isn't always possible. Sometimes silence itself becomes the answer.

Then I heard the crunching sound.

Not blind. Not uncoordinated.

One step. Then another.

At the entrance to the courtyard, between two buildings, the silhouette of the man with the umbrella appeared. This time not just in the corner of my eye. This time clearly. The umbrella was closed. The handle was a dark dot. I couldn't see the crack in the mirror, but I knew it was there, like a scar you no longer need to pay attention to feel.

He stopped, letting his gaze wander across the courtyard, over the fire, over the snow. He looked like someone admiring a painting that hung exactly as he wanted it.

He said, kindly: Ah. There is our fire.

The older man next to me shrugged his shoulders as if the word had hit him hard.

The umbrella man took two steps into the courtyard. The tip of his umbrella touched the snow, and I heard the soft crunching sound, so distinct that it sounded like a punctuation mark.

He said: You have learned. You choose places I like to be.

I stayed behind the wall. Mary's hand gripped my arm.

Then something happened that I hadn't expected: A figure emerged from a dark passageway on the opposite side of the courtyard.

A sleeping person.

Then one more.

Then one more.

They didn't come hastily. They came in the same slow rhythm, and as they walked, they hummed. Not loudly, but in unison. A sound that didn't drown out the fire, but complemented it. A chorale without melody, only breath.

The man with the umbrella turned his head towards them, and I saw something in his posture that was almost like respect. He said softly: Beautiful.

Then he turned back towards us, as if he knew we were there, even though the wall was covering us.

He said: Abraham.

No call. No threat.

A name, spoken like a key sliding into a lock.

I felt the bite burn, as if my throat wanted to answer me. Mary squeezed my arm tighter, as if she were binding me to silence.

The older man whispered: Don't react.

The umbrella man waited. Silence. Wind. The humming of sleepers. The crackling of the fire. Melting snow.

Then he said: You have freed them. You have cut threads. You have damaged velvet. You have fed fire. And you believe you are free.

He paused to let the sentence sink in. Then he said, very calmly: You owe me a confession now.

I remained silent.

He smiled. I could see it, even though I was far away. His voice softened: Just tell me one thing. Why are you saving her?

That was the question. Not "how." Not "where." Why. He wanted the core message. The sentence you tell yourself so you can sleep at night.

Mary whispered, barely audible: No...

But the answer was pressing within me. Not because I wanted to give him something, but because I needed to hear the answer myself. And that was his trap: He asks questions that you're actually asking yourself.

I held my breath. I searched within myself for a word that wasn't a door.

Then the older man did something I hadn't expected.

He stood up.

He stepped out of the shadows behind the wall, directly into the courtyard, into the light of the fire, into the snow, and he said loudly, clearly, without politeness:

Because he is guilty.

The sentence cut through wind and humming like a blade. The sleepers didn't stop, but their humming wavered briefly, as if the air itself had twitched.

The man with the umbrella turned his head to the older man. His smile remained, but it became narrow. He said: Ah. You speak for him.

The older man said: I am speaking the truth so that you don't have to squeeze it out of him.

The umbrella man nodded slowly, as if enjoying a pleasant turn of events. Then he lifted the handle of the umbrella slightly, as if it were a glass he was raising.

He said: Guilt. A wonderful word. It suits every castle.

The sleepers were now close enough for me to see their faces. Eyes open, empty. Hands groping. And they weren't walking directly toward the fire. They were walking in an arc, as if completing a circle.

A circle around the courtyard.

A circle around us.

The older man looked back at me, his gaze hard: Now.

I understood, without explanation. When the circle closes, no avenue remains open.

I gripped Mary tighter and pulled her to the side, not back, not forward—sideways, to where the snow was thinner at the edge and slush darkened the ground. We weren't running. We were sliding, stumbling, struggling. The older man went ahead, right on the edge of the circle, so close to the sleeping people that I could hear their breathing. They smelled of cold skin and smoke.

The man with the umbrella stood in the center, calm, and said behind us, kindly, as if it were a farewell greeting:

The Pact of Darkness no longer needs a signature. It has you in motion now.

And the moment we pushed past a sleeping woman, her hand brushed against my jacket.

Just a whisper.

But I felt it like a burn.

And I knew: touch is the true contract.

The Dawn Victory

The touch was so light that in normal life it wouldn't even be considered a touch. A brush against fabric, a finger accidentally catching. But that night, nothing was accidental. The mere breath of her hand on my jacket felt like someone had pressed a hot coin against my throat. Not where the bite was, but everywhere at once, like a signal rippling through skin and bone.

Mary stumbled beside me; I caught her, pulled her onward, away from the spot where the sleepers had intended to complete the circle. The older man led us like a shadow along the wall, always where the snow turned to slush, where tracks became illegible. The wind carried the smoke from the fire across the yard, and for a few seconds we became blurred shapes. Perhaps that was our only camouflage: a world that cannot stand still.

Behind us, the man with the umbrella remained in the center, and that was unnatural. Hunters don't stand in the center. Hunters follow. He stood there because he didn't have to follow. Because he knew that circles close themselves.

The older man whispered without turning around: Don't think. Don't feel. Go.

A sentence that sounds inhuman until you understand that it's precisely what keeps us human. Thinking and feeling are the doors it uses. Walking is simply movement.

We squeezed through a narrow passage between two sheds, so tight that Mary's shoulder scraped against the wood. She gasped softly, but she stayed on her feet. Her grip on my arm was tighter than before. Not out of strength. Out of panic, which had transformed into muscle.

The passage led into another alley, deeper, more sheltered from the wind. Here the snow lay deeper because the wind couldn't blow it away. White, honest paper, instantly revealing every trace. The older man paused briefly, shuffled his foot, blurring the tracks, creating an ugly, wide carpet of prints that conveyed more chaos than direction.

He whispered: Traces are words. Make them unreadable.

We continued walking. My lungs burned from the cold. Mary's breathing became ragged. The bite on my neck throbbed as if responding to the rhythm of the humming that still hovered somewhere behind us. The chorus of sleepers was no longer just sound. It was a net spreading across the city.

We reached a point where the alley forked. To the left, a narrow passage with a low door. To the right, a staircase led up towards a street that might have been bathed in faint morning light, if it were already morning. But it was still night. And yet, there was something in the sky that was no longer entirely black. A gray, barely visible, like a promise one doesn't want to believe.

The older man looked up. His voice was rough: "Dawn is coming. This is our only chance."

I asked quietly: Why?

He replied: Because he doesn't hate the light. But it makes him impatient.

Impatient. I thought of his politeness, his pauses. Impatience means mistakes. Perhaps that's the only victory one can achieve here: his mistake.

Mary whispered: Dawn... hurts...

I looked at her. Her face was pale, her lips chapped. I recognized in her not just exhaustion, but something deeper: an anticipation of pain. As if she had learned in the spaces beneath the city that light doesn't comfort, but burns.

The older man chose the stairs. No door. No interior. Openness, wind, risk. But also fewer traps. He went ahead, taking the steps quickly, but not running. I followed with Mary.

At the top, we came to a wider street, with streetlights whose glow now seemed pointless against the emerging gray. The snow lay thin and trampled. Traces of other people, real traces: fishermen, laborers, people who had to get up early. The city wasn't awake yet, but it was no longer dead.

That changed something. Not much, but enough for me to feel it: In a busy world, it's more difficult to build a stage without anyone seeing the scaffolding.

The older man didn't lead us toward the harbor, nor toward the church. He led us to a small square with an old fountain in the middle. The fountain was frozen solid, a white disc on top, and above it hung a dew, stiff with frost. No water. Just ice. And on the edge of the fountain lay something that didn't belong there.

A piece of velvet.

Black.

Like a piece of night on snow.

Mary froze. Her grip tightened so much it hurt. She whispered: No...

The older man saw the velvet and cursed softly. He said: He's ahead of us.

Of course. Always.

The piece of velvet wasn't large, perhaps the size of a hand. And on it lay something that immediately stood out in the gray light: a knife.

Not hidden. Not raised menacingly. Simply placed there, as if it were a gift. The blade was clean, the handle dark. A knife wrapped in velvet, in the middle of the snow.

A symbol that screams louder than any typing.

The older man stopped, a step away, as if the edge of the fountain were a boundary. He said quietly: Don't touch.

I looked at the knife and felt my own knife in my hand, hidden, warm from the handle. Two knives. A mirror. An invitation.

Mary whispered: He wants... you to swap.

Without looking at her, I asked: What will happen if I do it?

She shook her head. Tears were now flowing, thin lines that froze almost instantly on her cold skin. She whispered: Then you are... no longer you.

The older man stared at the fountain. Then he said something that surprised me: The fountain is a door.

I looked at him. He pointed at the ice. At the dew. At the velvet.

He said: He always places his things at transitions. A well is a transition, even if it's frozen. Beneath ice lies depth.

I swallowed. Depth. More depth.

And then I heard it.

Do not type.

Not sums.

A sound that was far more dangerous because it sounded so commonplace: footsteps on stone. Several. Real footsteps. People.

Two men appeared at the edge of the square, laborers perhaps, wearing thick coats and caps. They didn't see the knife immediately. They saw us. Three figures: a woman barely able to stand, an older man who looked as if he'd spent the night in the ground, and me, my face too pale.

One of the workers called out: Is everything alright?

The sentence was so ordinary that it hit you like a punch in the gut. Ordinarity is a weapon here because it makes you believe you can simply reply and everything will be alright.

The older man immediately said, calmly, not too loudly: Move along.

The worker hesitated. His gaze fell on the velvet. On the knife. His brow frowned.

And the moment he saw the knife, his face changed. Not out of fear. Out of... interest. Curiosity. Like a person who sees something valuable.

The second worker took a step towards the well.

Mary whispered: No...

I felt the bite burning on my neck. As if it could sense the worker's gaze.

The older man grabbed my arm and hissed: You see? He builds his stage with people who have no clue.

The man by the fountain was already reaching out to take the knife.

And I knew: If he takes it, a new scene will begin. A scene we cannot control.

I stepped forward, faster than I thought, and said loudly, clearly, quite calmly: Don't touch it. It's... hot.

An absurd word, but it was the first one that came to mind. Hot. Fire in the snow. A contradiction that sometimes stops curious hands, because nobody likes to get burned.

The worker paused, his hand in the air. He blinked. His gaze became briefly uncertain.

The older man took advantage of this, grabbed Mary tighter, and pulled her back. I remained standing between the well and the men.

And then I heard, very close to my ear, although nobody was behind me, a voice, quiet, friendly:

Good morning, Abraham.

Dawn had broken. And with it, his voice. Impatiently near.

His voice in your ear was so gentle it almost sounded like your own thoughts. That's precisely what made it dangerous. When a voice no longer comes from the outside, but resides within you, you eventually lose track of which sentences you formulate yourself and which are simply placed at your fingertips.

Good morning, Abraham.

I didn't react. No glance back. No flinch. I forced my body to remain normal, because normality was my only shield in that moment. The two workers stood before me, still uncertain, still human. Behind me was the well, the knife wrapped in velvet, and somewhere—unseen—he.

The worker with the outstretched hand slowly withdrew it, as if he had just caught himself doing something embarrassing. He asked again, more quietly: Hot? How should—

I didn't cut him off. Cutting him off is another form of violence. I said calmly: Leave it. It's not yours. Go home.

The second worker frowned, as if he disliked my tone. He saw Mary, saw the older man, saw me. In his gaze was the impulse to take responsibility. And responsibility is the easiest tool to trap people. You just have to make them feel like they have to help.

He said: The woman is injured. We can—

Mary raised her head, just enough for the men to see her face. Her lips trembled, but she managed one word, dry and clear: No.

Just that no. No drama. No explanation. A no that shifted the atmosphere because it didn't negotiate. The workers hesitated. In their hesitation lay a brief moment of freedom.

The older man used it. He whispered to me: Away from the well. Now.

I gave a barely perceptible nod. I took a step to the side, away from the edge of the fountain, and gave the older man space to pull Mary along. We weren't moving hastily, but like people simply walking somewhere else because they have an appointment. No rushing. Just a stroll that, at the wrong moment, becomes too fast.

The workers watched us go. The first one looked back at the knife. I saw it in his eyes: the object attracted him more than our drama. That was the real danger. Not that he would help us. That he would take his curiosity with him. Curiosity is a key he puts into other people's pockets.

The voice in my ear whispered: You have learned how to use the crowd.

I gritted my teeth and said nothing.

We were already two or three steps away when the second worker finally approached the well. Not for the knife. For the rope. He grabbed the stiff rope and pulled on it, purely instinctively, because you pull on a well to check if it's solid.

The dew stretched taut. The frozen well rim creaked.

And then I heard a sound that didn't belong to the dew: a dull crackling, deep, like ice giving way.

The worker flinched. He laughed nervously, as if it were just a sound. He said: Damn ice...

Mary froze. Her hand gripped my sleeve. She whispered, so softly that I felt it rather than heard it: Don't... open...

The older man stopped, and I felt his entire posture harden. He stared at the ice of the fountain. Then he looked at me and said something that chilled me to the bone:

That's not a well. That's a lid.

A lid. That word again. Flaps. Covers. Hatches. Transitions that pretend to be something else.

The worker pulled on the rope again, harder. The ice creaked louder. A fine crack ran across the white surface, like a vein.

The first worker finally saw the knife properly in the velvet. His face lit up, as if he had just found something. He reached for it.

At that moment, normality was over.

The older man hissed: No!

He didn't jump. He walked quickly, directly. But the umbrella man was faster—not physically, but in sync with the scene. It was as if the knife had been waiting for a stranger's hand to touch it.

As the worker grasped the blade, the light flickered around the well's edge. Not like fire, more like a mirror briefly catching sunlight. And the worker paused, as if something had trapped his hand. His fingers closed around the handle, but his arm remained motionless.

His gaze went blank, just for a moment. Then his mouth opened, and he said a sentence that wasn't his:

Confession.

I felt my stomach churn. The word, over and over again. But coming from a stranger, it sounds even worse. Like a virus.

Mary whispered: He's taking... voices...

The second worker let go of the rope and stared at his colleague, bewildered. Then he looked at us. He saw fear. And fear is contagious.

The older man grabbed Mary and pulled her further away, but I stayed put. Not out of courage. Out of necessity. Someone had to get the knife away from the well before it finally broke the ice. Someone had to stop the lid from opening.

I felt my own knife in my hand, hidden. I thought of the cut in the velvet. Velvet doesn't forget.

The voice in my ear said gently: You want to win. Here is your victory. Take it.

An offer. An exchange. His knife wrapped in velvet for my knife in my hand. Or for something else. Perhaps for a name.

I slowly walked back to the well, my hands visible as if trying to calm him. The worker with the knife stood frozen, his eyes glazed. The second worker took a step back, unable to comprehend what he was seeing.

I said loudly, quite normally, to the second one: Get help. Now. Run.

He hesitated. Then he saw Mary, saw the older man, saw the crack in the ice. And suddenly he decided to do what people often do in such moments: he ran. Away. Not to help, but to save himself. But running away was a good thing. Less of an audience.

I was now standing right by the fountain.

The crack in the ice was there, thin but alert. The rope hung over it, taut. The knife in the velvet no longer lay still. It was in the worker's hand, and that hand no longer belonged to him.

I said to him, quietly: Let go.

He didn't blink. He said in a strange voice: Tell me why.

I clenched my teeth. He used it as his mouth. He wanted to force me to confess after all.

Mary's whisper echoed within me: Say nothing.

So I said nothing. Not out of spite. As a strategy.

Instead, I pulled out my own knife. Not threateningly. Just conspicuously. The blade remained dull in the morning light. I didn't point it at the worker. I pointed it at the velvet.

The velvet strip at the edge of the fountain was still there, under the knife. I placed the tip against the fabric and cut through it.

A small cut.

The velvet gave way.

And the worker flinched as if I had cut his hand, even though I hadn't touched him. His fingers parted slightly. The knife wobbled.

I understood: velvet is the connection. The fabric is the leash. If I sever the velvet, I sever its access.

I continued cutting, quickly, cleanly. The velvet tore in two. The knife in the worker's grip suddenly became heavy, as if it had lost its magic. The worker stared at his hand, bewildered, and dropped the knife.

There was a clanging sound on stone.

A real sound. Metal, real.

At that moment I heard it behind me in the snow: a soft tapping.

The umbrella man was there.

Not at the ear. In the room.

I didn't turn immediately. I stared at the crack in the ice. The crack had widened. The ice cap had weakened. And from the narrow fissure in the ice rose a breath of warm air, unnaturally warm, as if it were coming from a cellar that had been breathing for hours.

The voice behind me said, kindly but thinly: Very nice. You've hurt my velvet. Again.

I could no longer feel Mary's touch. She was farther away. Alone at the fountain, I was now the only warm spot.

And it was there, in that morning light, that I understood what the dawn victory means: It is not a triumph over him. It is simply the moment when you first take a prize from him.

I didn't raise my knife.

Instead, I raised my gaze.

Not in the mirror. Not in the ice hole.

To heaven.

A strip of gray became lighter.

Dawn.

The sky above the rooftops was the color of old tin, and yet it grew brighter. Not quickly. Not dramatically. Dawn is not a spotlight. It is the world's slow admission that the night cannot keep everything.

I stood by the well, knife in hand, and felt the warm air rising from the crack in the ice. Warmth in a city where everything was cold was a betrayal. It didn't smell of smoke, nor of the sea. It smelled inward. Of cellars. Of the same sweet iron that had accompanied me through the night. As if the depths had now decided to make themselves known.

Behind me was the sound of typing in the snow, dense enough that I could feel the rhythm. Not hurried typing. A polite kind. As if it were saying: I am here, and you are not alone.

His voice came calmly: You saved a worker without intending to save him. You are full of contradictions, Abraham. That makes you useful.

I turned around slowly. Not out of fear. Out of choice. In this scene, I wanted to decide when I would see him.

He stood a few steps away, in the snow, his umbrella closed, the handle with its cracked mirror at eye level. The morning light didn't make him a threat in the shadows. It made him more distinct. A man, clean, too calm, too out of place in any environment. The kind of person who doesn't feel the cold.

He smiled slightly. The smile wasn't mocking. It was the smile of a man who believed that everything was happening exactly as it should.

I said nothing.

He pointed at the well with his umbrella. The crack in the ice continued, fine, like a line that writes itself. He said: You opened the lid, even though you meant to close it.

I squeezed the handle of the knife harder until my hand hurt. Pain is a small anchor. I replied: I was just cutting fabric.

He nodded as if he accepted that. Then he said: "Fabric is more than just fabric here. You know that by now."

I heard footsteps behind me, real footsteps, and turned my head only briefly. The older man was returning with Mary, slowly, her leaning on him. She looked paler than before, but there was something different in her gaze now: a fixed, alert awareness. As if the cut in the thread hadn't taken everything from her, but enough to make her herself again.

She stopped, not too close to the fountain. Her eyes didn't go to the ice cream. They went to him.

She whispered, more for me than for him: Don't talk.

The umbrella man saw them, and I could tell from his expression that he now saw them differently. Not just as a clause. As a movable part that was functioning again.

He said kindly: Mary. You look better.

Mary didn't answer. She only pressed her lips together. Her silence wasn't fear. It was defiance.

The morning light grew a little stronger. The snow took on contours. The velvet on the fountain's edge lay in two separate pieces, like a severed ribbon. The knife the worker had dropped lay innocently on the stone. The worker himself had vanished, run away or stumbled around the corner, and I was glad of it. Fewer witnesses, fewer victims.

The umbrella man took a step closer. His umbrella tapped, and the tip touched a precise spot in the snow, as if he had predestined his position. He said: This is the part where you think you can win, because it's getting light.

I remained silent.

He smiled. Then he said the sentence that was like a blade without metal: You are right.

The older man next to Mary froze. I felt my neck tense. Agreement is more dangerous here than a threat. Threats can be hated. Agreement can be believed.

He said: Dawn makes some things harder. Not impossible. Harder. And harder means... expensive.

I held the knife lower, not as an attack, more as a reminder of myself. I thought of the cut in the velvet. The brief, genuine gasp. He had reacted. He had truly reacted. Dawn made him thinner. Not weak. But less whole.

Mary whispered, hoarsely: Now.

The older man understood as well. He reached into his jacket and pulled out something I hadn't seen before: a small glass bottle. No label. Just clear glass with a dark liquid inside.

He didn't hold it up like a weapon. He held it like a possibility. Then he whispered: This is oil. Lamp oil. If fire awakens him, oil makes him visible.

I didn't understand at first. Then I saw the well's edge. The crack. The warm air rising. A lid that was open. A depth below. Like pouring oil on ice and lighting it... fire on ice. Fire in the snow. A light that doesn't flicker like a flame, but burns like a line.

A marker that does not consist of words.

Mary whispered: No... blood. Only... light.

The umbrella man noticed the bottle. His smile narrowed. He said politely: That's a bad idea.

The older man replied: Exactly.

He walked quickly to the edge of the fountain, before the umbrella man could intervene. The umbrella man raised his umbrella slightly, as if considering whether to use it. But dawn held him back for a breath, as if he were no longer quite sure which rules applied.

The older man poured the oil onto the ice.

The dark liquid spread like a stain in snow, only it slid on ice, pulling itself into the fine crack, seeping in. The smell rose, sharp, chemical, unlike blood, unlike smoke. A modern smell in an ancient night.

The umbrella man said, no longer entirely friendly: Stop.

The older man didn't stop. He continued pouring, sparingly, purposefully, until the oil formed a thin line that followed the crack. A web of darkness on white.

I looked at Mary. She nodded almost imperceptibly.

I understood: We are turning the crack into a torch. We are forcing the depths to reveal themselves. Not through words. Through light.

I drew my knife across the blade—and then I realized I had no match. No lighter. Of course not. Down here, it was never about those simple things. But the fire wasn't far. The town was filled with smoke. And was there a piece of smoldering wood from the fire site lying in the snow? No.

The older man had done something else. As he put the bottle away, he pulled a small matchbook from his pocket, as if it were the most trivial thing in the world. He tore out a match.

The umbrella man took a step forward, and I felt the air around us grow colder, as if he had decided to be whole again. He said: This will cost you.

The older man looked at him, tiredly, and said: Everything costs money.

He struck the match.

It flared up, small, yellow, alive. A tiny fire that looked like an eye in the dawn.

Mary took a sharp breath. I felt my throat burn, as if the bite were tasting the fire.

The older man threw the burning wood onto the oil.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then the flame traced the line, swiftly, like a tongue following a crack. Fire ran over ice. An impossible image, yet instantly meaningful, because oil has no morals. It burned, and the burning transformed the crack into a luminous net.

The ice creaked. The crack opened wider. Warm, putrid air burst out, now more forcefully. And from the depths came a sound that was neither human nor animal.

A deep, vibrating sigh, as if something beneath the well were waking up and stretching.

The umbrella man stepped back. Not much. Half a step. But it was a step.

And that half step was the dawn victory.

Not because we had defeated him.

Because we had forced him to react without smiling.

Mary whispered, almost triumphantly, but without joy: You see?

I saw.

Not in a mirror.

In fire running over snow.

Silence after the bite

The fire on the ice was not a raging inferno. It was a line. A luminous scar that stretched across the white surface, revealing the crack as if the world itself had been sliced open. The flames leaped swiftly, racing across the oil, licking at the fractured edges of the ice, and where they burned, steam rose. Steam climbed, grayish-white, and swallowed the well's edge in short, frantic gulps.

The umbrella man stepped back. Just half a step, barely more than a correction. But on this night, half a step was an admission. He acted as if it were voluntary. He held the umbrella perfectly still in his hand, as if he weren't budging, but merely making room so we could get a better look. But I had seen it: the reflex.

Mary clung to the older man, and I saw her shivering. Not from the cold. From what stirred beneath the ice. From the sound from the depths, that vibrating sigh that seemed to reside in her chest, not her ears.

The fire died down when the oil was used up. The line smoldered, becoming glowing points, then smoke. But the crack remained open. The ice was no longer a lid. It was merely a frame.

The warm air that poured out was revolting. It smelled of a stale cellar, of damp earth, and of the sweet smell of iron that had been haunting me for hours. And there was something else in it that immediately reminded me of the bite: a bitter smell, like cold ashes. As if someone had burned without actually burning.

Mary whispered hoarsely: Now... he can hear.

The umbrella man didn't smile. He said nothing. That was new. He stood there and examined the open tear, as if checking whether we had damaged something he didn't want to see damaged.

The older man pulled Mary back a step, away from the well. He said softly, "Not too close. When it's open, it's drafty."

It draws. That word again. Everything drew that night: keys, voices, warmth, eyes. And now the depths drew.

I felt it on my neck. The bite burned more intensely again, as if it had found a resonating chamber. Not just pain. A cry. A downward pull, as if my blood were a rope being taut at the bottom.

I pressed two fingers against the wound, not to stop it, but to anchor myself. It didn't help. The cry didn't come from the skin. It came from within me.

Mary looked at me. Her gaze was clearer than before, and therefore more terrifying. She said, whispering but clearly: You can feel it.

I wanted to lie. Lying is sometimes a form of protection. But down here—or up here, it felt the same—every lie was just new material for him.

So I remained silent.

The older man said gruffly: He's marked you. The bite isn't just a wound. It's an address.

The umbrella man raised his head and looked at us. His face was calm, but his gaze was now thin, tense, as if something had shifted in the air that he didn't like to control. He finally said, very politely: "You have opened something that wasn't meant for you."

I heard Mary let out a short, bitter laugh, more air than sound. She said: Nothing is meant for us.

The umbrella man nodded as if he accepted that. Then he said: And yet you always follow what determines you.

His gaze was on me. Not on Mary. Not on the older man. On me.

He said softly: Silence after the bite. This is the moment when you listen, Abraham. Not to me. To you.

I noticed my hands were trembling. Not from the wind. From the inner urge to answer. The confession was stuck in my throat like a bone I couldn't swallow.

Mary whispered: No.

The older man stepped between me and the umbrella man, as if he could block something formless. He said: Let him.

The umbrella man smiled again, but only with his mouth, not with his eyes. He said: I let him be. I always let him be. That's the beauty of it.

The ice crunched.

Not at the edge. From within the crack itself. As if something were pushing against the fracture line from below. Not with force. With persistence.

A piece of ice broke off and fell in. It didn't splash into the water. It fell... for a while. A dull thud, far below, and then silence.

Silence that doesn't soothe. Silence that waits.

Mary pressed her hand to her throat. She was breathing rapidly. Her eyes widened. She whispered: It's... rising.

The older man cursed softly and pulled Mary back even further. I stood frozen, because the bite on my throat tightened at that exact moment, as if it were trying to push me over the edge of the well. I took a step back, forcing myself not to give way.

The umbrella man said, almost kindly: You don't need to be afraid. It knows you.

That was the sentence that turned my stomach. It knows you. Not he. It. That which wants doors. That which breathes beneath the ice.

I said, against my will, barely audibly: What is it?

The umbrella man raised the handle slightly, as if pointing at an invisible stage. He said: The end of your excuses.

And a hand emerged from the crack.

Not like a sleeping hand, groping. Not normally human. Long, pale, with fingers that were too still. It didn't reach upwards. It simply rested on the fractured edge, as if testing whether the stone was still strong enough. Then a second hand appeared.

And with the hands came no head. No face. Only this feeling that something was slowly emerging, without any hurry, because hurry is only for those who can die.

Mary whimpered, a soft sound that was immediately blown away by the wind. The older man almost pulled her away, supported her, and whispered: Don't look.

But my eyes were glued to the crack because I felt: The bite inside me wants to see it.

The hand on the ice moved, and in the morning light something dark slid across the skin.

Velvet.

A piece of velvet tied around the wrist, like a cuff.

A pact that requires no signature.

The velvet on the wrist was the worst detail because it linked the scene to a simple, familiar material. No myth, no foreign symbol. Just fabric. The same black fabric that absorbs sound, that silences blades, that bears names like threads. If even that which comes from the depths wears velvet, then velvet is no longer scenery. Then it is law.

The older man pulled Mary back until she was almost at the wall. Mary's feet slipped in the snow, she gasped, and her hand remained on her throat as if to stop something inside her from responding. Her eyes were fixed on the crack, but she didn't blink. She wasn't looking out of curiosity. She was looking because fear is sometimes a compulsion.

I was still a step too close. I could feel it, but my body resisted. The bite burned as if it had been ignited by a second fire. Not on the outside. On the inside. A hot spot that pulsed every time my hand moved. As if my blood were responding to a frequency only it could hear.

The umbrella man said softly: Do you feel it? This is the silence after the bite. The moment when you can no longer escape, because what you are fleeing from answers you.

I didn't want to believe him. I never wanted to believe him. But I sensed that this time his words weren't just manipulation. They were description. And that's precisely what made them dangerous.

The hand on the crack tensed, pulled, and the ice crunched as if protesting. Then came a forearm, pale, smooth, too pristine. No dirt, no soil, no water. As if the thing hadn't crawled out of a well, but from a room that's kept clean. Cleanliness here is always a sign of control.

A second forearm followed. Both hands now grasped the fracture line, but not frantically. They lay down, like someone pushing themselves up to slowly stand.

Mary whispered, barely audible: Don't... look...

The older man growled: Get out. Now.

But where to? We were standing in a clearing. Open snow. Warning lights. Every direction was visible. And the thing didn't need to run. It had time. And he had time.

The umbrella man took a step to the side, not away, more out of respect, as if making room for whatever was rising up. He didn't say "it." He said: He.

He said: Good morning.

That hit me almost harder than my hands. If the umbrella man welcomes it, then it's not an accident. Then this isn't our trap. Then this is his door, and we've opened it.

The thing—it—continued to rise. A torso appeared, but not yet a face. Its back was beneath a dark coat that looked like velvet, but wasn't quite. Too heavy, too dull. Perhaps it was just the way dawn makes fabric.

Then came the head.

He wasn't grotesque. That was the problem. He was... almost normal. A man. Pale, yes, but not like a sick person, more like someone who never sees the sun because he doesn't need it.

His eyes were open, and I immediately recognized that they weren't "empty" like those of someone who's asleep. They were awake. Bright. And they saw me without looking searching.

He didn't smile. He looked at me as if he were reminding me.

And in that look, something happened inside me: The bite burned sharply, and for a moment I heard a sound that existed only in my head – a soft click, like a lock snapping into place.

Mary groaned, as if she had felt it too. She whispered: No...

The older man tore his gaze away from the creature and looked at me. His face was suddenly very serious, very old. He said softly: Don't answer. No matter what you feel. Don't answer.

The man from the crevice now stood fully upright on the edge of the well. The snow beneath his feet didn't melt. That was striking. He was drawn to the cold, and the cold persisted.

He wore something around his neck – not a scarf, not a collar. A strip of velvet, tight, like a ribbon. And within this ribbon glittered something almost invisible in the dawn light: a small, light-colored bone pendant.

A key piece.

My stomach cramped. The bone key. The splinter. The piece the woman had pulled out of herself. All fragments. And this thing wore a part like jewelry.

The umbrella man said politely: He is ready.

The man by the well said nothing. His voice didn't come. Or perhaps he didn't need it. Instead, he slowly raised a hand and pointed at me. No dramatic gesture. A simple, precise direction.

And inside me, the bite responded like an animal hearing its name. My body wanted to take a step forward. A step into the circle. A step into the crack.

I stopped because I was holding on to the only thing I could control: my feet. I pressed them into the snow as if I had to convince the earth to hold me down.

Mary whispered desperately: Abraham...

The umbrella man smiled. He said: She said your name. She opened the door.

Mary swallowed, startled by her own words, as if she had just made a mistake she could not take back.

The older man raised his hand as if he wanted to strike the umbrella man, and then lowered it again. He was wise enough not to jump onto his stage.

The man at the fountain lowered his hand and did something else: he held out his palm as if he were receiving something.

And suddenly I felt it in my jacket pocket: a tug. The little strip of paper, the message – NO MORE DOOR. STAIRS. – moved in the pocket as if a magnet were pulling at it.

My heart beat faster. Not from fear. From the shock that even paper doesn't stay still here.

The thing looked at me, and I knew, without words: He wants this paper. He wants this small trace of resistance. He wants it back.

The umbrella man said quietly: Give him what you stole.

I felt that if I took out the strip of paper, I would be making the same mistake as with every notebook, every sentence, every invitation: I would be accepting the rules. I would be giving something. I would be entering into an exchange.

And yet, the draft in my pocket was so strong that my fingers twitched involuntarily.

Mary whispered: No...

I pressed my hand against the bag as if I could suppress the urge. Then I did something that wasn't nice, but simple: I tore open the bag, pulled out the strip of paper, and instead of giving it to the man, I threw it into the fire, which still lay as glowing embers in the snow – the remnant of the oil flame.

The strip of paper immediately burst into flames, a tiny, bright flicker. Words turned to smoke.

The man at the fountain didn't flinch. But his eyes narrowed slightly. And in that minimal expression lay something that frightened me more than anger: recognition.

The umbrella man whispered: Oh.

Mary gasped. The older man stared at me as if I had just cut a wire he didn't know was holding us together.

The man at the fountain raised his hand again, slowly. And this time he didn't point at me.

He pointed at Mary.

And in Mary's face I saw something inside her tighten, as if an invisible thread were becoming taut again.

The pointing finger at Mary wasn't a command that needed to be spoken. It was a law inscribed on her body. I saw Mary's shoulders tense, her chin lift slightly, as if something inside her was pulling on an invisible thread. Her gaze remained clear, and that was precisely what made it so cruel: she saw what she was about to do, and she couldn't stop herself.

The older man took a step toward her, as if he wanted to grab her. Mary's hand flinched, not toward him, but away, as if touching her now would be a betrayal. She whispered, hoarsely, almost apologetically: I... can't...

The umbrella man stood in the snow like a carefully considered thought. He said softly, contentedly: That is the pact. Not blood. Movement.

I felt the bite in my neck respond. Not as pain, but as direction. As if my body were hearing the same command, only with a different target. The man at the well had chosen Mary, but he held me in his hand like a second rope.

Mary took a step.

The snow crunched, and in that crunch lay something final. She didn't walk quickly, not staggeringly, but calmly, as if she had suddenly regained her strength. This strength wasn't hers. It was borrowed. And borrowed strength demands interest.

The older man blocked her path. Mary stopped, for just a heartbeat. Her gaze passed right through him. Then she raised her hand, slowly, and placed it on his chest.

Don't push. Don't hit.

Just touch.

The older man froze, as if she had taken his breath away. He whispered: No...

Mary didn't push. But he stepped back, involuntarily, as if his body no longer controlled his position. I saw the same horror in his face as in Mary's: He was awake, and yet he was being moved.

The umbrella man said kindly: You see? Anyone can sign.

I couldn't let Mary take the second step. Not because I wanted to be a hero. But because I suddenly understood: If she stands at the edge of the well, she won't fall. She will rise. Into the depths, like a staircase that leads downwards and yet is called a "transition".

I tightened my grip on the knife. No shine. No sound. Samt had taught me that the most dangerous cuts are the silent ones.

Mary took the second step.

The edge of the fountain was only an arm's length away.

The man at the fountain raised his palm as if to receive her. His eyes rested not on her face, not on her neck, but on her movement. He gathered her like a signature that doesn't need to be read.

I didn't hear my own voice because I wasn't using it. I didn't jump, I didn't shout. I only did something almost banal: I stepped sideways, between Mary and the fountain, so close that I could smell her breath.

Mary stopped, and her gaze met mine. For a moment—just one—Mary was there. A flicker, as if the cut in the thread a moment ago had created an opening. In that flicker lay panic and plea at once.

Then the thread pulled again.

Mary's hand rose slowly, and I knew: she would touch me, just as she had touched him. And when she touched me, the pact could speak through me.

I didn't raise my knife against her.

I raised it against what was attached to her.

At my neck, right at the base of the collar, I saw a strip of velvet. Not large. I hadn't noticed it before because the fabric acts like a shadow. But now I saw it clearly, because the dawn makes every shadow more real. The velvet strip was narrow, almost like a ribbon. And within it was a tiny knot, barely visible.

The same node.

The same pressure point.

Mary's hand was already in the air when I placed the blade on the knot. No threat. No pause. A clean, controlled cut.

The velvet gave way.

Mary gasped, as if her sternum had been ripped open. Her hand didn't fall on me, but slumped limply. Her body staggered, and I caught her at the last moment before she fell into the snow. She gasped, coughed, and her gaze was suddenly hers again. No more pulling sensation. Only exhaustion and shock.

The older man immediately took a step forward to support her. This time Mary clung to him, not against her will, but as if to a wall.

The umbrella man said nothing.

That was remarkable.

But the man at the fountain reacted. Not with a scream. Not with anger. With a tiny, cold blink, as if someone had changed a light in a room he knew by heart.

I felt the bite in my throat flare up, as if it were offended. The pulling intensified, and I realized: The thread I had loosened on Mary was now seeking its next hold.

Me.

The man at the well didn't look at Mary. He looked at me. And this time – for the first time – he opened his mouth.

His voice was quiet. And it sounded like mine.

Abraham, he said, and the word was not just a name. It was a claim of ownership.

Mary whimpered as if she had heard the voice and understood what it meant. The older man whispered: Don't listen...

But how can you not listen when your own name comes from a well in your own voice?

The umbrella man lifted the handle slightly, and in the cracked mirror, the morning light glided across the fissures. I didn't see my face in it. I saw a movement: the fountain, the crack, the hands, the velvet. And I saw myself—not as I was, but as he wanted me to be: as a line between above and below.

The man at the well spoke again, in my voice: You cut. Now you bear the burden.

The pulling sensation in my throat became so intense that I briefly blacked out. I took a step, involuntarily, towards the well. Not because I wanted to. Because the bite stung like a hook.

Mary softly called my name. The older man grabbed my arm. His grip was firm, but it was human. Compared to a pact's grip, humanity is soft.

The umbrella man finally said, almost gently: You see? No paper. No pen. Just one step.

I looked at Mary. She was free—free enough to tremble, free enough to cry. And I knew: If I fight now, I will lose. Not because I am weak. Because the fight itself is the door.

I thought of the rule that had brought us this far: No talking.

So I didn't talk.

I simply nodded to Mary. A small, barely visible sign that explains nothing and yet says everything.

Then I did the only thing that was truly mine: I turned the knife in my hand, guiding the blade not outwards, but towards my throat.

Mary gasped: No!

The older man tugged at my arm, but I was faster, not with strength, but with determination.

I didn't cut deep. I didn't cut to die. I cut into the bite.

Right through the two points. Right through what marked me. A short, sharp pain, and immediately blood flowed – warm in the cold air. But at the same moment the blood flowed, something else happened: the bite stopped stinging.

Like a rope that suddenly snaps.

The man at the fountain flinched slightly. Not much. But enough. His hand gripped the fountain's edge as if he needed to hold on. The crack in the ice creaked again, as if the lid were resisting.

The umbrella man took a step forward—and paused. That was new. He wanted to intervene, but dawn, blood, oil smoke, and cut velvet made the scene unpredictable.

I pressed my hand to my throat. Blood trickled between my fingers, hot, real. Mary sobbed, and I heard her footsteps in the snow as she started to approach me. The older man held her back, not out of harshness, but out of fear that she would touch me and renew the pact.

The man at the well spoke once more, in my voice, but now there was something in it that was no longer calm. A thin crack, like in ice.

Why...? he said.

That was the question he wanted from me. The confession.

And finally I had an answer that wasn't a door.

I didn't say them out loud.

I just let it happen.

I raised my bloody hand, took Mary's torn velvet ribbon lying in the snow, and wrapped it around my own forearm. Not as decoration. As a knot. As a deliberate sign: if the pact seeks a second name, it should bind it to me, not her. Then I pulled the ribbon tight and dropped the knife.

Metal clanged against stone.

A normal sound. The most beautiful sound in the world.

The man by the fountain saw the ribbon. His expression changed, subtly, as if in recognition. Then he slowly withdrew, not hastily, not defeated. As if he had gotten what he wanted, just not where he had initially intended to get it.

The crack in the ice creaked and didn't close. But it stopped growing. The warm air diminished. The fire had long since gone out. Only steam hung over the well like the last breath of a night.

The umbrella man stood still. He said nothing. And his silence was the real conclusion. No praise, no insult, no "very good".

Mary sank into the older man's arms. She didn't cry aloud. Only softly, exhausted, as if she no longer had the strength for sound. She looked at me, and in her eyes lay gratitude and horror, closely intertwined.

The older man looked at me, and there was no admiration in his gaze. Only understanding. He knew what I had done: I had not achieved a victory, but had paid a price.

The sky brightened. The gray turned into a pale blue. The city began to breathe like a city, not like a castle.

I stood there, my hand on my neck, the velvet ribbon on my arm, and I finally felt something I hadn't felt since the first line:

Silence.

Not the lurking silence of a corridor.

The stillness of a morning that pretends nothing has happened.

And in that silence, deep down, where the bite had been, I heard no more pulling.

Just a quiet, patient tap.

Not in the snow.

Inside me.

imprint

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Year of publication: 2025