

Daughters of Fire
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PROLOGUE

England, the middle of the nineteenth century.

Not everyone was blind.

Somewhere in the dark corners of the Empire, in the damp cellars of taverns, in dusty print shops and stinking parish halls, something was waking. Not at once. Nothing good wakes at once in a country where even bread has to win a fight before it can avoid tasting of sawdust.

First there were whispers. Then sheets of paper passed from hand to hand. Then surnames spoken more softly than the names of the dead. The old ones remembered the Luddites, those who smashed machines as though the soul of an executioner truly sat inside the iron. Perhaps it did. I have never seen a machine with a conscience, but I have seen one take from people everything that might once have spoken to a conscience.

The word revolution was still a whisper, but it already had claws. It scratched at walls, newspapers, the throats of men who came back from meetings too late and far too sober for an ordinary trip to the tavern. Some knew of the Chartists, others merely sensed them, the way you feel a storm in your bones before the sky cracks open. Demands written on paper were more dangerous to gentlemen than a knife, because a knife can be snatched from a hand. Paper is more troublesome. Paper travels. Paper hides. Paper comes back. If it is written well, it can put a larger hole in a man's head than a bullet.

I once saw a leaflet pasted crookedly to the wall behind the bakery. The rain had smeared the ink, but the words still clung to the brick like a drunkard to a railing.

A voice for the working man.

Someone had written beneath it in charcoal:

Bread first, genius.

I laughed so loudly that old Mrs Hargreaves looked at me as though I had just spat on the Queen. Or perhaps she simply envied my teeth. She had three.

The factory owners slept badly. At least I liked to think so. Their goose-down beds must have grown less comfortable once a pea-soup of unease began bubbling under the mattress. The hats of rich men trembled not from cold, but from wicked foreboding. For even in that dirty, suffocating world, where a child was born coughing and died of overwork, there was still a spark. Small, stubborn, vicious. The sort a person tries to smother under a boot, only for it to burn through the sole.

And sparks, as everyone knows, are the easiest things in the world to turn into a fire.

Industry, you say, was the miracle of the century. Of course. Like the miracle of plague. Fascinating from a distance, murderous close at hand. A miracle for whom? For those who owned the machines, or for those the machines dragged in? For gentlemen in frock coats counting profits at desks that smelled of polish, or for little girls whose plaits ended their lives in gears like noodles in a mincer?

The future had steel teeth and turned faster than conscience. Anyone who failed to keep pace lost a hand, a leg, a child, and in a good week only a scrap of hope. In a factory, hope came off a person by degrees, like colour from a cheap dress washed in filthy water. First you stop believing things will get better. Then you stop believing they

will be different. In the end, you stop asking questions, because the answers all have the face of an overseer, a belt in one hand, and breath that stinks of onions.

Progress, they called it.

A large, smooth word, like grease on an industrialist's boots. Romanticism was over. The age of screws, cogs and accounts had come. Poets could weep over lakes if they had the time and boots without holes in them. We had canals, gutters, and water so foul even rats looked at it thoughtfully.

Cities swelled like abscesses. Tenements split at the seams and stank of fermented sweat and damp thick enough to cut with a knife and sell hot as workers' broth. Six families slept in one room. In the next, a seventh was dying quietly, without fanfare, unless you counted the whistle of consumption as a funeral march. Through the walls you heard everything: prayers, moans, children crying, old women coughing, drunk men cursing, and the thump of a bed that no longer served sleep so much as forgetfulness.

Children were born everywhere, unwanted, hardy and hungry, and they died like flies. Half of them never reached ten. At least it saved on funerals. A sack and a hole in the ground were enough. If the family still had a few crumbs of pride, a prayer could be added. If they had money, a piece of wood. Most often they had neither.

I saw mothers who cried without tears, because tears require strength too. They held bundles in their arms, stared ahead and rocked slightly, as though their bodies remembered the motion of soothing, even though the child no longer needed sleep. Men stood beside them, awkward, furious, helpless, because no one teaches a poor man grief. He is taught to work, drink and keep his mouth shut. The rest he is expected to guess for himself, preferably quietly.

School? Oh, certainly. The school of life. In other words, a factory with a diploma in calluses and spinal deformity. Children with hands black from oil, eyes clouded with exhaustion, and backs bent into the shape of a question: why the hell? The overseers looked like cemetery carpenters waiting for someone to go out. Severe, blank, with faces like unfinished sculpture and the morals of a dead rat.

Their motto? Do not cry, it will make the floor slippery.

Punishment: the belt. Food: stale. Reward: survival.

Promotion? If you were lucky, you became a cripple for life and reached the street before the rest. Then you could beg outside a church, unless a policeman decided your misfortune spoilt the view for decent people. Decent people disliked looking at the consequences of their own decency. They are a very delicate species. Easily disgusted.

And still they said: England is great.

And she was.

Great in exploitation, indifference and mass dying. Great as a chimney that throws its shadow over an entire street. Great as the belly of a factory owner after dinner. Great as the list of children who never came home from work because a machine had had a bad day.

The newspapers crowed about an empire that knew no dusk because it glowed with the fires of furnaces. They wrote of India, Africa, China, trade, fleets, glory and a civilising mission. Civilising mission, what a charming phrase. It sounds much better than theft with a military band.

In the streets, newsboys with thin voices sold papers while their bare feet turned blue in the mud. They shouted of the Queen's victories, new markets and national pride. Then they hid the coins under their shirts so an older boy would not take them.

In public houses, over mugs of watered beer, people whispered about the neighbour who had eaten a cat. Not from love, but hunger. She said the cat was more nourishing than bread and had no raisin-worms in it. Someone laughed, someone spat, someone else said that if she caught another one she should let him know, because his wife knew how to cook with onions.

That was what working-class humour looked like. If you did not laugh at the corpse, you had to admit it was lying at your table.

The churches were full of souls and fuller still of the stink of bodies. Priests ordered us to pray for patience, because, so they claimed, it was the only matter God was still willing to consider. The rich sat in the front pews as though they held a subscription to salvation. The workers sat at the back, dozing between psalms, not for lack of faith, but for lack of sleep.

The priest said: Blessed are the meek.

Old Tom, sitting behind me, muttered:

That must be why there are so many of them in the graveyard.

I snorted into my sleeve, and my mother drove her elbow into my side so hard that for the rest of the sermon I could feel holiness between my ribs.

God, if He was there, sat quietly. Perhaps He did not want to hear what people had to say to Him. Perhaps He had changed parish. Perhaps He was standing somewhere outside, under a roof of soot, hands in His pockets, wondering at what exact moment He had lost control of the project. I do not know. I never had the opportunity to ask. If I had, I would probably have begun with a short:

Well then, satisfied?

The police? A fresh institution, still smelling of new uniforms and old violence. Often they looked like thugs with a better sign over the door. They arrested those who shouted too loudly, because shouting spoiled the acoustics of progress. When the shout turned into a stone through a factory owner's window, the army rode in. Quickly, efficiently, brutally.

Justice? Yes, but only from one end of the truncheon.

I saw a policeman drag a woman by the arm because she was selling scraps of cloth she supposedly should not have had. Scraps. Not gold. Not weapons. Not the crown off the Queen's head. Bits of material, too small for a dress, perhaps large enough for a nappy or a patch.

Theft is theft, he said, proud of this wisdom as a cockerel of its own crowing.

The woman spat at his boots.

Then arrest all the factory owners, constable. Only bring a larger carriage.

For that she was struck across the face.

She did not fall at once. That is what I remember most. She staggered, pressed her palm to her split lip, looked at the blood on her fingers and laughed softly. The kind of laugh that makes men nervous, because they cannot tell whether a woman is about to faint or put something under their ribs.

I smiled too. Not because it was funny. It was not. But sometimes a smile is the only knife they cannot take from you.

That was the England of my childhood.

Not the one from paintings, where hills are green, sheep are white, and ladies stroll through gardens holding parasols like punctuation marks of wealth. My England was black under the nails. She had cracked heels, lice in her hair, and a cough that woke the neighbours before the factory bell. She stank of gutter water, grease and fear. She had the face of a mother counting coins three times, though each time the same poverty came out. She had the hands of girls from the spinning rooms, quick, wounded, far too young for such scars. She had the eyes of children who looked at bread the way rich people look at God: hoping it might answer.

And yet beneath it all, beneath the soot, the exhaustion and skin split open by cold, something held. Not dignity, because dignity is a word rich people like to serve the poor instead of dinner. Not hope, because hope was sometimes too expensive. Rather stubbornness. Dirty, hard, unbeautiful. The stubbornness that makes a woman rise after three hours' sleep, tie up her hair, swear under her breath and carry on. The stubbornness that makes a child steal an apple and divide it into four parts, though she could have eaten the whole thing herself. The stubbornness that makes a man with broken fingers clench his fist once more.

I had it too.

I was no saint. No angel of the factory halls, no pale virgin of suffering to be set in a frame and shown to ladies over tea so they might shed a tear for the fate of the poor. If some lady had shed a tear over me, I would probably have asked whether I could sell it, because water was sometimes valuable.

I was not a victim, though the world tried very hard to dress me as one. A victim is meant to lie quietly. She is meant to look properly sad. She is meant to move people, but not inconvenience them.

I inconvenienced them.

I breathed smoke, swallowed anger, and learned to look people in the eye even when they were convinced that a girl from a working street should look only at her own boots. My boots were pitiful too, so there was nothing there worth seeing.

If England was the heart of the Empire, then Manchester and Liverpool were its charred lungs. The heart beat somewhere in London, among parliamentary speeches, silver spoons and portraits of men who looked as though they had never once had to carry a bucket of coal up a flight of stairs. But the lungs were here, in the north. Blacker than soot, heavy with dust, sick, wheezing with every breath.

And we lived inside them.

Or rather: we were inhaled.

Manchester, proudly christened Cottonopolis, had a name so respectable it might have been carved into the front of a university or a temple. A pity that behind that elegant masquerade lay a stinking crater in which a person did not so much live as undergo slow industrial wear. Here the body did not age naturally. It wore down. Like a sole. Like a cog. Like cheap cloth in the hands of a washerwoman.

Factories stood everywhere. They grew out of the ground like black mushrooms after rain, except these mushrooms had chimneys, roared, spat soot and devoured people with such systematic zeal that they might have earned praise from a bishop for diligence. Inside, the air hung heavy with cotton dust, grease, sweat and hot steam. You went in a human being and after a few hours came out something of the same shape, but with less soul and more cough. I know, because I breathed there. If that can be called breathing.

People said that in Manchester you did not breathe air, you filtered the city through your own lungs. Very apt. After a few years a person became a walking chimney, only worse paid. In the morning they coughed black. In the evening, blacker. On Sundays, if God was in a pleasant humour, grey.

Soot settled on everything: brick, glass, linen, faces, tongues and prayers. Women hung shirts out to dry and took down rags the colour of penance. Children drew with their fingers on windowsills without needing chalk. It was enough to run a hand along a wall and there you had proof that the city itself signed every person unlucky enough to be born in it.

The taste of Manchester was simple: metal, ash, old water and poverty. Poverty had a taste. Anyone who claims otherwise has never licked their fingers after the last scrap of stale bread. The streets were muddy veins of want, carrying a river of people, urine, filth, coal, rotten peelings and that particular species of submission that soaked into skirts faster than rain.

Rain did not cleanse the city. Not at all. It merely mixed soot with mud, mud with horse dung, horse dung with human misery, until everything became one thick paste that people carried on their boots, if they had boots, or on their skin, if they had only feet.

And Liverpool?

Ah, Liverpool.

The port jewel of England, though it was closer to a rusted nail driven into rotten wood than to any gem. A city built on trade, or at least on a very liberal interpretation of it. Sugar, tobacco, rum, cotton, people. Yes, people too. Brought in, packed, weighed, entered into books.

The Empire did not ask questions, because questions interfere with counting money.

Liverpool was a gate. Proud people said so. A gate to the world, a gate to trade, a gate to wealth. For some reason no one added that every gate also has hinges that creak under the weight of bodies.

In the docks everything floated: rum, rats, disease, and morality drifting off into the blue distance, waving a handkerchief from the deck of a ship. There the sea did not smell of freedom. It smelled of tar, salt, rotten fish, wet timber, dockers' sweat and distant countries whose names England could pronounce only when there was something to carry away from them.

Ships came to the quays with bellies swollen by colonial gifts, that is, by whatever the Empire had gracefully taken from the world in the name of civilisation. India, Jamaica, Africa, China, all shared one return address: Liverpool. The plantations wept, but Liverpool celebrated. Always. Preferably with cheap rum, a wet brawl and a song in which half the words were curses and the other half lies.

In Liverpool you could hear the languages of the whole world, though most often they boiled down to the same prayer: pay me, move aside, or do not kill me today. Dockers walked with backs bent by loads and faces hardened by life. Their hands were like pieces of old wood, cracked, tough, always ready to lift a crate or a fist. Sometimes there was very little difference between the two.

And the holiest figures in that pantheon were the clerks, those who knew how to turn a barrel of sugar cane into a palace, a bill of lading into a sentence, and a human being into a column. Whoever had papers was a person. Whoever did not was cargo, a problem or a ghost, depending on precisely whom they inconvenienced. A clerk with a pen could ruin more lives than a drunken soldier with a bayonet, and at least he did not splash blood on his cuffs.

The funniest part, in the mortuary sense, was that the Empire truly believed it was building civilisation.

Queen Victoria, God save Her Majesty, had beneath her feet a world marked in red. Though some said it was not ink. Red spread across maps like a rash over the body of the planet, and elegant gentlemen looked upon it with pride, as though every overseas territory were another button on their well-cut waistcoat.

They spoke of duty, mission, morality, Christianity and trade. Five words with which any grave could be covered, provided they were carefully polished. Morality in those days was like an umbrella: always close at hand, but mostly for display. It was opened during sermons, banquets and public speeches. It was folded at once when money began to rain.

In drawing rooms they talked of virtue. In the docks they counted barrels of rum. In Parliament they mentioned God. In factories little girls fainted beside spinning frames. In newspapers they printed grand words about the nation. In workers' rooms mothers watered down milk, then watered down the water with more water, until all that remained was a pale suspicion of food.

Such was the harmony of empire.

Some sang the anthem. Others coughed in time.

The French were mocked because they had cut off a king's head. The English liked to feel more civilised. We did not cut off heads in public, except in machines and by accident. In England, a poor man did not even have the strength to raise an axe. He could spit, perhaps. And even that only if he had something to spit with.

Revolution requires energy, and energy is hard to find when from dawn till night you hand it over to a factory for a penny an hour and a piece of spine a week. In England, a poor person had a chance not at rebellion, but at consumption. Or at death beside a machine, which in the eyes of accountants was an almost poetic solution. Died early, no need to pay for long. Died without shouting, no need to call the police. Died young, therefore had no time to make trouble.

Capitalism with a soul.

The soul of a corpse, but still.

In Manchester I saw a boy whose two fingers were taken by a machine as though they were a loose thread sticking out of cloth. He was perhaps nine. Perhaps ten, if one counted winters rather than height. He stood with his mouth open, staring at his own

hand as if he could not understand why it suddenly looked different. Blood dripped onto the floor, dark in the factory light.

The overseer looked at the machine first. Only then at the boy. That says a great deal about the world.

Get him out of here, he barked. And wipe the floor, before someone slips.

Someone slips.

Not: the child is bleeding out. Not: fetch a doctor. Not: his mother will howl so hard the walls crack. Simply, someone slips.

There is the whole philosophy of industry in one sentence. If it could have been carved on a monument, the factory owners would probably have ordered it done in marble and placed it before the town hall.

In Liverpool I saw dockers carrying crates heavier than their own lives. One of them stumbled on a wet plank. A barrel rolled away, split open, rum ran over the cobbles, and people threw themselves at it with mugs, rags, hands, whatever they had. Someone laughed, someone cursed, someone else dropped to his knees and drank straight from the ground, the alcohol mixed with mud running down his beard like a blessing for the very fallen.

The overseer beat the backs of those who came too close with a stick.

One of the dockers muttered to me then:

Look, girl. Even when rum falls down, the poor man has to take a beating for it.

He was right. The poor man always took it. For hunger, for theft, for obedience, for rebellion, for another man's profit and his own birth. For everything.

Among all of it, between iron and poverty, between stench and hopelessness, between the factory bell and the harbour whistle, a story was being born. Not the one from schoolbooks, gilded and official, where kings are wise, generals brave, and the poor grateful for the chance to die in the shadow of great events. Real history was being born in the dirt beneath fingernails. In a cough that did not pass. In fingers cut by thread. In a dress that smelled of sweat and grease. In a woman who looked at the world and concluded that if the world was not going to give her mercy, she had no intention of serving it mercy in return.

That woman was me.

My name is Eleanor Whitmore, though most people called me Nell. Shorter, quicker and more convenient to shout when something was on fire, someone was running away, or Mr Briggs was on the edge of apoplexy at the mere sight of my face. Eleanor sounded like the name of a girl who sits straight-backed at a pianoforte and embroiders initials on handkerchiefs. Nell sounded like someone who might bite if a hand came too close.

I am not a tale of a girl in a ball gown. I have no fan, no dowry, and none of that languid gaze with which young ladies from good houses ask painters to immortalise their delicacy. If I had found myself at a ball, I would most likely have stolen a silver spoon, eaten something from a platter, insulted the host and left through a window only because the door was being guarded by some man with an ego larger than his intelligence.

This is not that kind of story.

This is a tale of a girl in an apron smeared with blood, sweat and spinning dust. Of hands that learned work too early, and a tongue that never learned obedience. Of eyes

that had seen too much to believe sermons, but too little to stop being furious. Of a city that tried to grind me down and was surprised when I began to scrape between its teeth.

I did not want to be a heroine. Heroes end up on monuments, and monuments are only elegant places for bird shit. I wanted to survive. At first, only that. Survive the day. Then the week. Then winter. Then one more morning in the factory, one more return through the mud, one more night with coughing beyond the wall and the thought that a person might crack from the inside while the world did not even slow its step.

But survival itself began, over time, to insult me.

For how long can one be grateful simply for not being dead yet? How many times can one wake and say: congratulations, Nell, another day in hell, do try not to become part of the machinery? How many times can one listen to being told that this is just the way things are, that poverty is natural, that a woman must be patient, that labour ennobles, that God sees everything?

If God saw everything, He had a very strange taste for silence.

So a day came when I no longer wanted merely to survive.

It did not happen beautifully. Nothing important in my life ever happened beautifully. There was no music, no light from a window, no tear sliding down my cheek in the manner proper to ladies in novels. There was the stink of grease, a scream, the warmth of someone else's blood on my palm, and that sudden, vile feeling in my chest that if I lowered my head one more time, I would never raise it again.

And I very much dislike giving people satisfaction.

If I was to die, then I would die screaming, not whispering. If I was to burn, then not like a candle in church, polite and for the comfort of others. More like a fire in a cotton warehouse. Loud. Filthy. With great losses for the owner.

But calmly.

This is only the beginning.

CHAPTER I

Cottonopolis

Do you know what a morning looked like in working-class Manchester? No? Then listen. Only do not expect skylarks singing, pink light on curtains, or the smell of freshly brewed coffee hovering above a table like the promise of a better day. Such things must have existed somewhere else, no doubt in those pretty houses behind iron railings, where windows were washed more often than children in our district, and birds chirped in cages on gilded sills. There mornings began with a silver spoon tapping porcelain, with toast, with butter, with soft light and the even softer hands of servants.

With us, the day began with coughing. Coughing was our reveille. More punctual than a clock and far less polite. It passed through walls, through floors, through the thin planks of doors, through sleep and through the body. First old Hargreaves in the room next door would begin, hoarse and deep, as if he were trying to scrape his lungs out from the inside. Then Mrs Mulligan downstairs, a tiny woman with a face dried like an old onion, whose cough had something wet, bubbling and deeply troubling in it, though everyone had long since stopped pretending anyone there could still be saved. Then the children. Thin, broken coughs, like twigs snapping. The lungs of the older neighbours rattled through the thin walls like broken bellows on their last turn. Someone vomited out of a window. Someone else swore so beautifully that if curses had been currency, our street would have had its own bank. Someone else was simply dying, usually in that order: cough, silence, a woman's whisper, quick footsteps in the passage, then that particular hush that said more than weeping.

Death in that building was not a guest. She was a lodger. She paid no rent, took the best place by the stove, and had a vile habit of arriving without knocking.

I woke on a bed that looked less like a bed than a sack stuffed with resentment, and for a while I lay still, listening to the world before forcing my body to admit it belonged to it again. Above me the dark ceiling, stained with damp, looked like a map of a country no sensible person would wish to conquer. Something scratched in the corner. A rat, or the dream of breakfast. Hard to say. Both were small, persistent and hungry.

The air held a mixture of soot, urine, burnt bread, wet wool and old fear. Not that theatrical fear from tales about forests and monsters. This was the everyday kind, cheaper and more patient: that the bread would not last until evening, that Father would start shouting again, that Mother simply would not rise one morning, that someone at the factory would notice your exhaustion and call it idleness. Fear like that did not leap at a person with a knife. It settled on the soul like dust. Quietly. Layer by layer.

The cold pushed into the room through every crack, more obstinate than a postman with bills and less inclined to compromise. It came up from the floor, from the walls, from the window through which the wind whistled so thinly it was as if someone were playing upon bones. It was so cold a person woke with their teeth clenched, not out of anger, but out of thrift with heat.

Even our feelings seemed to freeze. The soft ones, at least: tenderness, hope, patience. They all sounded like diseases of the upper classes. In the kitchen corner a pail steamed with the remains of something that may once have been water, and now mainly served as an imitation of tea. A dog would not have touched it. But I drank. Because it was there. And it was warm. And warmth is a luxury from the catalogue of dreams, the sort one studies through another person's window while pretending to tie one's laces.

Father sat in his usual corner, propped against the wall, quiet and heavy as a guilty conscience. After the paralysis, his body had become his prison, and our room the cell in which all of us served the sentence with him. His face was always the same: anger, despair and an eternal leave me alone mixed in proportions that could poison a well. Once, so Mother said, he had been strong. She sometimes said it in a tone as if speaking of the dead, though he was sitting right there beside us, alive enough to cause pain and dead enough to bring home no bread. He spoke rarely, and when he opened his mouth it was usually to spit out something sharp.

"You're walking too loudly again," he muttered as I lifted myself from the bed.

I looked at my bare feet, then at him.

"Forgive me, Father. Next time I shall levitate."

His eyes flashed with anger, but he did not answer. Lately he had not even had the strength for proper curses. You know poverty by the way it robs a person not only of food, but of the pleasure of a decent quarrel.

Mother was already up. She always was. Sometimes I suspected she never slept at all, merely closed her eyes for a moment so the world would not feel insulted by her constant vigilance. Rising in the dark had nothing to do with delicacy or some poetic discipline of the soul. Light cost money, that was all, and we had only as many candles as someone had stolen from church, or as we had managed to save by not eating something that would scarcely have deserved the name of a meal anyway. Her dress looked like a patch sewn to a patch and then patched again out of pure spite. Were it not for her spine, one might have mistaken her for a walking sack of potatoes. But her eyes were sharp. Mother always knew where everything lay, who had taken what, who had lied, who was hungry, who was pretending not to be, and whom she would not spare today. In our house she was like an old kitchen knife: nicked, tired, but still quite able to cut a finger to the bone.

"Get up, Nell," she said without turning from the hearth. "They won't pay you for lying down."

"They hardly pay me for standing."

"They don't pay at all for talking."

"Pity. I'd be rich."

Mother snorted. That was the nearest thing to laughter her morning allowed. Then she handed me a cup of our dirty, warm water pretending to be tea. I drank it slowly, though it tasted like rainwater that had lost faith in itself.

The concert was beginning in the corridor. Children howled as if at a country fair. One screamed because someone had taken his boot. Another because he had lost his bread. A third because he was alive, and some children understand from birth that this is reason enough to complain. The woman at the end of the passage was hammering with

her fist on the door of her husband or lover, it was hard to keep track, for the men in our tenement changed roles as fast as rats fleeing a broom. Someone carried a pail that slopped ominously. Someone stumbled. Someone said a word one ought not repeat in respectable company, which meant, in our case, that it was repeated often and with feeling. Breakfast, if it can be called that, was a crust of bread with fat that contained more memory than flavour. Lard spread so thin it looked more like a rumour of food than food itself. Even so, I ate carefully, in small bites, trying to deceive my stomach. The stomach, like most fools, can sometimes be tricked, but only for a moment.

"Don't make faces," Mother said.

"I'm not making faces. I'm negotiating with the bread."

"And who's winning?"

"The mould."

She gave me a look that might have killed a weaker person, but I was seasoned by then. Besides, she had no time for murder. Murder is a luxury, and luxuries were for people with carpets.

I moved because I had to. Because that was what one did. Because the body, even when it dreamed of staying in a corner and pretending to be dead, had to be forced upright. I tied my hair, straightened my apron, shoved my feet into boots that had once been a pair and were now joined only by shared despair. One had a hole at the toes, the other a split at the side. I prayed they would last another week. It was a senseless prayer, but in Manchester most prayers were. At the threshold, Mother stopped me with a hand on my shoulder.

"Don't give Briggs any cheek."

"Me? Never."

"Nell."

That one word was enough. She said my name the way one speaks to a pot standing too near the fire.

"I shall be an angel," I said.

"Angels don't roll their eyes."

"Perhaps that's why no one employs them."

She did not answer, only straightened my collar. Her fingers were cold and rough. For one brief moment, so brief it was almost insulting, she looked as if she wanted to say something soft. Something motherly. Something like take care of yourself. But soft words do badly in rooms like ours. Instead she patted my shoulder.

"Go."

So I went.

The road to the factory was a pilgrimage without holiness. I walked through nameless alleys that had only a smell: rotten potatoes, decaying scraps of meat, smoke from wet coal, and second-chance lavatory paper. My boots sucked through mud that was not entirely mud. More as if someone had dissolved sadness, mixed it with rain, faeces and everything the city no longer wished to remember, then generously poured it over the streets for the convenience of the residents. Every step was a risk. You could twist an ankle on a stone, fall into the gutter, slip on something that had once been a rat, or be splashed by the carriage of some gentleman passing through our district with the

expression of a man visiting a zoo for misfortunes. But nobody fell. There was no time for falling. A fall meant lateness. Lateness meant a deduction from wages. A deduction meant less bread. Less bread meant quieter children. The simple mathematics of empire.

Only lovers and idiots looked at the sky. I looked at my feet. The sky had nothing to offer anyway. It hung low and dirty, pressed down against the roofs like a wet rag. Chimneys spat at it without cease, and it endured with the patience of a saint or a victim. In Manchester, even God, if He still looked in on us, must have worn galoshes. On the way I passed women with baskets, men with ash-coloured faces, children in clothes too large and childhoods too small. One little girl sat on a step trying to tie, with a bit of string, a shoe that looked more like an open mouth than footwear. Her hair was pasted to her cheeks by the rain, and her eyes were so serious they seemed long since to have understood that the world was no place for children.

"Need help?" I asked.

She looked at me suspiciously.

"You won't steal it?"

"The shoe? No. I have tragedies of my own."

She gave me her foot without a word. I tied the string tight, though I knew it would give way before noon.

"Thank you," she muttered.

"Don't thank me. It's only a temporary victory over leather and despair."

She did not understand. Good. There are things children should not understand, though ours understood them far too early.

The factory appeared in the distance like a fortress of hell. Red wall, high and wet, windows black with soot, a chimney breathing smoke that dirtied the sky faster than the sins of the aristocracy. Before you truly saw it, you heard it. The roar carried down the street, passed through fog, through rain, through bone. It sounded as if someone were beating God over the head with a hammer and doing it rhythmically, for the sake of efficiency. People crowded at the gate. Women adjusted caps, men spat, children rubbed their eyes. No one said much. Before work, words were heavy. Breath had to be saved.

At the entrance stood the overseer, Percival Briggs. Of course he stood there. I do not know whether the man slept, ate, prayed or had ever possessed a mother. I liked to think he had hatched from a cracked whip somewhere in the dark cupboard of an overseer. His face was clenched like a fist, his lips thin, his gaze small and wet, like that of a rat that had learned to walk in boots. He held a cane in his hand. A whip hung at his belt, just in case, because authority feels naked without a prop.

"Late, Whitmore?" he asked as I passed.

I was not late. He knew that as well as I did.

"No, Mr Briggs. I only came to give you a moment's pleasure before the day turns gloomy."

His eyes slid slowly over me.

"One day that tongue will ruin you."

"Likely. At least I shan't die of boredom."

The woman behind me sucked air through her teeth. Briggs smiled without the slightest trace of amusement.

"Inside."

I went in. Inside there was a roar. Not sound. Roar. Something larger and thicker than air. It entered the spine like a dagger, then stirred it as if with a teaspoon in tea. The machines growled, moaned and hummed. A little like people, only more rhythmic. Except no one oiled people. Well, perhaps sometimes with blood. The spinning room was one great trembling mouth. Rows of machines stretched away in the half-dark like steel animals lined up for feeding. Transmission belts flicked overhead. Wheels turned with the stubbornness of dead things that know no mercy, because no one had fitted any into them. The floor was slick with oil and filth. The air was hot, though a moment before a person had been freezing in the street. The factory had its own weather: heat, dust and sweat. Clouds of cotton fluff drifted in the air, white and innocent from a distance, like candyfloss from hell. It settled on your face, entered your nose, your mouth, your eyes. After an hour a person had a dry, fibrous taste in the throat. After two, one felt one was breathing through a rag. After five, the coughing began. After ten, the cough became part of one's character.

I took my place. Spinner number seventeen. My beloved companion. Someone, long ago, had christened her Edna. I do not know who decided steel beasts should be given the names of old ladies, but they must have had a particular sense of humour, or a vile grandmother. Edna had belts, spindles, teeth and an appetite for fingers. She stood before me every day, patient as an executioner. Eighteen hours of dance: feed, twist, pull, shift. Feed, twist, pull, shift. Choreography from an infernal opera. Partner: noise. Stage: concrete. Audience: the hope I would survive the day. Beside me worked Maggie, thin as a broom handle, her cheeks sunk so deep it looked as though her face were trying to hide from life.

"Edna looks hungry today," she said without looking at me.

"She always looks hungry."

"She nearly took my sleeve yesterday."

"She's flirting with you."

Maggie snorted, then immediately coughed so hard she had to brace herself against the machine.

"Don't do that," I said.

"Do what?"

"Die near me. I have too much work to mourn you elegantly."

"I promise to drop farther away."

"Good girl."

That was how we spoke. Briefly, hard, as if each sentence had to be torn from the throat before the machines ground it down. Tenderness in a factory had to wear filthy clothes, otherwise everyone would laugh at it. A week earlier a boy from the second row had gone into a machine. He had a name, of course. People always have names before industry turns them into examples. Samuel, or Simon. I do not remember, and that is probably the worst of it. The machine cut him so quickly that the scream came later than the blood. A cap remained. And a stain. Eventually someone took the cap, because in poverty, even after a man's death, something may still be useful to someone. The stain stayed. Everyone avoided it with their eyes, as if looking could summon back what had

happened. Briggs said it had been an accident. In the factory everything was an accident except profit. The overseer walked between the rows with his cane and the whip at his belt. He claimed it was for discipline, but we all knew he liked the sound.

He liked the crack slicing through noise, the brief jerk of shoulders, that flash of fear in the eyes. There are men who cannot be great, so they learn to be terrible. Briggs was one of them. A small man with a long whip. A very dangerous combination, and unfortunately a popular one.

"Are you asleep?" he roared at one of the girls, striking metal with his cane.

The girl was not asleep. She was having a fit. Her hands trembled, her eyes rolled back under her lids, her body jerked strangely, as if someone had tugged invisible strings. Briggs stood over her and kicked her boot.

"Get up."

Maggie went pale.

"She can't," she whispered.

"Quiet," I said, though something had already risen in me. Something ugly and hot.

Briggs looked at us.

"Have you a problem?"

"Only one," I answered quietly.

"What?"

"That you're standing too far from the machine."

For a moment I thought he really would hit me. In his eyes came that small joy I had seen in boys before they kicked a dog. But the factory had its rhythms, and he did not want to stop the work longer than necessary. Work was sacred. A beating could wait if it interfered with production.

"You'll be begging yet, Whitmore."

"Please put me on the list. I expect it's long."

He turned away, but the back of his neck reddened. A small victory. Meaningless. Those were my favourites, because one did not have to die for them straight away.

Here, one was not a person. One was a rhythm. Stop moving and you ceased to exist. The factory did not tolerate pauses, tears or weakness. A machine could groan, shake, spit smoke and demand repairs. A person was expected to function until they fell. And when they fell, they were said to be defective.

My hands hurt after an hour. My fingers stiffened, my skin burned, my nails blackened with dirt. After two hours my back was on fire. After three I could no longer feel my legs, only their distant, offended existence. After five I began to pray, not to God, but to time, that it would stop dragging itself like an old horse uphill. After seven I felt nothing but the roar. After ten I wanted to fall in love with a wall. At least it did not answer back, judge me, or carry a whip.

Break. Ten minutes. Beautiful, generous, royal ten minutes, in which a person could remember she possessed a stomach, a tongue and a spine, though the last usually lodged a complaint. We sat by the wall, on crates, on the floor, wherever there was room. A slice of bread. A sip of water. A stare into space. No one wanted to talk. Conversation was a luxury, and luxuries, as we have already established, were for those who did not have to

work with their hands. Maggie ate her bread so slowly she seemed to be trying to extend its existence by force of will.

"Have you heard?" she asked after a while.

"No. I am surrounded by silence and the singing of angels."

"About the one from Ancoats. They say she gave birth in the night and came to work in the morning."

"The child?"

"With a neighbour."

"Alive?"

Maggie shrugged. That gesture contained our whole city.

"For now."

For now. The most common blessing of the poor.

Sometimes someone hummed something. An old hymn, a street song, something about the Queen. Without enthusiasm. For the Queen had a crown, a palace, portraits and a nation to love from a safe distance. We had crooked spines, cracked hands, and patriotism shoved down our throats together with cotton dust. Whenever I heard God Save the Queen, I always wanted to ask: "And who the hell will save us?" But I did not ask. Not yet. There are questions a person must first carry inside like a burning coal. Spoken too soon, they only burn the tongue. Later they can set something larger alight. After the break we returned to the machines. The body protested for the first few steps, then surrendered with the dignity of an old rag. Edna waited. She always waited. Steel, patient, hungry. The spindles trembled. The belts flashed. Noise filled my head again, until thoughts shrank to simple commands. Do not put your fingers too far in. Do not slow down. Do not look at the stain. Do not cough near Briggs. Do not think of bed. Do not think of bread. Do not think. Thinking in a factory was like a loose sleeve near a machine. One moment's inattention and it could drag you in.

And yet I thought. I thought that somewhere in the same country, perhaps even in that same hour, a lady in silk was complaining that her tea was too cool. I thought of gentlemen in London speaking of the economy as if the economy did not have our faces, our backs, our dead children. I thought of God, who was said to have made man in His own image, and then allowed man to make the factory in the image of his greed. I also thought that if I ever went to hell, I would be able to lodge a complaint that the conditions were not especially original.

Writing this now feels like looking into a mirror. Not one of those beautiful, smooth mirrors from the salons of ladies in lace, where the light falls kindly and a face may be set at an angle that pretends innocence. Rather a cracked mirror, misted, dirty with soot and steamed by the breath of too many lives crowded into one room. You see a face, yes, but it is hard to say whose. Yours, perhaps. A ghost's. Or only exhaustion that has learned your features and walks about the world in them. Sometimes I do not even know whether I truly exist, or whether someone once invented me and forgot to finish the job. Left me anger, bones, a tongue and a pair of eyes, but neglected to write in any decent exit. Very shoddy work. If I ever met the author, I would have several remarks. Let us begin with facts, since facts are the only things that have not yet quite been sold by weight.

I am twenty-four years old. An age at which ladies in silk learn to embroider mythological scenes in gold thread, to play the pianoforte badly enough to have it called charm, and to faint with grace at too bold a conversation. At that age I can perfectly bandage a bleeding stump after a finger has been cut off by a machine, which, incidentally, has been given a name. I can tell by a cough who will live until winter and who only until Thursday. I can tell by an overseer's step whether he is in the mood for beating. I can hide a crust of bread from a hungry child and then hate myself for it all day. There you are. Practical education. At this age, other girls receive their first serenades beneath the window. Beneath mine once stood a rat, and it did not sing, it merely ran across my stomach while I slept. So much for romance. Had it worn a hat, perhaps I might have taken it for courtship.

People say I am pretty, though I do not know what that means in a district where mirrors are used mainly to check whether you have worms in your hair or whether the bruise beneath your eye looks any less fresh. Prettiness is for women who have time to notice it. For those who may stand by a window and let the sun turn their skin into poetry. With us the sun appeared rarely, and when it did break through the smog, it looked embarrassed, as if it had entered the wrong room. My hair is the colour of ash. Not the silvery kind praised by poets, but the sort left at the bottom of a stove after badly burned coal. Sometimes, when wet with rain, it darkened and clung to my face like sorrowful seaweed. Mother said that when I was small it had been lighter. Perhaps. In Manchester everything darkens with time. Bricks, curtains, lungs, memories.

My eyes are grey, like water after washing. Clouded, bottomless, without shine, unless someone properly irritates me. Then, apparently, they sharpen. Briggs once said I looked at him like a cat looking at a drowning man.

"I do not like cats," he added.

"Very sensible," I answered. "Cats know people."

He did not appreciate the compliment.

My body is thin not from fashion, but from undernourishment, poverty and muscles held constantly tight. Not that elegant slenderness from a magazine, where a woman looks like a reed and has the strength of three sighs. Mine was a practical thinness. Sharp at the elbows, hard at the shoulders, hollow where other women had softness. My hip bones sometimes pressed so hard into the mattress that I woke with the feeling I had slept on my own skeleton. In a sense, I had. Each of us slept on what remained of us. My skin is tough, thickened and soaked with factory dust and grease. Even after washing, if rubbing oneself with cold water in the corner of the room may be called washing, I felt beneath my fingers a layer of labour that could not be removed. The factory did not end at the gate. It came home with me. Sat at the table. Lay down beside me. Got under my nails and under my eyelids. Sometimes I dreamt of Edna.

I woke with my hands clenched as if I were still minding the thread. My fingers are twisted and thickened by calluses, as if each bone remembers a separate day's work. One joint aches in rain. Another in cold. A third simply because it is part of me and evidently has a character. Across my knuckles I have scars, small white lines from cuts, burns, blows. Some I remember. Most I do not. Pain, if repeated often enough, loses its name.

My voice is low, a little hoarse, as if I had swallowed a fistful of soot and could not cough it back up. Perhaps that is exactly what happened. In Manchester a person swallowed soot with air, bread, prayer and curse alike. My laugh is rough too. Rare. Some say it sounds more like the blade of a knife drawn over stone than anything joyful. Well, everyone laughs with what they have.

A smile? Yes, I have one. Somewhere in reserve. I keep it for special occasions, though none has yet occurred. Sometimes I use its cheaper version, crooked and malicious, the sort that insults more than comforts. A true smile is risky. It shows too much. And if life has taught me anything, it is that whatever you show the world can be used against you.

I am not delicate. Nor am I brave in the way preachers and poets like to describe bravery. Bravery in their mouths smells of flowers and elevation. Mine smelled of sweat, fear, blood from a cut finger and old bread hidden in an apron pocket. My bravery consisted in getting up. Every day. Even when my body begged me to stay. Even when Father was silent as stone, Mother looked like a shadow, and the city beyond the window breathed smoke and waited for me to step out so it could begin grinding me down again. I was not a victim. Not because the world had not tried. It tried with the zeal of a man earning a bonus for it. But a victim ought to be quiet, grateful for sympathy, and look pretty in someone else's story. I was too loud, too stubborn, and too inclined to remarks that spoiled the mood. I did not know how to suffer elegantly. My apologies. Poverty did not teach me manners. It taught me to look.

At people's hands, because hands tell the truth faster than mouths. At shoes, because shoes betray who is going to work, who to church, and who after someone else's money. At the eyes of men with power, because there you most often see whether they are about to pretend at justice or go straight to violence. At mothers who count slices of bread and children at the same time. At girls in the factory who laugh too sharply, because if they began to cry, they might never stop.

A morning in working-class Manchester did not truly begin with coughing. The cough was only the bell. The true morning began when a person, in spite of everything, rose from the bed. When she put on wet boots. When she swallowed something warm and disgusting and called it breakfast, because the tongue too needs lies in order to function. When she went out into the mud, head lowered but not broken. When she heard the factory in the distance and kept walking. I walked too. Every day. With ash in my hair, soot in my throat, pain in my hands and a tongue sharp as a splinter under a fingernail. And if anyone then believed that a girl like me would spend her whole life only silent, working, vanishing piece by piece inside the belly of a machine, well. Manchester produced many things. Cotton. Smoke. Crippled children. Rich men with clean hands. But sometimes, by mistake, it also produced anger. And anger, if it survives long enough, begins looking for a door.

Family... that is more a story than a structure. Not the sort of story read by the fire with a cup of tea under a blanket, while the rain taps politely at the window and a person has

the luxury of finding sorrow beautiful. No. Our family was a story written on the backs of bills, on the walls of a smoke-blackened room, on the skin of hands cracked by cold and work. A story without ornament, without moral and without a good ending, unless one counts it as a good ending that not all of us had yet been carried out feet first. We were a family, yes. So people said, at least. But sometimes I felt we were rather a handful of people pushed into one room by poverty, a surname and the absence of alternatives. A common roof, a common smell of damp, a common bowl, a common shame when there was no money for bread. That too is a kind of bond. Not a pretty one, not with embroidered napkins and family portraits, but it holds tight. Like a rope at the neck.

Father, Albert, had once been a miner. When I said once, it sounded as if I were speaking of another man. And perhaps I was. The old Albert, whom I knew more from Mother's stories than from my own memory, had been strong, stubborn and broad across the shoulders. He had a voice that filled the room before it learned to sound like an accusation. His hands were so large that when he took a mug it looked like a toy. Apparently he had been able to laugh from the full chest. Truly. Loudly. From the belly. Like someone who did not yet know the world had plans for him.

He was naive. Not stupid. That is an important difference, though the rich are fond of mixing one with the other when speaking of the poor. Father knew how to read the ground beneath his feet, listen to timber in a shaft, recognise by smell when something was wrong in a mine. He could mend tools, sharpen a knife, split coal as if the stone were only stubborn bread. But in his heart he carried that dreadful, impractical faith that if a man worked hard, honestly and without complaint, he would build something lasting. A beautiful thought. Suitable for a sermon, an embroidered sampler, or throwing out of the window.

The system he believed in had other plans for him. The system always has plans. It is one of its worst qualities. It never asks whether a person has any of his own. The mine he knew like his own hand collapsed above him one day. Mother said the earth first groaned low and hollow, like an animal before death. Then it all happened quickly. Wood cracked. Stone moved. Men shouted. Lamps went out one after another, as if someone were blowing out small yellow lives.

Father was down there with the others, under the belly of the earth, in the place where a man went every day for coal and pretended he was not going down into his own grave. He did not die. As it later proved, that was not always a mercy. They brought him out after many hours: filthy, broken, his face so white beneath the layer of dust that he looked like a ghost who had returned to his body by mistake.

He breathed. That was enough for the doctor to declare the matter relatively fortunate, because doctors of the poor had very modest expectations of miracles. The right side of his body hung dead, like someone else's, attached to him by a drunken God. His leg dragged behind him. His hand lay useless in his lap. One side of his face had fallen slightly, giving him the look of a man forever hearing something no one else wished to hear.

He came home, but not whole. Half of Father stayed underground. The other half sat in the corner of our room and began to be silent. From then on he was in the house like an enchanted object. Heavy, present, impossible to move. He sat in the same chair

by the wall, his dead hand folded in his lap, his head slightly bent as if he were still listening for beams cracking above him. Sometimes I felt he had never truly left the mine. That our four walls were only another tunnel for him. Darker, because without work. Deeper, because without hope.

He spoke rarely. And when he did speak, it was usually to reproach someone.

"You used too much water," he would grumble at Mother when she washed her hands after work.

"Shall I leave it on me?" she answered without turning her head.

"Women used to know how to be sparing."

"Men used to know how to bring home wages."

After a sentence like that, silence fell heavy as a wet sack. They did not look at one another. Father clenched his good hand on the arm of the chair, while Mother moved faster, more sharply, as if every pot, every spoon and every piece of wood were guilty of her having told the truth. Truth in a poor house seldom clears the air. More often it merely adds to the stink. Father looked as if his eyes weighed more than his entire body. In that look there was everything: bitterness, disappointment, grief, humiliation, and sometimes something else I could not name for a long time. Shame? Perhaps. Anger that he had survived? Also possible. A man who has measured his worth all his life by what he can carry, after an accident is left with his hands full of emptiness. And emptiness is heavier than coal. There were days when I hated him. Yes. I can say it. I have no intention of powdering my memories like ladies powder their cheeks before a visit from the vicar. I hated him when he sat in the corner and growled at Mother.

When he looked at me as if I were a bill that could not be paid. When instead of thanking her for a cup of warm water, he said it was too cold. When he remained silent all afternoon and then ruined what was left of the evening with one sentence.

But there were also days when I saw his good hand trembling on his knee, saw how he tried to lift the dead arm, as if by anger alone he could force it into obedience, and then hatred lost its teeth. Something worse remained. Pity. And pity for one's own father is like drinking cold water from a dirty pail. A person knows she must, and is sickened all the same. One evening, when I was perhaps thirteen, I woke in the middle of the night. The room was dark, with only the red breath of embers left in the hearth. Father sat on his chair. I thought he was sleeping with his eyes open, as he sometimes did, but then I heard a sound. Soft. Broken. Not a cough. Not a curse. He was weeping.

Not with his whole body, not loudly, not as children weep, or women who are still allowed. He simply sat there and tears ran from his eyes, one after another, without his face moving, without a sob. As if his body had betrayed him once more and let out something he did not wish to show. I told no one. Not even Mother. Especially not Mother. In the morning he was stone again. Only I knew that stones, too, sometimes soak up water.

Mother, Mary, was another story entirely. She lived only because death had not yet called for her. Or because death, a sensible woman, was afraid to get in her way before breakfast. Mother was one of those people who looked as though any misfortune might break them, and then the misfortune itself went away with a black eye. Dry, hard, sinewy. She had nothing soft in her for display. Even when she stroked my head, she did it as if

checking me for fever or lice. She rose before dawn and went to the factory like an automaton. Not one of those shining automata in shop windows that delight rich children, but an old, worn mechanism that runs because nobody has granted it permission to stop. Her day began even earlier than mine.

Before I opened my eyes, she had already blown life into the last embers, cut bread so thin you could have read Holy Scripture through the slice, if anyone had wished to spoil their appetite, and checked that Father had water within reach. She came back after dark. She smelled of sweat, oil, dust and a weariness so deep it seemed to soak into the floor she walked on. When she took off her boots, she did not sigh. She did not allow herself such performances. She simply sat for a moment, very straight, hands on her knees, and stared ahead. Then you could see something in her disconnecting from the world. Not sleep. Not rest. More a brief failure of the soul. Then she rose and carried on with what had to be done. There was always something that had to be done.

"Fetch coal."

"We have no coal."

"Then fetch something pretending to be coal."

"Shall I fetch Father? He's black enough in humour."

"Nell."

One word. Enough. Mother did not have to raise her voice. She possessed the kind of authority born not of power, but of daily survival. Briggs had a whip. Mother had a look. To be honest, I feared hers more. At home she spoke little, and when she did, it was chiefly to set a task, scold someone, or remind us that her mother had had it even worse and had not complained.

"Your grandmother gave birth by a cold stove and milked a goat an hour later," she sometimes said.

"Was the goat grateful?"

"Do not be insolent."

"I am trying to be hereditary."

She did not laugh. But sometimes, very rarely, the corner of her mouth twitched. So quickly that someone less practised might have missed it. I did not. In poverty, a person learns to notice the smallest crumbs. Even a crumb of a smile can be chewed on all day. To Mother, weakness was a sin, dreams were stupidity, and questions were a sign of idleness. Her world was simple and cruel: if you stand, work; if you sit, sew; if you lie down, you are probably dying, so try not to make a mess. She had no patience with despair, especially other people's. Her own she carried deep, carefully hidden beneath layers of duty, anger and washed-out cloth. Once, I think, she had been someone else. Sometimes I caught her humming under her breath. Very softly, almost soundlessly, as if afraid the song might betray her.

The melody was old, perhaps country, perhaps Irish, perhaps something she had made herself in the days when she still believed life could give a person something without later deducting it from wages. When she noticed I was listening, she stopped at once.

"What was that?" I asked once.

"Nothing."

"Nothing had a tune."

"Then you heard wrong."

Another time I found a small piece of ribbon in her box. Blue. Faded, but still delicate. It lay curled under needles and buttons like a dead insect that must once have been beautiful.

"Where did this come from?" I asked.

She snatched it from my hand so quickly it was as if it burned.

"Do not root through other people's things."

"We live in one room. Other people's things is rather an ambitious notion."

She looked at me strangely then. Not sharply. Not angrily. Rather as if for one second she had seen not me, but some version of herself she had buried long ago without witnesses. Then she hid the ribbon and snapped the box shut. I never saw it again. Whoever she had once been had long dissolved in the roar of machines and in the silence she had grown inside herself. Perhaps she sang. Perhaps she laughed at table. Perhaps she liked to dance. Perhaps she wore her hair loose upon her shoulders and had eyes that did not yet look at everything as a list of duties. Now only the hard shell remained. Armour. Mother moved inside that armour quickly, precisely, without a needless gesture. But sometimes, when Father slept and the world lost its teeth for a moment, I glimpsed a flash of former years. A shadow on the wall after a candle has been snuffed. And then it vanished.

I had a brother. Tommy. Three years older than me, with a soul too large for our district. That is not a poetic phrase. It is a diagnosis. Tommy's soul simply did not fit between our walls. It stuck out of him in every laugh, every gesture, every sentence spoken too loudly and too confidently for someone who ought to have known his place. He laughed like no one else. He had few teeth, because poverty and fights do their work, but his smile was such that for a moment the room looked less like punishment for sins. He drew in chalk on walls: faces, birds, odd machines that did not devour people but helped them live, which already sounded like the fantasy of a fevered man. He wrote poems on scraps of paper, the backs of labels, sometimes even on wood if he had nothing else. He sang songs nobody knew. He claimed he did not know them himself until they came out of his mouth.

"Where do you get them, then?" I asked.

"From the air."

"From this air?" I pointed to the window, beyond which smog hung thick. "Odd that they do not cough."

"Everything coughs here, Nell. Even songs. You only have to listen between the breaths."

He was an idiot. A beloved, bright, dangerous idiot. He said the world need not look like this. Imagine. In our district, such a sentence sounded almost like blasphemy. People accepted poverty like weather: foul, unavoidable, and discussed chiefly so one had something to complain about. Tommy looked at it like a door bolted from within, which someone had once mistaken for a wall.

"The rich want you to think that's just how it is," he said when we sat on the steps behind the house and rats conducted their own affairs in the gutter. "That poverty is like rain. It falls from the sky and that's that."

"In Manchester everything falls from the sky. Rain, soot, sometimes a dead pigeon."

"I'm telling you poverty is made. Someone builds it. Brick by brick. Act by act. Penny by penny."

"You sound like a handbill."

"Thank you."

"That was not a compliment."

"From you, almost everything sounds like a compliment, if one has resilience."

Tommy had that dreadful habit of believing in people. Not all people, of course. He was not that ill. But he believed a worker could lift his head. That a woman did not have to be silent. That a child was not born to fit a hand between gears. That a man in a top hat was not by nature better than a man with dust in his lungs, only better dressed and more efficient at theft. It did not take long for someone to decide this was dangerous. Knives are not dangerous. Knives are simple. You can see them, take them away, hang a man for them, and everyone knows where they stand. Sentences are dangerous. Especially short ones. "We want bread." "We want a voice." "We are not cattle." Such sentences have a vile habit of passing from mouth to mouth until suddenly they become a crowd. Tommy began going to meetings. At first he said it was nothing. That he only listened.

That at the tavern near Oldham Road a few men gathered, sometimes women too, and spoke of rights, wages, working hours, the Charter, the vote for those whose hands were dirty with labour rather than ink in an office. Then he brought home leaflets. He hid them beneath the mattress as others hid money or pornographic engravings. He read passages to me in whispers when Mother slept and Father pretended not to hear.

"Listen to this," he said. "The working man is not a tool, but a citizen."

"Pretty."

"Only pretty?"

"Very pretty. Almost so pretty someone will get punched in the mouth for it."

"You fear everything."

"No. I only have eyes."

He smiled then, as if my warnings proved I was still worth persuading.

"One day you'll come with me."

"Only if you carry me in a sack."

"You'll see, Nell. Everything can still change."

That was his favourite sentence. Everything can still change. He said it so often I wanted to embroider it on his shirt to save his breath. Then came the protest. Not the first and not the last, but the first that took my brother from me. It had rained since morning. Of course it had. History likes drama, but in Manchester even drama was ankle-deep in mud. People gathered at a square near the factory streets. Men in old coats. Women with scarves over their heads. Children who came because they had nowhere else to be, or because hunger is also a kind of political education. Someone held a banner. Someone shouted. Someone handed out papers. At first there was something

strange in it, almost beautiful. People stood together. Not as separate misfortunes shut in separate rooms, but as one body, wet, hungry, furious. Tommy stood somewhere at the front. I saw him for a moment.

His wet hair was pasted to his forehead and his face was lit with that unbearable conviction of his that if a person spoke the truth loudly enough, the world would eventually feel ashamed. The world did not feel ashamed. The mounted men came. Police. Soldiers. Men with truncheons, men with sabres, men with faces shut to everything except an order. Someone threw a stone. I never learned who. Perhaps a worker. Perhaps a child. Perhaps some provocateur, because authority likes to plant the spark first and then put out the fire with offended dignity and someone else's blood. Everything broke. There was not one scream. There were many, laid one over another. The scream of a woman knocked into the mud by a horse. The scream of a boy whose hand had been trodden on. The scream of a man struck at the temple with a truncheon. The scream of the crowd when the crowd understood it was no longer an assembly, but prey. Tommy did not come home that evening. Mother waited at the table, very straight, hands clasped so tightly her knuckles had gone white. Father sat in the corner and breathed heavily. He said nothing. I walked from door to window, from window to door, as if my steps might bring him back.

"Sit down," Mother said.

"No."

"Sit down, you are annoying me."

"You at least are alive."

She looked at me so sharply that I ought to have fallen silent. I did not. Fear does odd things to me. From others it squeezes tears. In me it sharpens the tongue, because apparently my body decided that if we were going to die, we might at least insult someone on the way. They brought him after midnight. Not on his feet. On a stretcher. Two men from the district. One had a split brow. The other would not look us in the eye. Always a bad sign. People look you in the eye when they bring good news, money or gossip. When they bring death, the floor suddenly becomes fascinating. Tommy was still breathing. Shallowly. With difficulty. His face was so beaten that for a moment he did not look like my brother, but like someone the city had tried to erase and had run out of time. Blood had dried by his ear. His coat was wet, heavy, stinking of mud and iron. Mother knelt beside him without a word. Father made a sound I never heard before or afterwards. As if something in him had collapsed underground all over again. Tommy opened his eyes only once.

"Nell," he whispered.

I bent over him.

"I'm here."

I wanted to say something wise. Something tender. Something people say beside the dying to make death feel less brazen. But my head was empty. All my famous insolence, my tongue, all the words with which I could cut others like a knife, disappeared. There was only me and his breath, fraying like old thread.

"Don't let them..." he began.

He did not finish. Perhaps he meant: do not let them win. Perhaps: do not let them forget me. Perhaps: do not let them make of you what they made of us. Or perhaps he only meant that I should not let Mother burn his drawings. I do not know. That is the worst thing about last words. People make monuments of them, and often they are only an unfinished sentence from a man who ran out of air. He died before dawn. Mother did not cry at once. She sat beside him, holding his hand, as if warming dead fingers could still change anything. Father stared at the wall. I stood by the door and felt something in me go away very quietly, without knocking. Perhaps childhood. Perhaps the last scrap of faith that the world had a bottom one could push off from. We could not afford a grave. Of course we could not. The poor cannot even afford a proper ending.

Tommy went into a common pit, without his name cut in stone, without fine words, without a place one could visit and pretend that talking to the earth made sense. The city does not like traces. Traces remind it that someone existed. And the existence of a poor man after death is inconvenient. It takes up space in memory, and memory is often the first step towards anger.

But I remember him. I remember his laugh. A chalk line on a wall. The way he tilted his head when listening, as though every word might be the beginning of a song. I remember how he once stole an apple and gave me the larger half, claiming he disliked the part with "too much apple" in it. I remember his hands, dirty with coal and ink. I remember the foolish sentence he repeated with the stubbornness of a holy madman. Everything can still change. Sometimes, when I cannot sleep, I hear him say it to me from the dark. His voice is quiet then, almost cheerful, as if death had failed to teach him sense. And then I wake in the same room. Father in the corner. Mother by the hearth. Damp on the wall. The factory bell in the distance. And the world, which apparently never received the message that it was supposed to change.

Work? The factory. Officially: Worth & Fidds Ltd Industrial Works. Unofficially: a place where machines had more rights than people. A machine that broke was put under the care of a mechanic. A person who broke was put onto the street. A machine was oiled, dismantled, cleaned, adjusted, spoken over with concern, like a rich child taken ill. A person was told not to exaggerate, because the queue of those wanting work was long and the street was longer.

I began working there when I was nine. Too young to be legal, but small enough to put a hand where an adult could not, and strong enough to lift a sack and not cry too loudly. The law, as I quickly learned, was like a window in a rich house: it existed, but not for the likes of us. Inspectors announced their visits in advance, which was very polite of them. Children were then hidden in storerooms, sent on "errands", or told to pretend they were older. Some even had their faces dirtied less so they looked healthier. That always amused me. In our district a clean face on a child looked more suspicious than a knife in church. On my first day Mother led me to the gate. She held my arm too tightly.

"Do as they tell you," she said.

"And if they tell me something stupid?"

"Then do it faster, before they notice you are thinking."

I was nine years old and still believed adults understood the world. The factory cured me of that very efficiently. Inside it was hot, loud and frightening. The machines seemed larger than houses. Women shouted at one another, but their words vanished in the roar. Someone cried. Someone laughed. Someone was hit across the hands for crying too long. The foreman showed me where to stand, what to pass, what not to touch, and then what to touch anyway if I did not wish to be struck.

"Your hands are small," he said.

"Will they grow?"

"If you are lucky."

He meant nothing kind by it. Now I am experienced. Which, in this context, means only that I am still breathing, though no one can guarantee I shall be by the end of the week. Experience in a factory does not mean wisdom or advancement. It means you know where the floor is slickest, which transmission belt sounds different just before it snaps, when Briggs is drunk and when he is merely cruel, and how long one may work with a fever before the body refuses cooperation in a manner visible to an overseer.

Wages? Ha. The funniest joke in this whole circus, and believe me, the competition is fierce. In theory, seven shillings a week. Seven. It almost sounds proud if one says it in the right tone. Like something a person might put in a pocket and feel human for a moment. In practice, after deductions for light, tools, damaged clothing, lateness, breaks, "voluntary" contributions to a relief fund that never relieved anyone, perhaps four remained. Sometimes less, if Briggs was in a bad temper. And Briggs was often in a bad temper, no doubt because of the face he had to live with. The relief fund was my favourite joke. They deducted from our wages in case of illness, accident or death. Then, when someone fell ill, they said the conditions had not been met. When someone had an accident, they said it was his own fault. When someone died, they said the application had been filed too late. Brilliant. If thievery wore a frock coat, that is exactly how it would look.

"Four shillings and threepence," the cashier once told me, placing the coins on the counter as if throwing bones to a dog.

"And the rest?"

"Deductions."

"For what this time? Breathing?"

He looked at the paper.

"Damaged spool."

"The spool was older than the Queen."

"Complaint to the office."

"Has the office ears?"

"Next."

Next. That was how all conversations about justice ended. Next. Next person. Next complaint. Next loss. The system did not need to win the argument. It was enough that it had a queue. Four shillings bought bread, a little fat, and tea made from leaves brewed until surrender, until the water took on the colour of sorrow and the taste of old leaves. Sometimes it bought coal. Sometimes not. When it did not, we sat closer together, which

was practical and dreadful at once. Warmth, as I said, was a luxury. And luxury had that disagreeable habit of living elsewhere.

And dreams? A curious matter. In our district dreams were like boots: everyone had once had some, but now they were full of holes, let in water and did not suit the road. Some still tried, especially children. Children are insolent in their hope. They can look at a puddle and see the sea, at a cloud and see a castle, at a piece of bread and see a feast. Then work arrives, and Briggs with his whip, and dust in the lungs, and the first winter without coal, and the first death of someone close, and dreams fly off like pigeons from a station: suddenly, filthy, and without farewell.

I too once dreamed. Do not tell anyone. I have a reputation. When I was little, I dreamed of foolish, insolent things. Of my own bed. Of a dress without patches. Of boots that did not drink water faster than I drank tea. Of not hearing a cough for one whole day. Of Mother singing an entire song without breaking it off halfway. Of Father rising from his chair and going out into the street with us, as before, though I did not remember any before well enough to know whether it had truly existed. Later my dreams became more practical. Less romantic. More resistant to laughter. I wanted silence. Not eternal silence, for that is called a grave, and I was in no particular hurry for one. I wanted living silence. The kind in which there are no machines, no screams, no coughs, no Briggs footsteps, no coins counted by a cashier, no Father's breath heavy with anger. I wanted to hear my own thoughts without a roar in the background. I wanted to see a colour that was not grey, black, brown, or that dirty shade of white cotton had after an hour in the factory.

Sometimes at night, when everyone slept and the walls had not yet remembered the day, I allowed myself a dream. Not a great one. Great dreams are impractical. They attract attention and die quickly. Mine was small, but stubborn.

I imagined a room. That was all. A room with a door that locked from the inside. Walls that did not leak. A bed that knew no other body. A window through which one saw not a chimney, but a piece of sky. A real sky, not that filthy rag hung over Manchester. I imagined a shelf of books. Not one, stolen or borrowed for ever, but several. My own. I imagined a basin of water so clean it was absurd. A dress that did not drag over the floor like a dying flag. Hands without blood under the nails. Most of all, I imagined a world in which a woman could say no and did not have to check at once from which direction the blow would come.

No. A simple word. One syllable. And in our district heavier than a sack of coal. No to the manufacturer. No to the overseer. No to the man who thinks a woman's hunger is an invitation. No to the priest who tells you to suffer patiently. No to Mother when she says that is just how things are. No to Tommy's voice in my head, if at times it told me to believe too fiercely and too foolishly. But then the bell would wake me at four in the morning and remind me: it was only a dream. And we do not dream here. We spin. We spin cotton, other people's fortunes and our own lives, thread by thread, until one day a person looks at her hands and does not know whether they are still hers or already belong to the machine. We spin the silence of mothers, the bitterness of fathers, the deaths of brothers and the laughter one must hold carefully, because it might crack into weeping. We spin every day from the same filth, the same hunger, the same rage.

And perhaps that is why I had not yet broken. Because if all your life you are taught to spin, bind, twist and hold the thread, then one day you begin to understand that history too is a thread. And if the thread is strong enough, you can stitch something with it. Or strangle someone.

Accidents in the factory were nothing new. I do not say this to sound hard. Hardness is one of those words people use to cover the fact that something in them rotted long ago. That was simply how it was. Accidents happened with such regularity that we stopped thinking about them and started numbering them. Not with names, because names vanished in a factory faster than blood from concrete. A name required memory, and memory required strength. Strength was needed for work. So we spoke in incidents. The one who lost his leg. The one that got pulled in. The boy with the head. Everyone knew who was meant. Everyone remembered more or less by which machine it had happened, how much blood stayed on the floor, who fainted, who pretended they would not faint, and whether production had to be stopped. Because that was the most important thing. Not the leg. Not the hand. Not the head. Production. If the machine did not have to be stopped, the accident more or less did not exist. It was only a small disturbance in the rhythm of the day, something between a broken belt and a lost button.

A person learned this quickly. The first scream still tore the heart. The second made a hole somewhere beneath the ribs. The third left a bitter taste in the mouth. After the tenth, you began instinctively to check whether your own fingers were still there, and then you returned to work, because Briggs was watching. After the twentieth, death became part of the room, as ordinary as dust, grease and that damned roar that even dreams had in its rhythm. But that day was different. Not from the beginning. The beginning was the same as always, which is the foulest thing about tragedies. They never have the decency to announce themselves with something grand. The sky does not split. The clock does not stop with dignity. No raven lands on the sill, no old woman spits over her shoulder. You simply come to work, straighten your apron, clench your teeth and think this will be another day to survive without losing a limb or your mind.

The metallic sound of the bell cut through the morning air, soulless and reliable like everything in that factory that reminded us of time. The bell did not ask. The bell did not explain. The bell commanded. People began taking their places with the same mechanical obedience one sees in horses drawing a cart to the slaughterhouse. An army without uniforms. An army without honour. Soldiers of cotton, grease and someone else's wealth. The first jerks of looms. The first strikes of spindles. The first curse muttered by someone who had cut the skin of a hand but did not even look at the wound, because the wound was small, and small wounds had no right to attention. The air, despite the morning cold, soon began to thicken in the lungs. Cotton dust floated in the light that fell through dirty windows, innocent to look at, white, light, almost delicate. Like snow, if snow could kill slowly. It settled on hair, on lashes, on the tongue. One swallowed it with saliva, with curses, with one's own weariness.

I stood at my station, beside Greta, as usual. Edna trembled before me, ready for another day of our loveless marriage. Greta had her sleeves rolled up, her jaw clenched, and a face still as a stone on the grave of a man no one visits any more. John worked a little farther off, adjusting a thread with one hand so skilfully it made a person ashamed

to possess two. Children ran along the floor, small shadows between the legs of machines, quick, quiet, trained in vanishing. Everything was as usual. And that was precisely why, when the other sound came, the world for a moment no longer fit its own skin. It was not the crack of a snapped belt. Not the thud of an overstrained engine. Not the unmetallic groan of a badly set axle. We knew those sounds. Each had its place in the factory choir. This one was foreign. It was a scream. Human. High, piercing, clean in its horror. It cut the air like a knife through thin cloth.

There was something so true in it, so naked, that for a moment it seemed even the machines hesitated. Of course that is impossible. Machines do not hesitate out of pity. At most, from damage. Yet for that one second I would have sworn the whole steel mechanism, our entire temple of progress, that damned mouth of industry, took a breath and itself did not know whether to go on swallowing. Heads lifted all at once. Hands froze. Someone dropped a spool. It rolled across the floor, small and helpless, absurdly loud in that second between scream and reaction. Then all of us looked in one direction.

Station number nine. Elsie worked there. Thirteen years old, perhaps fourteen, though she looked younger. Poverty keeps some children small like a spiteful mother. She was too slight for that machine. Everyone knew it. Even Briggs. Especially Briggs. But she was also too poor to refuse, too hungry to complain, and too necessary to her family for anyone to have the luxury of saying: "She is still a child." A child in a factory was only an adult who had not been granted time to grow up. Elsie had red hair, usually hidden under a scarf, though a few strands always escaped at her temples, as if even they did not wish to sit obediently. The freckles scattered over her nose and cheeks looked like little sparks on a face forever dimmed by exhaustion. Sometimes she sang under her breath. So softly that one saw the movement of her lips more than heard the tune. She did it when she thought no one was watching. As if she were trying to drown the rhythm of the loom with something that still belonged to her. Once, during a break, she sat near me and ate a dry slice of bread, picking at it with small fingers.

"What are you singing?" I asked.

She started at once.

"Nothing."

"Your nothing has more melody than most hymns in church."

She blushed, and the freckles almost vanished beneath the colour.

"Mother used to sing it to my brother."

"You have a brother?"

"He's six. Says when he grows up he'll be a ship's captain."

"Sensible. On a ship, at least a person drowns honestly."

She did not understand the joke, but she smiled. She rarely smiled. When someone smiled rarely in a place like that, you remembered it for a long time. Like a ray of sun on a prison wall. Now she lay on the floor. I did not understand at once what I was seeing. Strange, is it not? A person thinks that in an instant of horror everything becomes clear, sharp, impossible to mistake. Nonsense. First comes refusal. The head looks at blood and says: that is not blood. Looks at a twisted body and says: that is not a body. Looks at a child on the floor and says: perhaps she fell. Perhaps she will get up. Perhaps the world is not that foul. The world usually proves that it is. Elsie lay on her side, her face pressed

against the boards. Her eyes were open, but looked at nothing in particular. Her mouth moved soundlessly, as if she were still trying to sing, only the melody had remained somewhere in the machine.

Her arm, or rather what was left of it, hung at a strange angle, as if someone had tried to arrange it and then given up halfway. The material of the sleeve was caught between the cogs. The machine still held her, greedily, stupidly, mechanically. Like a dog that does not understand the game is over.

Cogs do not know mercy. They never have. They tore, jerked, pulled, until there was nothing left to pull. Blood spread over the boards faster than a person would wish to believe possible. Red against dirt looked almost indecent. Too alive. Too true. As if someone had suddenly poured colour into a world that had spent years pretending it was made only of greys.

"Stop it!" someone shouted.

I do not know who. Perhaps John. Perhaps Greta. Perhaps me. Sometimes memory takes your own voice and will not give it back. The machine jerked for another moment before someone managed to pull the belt away. They were seconds. A few. Perhaps less. Then they seemed like hours. Every next twitch of the mechanism was an insult. As if Edna, number nine, the whole steel family of butchers, could not understand why everyone was suddenly making such a fuss over a little meat. Briggs appeared like lightning. Not out of concern. Out of suspicion. The first thing he did was check the machine. He bent over the mechanism, touched the belts, looked at the cogs, like a doctor examining a valuable patient. Only then did he cast a glance at Elsie. At the child. At that small red-haired girl who only yesterday had stolen crumbs from her apron pocket for her brother, because she said he was growing more and therefore needed bread more. Briggs looked at her the way one looks at an overturned sack.

"Is it jammed?" he asked.

Dryly. Officially. That is the tone one uses for a cracked transmission belt, a delayed coal delivery, or mice in the storehouse. Not for cracking bones. Not for a child whose face was white as flour, if flour had the right to terror. For a while no one answered. The hall stood in a strange stillness. Even where machines still ran, people had stopped moving. Dust floated in the air, calm, indifferent, as though it were not what Elsie had breathed for years. Briggs turned his head.

"I asked if it is jammed."

John stepped forward.

"The girl's been caught."

Briggs looked at him with irritation.

"I can see what has happened."

"You do not look as if you can."

Something passed through the hall like a current. Not loudly. Not openly. Rather a tension in necks, quick glances, held breaths. John rarely spoke in that tone. Old one-handed John had the calm of a man who had left too much on battlefields to squander anger without need. If he spoke sharply, something had snapped. Briggs straightened slowly.

"Get on with your work."

"She's bleeding."

"Then someone carry her out."

"To a doctor," Greta said.

Her voice was low. Even. Neither plea nor shout. Something worse. A fact. Briggs looked at her.

"To the shed."

"To a doctor," Greta repeated.

Then I saw his face change. Not much. Not so everyone would notice. But I noticed. A shadow of unease entered his eyes. Not about Elsie. About order. About the fact that a word spoken once could be repeated. About the fact that if one woman said "to a doctor" calmly enough, another might say something more. And then a third. And then perhaps someone would raise a hand not to work, but against him.

"I said: to the shed," he hissed. "A doctor costs money."

"And she doesn't?" slipped out of me.

Briggs turned to me. For a moment I felt the roar return only to drown out my heart.

"What did you say?"

I could have been silent. I should have been silent. It would have been sensible. And sense, as we all know, is very useful when one intends to live long and dully. I looked at Elsie. At her red hair, wet with sweat and blood at the temple. At her mouth, now almost still. At Greta's hands clenched so tightly her knuckles had gone white. At the children standing by the wall, children who looked at the floor as if they saw their own future poured between the boards.

"I asked whether she costs nothing," I said.

Briggs came closer. I could smell his sweat and leather, the same stink of petty power worn too close to the body.

"Careful, Whitmore!"

"We are careful every day. It does not help."

His hand twitched towards the whip. Greta shifted almost imperceptibly. John too. Nothing grand. No scene. No heroism fit for a cheap ballad. Simply two people who, for a fraction of a second, set their bodies as if, if it came to it, they meant to stand between me and the blow. And that was the most dangerous thing. Not my insolence. Their movement.

Briggs saw it too.

"Carry her out," he snarled. "And get back to your stations at once. If this disorder delays the work, I'll deduct it from wages."

He did not say whose. Probably everyone's. Or perhaps the machine's. Though that one he would hardly dare dock. Machines were more important here than people. A machine had value, a number, inspections and a place in the ledger. A person had a name only until it had to be written on a wage list or crossed from it for good. Two men lifted Elsie. Gently, insofar as it is possible to lift gently someone who is at once a child and a wound. One of the girls, Sarah, pulled off her own scarf and pressed it to what remained of Elsie's arm. The scarf turned red at once.

"Elsie," she whispered. "Look at me, love. Look."

Elsie did not look. Or else she was looking somewhere none of us could follow. They carried her to the shed. Not to a doctor. A doctor cost money. And we were not an investment. In the shed they kept the injured, the dead, damaged tools and things no one knew what to do with until someone more important decided whether they were still fit for use. Sometimes it was hard to tell which was which until it began to stink. Some lowered their eyes. Others stared at the place where she had lain a moment before with terror so great it looked almost like stupidity. But it was not stupidity. It was recognition. They were not looking at Elsie, but at a warning. At a truth that had suddenly come out from under the machine and laid itself in the middle of the hall, red, wet and impossible to mistake for anything else. Greta clenched her fists so tightly her knuckles whitened. John turned his face away.

Annie touched her scarf, the one that covered the scars where her hair had been, and for a moment she looked as if she felt again the teeth of the machine on her skin. And I looked. Not because I was cold. Not because it did not move me. Coldness in such moments is a luxury. I looked because I could not not look. Because if a person turns away every time the world shows its true face, then what remains is only blindness in human skin. I looked because the image was a knife. It entered beneath the skin and stayed.

Something in me cracked. Not loudly. No thunder. No music. No great gesture. More like a thread snapping inside a body so exhausted it had forgotten it was still holding anything. For a moment I felt nothing. That was the strangest part. Not pity. Not anger. Not fear. Only a blank space, white and silent, like freshly washed cloth before blood reaches it.

After a few minutes everything returned to normal. The sentence sounds innocent. Almost calm. And there is nothing more disgusting than a return to normal after something that ought to stop the world. The machines started again, first one, then another, then the whole hall swallowed the roar back into itself. People returned to their stations. Hands began to move. Thread twisted. Cotton slid. The floor still bore blood, but someone threw sawdust over it. Sawdust is a marvellous thing. It absorbs blood, vomit, spilled oil and apparently also responsibility. Briggs walked between the rows and struck a crate with his cane.

"One more and I'll deduct it from wages."

He did not say from whom. No one. Everyone. The world. Perhaps Elsie herself, if by some miracle she was still breathing in the shed and had the insolence to do so at the company's expense. I returned to Edna. My machine waited patiently, like an old woman who has seen so much she no longer bothers pretending surprise. My hands moved. Feed, twist, pull, shift. Feed, twist, pull, shift. The body knows how to continue when the soul stands in a corner and retches.

During the break no one spoke. We sat behind the factory on stones that were cold, but less hostile than the boards inside. The wall at our backs gave off chill, as if even the bricks were tired of the heat of human bodies. Above us the chimney spat at the sky. Before us the gutter carried something I did not wish to recognise. Each of us held a piece of bread, but hardly anyone ate. Hunger was there. It always was. But sometimes disgust could sit on its throat. Maggie turned a crust of bread in her fingers until it began

to crumble. Annie looked at her knees. John smoked the last of his tobacco in such silence that every ribbon of smoke seemed a separate curse. Greta sat motionless. She stared somewhere ahead, beyond the wall, beyond the factory, perhaps beyond all Manchester. Her face was closed, but her hands betrayed her more than usual. Her fingers were interlaced so tightly the skin near the nails had gone white. She was silent a long time. Then she said:

"She had a brother."

That was all. Three words. And yet in those three words lay everything no one had the courage to say. A brother who did not know. A brother who perhaps waited in some cold room, nose at the window, looking for his sister's red hair. A brother who asked his mother whether Elsie would bring him a crust of bread. A brother who might come to the factory gate that evening and stand there too small to understand the silence of adults. Perhaps someone would hand him her last wages. Two shillings. Perhaps less. After deductions. For lost time. For soiled cloth. For damage to the machine. I almost laughed when the thought came into my head. Not because it was funny. Because it was so disgustingly probable that laughter seemed the only response that did not require throwing oneself at someone's throat.

"What's his name?" I asked.

Greta looked at me slowly.

"Who?"

"Her brother."

"Jamie."

Jamie. A small, ordinary, soft name. The name of a child who should not yet know what a coffin costs, and who might soon learn there would be no coffin. Maggie suddenly covered her mouth with her hand.

"She said she wanted to buy him a wooden horse at the fair."

No one said anything. What could be said? Sorry? God willed it? Things will get better? Such words ought to be punished with flogging. At least in poor districts, where lies sound especially brazen. At last John put his tobacco out against a stone.

"She was not the first."

Greta raised her eyes.

"No."

John looked towards the hall.

"And she will not be the last."

The silence after those words was heavier than the roar inside. I returned to my station with my teeth clenched and my jaw aching, because when you have no strength to scream, you clamp your jaws until something in you begins to tremble. That trembling was not rebellion yet. It had no banner, no slogan, no plan. It was too small, too wild, too fresh. More like an animal locked in the cage of the ribs, throwing itself against bone. Then I thought perhaps that is how hatred is born. Not in one great scream. Not in one moment when a person springs up, grabs a knife and runs to change history. No. Hatred is born piece by piece. After one tear no one notices. After one day when someone tells you your suffering is a cost of labour. After one child carried to a shed instead of a doctor. After each drop of blood that dust covers faster than memory.

After every quiet scream that does not echo because the hall is too loud and the world too busy. Every drop of sweat. Every trace of blood. Every breath wasted for another man's profit. It was not merely pain. It was fuel. And perhaps, just perhaps, I would one day set it alight.

After the break everything was forcibly shoved back where, according to the factory, it belonged. People at machines. Children under machines. Briggs between the rows. Blood in the wood. Anger under the tongue. Death in the shed.

The machines began growling again like irritated beasts. Briggs walked once more with the whip in his hand, which he no longer used from anger, but out of habit. Some people scratch their chins, others adjust a hat. Briggs struck the air with the leather end of his whip, as if reminding us that if it did not fall on a back today, it was only because it waited for a better moment.

The air was heavy. The same damned air, thick with dust and heat, but now also with something stickier and more suffocating. Indifference. Not ours. Not entirely. Rather the indifference built into the bricks, the machines, the account books, the eyes of men like Briggs. Indifference was the most durable material in that factory. Iron rusted. Wood cracked. People died. Indifference remained.

I stood by Edna and felt something boiling inside me. It was not a violent explosion, not the kind poets like to describe, especially poets who have never had wages docked for bleeding. It was a slow process. Like a kettle set over too weak a flame. First the steam under the lid. A barely audible bubbling. Then nausea, which came suddenly, though the reason lay a few yards away, drying between the boards.

Then anger. Not explosive, not bright, not beautiful. Thick. Sticky. Dark. And at the end came something far worse. Shame. Shame that I had stood like the rest. That I had done nothing. That I had not pulled Elsie from the machine sooner. As if I could. As if I had the strength to stop iron with bare hands. Shame is not fair. It does not ask whether you could have done anything. It sits on your chest and says: but you were breathing while she stopped.

Shame that I watched as if it were another day in a mechanically measured age of suffering. Shame that again I allowed us to be treated like cogs. And yet all my life I had felt I was something more. I did not know what, had no word for it, but beneath the dust, sweat, hunger and cotton there smouldered some Nell who had more to say than "Yes, Mr Briggs." Greta felt it too.

We saw it in one another. There was no need to speak. There are moments when a look becomes a conversation, and conversation would only be a waste of breath. Her face, usually blank as a wall, had edges today. As if something inside her were straightening. Something old. Something that had sat hunched for years and suddenly remembered it had a spine. When Briggs passed us again, pretending as usual that he saw only efficiency, Greta bent slightly over her work and whispered almost soundlessly:

"This is not the first time."

I did not answer. Her fingers moved over the material evenly, quickly, flawlessly. If someone had looked from a distance, he would have seen the perfect worker. Quiet. Obedient. Efficient. Then she added:

"But perhaps the last?"

It did not sound like a question. Not quite. Rather like something a person says to herself before daring to admit that she has made a decision. I did not answer, because I was not certain the answer would not turn those words into something real. And real things are dangerous. Especially in factories. But they stayed in me. Like a splinter under a nail. Small. Sharp. Impossible to ignore. After work the bell announced the end of the day. The same sound that in the morning drove us inside now pushed us out into the street, as if the factory were spitting out spent refuse to make room for tomorrow's. People began slowly pouring through the gate like a dirty river spilling onto cobbles. No one said much. Weariness usually stole our words, but that evening the silence had another face. The shed stood to one side, behind the storehouse of cloth bales. The door was shut. I did not look at it at once. I tried not to look.

Eyes, out of spite, always find what a person wants to avoid. I saw the narrow gap beneath the door, dark with mud and something else. I saw a piece of bloodied scarf abandoned by the threshold. I saw Sarah standing a few paces away, her hands pressed to her stomach. Someone was saying something to her, but she only nodded. I did not know whether Elsie was alive. And no one wanted to tell me. That too was an answer.

I did not go home at once. My legs turned left, as if they knew where they wanted to go. Sometimes the body understands things before the head stops pretending. I passed the main street, the gutter, the bakery with its window steamed by warmth that was not for me, and entered the side alley behind the brickworks. Where the walls stood closer together, where the wind carried the smell of wet clay, stale paper and cheap tobacco. Where those gathered who did not fit the rest of the puzzle, or fitted too well and began to choke on it.

Henry was already there. He stood leaning against the wall, collar open, waistcoat stained with ink, printer's black on his hands that never washed off entirely. He claimed it was his distinguishing mark. I suspected he simply could not afford decent soap. His hair was in disorder, and he had the face of a man who slept too little, read too much, and had not yet understood that in our world the combination could prove fatal. He was young, perhaps not much older than me, but in his eyes there was something that did not belong to his age. Not age itself. That would be too simple. Rather sharpness. As if he had been born too awake for a world that liked stupidity because stupidity is easier to govern. He was the son of a former lecturer who had once taught rhetoric and now sold second-hand books at market, because rhetoric had proved less profitable than mouldy volumes of sermons and Latin primers. Henry printed leaflets. Sometimes religious, sometimes political, sometimes one pretending to be the other. The last was most effective, because the police read less carefully if there was something about God at the beginning. When he saw me, he pushed away from the wall.

"You are late."

"Good to see you, Henry. I too have had a delightful day."

He measured me with his eyes and at once stopped smiling.

"What happened?"

I did not answer at once. Not because I did not want to. Because words suddenly proved too small. What do you call something we had all seen so many times, and yet this time it went deeper? How do you say a machine dragged in a child and prevent it from sounding like another factory rumour?

Henry came closer.

"Nell."

That one word, my name, spoken without mockery, without command, without haste, almost enraged me. Gentleness can be worse than a whip if a person has been holding herself up all day by hardness alone.

"Elsie," I said at last.

Henry knew the name. Everyone knew everyone, if not by face, then by misfortune.

"The little one from number nine?"

I nodded.

"The machine took her arm."

His jaw twitched.

"Is she alive?"

I gave a short laugh. Ugly. Joyless.

"Funny that you ask, as if the factory had a duty to inform us of such trifles."

"Nell."

"They carried her to the shed. Briggs checked the machine first. Then her. In that order, if you wish to preserve details for posterity."

Henry turned his eyes away. Not for long. Only long enough for me to see that it struck him.

"A doctor?"

"Do not be ridiculous."

"How old was she?"

"Thirteen. Perhaps fourteen. In a factory, age depends on who is asking."

Henry took a small notebook from his pocket. The gesture ought to have pleased me. That was why I had come, was it not? So it would not remain under the boards with her blood. So someone would write it down. So words could do what we had not. And yet when I saw the notebook, something in me hissed.

"No," I said.

His hand stopped.

"No what?"

"Do not write her down so quickly."

"I only want..."

"I know what you want. You want to make a sentence out of her."

Henry looked at me carefully.

"And what would you rather she became? A stain by the station?"

He struck home. The bastard. For a moment I wanted to hit him. Not hard. Just enough that both of us might feel more honest.

"I want her not to vanish," I said quietly. "But I do not want you to smooth her over. Do not write tragic accident. Do not write unfortunate incident. Do not write like

those newspaper men who can turn the death of a child into a polite paragraph between the price of coal and a notice for a lost dog."

Henry slowly put the notebook away.

"Then how should I write it?"

I looked at my hands. Beneath my nails was dark grime. In one place, by the thumb, dried blood. I did not know whether it was mine or Elsie's. That too was something. Our blood mixed so often it ceased to be personal.

"Write that her name was Elsie," I said. "That she had red hair. That she sang under her breath. That she had a brother called Jamie and wanted to buy him a wooden horse. Write that Briggs ordered her taken to the shed because a doctor costs money. Write that the machine mattered more. Write it so someone chokes on his bloody toast at breakfast."

Henry looked at me for a long time. Then he nodded.

"Good."

"Not good. Good will be when Briggs begins to fear entering the hall."

"That can be written too."

"Not everything can be settled with paper."

"Paper can start a fire."

"But someone has to bring the flame."

Silence fell in the alley. Behind us the city went on working. Carts rattled over cobbles. Somewhere someone shouted at a child. Smoke rose from the brickworks chimney, smaller than the factory's, but just as stubborn. Manchester stopped for no one. Not even for Elsie. Especially not for Elsie.

"Have you anything for me?" I asked.

Henry hesitated, then reached beneath his waistcoat and took out a folded sheet. The paper was cheap, rough, still slightly damp with ink. He handed it to me carefully.

"Do not show it to anyone you do not trust."

"The list is short. Convenient."

I unfolded the paper. At the top, in large black letters, stood:

WE ARE NOT PARTS OF A MACHINE.

For a moment I looked at those words and felt something strange. Not hope. I dislike abusing large words. Hope is like fresh bread, if you stare at it too long, hunger begins to hurt. It was more recognition. As if someone had written on paper something that had long been sitting in my bones. Beneath it there was more: about working hours, about children, about deductions, about accidents hidden from inspectors, about the right to assemble, about the fact that work without dignity is only a slow execution with a dinner break, and no dinner besides.

"Pretty," I said.

Henry raised an eyebrow.

"Is that all?"

"Pretty things can be dangerous. Let that satisfy you."

"That is your sentence at the bottom."

I looked again. At the very bottom, in smaller type, it said: If we must die by the machines, let us at least not die in silence. I did not remember when I had said it.

Perhaps once after work. Perhaps in anger. Perhaps Henry had the vile habit of listening too carefully. My throat tightened.

"You stole my words."

"Borrowed."

"Will you return them?"

"I hope not."

I ought to have answered with something sharp. Something about thieves, printers and men who think ink gives them a right to everything. But the words at the bottom of the sheet held me by the throat. If we must die by the machines, let us at least not die in silence. I thought of Elsie. Of her mouth moving without sound. Of Jamie, who might never receive a wooden horse. Of Tommy, who had not finished his sentence. I folded the leaflet and slid it under my apron.

"Nell?"

I had already turned towards the mouth of the alley.

"What?"

"Take care with Briggs."

I laughed softly.

"Henry, I have spent my whole life taking care with men like Briggs."

"Today he may be taking care with you."

That was almost kind. Almost.

"Then let him take proper care," I said. "I have a bad habit of surviving."

I set off towards home. The city around me was the same as it had been that morning: dirty, wet, hungry, indifferent. Chimneys stood motionless like sentries. The streets sucked underfoot. People returned from work with faces so grey it seemed the day had drained the colour from them and left only skin. But something had changed. Not in Manchester. Not yet. In me.

Beneath my apron I felt the paper. Thin, fragile, easily crushed. And yet heavier than it ought to have been. As if someone had slipped not a leaflet under my clothes, but a piece of glowing coal. At home Mother would ask why I had come back late. Father would look from his corner with that dead, heavy gaze. The bell would wake me before dawn again. Edna would be waiting. Briggs would walk between the rows. At station number nine, perhaps they would put a new little girl. Everything would be the same. And that was precisely why it could not remain so.

That evening at home, everything was the same as always. And that was the worst of it. After a day like that, one would expect the world to shift at least a little. That the walls would look different. That the table would crack. That the pot would refuse obedience. That Father would lift his eyes and ask why I had the face of someone who had returned not from work, but from the funeral of her own patience. But no. None of that. The world had a disgusting talent for continuing, especially when it ought to fall to its knees and apologise. Mother scraped the remains from the bottoms of pots with the precision of an apothecary, as if she might scrape one more spoonful of dinner from the metal

itself. The pot protested softly under the knife, a dry, rough sound that drilled into the teeth. Father sat in his corner and stared at the wall with such intensity one might think he was trying to pierce it with his eyes and find something better there. Perhaps the old mine. Perhaps his own legs.

Perhaps a world in which hard work truly meant something, and was not merely a slower method of dying. The silence was thicker than in the factory. There was no roar in it, but it was heavier. Heavier because nothing distracted from it. In the factory, noise at least pretended something was happening. At home, silence sat with us at the table like a fourth member of the family, well fed, insolent and entirely uninvited. One could hear only the scraping of the pot, Father's breathing, the crackle of something in the hearth and water dripping somewhere. Drop by drop. As if the house itself were patiently counting how much more we could endure.

I sat in my corner. I said nothing. No one asked, because no one asked anything here. Questions were dangerous. The question "what happened?" could open a door that would not later close. And in our house doors had to hold. The walls were barely managing. I took out my notebook. Old, with yellowing pages, soft at the corners from hiding and from too-careful fingers. I kept it chiefly so I would not go stupid. Or so I might go stupid in a more orderly fashion. Paper was for me somewhere between a confession and a knife. I could drive into it things one could not say aloud. I could store my own voice there before the factory ground it up with the rest. I opened it on a blank page. The pen trembled in my fingers. Not much. Only enough to betray me. I wrote one sentence.

"Today a girl lost her arm. I lost my patience."

I looked at those words for a long time. The ink sank slowly into the paper, like blood into boards. For a moment I wanted to cross them out. They sounded too clean. Too elegant. Nothing about that day had been elegant. Elsie had not lost her arm in a sentence. She lost it in the roar, in blood, in the stink of grease, in that vile moment when all of us understood the machine had won before anyone had time to fight. But I left them. Sometimes one sentence is all a person can afford. Mother turned her head.

"Writing again?"

She did not say it with curiosity. More as if she had caught me wasting bread.

"No," I answered without raising my eyes. "I'm talking to paper."

"Paper does not answer."

"That is precisely why I like it."

Father moved in the corner. The board beneath his chair gave a soft groan, as if it too were tired of serving in our family.

"Writing won't bring in bread," he muttered.

I did not look at him at once. I felt the words rising to my throat. Tired, dirty, sharpened by the whole day.

"Nor will staring at the wall," I said. "And yet I see everyone in this house has his passions."

Mother froze with the knife above the pot. Father slowly turned his head. His eyes were dark, heavy, sunk in his face like two stones dropped into a well. Once I had feared that look. Later it began to anger me. Now, most often, it made me cold.

"Careful, girl," he said quietly.

"I am careful all day."

"Then be more careful."

"Of what? Machines? Briggs? Hunger? My own tongue? The list is growing long, Father."

"Of starting to think you are larger than you are."

Mother lowered the knife onto the table.

"Albert."

She did not shout. She did not need to. There was warning in her voice, though one could not tell for whom. For him or for me. Father, however, looked only at me.

"I've seen your sort," he said. "In the mines. Lads who began talking louder than was good for them. Thought because they had a tongue and two fists the world would make room."

"And what happened to them?"

"The earth taught them."

"Splendid. A charming family tale. Moral: keep quiet until something buries you."

Mother struck the table with her palm.

"Enough, Nell."

This time her voice was harder. I looked at her. Her face was tired, greyed by steam and smoke, but her eyes were sharp. Always sharp. Mother might be near collapse, but her gaze could still give orders long after death.

"You know nothing, child," she said more softly.

That stung me. Not girl. Not Nell. Child. After a day in which I had seen Elsie on the floor, after a day in which the blood of a thirteen-year-old had soaked into boards, someone called me a child. I wanted to laugh, but the laugh stuck somewhere under my ribs.

"I know enough," I said. "I know that today a girl was carried to the shed instead of a doctor. I know Briggs checked the machine first and only then looked at her. I know that tomorrow someone will put another child at her station and everyone will pretend it has to be so."

Mother did not answer at once. Father lowered his eyes. That was almost worse than a quarrel.

"Elsie?" Mother asked after a moment.

I nodded.

"The red-haired one?"

"Yes."

Mother closed her eyes for one second. Only one. Then she was herself again.

"Is she alive?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"They carried her to the shed. With us, information about the injured is a luxury, like meat and a dry floor."

Mother drew a hand over her face.

"Poor girl."

"Is that all?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"I don't know. Something. Anything that does not sound like a prayer over a pot."

"You think if I name it louder, I shall change it?"

"Perhaps at least it would sound as if we still cared."

Father snorted bitterly.

"Cared. Fine word. You care? Go to Fidds tomorrow and tell him he has a heart of stone. We shall see what you get for courage. Likely less than for work."

"At least for once it would be honest pay."

Mother pointed at my notebook with the knife.

"Hide that."

"Why?"

"Because paper is dangerous."

"Everything is dangerous. Machines. Hunger. Men. Cold. Even bread, if old enough."

"Do not joke."

"I am not joking."

We looked at one another for a while. Two women in one room, both tired, both furious, both tied to life like to a cart being dragged through mud, because there was no one to stop it. Only she had learned to clench her teeth. I was still learning to show mine.

At last Mother looked away.

"Write, if you must. But do not show anyone. And do not leave it out."

"Are you worried about me?"

"I am worried about the rent."

"Of course. Tenderness, our way."

"Tenderness will not feed a family."

"Has silence fed it?"

She did not answer. Father tilted his head back against the wall.

"Tommy asked questions too."

The room suddenly grew colder. Not from the window. Not from the walls. From the name. Tommy. One word, and it could move everything in us that pretended to be dead. Mother turned sharply.

"Do not start."

Father went on as if he had not heard her.

"He had eyes full of fire too. Thought if he said no, the world would stop. And it did. For him."

I closed the notebook slowly.

"Do not speak his name if you mean to use it as a muzzle."

Father looked at me for a long time.

"I want you to live."

"No. You want me to survive. It is not always the same thing."

Mother turned back to the hearth, but I could see her back. Tight. Stiff. As if each of our words entered between her shoulder blades. Father did not answer. Nor did I. But my hands were still trembling, so I opened the notebook again. Because if I did not

write, I would have to say something. And if I said one more sentence, I might truly set the house alight that evening. Perhaps not with fire. Perhaps with something worse. Ink was safer. For now.

It began with a spool. A stupid, damned, cracked spool that decided to fly from its socket with the force of a revolutionary. It shot out suddenly with a dry crack, as if it had an opinion of my pace and had decided it was time to interrupt the diseased routine. It rolled across the floor quickly, insolently, leaving behind it a trail of dust and my future misfortune. And I, idiot that I was, reacted too slowly. Perhaps from exhaustion. Perhaps because my thoughts still returned to Elsie, to her red hair and her mouth moving without sound. Perhaps because of the stain at station number nine, which no one had washed away and which all day had watched us from the floor like an accusation. Or perhaps, and this is most likely, because I was already tired of pretending to be nothing but a pair of hands for work and silence. The spool struck the leg of the machine, bounced, described a crooked arc and stopped only by the passage. The children at the nearest stations instinctively ducked before his name had even been spoken. That is how factory wisdom works: the body knows before the mind that Briggs is coming. And of course he saw.

Briggs always saw. He had the eye of a vulture over carrion. He did not look for beauty, for no doubt he would not recognise it even if beauty kicked him in the teeth. He looked for weakness. A stumble. A tremor of the hand. A hesitation. A person who, for one second, had stopped being a cog and started being himself. I do not know whether he was more like a hunting dog sniffing out errors, or a judge who needs no trial to announce a sentence. In any case, he moved towards me at once. A few of his steps were enough to thicken the air around me.

"Whitmore!" he bellowed.

His voice cut through the roar of the machines with such force that Greta lifted her head, and the machine beside me shrieked like a wounded animal. I picked the spool from the floor. My fingers were stiff, dirty, slick with sweat. I wanted simply to put it back and survive. Truly. For one brief, sensible moment I wanted to be a clever girl. A quiet girl. The sort who knows when to shut her mouth. Unfortunately, I had never been especially good at sense. Briggs stopped in front of me.

"It is a spool, Whitmore, not your mother. You need not cuddle it, stroke it or sing it lullabies. Put it back before I decide the work is too much for your poor little head."

A few boys at the back snorted with laughter. Empty, nervous, pathetic laughter. The kind that comes not from amusement, but compulsion. From fear that if they did not react, they would be next. Laughter in a factory often sounded like a plea to be spared one's skin. I looked at Briggs. Directly. Without lowering my eyes. My heart beat like a mad thing. My throat held sand, dust and something sharp, perhaps my own sense trying to escape into freedom. My knees went soft, but my eyes did not retreat an inch.

"I apologise, Mr Briggs," I said calmly. "I merely made a mistake. My mother, when something falls to the ground, does not immediately reach for a whip. You see, a person can confuse the rules learned at home with the rules of the factory. Very dangerous."

The silence that fell after those words was like a suspended blade. The machines had not truly stopped. Of course not. Worth & Fidds Ltd. could survive the loss of a child,

but not several seconds of idleness. And yet for a moment I felt the noise step back. That people stopped breathing. That even the dust hung in the air, curious whether it was watching the last sentence I would ever say with all my teeth. Briggs froze. He took half a step towards me, then stopped. His eyes, usually small and empty, held something different. Not ordinary anger. Anger I knew. Anger had colour, temperature and rhythm. Anger reddened the neck, clenched fists, spat words. This was different. Interest. As if he had just discovered a new kind of cog, one that did not break at the first pressure. That was worse.

"You have a tongue like a razor, girl," he said slowly. "Pity you cannot use it for prayer instead of rebellion. Perhaps if you knelt before God more often and stood against your superiors less, it would do you good."

Someone beside me drew air through his teeth. Greta stood motionless. Only her hand moved lightly over the cloth, as if she wished to remind me: careful. Too late, Greta. We are always careful too late.

"I do not believe in miracles, sir," I said before I had time to be frightened of my own voice. "And prayer must belong to them, since so many people try it and somehow no one has yet prayed up a shorter shift, higher wages, or a doctor for a child carried to the shed. So I prefer to concentrate on things more likely. Such as not dying here of stupidity."

This time the silence was shorter. Perhaps because several people immediately returned to work in order to pretend they had not heard. Perhaps because Briggs moved his hand and everyone looked at the whip at his belt. Perhaps because the word rebellion still hung between us, heavy and dangerous, like a lamp above a table full of powder. Briggs smiled. I did not like it when he smiled. His shouting was simple. The whip was simple. A smile meant he had begun to think, and thought in a man like that was like a rat in a pantry: small, perhaps, but doing enormous damage.

"Do you consider yourself clever, Whitmore?"

"No, sir. Only awake."

"Wakefulness can be lost."

"Indeed. In this factory people lose all manner of things. Consciousness, fingers, hands, childhood, patience. It is hard to keep the accounts straight."

His face hardened. For one horrible second I was certain he would hit me. Truly. I felt it in my skin before his shoulder even moved. My throat went dry, and all my cleverness, all my insolence, all that supposedly razor tongue of mine suddenly shrank to one small thought: do not fall if he strikes. Not in front of him. Not in front of them. But he did not strike. Not then. He only looked around the hall. And that frightened me more. Because I saw what he saw. Greta was looking. John was looking. Annie was looking. The children beneath the machines stared wide-eyed, and one boy held a brush so tightly it might have been a weapon, though at most it could have offended dust. Briggs understood it was no longer only about me. That if he struck me now, perhaps everyone would return to work as always. And perhaps not.

Perhaps after Elsie, after the stain on the boards, after everything, something had already been drawn too taut. Perhaps one blow would be enough for something to snap. So he did what cowards with a little power do: he postponed violence for later.

"Get to work," he said quietly. "And I advise you, Whitmore, to learn the difference between courage and stupidity. Courage sometimes impresses. Stupidity leaves a body in the gutter."

"Thank you for the lesson, sir," I replied. "As always, extremely uplifting."

"One more word."

"That was the last."

"For today?"

"I do not promise miracles. I have already said I do not believe in them."

His fingers tightened on the handle of the whip. Greta shifted beside me, barely perceptibly. John turned his head. The hall again thickened for a moment with waiting. But Briggs only leaned towards me.

"I will be watching you."

"In that case I shall try to look industrious."

"Try to look obedient."

"That may be harder."

For a while we looked at each other from such a short distance that I saw the broken little veins in his eyes and a small clot of tobacco by his lower lip. I could smell his breath. Sour, heavy, full of onion and that particular odour given off by men convinced that power is the same as reason. At last he stepped back.

"To work, Whitmore."

I turned back to the machine. I lifted the spool, set it back with such precision it might have been a dagger slid between ribs, and started the mechanism. Edna shuddered, wheezed and began again her steel muttering. Feed, twist, pull, shift. Feed, twist, pull, shift. My hands shook. My knees too. My heart hammered at my ribs, and for a moment I truly thought I would faint. Not from courage. Courage looks well only once someone tells it from a safe distance. Inside the body, courage is more like nausea, cold sweat and the idiotic question: why did you open your mouth, Nell? But I did not faint. And that was something. For the rest of the day no one said one word more than necessary. Even Greta was quiet. That is, quieter than usual, which in Greta's case meant an almost funerary state.

John did not look at me once, but when he passed, he dropped a small piece of bread wrapped in cloth by my station. I did not say thank you. He did not wait. Such things were done without witnesses among us, because tenderness was too easy to mock. Only towards the end of the shift did Greta speak under her breath, without looking at me.

"Have you any sense?"

"Sometimes. Not today."

"That was foolish."

"Possibly."

"He will not forgive you that."

"Briggs does not look like a man who forgives much. Perhaps apart from his own ugliness."

Greta hissed through her teeth.

"Nell."

"What?"

"I am serious."

Then I looked at her. Her face was hard, but her eyes held something she did not often show. Concern. And that irritated me more than Briggs's threats. Fear for oneself is easy to bear. Someone else's fear is awkward. One has to do something with it, and I had no free hands.

"I know, Greta," I said more quietly. "I know it was foolish. But today they carried Elsie to the shed. If after something like that we still speak only in whispers, soon we shall forget the sound of our own voice."

Greta said nothing for a long time. Then she replied:

"A voice will not stop a whip."

"No."

"Nor a machine."

"That either."

"Then why?"

The question hung heavily between us, almost as heavy as the dust. I worked in silence for a moment. The cloth moved beneath my fingers, Edna panted, the hall roared, Briggs stood somewhere farther away, but I felt his gaze like insects beneath my collar.

"Because if we have nothing but a voice," I said at last, "perhaps we had better see whether it can make even a scratch."

Greta glanced at me briefly.

"A scratch is not enough."

"One must start somewhere."

"A wall sometimes cracks from a scratch."

"You see? And you said I was stupid."

"You still are."

But this time there was not only rebuke in her voice. There was something else. Something small, reluctant and dangerously like agreement. Briggs did not come near me again. That was the strangest thing. He did not shout. He did not knock me with his shoulder. He did not suddenly find an error in my work, though had he wished he could have found one even in my breathing. He only watched. I felt it. His gaze crawled over my back like vermin. From my neck to my shoulder blades. From my hands to my face when he thought I did not see. As if in his head there appeared a new label beside my name. No longer: child. Not: hands for work. Not even: insolent girl. Potential problem. That word carried a different weight. Problems were not scolded. Problems were removed. When the end-of-day bell threw us out of the hall, I left with the rest, but I did not feel relief.

The air outside was cold, dirty and wet, yet compared with the hall it tasted almost like freedom. Almost, because in the street a person was still poor, hungry and watched by a city with a thousand eyes and not one conscience. Greta caught up with me only beyond the gate. We walked a while in silence. Then she said:

"You are stupid."

"You repeat yourself. I am beginning to suspect this is your form of poetry."

"This is not a joke."

"I know."

She stopped. So did I. People passed us on both sides, a dirty river of bodies flowing towards rooms, pots, children, quarrels and sleep. Greta looked at me as if she were trying to decide whether I was still a person or already a lit candle in a powder store.

"He has marked you," she said.

"Sounds almost romantic."

"Do not do that."

"What?"

"Hide fear behind jokes. I can see you are afraid."

That silenced me. Not because she had said something cruel. Because she had said the truth.

"Of course I am afraid," I replied after a while. "Only it worries me that everyone has decided fear is a good reason to do nothing."

Greta sighed heavily.

"Fear sometimes keeps a person alive."

"And sometimes only prolongs dying."

For a while neither of us said anything. Then Greta leaned closer.

"If you keep speaking like that, someone will inform. Not Briggs. One of ours. For a few pence, for the promise of lighter work, for fear. People do things when they are hungry."

"I know."

"No, Nell. You like saying you know. That is not the same."

Her words hurt. Not because they were malicious. I would have preferred that. I dealt very well with malice. With concern, less so.

"What am I to do, then?" I asked. "Be silent? Come back tomorrow, stand by Edna, look at Elsie's stain and pretend the only problem is a badly set spool?"

Greta clenched her jaw.

"You are to survive."

"Is that a plan or a sentence?"

"Sometimes both."

She walked on, and I stood on the cobbles for a moment, feeling cold in my boots and anger under my skin. At home, over the notebook, I returned to that moment again and again. To the spool. To Briggs's voice. To my own sentence, which had come out of me so calmly, as if it had long waited under my tongue for the proper moment. Perhaps it had. Perhaps all our unspoken words sit inside us like rats behind a wall, scratching, gnawing, breeding in the dark, until one day there are too many of them and they come into the middle of the room. On the way home, the cobbles under my boots thudded like the echo of the day. The rain had stopped, but the city still dripped. Gutters carried cloudy water, bread crusts, ash and all the things the residents had neither strength nor courage to keep with them. Above the roofs hung smoke, thick and heavy, as if Manchester were slowly cooking its own lungs.

I walked with my head down, because in that district only lovers, drunkards and fools looked ahead with trust. I belonged to none of those categories. At least not that

day. At the corner old Alfie accosted me. He sat on a barrel by the wall of the tool shop, as if he were part of the street's furniture. A man who had seen more corpses in that factory than a priest in a graveyard, and had apparently decided to outlive everyone out of pure spite. He wore a cap from some war, though no one knew which, and when asked, answered only: "The one we lost," which narrowed the matter roughly to the whole history of mankind. His toothless smile was a trademark, a warning and proof that one may lose almost everything and still remain a nuisance to the world.

"You gave it him nicely, Nell," he said, nodding like a judge who had just heard a good argument. "Straight between the ribs. Or where he ought to have ribs."

I stopped.

"I am not sure it was wise."

Alfie snorted so hard he almost lost his pipe.

"Wise? Girl, wise is sitting quiet, bending your neck and dying at thirty with lungs full of cotton. Very sensible. Highly recommended by factory owners, priests and widows without money."

"That sounds like praise of stupidity."

"Sometimes stupidity is only courage that has not yet had time to dress properly."

I looked at him suspiciously.

"Alfie, did you just say something wise?"

"Do not repeat it. You'll ruin my reputation."

He leaned his elbows on his knees and spat into the mud.

"Listen, Nell. I'm not saying you should now walk round the hall like the Queen of Sheba with a knife between your teeth. Briggs is a swine, but a swine with a whip and the support of the gentlemen in the office. Swine like that bite harder than they look."

"I know."

"No, you do not. Not yet. You know he can hit you. You know he can dock your pay. You know he can throw you into the street. But men like him have another trick. They can make others fear you more than they fear him."

That stopped me more sharply than his first words.

"What do you mean?"

Alfie scratched his jaw, where pride or a beard had once presumably grown.

"People are hungry. Hungry people are not noble. Not always. Sometimes they will admire you because you said what they have kept under their tongues for years. And sometimes they will hate you because you remind them they stayed silent. The second is worse. A person forgives the theft of bread more easily than his own shame."

I did not answer.

Alfie nodded, as if he saw he had struck home.

"But what you said was true. Stupid, perhaps. Dangerous for certain. But true."

"Does truth change anything?"

"Not at once. First it gets in the way. Then it irritates. Then someone tries to bury it. And if he is unlucky, he buries it shallow."

He smiled toothlessly.

"And then it stinks."

"Is that your theory of revolution?"

"My theory of everything. If something stinks long enough, even a lord eventually opens a window."

I tried not to smile, but failed.

"You should write leaflets for Henry."

"I cannot write."

"Perhaps that is better. Writing people are insufferable."

"Says the girl with a notebook under her apron."

I looked at him sharply. Alfie raised both hands.

"Easy, little one. Old eyes see more than they pretend. Do not worry. I am no informer. I am paid too little for my own silence, let alone anyone else's."

Then he slid from the barrel, adjusted his cap and went slowly away, leaving behind a track in the mud, the smell of cheap tobacco and the sense that he had said more than he meant to. That evening in my journal, on the same yellowed pages on which for months I had tried to assemble myself from pieces, I wrote one sentence: "Today I told Briggs the truth. I do not know which frightens me more: that I did it, or that I felt relief." I looked at the ink until it began to dry. Then I added: "Alfie says truth gets in the way first. Perhaps it is good, then, that I have begun to be inconvenient." Later I lay on my bed, if that sack stuffed with old straw grief could be called a bed, wrapped in a blanket that stank of mice, damp and the past. The wall at my back was cold. Father breathed in the corner, heavy and uneven.

Mother moved about for a while longer, mending something that could not be mended, because women like her could sew holes even when the whole cloth had rotted long ago. I thought of the books we sometimes smuggled from Henry's print shop. Of all those great words printed in black ink on cheap paper. England. Empire. Civilisation. Progress. Mission. Light in darkness. Beautiful. Truly beautiful. Except that before empire lit a torch, it first trampled everything still twitching. Then had the cheek to say the flame burned for our good. If that was civilisation, then I was savage. And perhaps that was where hope lay.

The next day, at first glance, everything looked the same. The same faces. The same noises. The same air, like stale wadding soaked in sweat. The same gate, the same bell, the same monstrous order of people taking their places by their own exhaustion. But something was different. Not in the bricks, not in the machines, not in the dusty light falling through dirty windows. In us. I do not know whether anyone from outside would have noticed. Probably not. The rich see only large things: buildings, profits, reports, ships, maps. Never the small shifts in workers' eyes. Never that fraction of a second when a person does not lower his gaze as quickly as yesterday. Briggs did not say a word. He did not greet me in his fashion. Did not toss out a biting remark. Did not ask whether today I intended to play spinner, poetess or local misfortune.

He stationed himself beside the machines, walked as usual, adjusted the belt at his hip, tapped his cane on the floor, but he was quiet. And there was something disturbing in that quiet. His silence was not rest. It was a tool. I felt his gaze. Not the usual dry

grimace of an overseer who registers output and waits for a stumble, but something more conscious. As if he were looking in me not for an error, but an intention. As if he were trying to peer inside, into those dusty corridors of my soul where even I was reluctant to look. I had the impression he no longer saw me as a girl with a number on a rota, but as something that might stand in his way. It was almost flattering. In the bleakest possible way.

Machine number seventeen did not fail me. That is to say, it failed me exactly when it could make the greatest spectacle. Edna grated, shuddered like a dog with fever and suddenly spat out the thread as if she wished to be rid of me, or publicly accuse me of bad conduct. She stopped with a groan that sounded like a hiccup from the entire factory. The sound was so out of place, so hideously solitary amid the ordered roar, that for a fraction of a second people froze in their rituals. Of course. If ever I were to die by a machine, it would probably first deliver a short speech. Briggs appeared beside me faster than the air could thicken again. His shadow fell across my hands, long and heavy, as if the light had decided it would rather not be responsible for illuminating his face.

"You again, Whitmore?" he asked with a feigned sigh. "I begin to suspect you have a talent for spoiling everything you touch. Machine, order, the patience of your superiors. An impressive list for one girl."

I straightened slowly. My heart immediately set off at a run, as if it wished to leave my body before I did and find somewhere safer to live.

"It is not me, sir. It is the machine."

"The machine?"

"Yes. Number seventeen. Edna, if you wish to be polite."

Several people shifted nervously. Greta, standing beside me, did not even lift her head, but I saw her fingers stop on the cloth. Briggs narrowed his eyes.

"You give machines names?"

"Not only I. It is easier to speak to something trying to kill you if it has a name."

"Machines do not try to kill anyone, Whitmore. Machines work. Unlike certain people."

"Of course. They only happen to collect fingers, hair and children on the way."

His smile appeared slowly. Not the smile of an amused man. The smile of an executioner who has just heard the condemned man's last words and decided they were rather neat.

"Careful."

"I am trying. Edna less so today."

"Perhaps you should blame yourself, not the iron."

"Iron at least does not pretend to have a soul."

The line of glances around us trembled. From the corner of my eye I saw Greta stop moving at her loom, little Joe, who usually worked like a clockwork toy, halt his hand halfway through a movement, and John turn his head from his machine. That tension entered the air again. Thin, high, hard to catch. Like the sound of glass just before it cracks. Briggs leaned slightly forward.

"What did you say?"

"That it is a machine. Perhaps it has had enough. Like all of us."

This time several breaths broke off at once. I do not know why I said it. Or I know and would rather not. Briggs stood very still. Too still. In his eyes flashed that unpleasant, venomous curiosity I had seen the day before. As if he were not only listening, but collecting evidence.

"You are amusing," he said at last, with the gentleness of a woodsman speaking to a tree. "What next? Machines begin to rebel? Spools write a petition? Looms march to Parliament with banners?"

"It would be more logical than praying to the Queen to have pity on our spines."

And then something small happened. But small things can make a great noise if they fall in the right place. Someone laughed. Quietly. Nervously. Almost soundlessly. Then another. Somewhere behind the line of spinners someone hissed:

"Damn her, she said it aloud."

I did not know who. I did not look. I did not want to know. Knowledge can be dangerous, and that morning I already had too much of it. Briggs stopped smiling.

"Empire is not built by complaining," he snarled. "Empire is built by sacrifice. By work. By discipline. By people who understand their place."

"No," I said.

That one word sounded strange. Short. Naked. It had no joke behind which I could hide.

Briggs tilted his head.

"No?"

"No, sir. Empire is built by silence. And by blood. A great deal of blood. Only blood is not mentioned in the papers, because it dirties the fingers of those who like to read at breakfast."

That was the moment. Brief as a blink. Loud as a shot. Briggs watched me for a long time, as if he were trying to remember every wrinkle of my face, every movement of my mouth, every letter that had come out of me and stood between us like a knife driven into a table.

"You have a tongue sharper than the knives in a slaughterhouse," he said at last. His voice was oddly quiet. "But knives grow blunt too, Whitmore. Especially when someone uses them too often."

"And your hearing is blunter than a steam hammer," I answered before sense could catch me. "Because people have been speaking for years. You only hear them when they stop whispering."

Silence. Real this time. Even the machines seemed farther away, as if the hall had stepped back to make room for what might happen. Briggs took half a step towards me. Greta moved beside me. John turned farther round. Little Joe dropped his brush. Briggs looked first at me, then at them. And he saw what I saw. I was no longer alone. It did not mean anyone would throw themselves under a whip for me. Let us not turn the poor into saints. Each of us had a belly, bills, family, fear and our own backs, which ached enough without other people's business. But something had shifted. Eyes did not flee quite so quickly. Heads did not bow at once. People looked. And looking can be a beginning too. Briggs evidently understood that. And then something happened that nobody expected. He turned and walked away. Without a word. Not because he had lost.

Such men rarely admit defeat, even when they lie face down in mud. Rather because he had begun to count. Risk. Witnesses. Moment. Possibilities. He needed to digest what he had heard. Or he feared that if he stayed another moment, he would do something even Mr Fidds could not call discipline without clearing his throat.

The machines started again. But they no longer sounded the same. Their clatter was harder, sharper. Or perhaps only my ears had changed. Perhaps once a person has spoken certain words, the world never returns to its former tone. Something stirred in people's heads, something that until then had been only a shadow in the corner, an unspoken sigh, a brief glance over a loaf of bread. I did not know which frightened me more: that I had spoken those words, or that I was not alone any more. After a few minutes Greta came to me. Not directly. Not theatrically. She simply shifted closer under the pretext of straightening cloth, then whispered, eyes wide:

"You are not joking, are you?"

I shook my head.

"Not today."

Greta looked at me for a while as if trying to see whether there was still room in me for fear.

"Perhaps never again," she said.

"That sounds serious."

"Because it is serious, you idiot."

"Again, that tenderness."

"Listen to me. He walked away because everyone was looking. But that does not mean he will let it go."

"I know."

"No, Nell. You keep saying I know as if it were a charm. I am telling you he will wait. He will find a moment when nobody is watching. Or make everyone look the other way."

"So should I begin walking backwards?"

"You are to stop mocking."

Her voice trembled. That silenced me.

"Greta..."

"I do not want to carry you to the shed one day," she said quietly. "Do you understand? I do not want to see your grand words end under a dirty sheet, with Briggs saying you brought it on yourself." For a while I could not answer. The factory roared. Edna panted. Dust entered my throat. And Greta, big, hard Greta, who looked as if she could break a man with disappointment alone, stood beside me and spoke almost like someone who cared. It was awkward. Dangerous. Human.

"I do not want to end there either," I said at last. "But I also do not want to reach old age as a woman who knew all her life that something was rotten and only stepped round the puddle."

"Old age is a privilege."

"Exactly. Perhaps that is why we should stop treating it as a reward for obedience."

Greta closed her eyes for a second.

"Did Tommy speak like that too?"

"Tommy spoke more prettily."

"And where did it take him?"

It hurt again. But this time I did not look away.

"Perhaps it did not take him far," I said. "But at least he was walking in his own direction."

Greta did not answer. After a moment she returned to her machine.

That evening, at the table, Mother stitched my old shirt with such precision that it seemed she hoped with every seam to piece me together as well: my disobedience, my words, my looks that had begun to last too long. The needle passed through the fabric quickly, evenly, without hesitation. Mother sewed as she worked, breathed and endured life: without ornament, without complaint, with the stubbornness of a wall that refuses to admit it is already cracking. Father sat in the corner. The fire was weak. In the pot there was nothing left but the smell of yesterday's soup and today's disappointment.

"I hear you answered Briggs back," Mother said without emotion, as if speaking of the weather or the price of onions.

She did not raise her eyes from the shirt.

"Who told you?"

"In this district a person hears things before they have been said."

"Practical."

"Do not be insolent."

"I'm tired. Insolence comes out of me by itself when I haven't the strength to keep watch over it."

Mother drew the thread through the cloth.

"What did you say to him?"

"Which time?"

The needle stopped halfway through its movement.

"Nell!"

Father shifted in the corner.

"Here it begins," he muttered.

Mother looked at him sharply.

"Albert, not now."

"It is always not now. And then someone brings a body after midnight."

Silence fell in the room. Tommy came between us again, though no one had opened the door. Mother returned to her sewing, but her movements grew harder.

"I only told the truth," I replied.

"Truth does not feed," Mother said. "Work feeds."

"Work kills."

"So does rebellion."

"So does silence. Only slower."

Father laughed shortly, dryly, without a shadow of mirth.

"Fine words. You can write them on a board when they carry you."

"If so, I should like something catchier."

"You think this is funny?"

"No. That is why I joke."

Mother set the shirt down in her lap.

"Both of you, stop."

But this time we did not stop. Something in that room was too taut. Perhaps after Elsie. Perhaps after Briggs. Perhaps after years of choking down everything that ought to have been shouted long ago. Father looked at me from the corner. His good hand clenched on the arm of the chair.

"You do not know what you are playing with."

"I do, Father. The same thing as everyone else. Only I have stopped pretending it is weather."

"The system does not care about your pretending."

"The system cares about nothing except whether the machine runs."

"Then keep away from its teeth."

"I try. But it has teeth everywhere."

Mother stuck the needle into the cloth and left it there, like a small metal cross.

"And what of it, Nell?" she asked at last, not lifting her eyes. "Tell me. What of it? Let us say you are right. Let us say everything is rotten. The factory, Briggs, Fidds, Parliament, the Queen, God and all this filthy world. What of it? Tomorrow one must still get up. One must still eat. One must still pay the rent. Will your truth put bread on the table?"

I looked at her hands. At the wrinkles around the knuckles. At veins more visible than muscle. At fingers so skilful, so worn, so constantly busy saving things that could not truly be saved any more.

"I don't know," I said quietly.

"Exactly."

"But I know lies have not put it there either."

Mother closed her mouth. Father looked away.

"All my life I hear that I must be sensible," I went on. "Sensible to be silent. Sensible to work. Sensible to lower my head. Sensible not to look too long when a child is carried to the shed. Sensible not to ask why a machine has care and a girl does not. And do you know what? Perhaps sense is only a prettier word for fear."

Mother raised her eyes. She was not angry. That was worse. She was terrified.

"Fear keeps people alive."

"Sometimes only at work."

"And what do you want to do? Shout? Follow Henry to those cellars of his? Hand out leaflets? Give Briggs a reason to throw you out of the factory? Do you think I do not know what is happening? Do you think I am blind because I do not speak?"

I did not answer. Mother rose from the table. Slowly. Tired, but upright.

"I see more than you think. I see how you look when someone talks about work. I see ink on your fingers. I see you come home later than you should. I see you carry something inside you that will burn you if you do not learn to keep it under control."

"Perhaps I no longer want to keep it."

"Then you are stupid."

"Possibly."

"I do not say it to hurt you."

"I know. In this house we wound one another out of concern. It is our tradition."

Mother closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she looked older.

"Tommy thought anger would be enough too."

"No. Tommy thought people would be enough."

Father spoke quietly:

"People run when the beating starts."

I looked at him.

"Not all."

"Enough."

"And you? Did you run?"

The question came out of me too quickly. I saw Father stiffen. Mother took a step towards me.

"Nell."

But it had already been said. Father looked at me for a long time. Something terrible appeared in his face. Not anger. Not only. Pain pretending to be contempt, because otherwise it would have had to fall on its knees.

"No," he said at last. "I did not run. That is why I sit here now."

The words drove deep into me and stayed. I wanted to say something. Apologise. Or not apologise. Or bite harder so I would not have to feel guilt. But no word was right. Mother lifted the shirt and began to sew again.

"Enough for today."

This time I obeyed. I sat in my corner. I took out the notebook only when Father had fallen asleep and Mother pretended not to see. I wrote slowly so the nib would not scratch too loudly. "Today Briggs was silent. It was worse than his shouting." Then I added: "I said empire is built by silence and blood. Several people laughed. Several did not lower their eyes. Greta says I am no longer alone." I stopped the pen. Outside, someone coughed. Farther away, a child cried. A drop of water fell from the ceiling into a bowl, evenly, patiently, like a clock measuring the lives of people no one intended to record in schoolbooks. I added the last sentence. "I do not know whether this will save me or kill me. But for the first time in a long while I feel alive for more than the fact I am still breathing." Then I closed the notebook and slipped it under the mattress. Mother did not turn from the hearth, but said quietly:

"Nell?"

"Yes?"

For a while she was silent.

"Do not make me bury another child."

I did not answer at once. All my anger, all my tongue, all the courage I liked to wave about like a knife, suddenly became small.

"I shall try," I said at last.

"That is not enough."

"I know."

And this time I truly did. But somewhere beneath the fear, beneath the guilt, beneath the old blanket stinking of mice and the past, I still felt that paper heat. Henry's words. Greta's voice. Laughter from behind the spinning frames. The looks of people that had not fled as fast as usual. Perhaps it was nothing. Perhaps only weariness. Perhaps the beginning of catastrophe. Or perhaps that is what the first broken seam looks like in a world that has pretended too long it will not fall apart.

Evenings are the worst. Not because of tiredness. I had become immune to tiredness as a rat to poison, dosing myself with it a little each day until the body stopped protesting and began treating it as part of the diet. Tiredness was ordinary. Cheap. Common. Everyone had it, like holes in boots or a cough after winter. That was not the worst part. The worst was thought. Because when the machines fell silent, when Briggs vanished into darkness with his whip, when the factory bell stopped jerking a person about like a dog on a chain, silence remained. And silence was no rest at all. Silence was thick as old fat at the bottom of a pot. It stuck to the skin, to the tongue, to the ribs. In the factory, noise at least did one the courtesy of drowning out everything one did not wish to feel. At home there was no such mercy.

At home everything returned. Elsie. Briggs. The stain at station number nine. Greta's voice when she said: "Perhaps the last?" My own words, which could no longer be shoved back into my mouth. So I sat in the corner. My corner. The same as always, beneath the cracked sill and opposite the candle, which guttered faster than people in our district but with similar dignity, meaning none. The flame trembled uneasily, as if afraid of what it saw in my eyes. Perhaps rightly. Lately even I did not much like looking there. Then the feeling seized me.

Strangeness. Not the kind Greta had, with her hard accent, heavy silence and a past carried in a language almost no one in the factory understood. Not like Sarah, with red hair and the eyes of a cat pulled from a fire, wild, bright, as if Manchester were only a place she passed through, not mud that held her by the ankles. My otherness was quiet. Internal. More humiliating, because invisible. As if someone had put me inside the body of Eleanor Whitmore, Manchester worker, daughter of a paralysed miner and a woman who had learned to stitch life from scraps, while I, the real I, was only a lodger. Temporary. Mismatched. Waiting for a better address. Only no better address came.

Mother said one had to be grateful. That God saw. That life was not a ball, but a duty. That it was better to be silent than to dream, because dreams cost money, and we could not even afford decent fuel, let alone the luxury of disappointment. Sometimes I truly wanted to scream straight into her face that all that gratitude was only poverty with a ribbon tied round it. That resignation, when polished properly, shines like virtue. That her mother, and her mother's mother, and all the women before them had passed us nothing but the skill of surviving. Not a single instruction on how to live. Father stared at the wall as if trying to dig something from it with his eyes. Perhaps the memory of himself before the accident. Perhaps a little dignity. Perhaps the face of the man he had

been before the mine took half his body and returned the rest to us, heavy, bitter and unbearable.

Sometimes he spoke of the mine with such reverence one would think it a holy place, not a black hole that had swallowed his legs, his spine and half his soul. Strange, how people can love the places that destroyed them. Perhaps because if they stopped loving them, they would have to admit they had suffered for nothing. Everyone here had made peace. With their place. With their fate. With their role in that great British theatre of industrial tragedy, where the rich sat in boxes, the poor played corpses, and the curtain never fell because production had to continue. Everyone chose survival. And I did not want merely to survive.

I do not know when it sprouted in me. Perhaps when, as a child, I first saw a poster of a steamer on a tenement wall. It had been pasted crookedly, the rain had soaked it, someone had smeared its corners with a dirty hand, but to me it looked like a door to another world. A woman in a white dress, wearing a hat larger than my future weekly wage, stood against the sea. The sea. Not coal. Not mud. Not factory walls. Only space. Movement. Direction. Something that did not stand still and stink of the breath of people crowded into one room. I had no idea where the woman on the poster sailed, but I knew there was no dust there, no Briggses, no transmission belts, no groan of machines, no sound of a spine breaking. There was freedom. In my head, at least. And my head, though often foolish, was the only place where something could still be arranged as I wished. Greta said recently:

"You are different."

She said it as if it were an accusation. Or a warning. Or perhaps praise that had lost its way and emerged from her mouth in the wrong coat. I did not answer. What could I say? That I knew? That this difference was not a gift, but a splinter driven deep beneath the nail of the soul? That it hurt with every movement, but could not be pulled out without tearing everything around it? I once heard a woman in the factory, old, with a face like a dried walnut and eyes so milky they looked already fogged by the grave while she still lived, say to a new girl:

"Do not ask questions, child. Questions lead to trouble."

Perhaps that is why I had so many. Why does all this look as it does? Why does no one throw a brick through the manufacturer's window? Why does everyone pretend all is well when we have just carried thirteen-year-old Elsie to the shed together with her lost arm? Why does no one wake from this bloody nightmare? And why can I not be like the others?

Sometimes I thought I had been sewn from different threads. That when God, fate or blind chance stitched me into the rest of this workers' fabric, He used some faulty thread. One that would not easily be sewn in, stuck out, pulled the cloth, ruined the pattern. Perhaps that is why I was always coming undone. I looked at the window. Dirty, steamed, like everything here. And imagined that on the other side there was no Manchester. That somewhere there were cities where one could speak aloud, laugh for no reason, breathe air that did not scorch the throat. That there existed a world where a woman was not a nuisance if she had an opinion. A world where I was not a problem. Only a possibility. I did not know who I wanted to be. But I knew one thing: I did not

want to be what I was now. On the wall where that old poster had once hung, only the mark of glue remained, and the shadow of a memory. But I remembered. Perhaps that is why I did not fall asleep at once that night. Instead I opened the notebook and wrote one sentence: "I do not know who I am, but I know I do not want to be nobody." The ink shone for a moment in the candlelight. Then it dulled. Like everything.

The evening was quiet. Too quiet. The kind that does not soothe, but scratches the throat like dust in an old room no one has the strength to clean any more. There was only the creak of the floor beneath Mother's feet and the rustle of cloth passing between her ruined fingers. She sat at the table as always: bent, intent, as though she were stitching not linen but herself, stitch by stitch, trying to arrest a falling apart that had begun long ago anyway.

Father slept, or only pretended. In this house many things pretended. To breathe. To feel. To remember. To love. To have any sense left. I sat by the window, elbows on the sill, staring at the black sky. Starless. As if even the stars had had enough of Manchester and taken their light elsewhere. Perhaps where people still knew how to dream. Here even the sky looked like a factory: dark, heavy, veiled with smoke, labouring for someone else's glory.

"You are sitting there staring at nothing again," Mother said, not lifting her eyes from the cloth.

Her voice was sharp as a needle. Not to kill. To sew up everything still moving.

"I am looking at more than your stitches," I answered without turning my head.

The needle moved through the cloth. Once. Twice. Thrice.

"Your looking changes nothing."

"And what does your sewing change? Apart from the fact another old rag may not fall apart tonight?"

Mother's hands froze. There was no rustle now. No sound of thread being drawn taut between fingers. Only silence. The sort that does not calm, but foretells a storm. She looked at me. Truly looked. As if for the first time in years her eyes were actually searching my face, not merely my presence as something to scold. There was weariness in that look, anger and something else. Something fragile she instantly hid, as one hides the last coin from a hungry house.

"At least it patches what is tearing," she said quietly. "Not perfectly. Perhaps uglily. But it patches. Something is left after me."

I turned from the window. The candle between us trembled.

"Not everything can be darned, Mother."

"Not everything needs to be."

"Some things are holed for ever."

Mother pressed her lips together.

"You speak like someone who does not yet know that even things full of holes must serve until there are new ones."

"That is exactly the point. We all serve here, though we are long since falling apart."

"Do not start."

"I have not even begun."

"I hear you were naughty at work again."

I laughed shortly.

"Naughty?"

"That is what Mrs Wilkes said. That you gave Briggs cheek in front of people."

"Mrs Wilkes also says her dead husband sings to her through the chimney, so perhaps we should be careful with authorities."

"Do not mock."

"Mother, we are not children any more. Children are naughty when they steal apples from the market or stick their tongues out at the priest. We work a dozen hours and more a day, breathe dust, and watch little girls lose their hands. This is not a matter of good behaviour."

"It is a matter of survival."

"Everything with you is a matter of survival."

"Because survival comes first."

"And then? What comes then?"

She did not answer at once. And that was the answer. She set the needle aside. Slowly, almost ceremonially. Her hands were red and cracked like dried earth. Each crack looked like a keepsake from another year in which she had not given up. When I was younger I thought those hands proof of strength. Now, more and more, I saw something else in them. A habit of pain so old it had begun to pretend to be character.

"Servants at least have a roof over their heads," she said. "And you want to bring everything down, and then you will be surprised to find yourself lying in the rain."

"You call what we have a roof?"

My voice rose before I could catch it.

"It is only a dusty cover over a coffin. A lid for a life no one here is living any more. Only repeating. We rise, work, return, eat scraps, sleep if the coughing allows, and begin again in the morning. That is not life. It is habit."

Mother stood. She did not shout. Did not even move violently. But her voice trembled, and with it everything in me that was still a child.

"Perhaps it is all worth shit, Nell. Perhaps this house stinks of damp, perhaps your father is rotting alive in the corner, perhaps I am stitching rags that should long since have gone into the fire. But it is our shit. I have been cleaning it for years. I pick it up when it falls over. I make sure there is something to put in the pot, even if it is only water with the memory of a potato. And I do not want you coming with that fire in your eyes and scattering it all over the room."

Those words struck harder than I wanted to admit. Because they were ugly. And true. I rose slowly, as if my body knew this conversation would stay with me for the rest of my life. I felt fire in me, but it was not yet the flame of revolution. That is not what a beginning looks like. It was a quiet, stubborn heat smouldering in the corner of the soul, reminding one that a person is more than a cog in someone else's machine, even if all her life she has been told otherwise.

"And I do not want to clean it, Mother," I said. "I do not want to patch holes all my life that someone else has torn. I do not want to say thank you for a crust of bread and apologise for breathing too loudly. I do not want to stand by a machine until Edna takes my fingers and Briggs says it is my fault because I held my hand wrong. I do not want

everything I am to fit one day into the sentence: she worked hard and caused no trouble." Mother looked at me without moving.

"Trouble kills."

"So does obedience."

"Obedience gives one a chance of living till tomorrow."

"And if I do not want only to live till tomorrow?"

"Then you are young and stupid."

"Perhaps. But at least something in me still wants more."

Mother seemed to withdraw into herself. Not physically. She stood in the same place, by the same table, in the same worn dress. But I saw something behind her eyes close a door.

"More," she repeated quietly. "Always this more. People of your sort like that word. More freedom, more rights, more voice. And then soldiers come, truncheons, hunger, and there is less. Less bread. Fewer people at the table. Fewer children to bury."

Tommy. She did not say his name. She did not have to. He was between us at once, like a shadow thrown by the candle.

"You are not talking about me," I said.

"Who, then?"

"Him."

Mother turned her eyes away.

"Do not start."

"You started."

"No. You started when you decided suffering made you wiser than everyone."

"Not suffering. Looking."

"I look too, Nell."

"No. You lower your eyes when it gets too hard."

For one second I thought she would strike me. Perhaps I even wanted her to. A blow would have been easier than what I saw on her face. Pain. Sudden, clean, uncovered. The kind she had not had time to hide.

"You think I have not seen?" she asked quietly. "You think I do not see little girls coming back from the factory with the eyes of old women? You think I did not see blood on your apron? That I do not know when you cry without tears? That I do not hear you grinding your teeth in your sleep at night? I see, Nell. I see too much. Only I do not have the luxury of making poetry out of it."

That silenced me. For a while. Father moved in the corner, but did not speak. His eyes were open. Of course he was not asleep. In this house no one truly slept when such words were falling. Mother went on, more quietly but more firmly:

"You think I never dreamed? That I was born with a needle in my hand and a readiness to endure everything? I wanted to leave once too. I too thought there was something beyond this city besides smoke and bills. Then came marriage, children, mine, factory, sickness, death, rent. Life does not ask whether you wish to keep your dreams. It takes them piece by piece and does not even leave a receipt."

I looked at her differently. Not more softly. Not yet. But more carefully.

"So that is why I should surrender mine willingly?"

"No. That is why I am telling you to be careful whom you show them to."

That answer was different. I had not expected it. Mother lifted the shirt from the table, but did not return at once to sewing.

"You think I want you to be quiet because I love silence. I do not. I hate this silence. I hate it more than the noise of the factory, because in the noise at least a person knows who is killing her. But silence... silence is what remains after everything. After a quarrel. After a funeral. After a child has been taken. After a husband returns from the mine and is never again a husband, only a shadow on a chair."

Father closed his eyes. His face hardened, but he said nothing.

"I do not want you quiet," Mother added. "I want you alive long enough to speak one day without trembling."

I felt something rise in my throat. Not crying. Not now. Not before them.

"And if there is no one day?" I asked.

Mother looked at me for a long time.

"Then all the more do not waste now on a stupid death."

For a while neither of us spoke. The candle snapped softly. Outside someone coughed so hard he spat. Somewhere in the corridor a child began to cry and was hushed at once. Manchester breathed around us, heavily, dirtily, reluctantly.

"I want to leave," I said at last. "To see something else. Another world. Even if it kills me. Even if it proves a lie. I want to know that I tried."

Mother shook her head.

"There is no other world, Nell."

She said it with such certainty she might have been its maker. And then I understood. She had already believed it. Sold her maybe for a warm corner, a dry crust of bread and one more day without police at the door. Not because she was weak. No. Mother was harder than anyone I knew. But even the hardest stone, if it lies long enough under water, changes shape. She had made peace. I had not yet.

"And if there is," I said quietly, "I would rather look for it and lose than stay here and never try."

Mother sat back down. She did not answer. The needle pierced the cloth again. The movement was automatic, stripped of anger now. As if she knew something had just ended, though neither of us could yet name what. And I felt that though I stood in the same corner of the same room, though the same boards were under my feet, though the same beam hung over my head, clinging on with a stubbornness worthy of the poor, I no longer belonged to that place as I had before. I had not yet left. Had not taken one step beyond the threshold. I had no money, no plan and no proper boots, three things without which every great journey begins as idiocy. But something in me had already untied itself. Quietly. Without witnesses. Like the first thread giving way in a seam. Father suddenly spoke from the corner. His voice was rough and low, as if words long unused had to push through dust in his throat.

"The world beyond the door is no kinder."

I looked at him.

"I know."

"You do not."

"Everyone tells me so."

"Because it is true."

"Perhaps. But your truth always ends the same way: stay, be silent, work, do not stand out, do not ask, do not want. And I can no longer do that."

Father moved his good hand on the chair arm.

"Wanting is a hunger that cannot be fed."

"Then at least I feel something."

His gaze grew heavier.

"Feeling is not a reward."

"No. But being dead while alive is not either."

Mother stopped sewing. Father looked at the floor for a long time. When he spoke again, his voice was quieter.

"When I was young, I thought strength would be enough. That if a man had a back, hands and stubbornness, the world would eventually give way. It did not. It took what it wanted. The rest it left to you."

I did not know what to answer. That was probably the nearest Father had ever come to a confession.

"I do not want you to think, if you lose against this world, that it is because you were weak," he added.

I looked at him carefully.

"And if I win?"

The corner of his mouth moved. Not a smile. More the memory of a smile that had wandered onto a face unaccustomed to such things.

"Then you will be the first Whitmore who did something properly."

Mother snorted.

"Albert."

"What? The girl wants the world. Let her at least know the world has teeth."

"I know it has teeth," I said.

Father looked straight into my eyes.

"No, Nell. You know that it bites. That is not the same."

That conversation should have frightened me. And it did. But beneath the fear there was something else. Not relief. Not agreement. Rather a peculiar sense that for the first time in a long while we were not speaking only to survive the evening. We were saying something true. Dirty, painful, inconvenient. But true. And truth in our house was rarer than meat. Mother returned to sewing. Father leaned his head against the wall again. I sat by the window. The sky was still black. There were still no stars. Manchester still breathed smoke, coughing and other people's dreams ground into ash. But I was no longer looking at nothing. I was looking at a road that did not yet exist. Later, when the candle had almost died and Mother placed the mended shirt beside me without a word, I opened the notebook once more. I wrote: "Mother says there is no other world. Father says that if there is, it has teeth." I held the pen above the paper. Then I added: "Good. So do I."

I tore that night open like an old seam. Brutally, without tenderness, with the greed proper to people who all their lives must share everything: bread, room, sleep, air, even silence. Especially silence. Among the rich, silence was no doubt elegant, soft, lined with carpets and good breeding. With us it was like a damp blanket thrown over the face. It suffocated slowly, leaving no marks one could show a doctor, if, of course, a doctor had ever considered us anything more than a walking expense. In the air hung the kind of tension that no longer announces hope, but inevitability. Like pressure before a storm. Like the glance of an executioner who has not yet moved, but has already taken aim. Everything seemed still: walls, bed, table, Father in his corner, Mother by the dying hearth, me under a blanket. And yet even the worms in the boards seemed to feel that something was about to go to hell.

I could not sleep. Thoughts thrashed in my head like rats in a barrel: fat, nervous, biting one another, impossible to silence. They struck the skull and returned with greater force. Mother's voice circled in me like a cold draught. "There is no other world, Nell." She had said it with such certainty, as if she had once looked for it herself and come back empty-handed. Perhaps that was why. Perhaps a person denies most loudly the existence of a door before which she once stood too long, until she understood she had not the courage to press the handle. When she said it, something in me broke. Not violently. Not with tears or a cry. It was no dramatic explosion at which candles die, mothers faint, and fathers suddenly recover speech and morality. No. It was a quiet crack. Like when a knot gives way inside. Like when an old beam in a wall yields after years of bearing too much weight. Perhaps not for the first time.

But certainly for the last. Because this was no longer sadness. It was decision. I lay for a while longer, listening to the house breathing. Father slept heavily, with a broken whistle, as if every night were a mine from which he had to extract air. Mother breathed more softly, almost soundlessly. She always slept that way. Like someone who did not want to trouble anyone even in sleep, because troubling could cost. In the passage someone coughed. Somewhere below a child cried until someone hissed it quiet. Manchester never truly slept. It only stopped pretending to live for a moment.

I rose slowly. The floorboards groaned beneath my foot. I froze. Mother shifted slightly, but did not wake. Or perhaps she woke and chose not to see. In our house, not seeing was a form of mercy. Sometimes cowardice too. It is hard to tell one from the other when everyone is hungry. I put on Father's coat. It was too large, heavy, smelling of the old mine and everything that had come out of it: sweat, dust, damp, bitterness. The cloth was stiff with memories and rain. When I slid my hands into the sleeves, for a moment I felt as if I were putting on someone else's life. His old shoulders, his old back, his old strength. All that the mine had taken, and that the coat insolently still remembered. I felt like a knight going to war. Only instead of a sword I had a piece of chalk, a pocket full of thoughts, and anger that needed no blade to wound.

At the door I stopped once more. I looked at Mother. She lay on her side, face to the wall, curled under a thin blanket. In the light of the dying embers she looked older than by day, as if sleep removed the last remnants of pretence from her. Father sat, as

always, half in shadow, half in a world he no longer knew how to leave. I thought that if I went out now, something would end. I did not know what. Perhaps childhood. Perhaps obedience. Perhaps that last thin thread that held me to this house not by love, but by habit. I opened the door. The hinge squealed softly.

Splendid, I thought. Even the door had to have an opinion. In the corridor it smelled of old smoke, a slop pail, and people sleeping too close to one another. I went down carefully, keeping a hand on the wall. The plaster was damp, cold, crumbling under my fingers. I passed the Mulligans' door, from beneath which seeped the stink of gin. Someone snored so loudly it sounded as if he were fighting his own throat and losing. Something darted by the stairs. A rat. It looked at me accusingly, as if I had disturbed its hour for walking.

"Do not look at me like that," I whispered. "I too have business at night."

The city at night was even uglier than by day, which was an achievement in itself. No fog hid its hideousness. Lights from taverns threw patches across the cobbles, as if trying to cover filth with a glow that lacked the courage to shine fully. Tenement windows glowed here and there, weak and yellow, like diseased eyes. Gutters gleamed wetly in the dark, carrying their small disgusting rivers towards greater disgusts. Somewhere someone sang a drunken song. Somewhere someone laughed. Somewhere someone was struck in the face, because such sounds are recognised at once, even when a person very much wishes to pretend otherwise. Smells were sharper at night. Rotting meat. Old grease. Spilled beer. Piss-soaked walls. Wet ash. Cheap tobacco. Human bodies shut all day in work and released only when they no longer had the strength to be human. And something else. The smell of suppressed fury. I do not know whether anger truly has a smell. Perhaps that is nonsense.

Perhaps I invented it later, trying to give the night meaning. But then I felt something in the air. As if the whole city were dreaming the same dream of escape and waking back inside a cage. As if every chimney, every brick, every sunken window had had enough of its own silence. I walked slowly, but with my head high.

Every step was an act of blasphemy against their holy order. The order that said: do not stand out, Nell. Smile, Nell. Work, Nell. Be silent, Nell. Die quietly, Nell, other people are trying to sleep. Briggs was probably asleep in his lodging, if creatures like him sleep at all and do not hang head down from a beam waiting for the morning bell. He was no doubt dreaming of tally boards, late arrivals, perfectly even rows of workers, and women apologising for bleeding. Mr Fidds slept in sheets worth more than a year of my mother's patience. The Queen, somewhere far away, might just then be turning on silk and dreaming of an empire marked in red. And I was walking to leave on their wall something that could no longer be cleaned with an ordinary brush. I did not go straight to the print shop. First I turned towards Saint Elizabeth Street, where the factory wall met the public privy.

A symbolic place, if one was in the mood for bleak theology. Here the factory made a commodity of you, there the system flushed you into the sewer. A perfect place for the beginning of the end. Or the beginning of the beginning. Such things are always troublesome. Only later do people give them names and pretend everything was clear from the first moment. The wall was wet with fog. The brick rough, cold, dark. I took

the chalk from my pocket. My hand trembled. Not from fear. Or not only. From adrenaline. From cold. From that vile, marvellous feeling that the body already knows it is doing something irreversible, while reason stands aside holding the coat. The chalk was thick, soft, left a white mark at once, without hesitation. Each letter cut into the brick like a blow.

GREAT BRITAIN, GREAT LIE.

I wrote it in large letters. Unevenly. Anger rarely has fine handwriting. I stepped back. My heart was pounding like a steam hammer. But not with fear. With joy. It was the first time my silence had given way to action. Small, foolish, ridiculous perhaps. A few words on a wall by the latrines. Behold the great deed of Nell Whitmore, ladies and gentlemen. The empire trembles already, the Queen hides the silver, Mr Fidds loses his appetite at breakfast. And yet I stood there and felt as if I had just struck my fist against something that all my life had passed for untouchable. I did not run. I walked away quickly, yes. I am not an idiot. Or not entirely. But I did not run. My legs quickened of their own accord, as if the body already knew I would not return to the old self. The print shop was dark, but not dead.

Henry's place was never entirely dead. Not even at night. Especially at night. By day it looked like the neglected workshop of a man who had quarrelled with order and won. At night it became something else. A quiet forge of words. A small factory of disobedience. There, people were not ground down. There, lies were ground until they began to look like truth, or the reverse, depending on the order. I knocked three times. Then two. As he had taught me. For a while nothing. Then soft steps. The door opened to the width of suspicion. Henry's eye appeared in the crack.

"Nell?"

"No, the ghost of industrial morality. Let me in before I die of disappointment."

He opened wider.

"You? Here? At this hour?"

"Do not begin with questions. Questions lead to trouble, I have heard it from experts."

I stepped inside. It smelled of ink, paper, dust and cheap tobacco. Henry had his collar open, sleeves rolled, ink beneath his nails and a cigarette between his teeth that he had apparently forgotten to light. His gaze was like ink: dark, deep, difficult to wash off once it had settled on the skin.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I changed my mind about the world."

"That sounds dangerous."

"It is. I need paper, ink, and something that explodes. But in letters."

Henry closed the door and drew the bolt.

"Leaflets?"

"Insults. Formatted, justified, ready to be thrown in the system's face."

For a second he looked at me as if he were not sure whether I had a fever or had begun speaking sensibly for the first time in my life.

"Sit down," he said.

"I did not come to sit."

"I know. That is why you should sit before you start marching round the room and wake half the street."

"Since when are you the voice of reason?"

"Since you came to the print shop after midnight with the face of a woman who has either burned down a factory or is about to."

"I have not burned it yet."

"Yet is the word that worries me most here."

I gave him the paper. It was crooked, hurried, raw, written in my hand by the light of a dying candle before I left. The ink had bled in places because my hand refused to be calm. But they were my words. Mine. Henry took the sheet carefully. He read aloud in a half whisper:

"Our blood runs through the pipes of Empire. Time to turn the tap."

He said nothing. He read on. There was no smile on his face. Good. I could not have borne a smile then. I wanted those words to stand between us as heavy as they had been in me. I wanted him to feel their dirt, their smell, their teeth.

"It is strong," he said at last.

"Strong?"

"Yes."

"Henry, strong is tea that cannot be drunk without cursing. This is meant to be more."

"It is more."

"Then why do you sound as if you were marking the pastor's daughter's composition?"

He put the paper down on the table.

"Because if I tell you the truth, you will start arguing."

"Now you must."

"It is good."

"Terrible beginning."

"And dangerous."

"Better."

"And personal."

"Best."

Henry rubbed his face with his hand, leaving a streak of ink by his temple.

"Nell, do you understand what will happen if this goes round the district?"

"People will read."

"People will begin asking questions."

"Let us hope so."

"Briggs will start looking."

"He already is."

"Fidds will call the police."

"The police will at least have the opportunity to learn to read."

"This is not a joke."

"I know. That is why I joke before I start screaming."

He watched me for a long time. Then he nodded.

"How many copies?"

I felt something strange beneath my ribs. As if someone had suddenly opened a window in a room where wet coal had been burned for years.

"Enough that even blind Briggs has to tread on one on his way to the privy."

Henry snorted softly.

"A romantic vision of distribution."

"You know me. I have a poetic soul and very practical aims."

"Fifty?"

"Too few."

"A hundred?"

"Better."

"Two hundred will be risky. Paper, time, noise. And someone may notice."

"Who?"

"People."

"People always notice the wrong things."

"Nell."

"Two hundred."

"One hundred and fifty."

"One hundred and eighty."

"One hundred and sixty, and I am not arguing, because it is my print shop."

"Yours? I thought it was your father's."

"My father sleeps above the shop and believes I am printing bills for the butcher."

"So it is his print shop and your crime."

"Excellent summary."

The machines began. Not like those in the factory. Smaller, more delicate, less hungry. And yet their sound moved something deep in me. Knock. Press. The rustle of paper. The smell of ink. The rhythm of work, but different. Not to squeeze life out of a person, but to put into paper something that could return to people as fire. Henry worked quickly. Precisely. His hands knew every movement. He set type, adjusted the margin, cursed under his breath when one letter refused to sit straight.

"You have a great deal of anger for a woman who came only for paper," he said after a while.

"And you have a great many opinions for a man who should be minding the letter r."

"That letter r is presently attempting to betray the workers' cause."

"Then hang it as an example."

"You sound like a tribunal."

"I sound like a woman after work."

He looked at me over the type case.

"Did you write this after Elsie?"

"Yes."

"Is she alive?"

I did not answer at once.

"I do not know."

Henry stopped correcting the type.

"No one told you?"

"Henry, we do not receive information. We receive orders. Information is for people entitled to truth."

"I am sorry."

"Do not say that."

"What?"

"I am sorry. It sounds as if you are putting death into a clean envelope."

He fell silent. After a while he asked more quietly:

"What am I to say, then?"

I looked at the sheets of paper waiting on the table.

"Nothing. Print."

He printed.

With every strike of the press, something grew in me that had always been strangled at birth before. Pride? No. Pride made me think of manufacturers and people who mistake their own boots for proof of moral superiority. This was sharper. A sense of agency. A hideous phrase, if spoken at table Mother would probably take it for an illness or a new tax. But that was what I felt. I was not only thinking. Not only writing in a notebook. I was doing something. At the end I left one more sheet. A small one. With the signature: W. Henry looked at it.

"W?"

"It is enough."

"Whitmore?"

"Perhaps."

"That is risky."

"Everything I have done since birth has been risky. Breathing in Manchester ought to carry its own warning."

"Nell."

"Those who need to know will know. Those who do not need to know will learn later."

Henry did not look convinced.

"A symbol can help. But it can also lead them straight to you."

"Let them go carefully. The streets are slippery."

"You truly have something suicidal in you."

"No. I have something in me that no longer wants to pretend it is dead. Easy to confuse."

On the way back I felt the ink drying on my hands, and the air seemed a little less suffocating. Not because Manchester had suddenly become kinder. Let us not deceive ourselves. Manchester had no such tendencies. But that night I breathed differently. As if

every breath were the theft of something that had always belonged to me, only someone had kept it under lock for years. I wrote nothing in my journal.

Not because there was nothing to write. I simply did not want to speak to paper. That night I spoke to walls, to brick, to the city. Paper was too small. In my mind there was only one sentence. Not written. Burned beneath the skull. "This Empire will spit my name before it forgets me."

CHAPTER II

Great Britain, the Great Lie

The morning was far too bright for the day after a crime. The sun, shameless and indecent, slipped between the tenement roofs like a thief with the nerve to return to the scene of the offence. The air smelt as it always did: dust, soot, half-eaten bread and hope already worn threadbare. Yet there was something new in it. Something electric. Like tension in a muscle before a blow. As though the city itself knew something had happened, only not yet what. Or who. People moved faster than usual. Whispered less. Looked more. As if someone had lifted their chins and told them to see what they had spent their lives ignoring. Everyone was a little too quiet, a little too watchful. Even the dogs did not bark, as though they too wished to provoke nothing. By the bakery two women with baskets pretended to discuss bread, though both kept looking towards the factory wall. The newspaper boy was not shouting as loudly as usual. Old Alfie sat on his barrel and smiled at the world with three teeth and the expression of a man who knew either everything or nothing, which with Alfie usually meant both.

I came to the factory as always. On time. In my coat. With hands that still smelt of paint and unease. My face was calm. Perhaps too calm. Calm did not suit a working girl, especially the day after the city had woken to writing on a wall. A working girl was meant to be tired, frightened, occupied by her own hunger. Calm smelt of suspicion. But I was no longer only a working girl. I was a sainted sinner who had brought conscience and chalk to work. The wall by the privy was still wet with morning fog, but the words held. Crooked, but proud, like a poor man in a ruined top hat. Someone had tried to scrub them off. With a brush perhaps. With a rag. Perhaps with outrage alone. He had only smeared the letters and left behind something more visible still, like a bloodstain on a white apron. No longer words, but an accusation.

GREAT BRITAIN, THE GREAT LIE.

The writing looked worse now. Which meant better. A lie, when someone tries to erase it, often grows larger. Briggs was already there. Of course he was. He stood straight, hands behind his back like a general inspecting a battlefield, wearing the expression of a man about to deliver an address to the nation rather than threaten a handful of exhausted people with dust in their lungs. Beside him stood a younger foreman with a bucket, a brush and the face of a man who had encountered literature for the first time in his life and was displeased by it. Briggs did not shout. That was the worst of it.

"Who did this?" he asked.

His voice was quiet, even, dangerous. No fury. Cold calculation. Quiet Briggs was venomous Briggs, and venomous Briggs was the worst version of that man, if the word man could still pass through the throat without the conscience objecting. We said nothing. Even the children. Even Joe, who usually chattered like a parrot after rum. Even Greta, who could bully a stone into silence, did not utter a sound. John stood a little

behind, his empty sleeve pinned to his waistcoat, his face so still he seemed carved from very old tiredness. Briggs walked slowly between us, sniffing the air like a hunting dog.

"This is not a joke," he said. "This is not play. This is not childish scrawling on a wall."

Old Alfie, somewhere at the end of the line, muttered very softly:

"Pity. Children usually write neater."

Several people pretended to cough. Briggs turned his head, but found no culprit.

"From today every worker will be searched at the entrance and the exit. Every sheet of paper, every piece of chalk, every trace of paint will be treated as an act of betrayal against your bread-giver."

Bread-giver. He spat the word out like a sacrament, as though he truly pressed a loaf into our hands every morning and not merely another hour to survive. As though work were mercy, and hunger proof of poor conduct. I could not stand it. Of course I could not.

"Bread-giver?" I said quietly.

Greta closed her eyes. Briggs turned slowly.

"What did you say, Whitmore?"

"I was only wondering if that is an official title. Because if so, the bread ought to be included in the wages."

A few faces twitched. Not laughter. Not yet. More like a suppressed reflex of life. Briggs looked at me for a long moment.

"You."

One word. He did not need more. I straightened. Not from pride. From spite. My heart was hammering like a steam engine after five coffees, but my face stayed smooth. I could see the words from the corner of my eye. I could also see the smear of chalk on my sleeve, which I had not noticed before. Excellent, Nell. Truly elegant.

"You saw nothing?" Briggs asked. "Heard nothing? You do not know who goes about at night under walls with chalk and grand thoughts in an empty head?"

"I see a great deal, Mr Briggs."

"Indeed?"

"Unfortunately. It is one of my defects."

"I am asking whether you saw anything worth reporting."

"I see things worth reporting every day. Children under machines. Blood on planks. Women coughing cotton. An overseer who mistakes a whip for an argument. But I suspect that is not the sort of report you mean."

His face changed just enough for me to see I had struck something soft. Not conscience. Vanity. In such men it is a very delicate organ.

"Take care, Nell," he said. "Walls have ears."

"And workers have eyes. Is that still permitted?"

"Eyes can be trained to look down."

"They tried. The results are uneven."

Briggs stepped closer.

"Do you think you are brave?"

"No. I think I am late for work."

"Do not mock me."

"I am trying, but you make it difficult."

Greta shifted beside me. John cleared his throat. Joe stared at the ground so hard he looked as if he were trying to see Australia. Briggs leaned close.

"People like you end badly, Whitmore."

"People like me begin badly. At least with the ending there is still something to do."

For a moment I thought he would truly strike me this time. I saw his fingers twitch. I saw his eyes pass across the crowd, searching for a place where violence could be hidden beneath the name of order. But again there were too many witnesses. Or too much tension. Or too much of something none of us yet knew how to name. He turned away.

"Inside," he growled. "All of you. And remember: whoever is caught with a leaflet, chalk or paint will be dismissed. No wages. No reference. No right of return."

"So like dying," Alfie murmured behind us. "Only quicker."

This time several people coughed too sharply. Briggs pretended not to hear. But he heard.

During the break Greta sat beside me. For a while she said nothing. She looked at her hands. Then at me. Greta had a way of looking at a person as if she were a badly stitched coat about to split in public.

"Is it yours?"

"What?"

"Those words."

I drank water that tasted of metal, dust and defeat.

"Many words are mine, Greta. It is my worst habit."

"Do not pretend to be stupider than you are."

"And if I am not pretending?"

"Then we have a larger problem."

I did not answer. She leaned closer.

"Was it yours?"

I looked ahead, at the wall, the chimney, the children eating bread as if every bite required permission from heaven.

"Do not ask me questions when you do not want the answer."

Greta sighed.

"Fine. I am not asking."

"You sound as though you just did."

"Because I did."

"And?"

"And I heard no answer."

"See? Everyone satisfied."

She did not smile.

"They will search."

"Let them."

"They will beat people."

"They already do."

"They will throw people out."

"They already do."

"They may kill someone."

"They already have."

That silenced her. Elsie sat between us, though there was no body, no voice, no red hair. Only the name we did not say. Greta looked at me differently then. Not gently. Greta was not made for gentleness. More with a kind of brutal understanding.

"If this has begun," she said quietly, "you will not stop it with chalk."

"I know."

"Nor with paper."

"I know."

"Then what do you want?"

I looked at my hands. Black paint still sat in the cracks of my skin. Stubborn. Not washed away by one morning.

"For them to stop thinking they are alone."

Greta looked at me for a long time.

"That is a dangerous dream."

"All my dreams are dangerous. The safe ones were out of stock."

After the break I returned to the machine. But it was no longer only my enemy. It was a stage. A hammer. A metronome for something that did not yet have a melody but already had rhythm. My hands did what they always did. Feed, twist, pull, slide. Feed, twist, pull, slide. But my mind was elsewhere: beyond the gate, in the print shop, on the wall, in the pockets of people who might already have found a leaflet, in the breath of anyone who had read and could not quite return to silence. For the first time I was not only a cog. Not even only a victim. I was the beginning of something without a name. And nameless things frighten most those men who live by cataloguing other people's poverty.

The next hours were a walk along a rope someone had stretched above a pit, tied at both ends to factory chimneys and ordered us to cross barefoot, with Briggs's whip as counterweight and the crowd's silence as a net nobody intended to spread. At Worth & Fidds, concern for workers' safety always ended where string began to cost money.

Everyone who entered the factory had to raise their hands, show pockets, remove caps, sometimes boots. Older women were told to untie their aprons. Children's pockets were turned out as if they might contain cannon rather than a crust of bread, a dead beetle or a stone declared treasure. It looked more like entering a prison than a workplace. Though, to be honest, the differences were mostly decorative. In prison at least nobody pretends your presence is an honour.

Little Joe held his crust with both hands as if it were the last plank of a sinking ship.

"It is mine, Mr Briggs. Mam gave it me."

"Your mother does not sit on the board of this factory," Briggs said. "Hand it over."

"But I did not write anything on the wall. I can hardly write my name."

"All the more suspicious."

Joe frowned, because even his child's mind saw that Briggs's logic worked like a broken machine: noisy, crushing and impossible to understand.

"How am I meant to be less suspicious, then?"

"By being silent."

"Can I have the bread back after?"

"If it proves innocent."

Someone snorted and turned it into a cough. In that factory even laughter had to wear a disguise if it wanted to live until afternoon. Briggs stopped Edith because of black grease on her fingers and made ink of it with his eyes. He stopped Freddie because there was chalk dust in his boot and nearly hanged him with his own clumsy answer. He stared, sniffed, collected faces, gestures, breath, sweat. Briggs was a collector. He collected fear the way others collect coins.

Inside the hall the machines growled as always, but the air had changed. It was thicker. People did not talk, yet their eyes said more than before. That was the worst thing for Briggs. A silent worker can be counted obedient. A silent worker who looks is another kind of trouble entirely.

Greta bent over her machine and whispered:

"Did you see how he looks at the notice board?"

"Like a grave he dug himself."

"Do not joke."

"I have never been more serious while comparing Briggs to a corpse."

"He knows this is not ordinary scrawling."

"Even Briggs can recognise fire when it begins to singe his trousers."

"Do you think it will end?"

"Yes," I said. "But not as he thinks."

"And how do you think?"

"I do not know yet."

"That is a dangerous sentence."

"Most good sentences are."

She looked at me as if she saw a wall coming down brick by brick and was not certain whether to hold it up or help push.

"If it spreads, you will not stop it."

"I do not want to stop it."

"Then what do you want?"

I wanted too much. Briggs afraid to enter the hall. Mr Fidds choking on his breakfast. Elsie alive. Tommy alive. My mother not stitching life from scraps. My father rising from his chair. A blue sky over Manchester, just once, not old ash. I wanted everything. And when a person wants everything, she usually begins with something very small and very foolish, such as writing on the wall beside a public privy.

"I want them to stop thinking nothing can be done," I said.

"Does it begin with a sentence on a wall?"

"No. With someone reading it and not forgetting."

Later, in the canteen, someone left a folded note on the table. No one admitted placing it there. No one was fool enough to pick it up at once. We stared at it like a dead rat that might still bite. At last old Alfie reached out.

"Since you have all become ladies at tea, I shall inspect the invitation to the ball."

"Alfie," Greta hissed.

"What? I am old enough that if they hang me, they at least save themselves the waiting."

He unfolded it. Black writing. Clumsy. Uneven. No signature. No initial. Only one sentence:

W. was right.

We stopped eating. Even Joe, whose crust had returned from analysis looking like evidence in a trial against hunger. Alfie read it twice and looked sideways at me.

"Interesting."

"Very."

"Familiar letter."

"Alfie, the alphabet is not private property."

"Not yet. Give Parliament time."

Then Briggs entered the canteen as quietly as damp enters a wall. Suddenly he was there.

"What is that?"

"Paper, Mr Briggs," Alfie said. "A dangerous thing, by all accounts. Since people learnt to read, they have had no peace."

"Give it."

Briggs read the note as if it were a floor rag that had insulted him. I do not know what angered him more: the sentence, or the fact that someone had dared write it a second time.

"Who put it there?"

Silence.

"No one? Excellent. Papers in this factory have learnt to walk by themselves. Progress truly surprises us."

"Perhaps paper has had enough too," Alfie murmured.

Briggs burned the note in the candle. The edge curled, the letters shrank, the sentence vanished. But it was like smoke. It had spread before the flame could eat it. I saw it in people's eyes. The paper was no longer needed.

That evening, behind the hall, Greta sat beside me with a bowl of water pretending to be supper.

"Someone else is beginning to speak."

"Maybe they always spoke, just quietly."

"No. This is changing."

"Everything changes. Even the mould in our room has new plans for the wall."

"Nell."

"I know."

"It is spreading."

"Maybe it is chance."

Greta looked at me as if I had said the Queen slept in the gutter for her health.

"Chance leaves one note. Not two. Not writing on a wall. Not people suddenly looking into each other's eyes instead of the floor."

"Or perhaps it is a beginning."

She said it. Not I. Which made it sound more dangerous. I did not answer. Someone had struck a match. We were all sitting in a barn full of hay. And we were beginning to feel warmth.

From then on Briggs asked questions instead of making speeches. Short questions. Like a metronome before execution.

"Greta, where were you after work?"

"Home."

"Who can confirm it?"

"My mother."

"Can she write?"

Greta's hand stopped for the tiniest second. Briggs saw it.

"No," she said.

"Convenient."

"For whom?"

"What did you say?"

"I asked for whom. For me, because my mother cannot write you a letter? Or for you, because it is easier to call a poor woman a liar when she has no paper?"

The hall shifted. Briggs stepped closer.

"Careful, Greta."

"I am careful. All day. With the machine. With my fingers. With words. With you. A very busy life."

For a moment I saw Greta cross a line. Not wide. Not bright. But real.

He moved to Joe and accused his boots of carrying chalk.

"Rebellion has chalk?" Joe asked, bewildered.

"Rebellion has many faces."

"Then I do not think I have seen any, sir."

"You will."

Those were no longer conversations. They were prefaces to funerals.

One morning Briggs made us stand in a line. Women with hands red from work. Children with faces too old. Men staring at a fixed point so as not to say something foolish. I stood between Greta and Annie, feeling the heat of their shoulders.

"You are fortunate," Briggs said, his tone cold enough to chill meat, "that we need you more than we wish to punish you. But that balance is very, very fragile."

He walked down the line.

"One note."

A step.

"One word."

A step.

"One piece of chalk."

A step. Beside me.

"One girl who thinks her tongue can replace sense."

He looked straight at me.

"Have you anything to say, Whitmore?"

I tilted my head as if posing for a portrait and rolled a piece of cotton between my fingers.

"Only what everyone would say, Mr Briggs."

"Which is?"

"That I love my work, believe in the Queen and pray for the Empire."

Several people lowered their eyes to hide their faces. Briggs smiled, and his smile was like a dead cat by the road: still, but smelling of death.

"Careful. Sarcasm is not a shield."

"I know. But sometimes it is the only thing sharper than a needle."

"We are watching you."

"Then watch, all of you. Perhaps someone will finally see the truth."

That was enough. He did not shout. He did not raise a hand. But something twitched in his jaw. For a moment he looked at me as if he were trying to remember where best to strike later.

"To work," he barked. "If one more note appears, if one more inscription is found, if one more of you imagines he is greater than rules, all of you will answer. Understood?"

"Understood," the crowd answered.

But it was not the same voice as before. Once it sounded like obedience. Now it sounded like remembering.

At the next break Sara came to me, red hair like a flame in bad air.

"W. knows what she is saying," she whispered.

Greta looked at her sharply.

"How do you know W. is a woman?"

Sara smiled.

"Because no man would have that much nerve."

The laughter was short, quiet, nervous. But laughter is a weapon. Even before it fires, it is already loaded.

Sabotage does not begin with a bomb. No thunder, no dramatic boom after which ladies may faint over tea and husbands declare that the country has gone to the dogs since the poor learnt to read. Sabotage begins more quietly. With a thought pretending to be curiosity. With a glance at a screw. With noticing a flaw one is not supposed to notice. With the question: what if all this is not as strong as they tell us?

Steel itself is honest. Hard, cold, stupid. It does what it is forced to do. Man is worse, because he can persuade steel that brutality is progress. The machine does not know it takes fingers. The factory owner knows. Briggs knows. Mr Fidds knows. And so steel interested me less than the clean hands and dirty consciences behind it.

I had watched machine number seventeen for years. Edna. My personal tyrant. An old hag with the soul of a hangman and the voice of a wheezing corpse. Mr Fidds knew her value. Briggs knew her number. I knew her illnesses. I knew where she hissed, where she trembled, where she coughed, where she might be persuaded to betray her masters. It would not take much. A small disturbance. A bit of filth in the right place. A fever in the belly.

For two days I circled Edna like a lover before betrayal. I wiped, adjusted, listened, touched. Briggs watched, of course. But he did not understand. To him steel was obedient. To me it was vulnerable.

At break Greta sat beside me without asking. That alone was almost a declaration.

"I have watched you with that machine."

"Good to know I have an audience."

"Do not pretend."

"What do you want, Greta?"

"To know if you are planning something."

"And are you the management?"

"No. If I were, I would have better boots and a worse soul."

She looked at me with those grey-green eyes, calm as moss on a tomb.

"I know what someone looks like when she is no longer only thinking."

"Thoughts are not enough," I said. "They do not stop machines, boots or money."

"What does?"

"Fear."

"Whose?"

"Theirs. Fear that the machine can stop. Fear that profit can stop. Fear that something expected to work without question might answer."

"Are you talking about machines?"

"Not only."

She took a piece of my bread, which for Greta was a treaty.

"If they catch you, there will be no hearing."

"There are never hearings in a factory. Only conclusions."

"No trial."

"Trials are for people whose deaths require paper."

"Nell."

"What?"

"You no longer sound like a girl who is angry. You sound like someone who has chosen."

"And if I have?"

"Then choose wisely."

"Wisely means dying slowly and not leaving a stain?"

"Wisely means not giving them a reason to hang you as an example."

"Let them. I am already hanging here. Only upright."

After a moment she said:

"If you do something, do not do it alone."

"That sounds like concern."

"It sounds like sense."

"With you everything sounds like a sentence."

"Because life is a lazy executioner. You have to watch its hands."

The next morning I had a small thing in my pocket. Dirty, sticky, foul, found where even poverty stops wanting things. No need to describe it better. The factory provided the material for its own illness. When Briggs looked away, I slipped near Edna and

moved as one moves in a factory: like work. Work is the best mask. Under it one can hide tears, pregnancy, hatred and sometimes something more.

At one o'clock Edna howled. First her rhythm changed. Then a tremor came. Then a long painful grind. One bobbin jumped. A thread snapped. The spindles choked. And then she stopped with a groan so deep it sounded as if something in the factory's belly had turned over and died.

It was beautiful. Not like flowers, clean windows and music. Beauty in my world needed dirt under its nails. It was the beauty of interruption. One second in which something meant always to obey refused.

Other machines faltered. One lost rhythm. Another tore cloth. A third slowed as the common belt struggled. The hall did not stop entirely, but it staggered like a drunk after a blow. A small hole had opened in all that steel order. Enough.

"Who the devil touched the cooling?" Briggs roared.

No one answered. We were not heroes in a cheap ballad stepping forward with open chests and crying, "It was I." In real life a person keeps quiet because she has a mother, rent, hunger and a back that does not enjoy the whip. But the silence was different that day. It was shared.

From the end of the hall someone said:

"Maybe God. Maybe He has had enough too."

For a second no one breathed. Then someone snorted. Briggs spun around.

"Who said that?"

"Hard to hear, Mr Briggs," Alfie called innocently. "Machines are unclear today."

Briggs rushed back to Edna. The machine was more important than an old man with an unwashed tongue. That was the first law of the factory, and that day it worked in our favour.

The mechanic knelt beside Edna and looked inside.

"Something blocked her."

"What?"

"I do not know yet."

"Find out!"

"Shouting will not help me fix her faster, Mr Briggs."

Briggs bent over him.

"This was sabotage."

The word fell heavily. Sabotage. Not failure. Not old machinery. Sabotage. In Briggs's mouth it sounded like plague, treason and a personal insult to his whip.

"Maybe," the mechanic said.

"Maybe?"

"She is old. She runs too long without proper repair. I said it last month."

"I did not ask for your opinions."

"Then why call me?"

The hall froze. Even in him something had begun to creak.

"Repair it."

"I need time."

"How long?"

"An hour. Maybe two."

It was music. In the factory time belonged to everyone but us. The bell. Briggs. Fidds. Machines. Hunger. Now someone had stolen an hour and thrown it into the hall. Not freedom. But a pause in the sentence.

Greta came close while Briggs shouted.

"Was it you?"

"I am only working, Greta."

"Do not lie to my face."

"I am not looking at you, so technically..."

"Nell."

"You told me not to do it alone."

She fell silent.

"I told you to choose wisely."

"That was wise. No one was hurt."

"Yet."

"If we do nothing, they will destroy us anyway."

"True. But do not pretend it is clean. Sabotage, leaflets, jokes, words. If you begin, the dirt stays on your hands too. Not only theirs."

She was right. That was the worst of it. Being right does not make a person innocent.

For an hour the hall worked crookedly. Edna stood half opened, her insides exposed. I felt something almost tender. Not for her. For the pause she had made. Greta later left at my station a small folded rag. Inside was a bit of graphite. Something to write with quietly. She did not look at me. Greta had style.

That evening I did not write in my journal. Paper makes things facts, and facts are harder to forgive than thoughts. In my head there was only one thing, hot as rust under a nail: let it break. Let everything begin to break. If necessary, I shall add my part.

After work one does not go to sleep. Sleep is for people with dreams, and we had scabs, bills and clothes that after washing still smelt of someone else's profit. One does not go to church either, because God had recently closed His business in our district and left only preachers speaking of patience with the voices of well-fed men. One goes where it hurts less. To the pub.

The Boiling Crown stood on the corner of Blake Street, held together by old promises, grease and despair thick enough to spread on bread, had bread been available. By day it looked like a boil on the paving stones. By night it became a harbour for those who had survived one more day, although no one had asked them to. Yellow light leaked from the windows. From a distance it looked warm. Up close it was smoky, dirty and tired, like everything that tried to shine in Manchester.

Inside, the pub was a coffin with curtains. Low ceiling, cracked beams, walls soaked in sweat, beer and stories nobody wanted to remember but everyone told after the third pint. The floor clung to boots with the affection of a drunken aunt. Above the fireplace hung a portrait of Queen Victoria, slightly crooked, as if even she were trying to leave. Someone had drawn her a moustache; someone else had tried to rub it off, leaving Her Majesty looking like a customs officer after three mugs.

Behind the bar reigned Edie Two-Hand. Whether it was a name, nickname or warning, no one asked. She was built like a barrel, had a voice like sandpaper and a stare that could sober a drunken man faster than cold water and prayer. Her apron could have served as a sail or a shroud for a small horse. She set mugs on the counter like verdicts.

"What today?" she asked when Greta, Sara and I came in. "Oblivion, courage, or simple liver destruction?"

Greta shook dust from her kerchief.

"For headache, heartache and conscience. In that order."

"Gin, then."

"And beer," I said. "Gin is for inward wounds. Beer for those still pretending to be sociable."

Edie looked at me.

"You, Whitmore, talk too much for someone with all her teeth."

"I am making use of them while I may."

"Wise. Life rarely warns before taking pieces."

She put down mugs and gin so clear and suspicious it looked like water that had committed a crime.

Sara sniffed hers.

"It smells like something to clean surgical tools."

"And souls, if not too dirty," Edie said. "Though with you lot I would not hope."

We sat at a bench where the wood was less wet and the draught less personal. Clive was there already in his coat that stayed on him out of pity and spectacles without glass through which he saw more than all of us. One eye wandered, so he looked at both the speaker and the consequences.

"Royal company," he said. "Three graces of the industrial apocalypse. Shall we speak of gold, blood or hell?"

"All three. But begin with hell. It is closest and requires no travel."

Sara's red hair looked too alive for Manchester. Greta sat as if the chair had offended her.

"If anyone sings about the Queen, I am leaving."

"Leaving or throwing a mug?" Clive asked.

"Depends on the tune."

The beer was warm but honest. The gin was cold and struck hard. For a moment we drank in silence. Good silence. Not home silence, which counts failures, nor factory silence, lined with a whip. Pub silence after the first drink is like setting down a heavy sack. Only for a moment, but sometimes one lives on moments as on crumbs.

Sara said Briggs had questioned Joe for twenty minutes.

"Joe?" Clive said. "The boy who cannot lie even to his own stomach?"

"That one. He nearly wet himself."

"Not nearly," Edie called. "If it is the one with ears like bucket handles, definitely not nearly."

"Poor Joe," Sara said.

"Poor Joe should be left alone," Clive muttered. "He does not know what rebellion is. You threw him into a fire and he thought it was a bonfire."

"You?" I said.

"Do not pretend, Nell. I saw the leaflet. The wall. Edna."

"Edna has always been a woman of delicate health."

"A machine may sound like a dying horse, but it does not kick the owner exactly when slogans and notes marked W. appear."

"Perhaps Edna is well read."

"Perhaps Edna is smarter than half the factory," Sara said.

Greta warned us to speak softly because any neighbour might sell us for half a shilling and beer money. Clive looked around. Dockers by the fire. A miner saying government was a disease spread by polished shoes. A man asleep at a table whose mug stood more firmly than he did. No one looked like an informer. Informers rarely do. It is one of their worst qualities.

Clive lowered his voice.

"I understand the writing. The leaflets. Even Edna, though officially I understand nothing. But what next?"

"Beer," Sara said. "Then gin."

"I am serious."

"So am I. Without beer revolution will have a foul temper."

"Walls will not stop looms."

"It is not only about stopping machines," I said. "It is about stopping ourselves from working like them."

"That sounds good," Clive said. "But not like a plan."

"It is a start. Like a machine. First something trembles, then finds rhythm, and only then do you learn whether it tears the hall apart or spits out thread."

"When will there be a plan?" Greta asked.

"When we stop being afraid."

"Then we shall sit here until the world's end," Clive said.

"The world looks on its last shift anyway," Sara said. "We might push it."

Greta leaned in.

"Fear does not leave, Nell. It sits with you. Sleeps under the bed. Holds your neck when you speak too loudly."

"Then do we ask it politely to be gentle?"

"I say do not confuse courage with a weight round the ankle."

"And I say do not confuse caution with kneeling."

Silence fell. Then I said the worst word of all:

"Nothing."

Nothing was breakfast for many children. Nothing was the owner's answer to complaints. Nothing remained after wage deductions. Nothing was what doctors said when poor men had no money. Nothing was what people did when they feared that doing anything would cost them even the small hell that kept them alive.

Someone by the fire began a drunken hymn:

"God save the Queen,

she's drunk again,

with blood on boots
and gin for men..."

Laughter rolled. Someone shouted that song could earn a meeting with police. The singer said at least police cells were warm.

"Perhaps we are only drunk," Greta said. "Perhaps we think a mug can change the world, when really we want to forget we have no bread."

"Perhaps one does not exclude the other. Perhaps one can lack bread and still want a world where bread is not a privilege. Perhaps revolution needs a pub, because people do not start with banners and halls. They start at a dirty table over beer they should not buy because children at home are hungry."

"That sounds almost like a sermon," Clive said.

"Take that back."

"A good sermon."

"Take it back twice."

Sara smiled. "Revolution needs a pub. And women who have had enough."

Then the plan began. John might come. Alfie if there were questions, and beer would help. Maggie, though frightened. Dockers from Liverpool could carry leaflets, because the port listens faster than a factory. Henry made paper. Paper can be more dangerous than a knife.

We needed a place. Not the pub. Not Bellamy's cellar. Not the cobbler, though the smell would drive away police. At last I said:

"The old washhouse by the canal."

"The one with the leaking roof?" Greta asked.

"In Manchester that hardly distinguishes it."

"It is cold."

"People have coats."

"And rats."

"Rats do not inform unless Briggs pays in cheese."

The washhouse had been empty for months. Nobody went there after dark because someone was said to have hanged himself inside. Better still. Superstition is cheaper than guards.

We looked at one another and suddenly it was no longer talk. It was a plan. Not grand, not perfect, not the kind that appears in books with maps and men in clean collars. It smelt of beer, wet wool and mildew. But it existed.

Clive raised his mug.

"To the washhouse that will pretend to be Parliament."

"Do not insult the washhouse. It once cleaned things."

Sara raised hers. "To those who speak when everyone else is silent."

Greta lifted hers after a pause. "To those who speak and live to the next day."

"And to the paper kingdom," I said, "which shall burn from one spark."

The mugs struck together. It did not sound like a toast. More like a small sentence.

When I left The Boiling Crown in the wet night, gin burning my throat and a plan heavy beneath my ribs, I thought perhaps beginnings sound like that. Not trumpets. Not a great word on a banner. Only mugs striking in a den on Blake Street, a woman saying

enough through clenched teeth, and the laughter of people still afraid of tomorrow but no longer willing to fear it alone.

Mr Percival H. Briggs was not a monster. Monsters at least have style: claws, slime, theatrical roaring, sulphur, sometimes a tail if the storyteller has had too much time. A monster shows its teeth and gives you one honest moment to know you are dinner. Briggs was worse. Briggs tried to be respectable.

Respectability is an underestimated form of cruelty. People fear knives, pistols, raging crowds. They should fear clean collars, notebooks and men who say "I am sorry" in a tone proving nobody is sorry. Briggs did not need blood on his hands. He had rules, deductions, reports and other people to do as ordered because they had children, rent and stomachs too empty for morality.

He wore the same stiff suit, the colour of buried ambition. His shirt was white as if washed in widows' tears or milk taken from hungry children. His pocket watch shone like the conscience he never had. His boots were polished to insult. A man standing among blood, dust and despair should not have shoes one can see oneself in.

His face was like a dead herring pulled late from a cellar: long, pale, damp-eyed, lips narrow as if he had spent life preventing pleasantness and mistook that for virtue. He wore a little moustache with pride, as if inherited from Napoleon and not a warning sign: man with power and a grievance.

They said he was the son of a clergyman and a bitter teacher of calligraphy from Leeds. That at school obedience was measured more carefully than height. That he once informed on a boy for looking at a flag crookedly. That his first smile came at a productivity table. The worst part was that he believed. Truly believed. Briggs was not a cynic. He thought order virtue, work duty, poverty a test, and us proof that God enjoyed difficult social experiments.

He quoted safety regulations as if preaching the Gospel of Production. He loved "the social duty of labour", "the dignity of honest toil", and other phrases men use when other people's sweat funds their morality. He did not always shout. He looked. Like an accountant balancing columns, not seeing people. Efficient. Weak. Loud. Too quiet. Breakable. Requiring whip. Requiring subtler methods. We were printing errors to him, to be withdrawn before anyone began to read.

And he had imagination. Not the good kind. Not songs, pictures or better worlds. The imagination of a clerk in hell. He could guess where a paper would be hidden, whom to frighten in order to frighten five others, how a joke becomes an offence, an offence treason, and treason an example. Imagination in such hands is a knife held by a child who has just learnt other people bleed.

On Monday he came early, smiling like a cat that had swallowed a canary and expected applause. He gathered us all and mounted the platform.

"From today," he announced, "we introduce the Programme of Good Patriotism."

Greta hissed. "What in damnation..."

"Wait," I whispered. "There will be a hymn."

"If they make me sing before breakfast, I shall consider it war."

"They declared war long ago. They called it employment."

Briggs spoke of vandalism, unauthorised content, malicious jokes, whispers and suspicious machine failures. He looked at me on that last phrase. I smiled with all the innocence of a woman hiding a knife in her sleeve.

"Worth & Fidds Ltd. is not merely a place of work," he said. "It is part of the great organism of Empire. Each of you, humble and insufficiently aware as you may be, has a role."

"Spleen," I whispered.

Greta nearly choked.

Every worker had to read a prayer for the Empire, sign a Declaration of Loyalty and sing the first verse of God Save the Queen. False tone, lack of enthusiasm, irony and improper spirit would have consequences. Sara whispered that he had just forbidden me to breathe. I said he probably had a draft order ready.

They gave us thick, good paper, the kind never wasted on workers' complaints, widows' pleas or bills for children injured at machines. But loyalty always has a budget.

DECLARATION OF LOYALTY

I, [space for name], pledge to remain a faithful subject of Her Majesty, to work devotedly for the Empire, to support order, avoid sabotage and thinking, and refrain from unnecessary questions.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Avoid sabotage and thinking. I read it twice. I did not know which insulted me more: that they put the two together, or that they were right to fear both.

Clive raised his hand.

"Mr Briggs, is this legal?"

"Legal is whatever serves the Kingdom."

"Broad definition."

"The breadth of definition is not your concern."

"And mine?"

"Work."

"So if eating my boot served the Kingdom, should I ask whether to include the sole?"

Briggs noted his attitude. Clive asked him to write clearly because his spectacles had no glass.

Greta did not sign at first. Briggs came to her.

"It says I should avoid thinking," she said. "I am not sure I can promise that with a straight face."

"You are not paid to think."

"No. That is why it remains mine."

She signed in the end. Not agreement. Calculation. One by one the others signed. Joe slowly, as if building a bridge to treason plank by plank. Alfie with a flourish so ridiculous that if handwriting could fart in church, his did. I signed too. Eleanor Whitmore. The letters looked almost elegant. That annoyed me. Betrayal should have uglier handwriting.

By night the Programme of Good Patriotism had become what it deserved to become: a joke. A good one. A dangerous one. At home, by candlelight, I wrote on scraps of paper:

DECLARATION OF SURVIVAL

I, living creature number [write your name or any sound resembling human existence], pledge:

not to die today if possible,

not to overturn any machine unless it starts first,

to pretend God Save the Queen does not sound like the funeral of my dignity,

not to sneeze towards Percival H. Briggs, though I very much wish to,

to laugh inwardly when ordered to sing to cogs,

to work with devotion until devotion is deducted from my wages,

to love the Empire as much as it loves my lungs, which is from a safe distance.

I further undertake:

not to murder fellow workers unless they ask very earnestly,

not to plan a coup during tea break, because tea break is too short,

not to say aloud what I think of the Queen unless the machines drown it out,

not to ask unnecessary questions, only essential ones such as: why the devil are children working under machines?,

not to believe every lie merely because it is printed on thick paper.

Signed: A Tired Person.

Date: It makes no difference. We shall all die.

Mother read it. For most of the page her face did not move. At tea break the corner of her mouth twitched, almost too little to be seen.

"That is foolish."

"I know."

"Dangerous."

"I know."

"And I raised you badly if you have such a tongue."

"You raised me well. I survived."

She handed it back.

"Leave no traces."

That was the closest to a blessing I could expect. I made copies until the candle almost died. I put one under a tool chest, one in the changing room, one where Greta sat. Not a message. A gift. A smuggled cigarette in a cell.

Greta found hers first. She read, and then she began to laugh. Not aloud. Inside, through the body. A weight leaving her. Maybe fear. Maybe the feeling that the world is too large to bite, and someone has just handed you teeth. Quiet laughter in that factory sounded like an explosion.

Briggs saw.

"What have you there?"

"Nothing, Mr Briggs."

"Show me."

"It is private."

"There are no private things in this factory."

"A sad confession from a man of your age."

Life saved her then by its usual filth: someone shouted that Freddie was vomiting by the belt. Briggs turned away. Clive found his copy and bowed to me as if saluting a military secret.

"Miss Whitmore, is this your work?"

"I work and pray for the Empire."

"Then your prayers are very literary."

"God likes style."

"And Briggs?"

"Briggs likes columns."

The papers spread like a useful disease. Someone copied the Declaration on the privy wall. Someone made a tune. Joe asked whether a patriotic sneeze at Briggs would cost the Queen a pound. Clive explained that one sneezes patriotically with pain and without expectation of payment.

Sara told me five people had not sung the hymn that morning.

"From laziness?"

"From courage."

"A thin border."

One woman only moved her lips. Old Patrick hummed the Declaration tune instead of God Save the Queen. I said he risked life for rhyme and I respected that.

Briggs watched, searched, questioned and found nothing but traces of laughter. He asked Clive what he hummed.

"A tune."

"What tune?"

"A sad one."

"I know many sad tunes."

"This one was particularly industrial."

"Do not mock me."

"I mock general conditions."

After work Greta waited by the gate.

"That was not sabotage."

"I tried not to stop any machines this time."

"It was genius."

"Greta, warn me if you are about to say something kind. I am unprepared."

"It was only a joke."

"Exactly. People fear leaflets, sabotage, strikes, rights. But a joke slips under doors like smoke. A person reads, laughs, and then realises he is laughing at Briggs, at the declaration, at the whole paper majesty of them."

"That is how revolutions begin," Greta said.

"With laughter?"

"With the moment people stop believing gentlemen are larger than they are."

"And laughter makes them smaller?"

"To the proper size."

She was right. Laughter does not pay rent, break chains or restore Elsie's hand. But once it settles in, it can crack an order built on fear. Briggs could burn paper, search pockets, take notebooks, threaten wages. But he could not force people to take him seriously. And power that stops looking serious begins to stink of fear faster than a dead rat under the floor.

Within a week everyone knew the Declaration of Survival. Some recited it like prayer. Someone placed a paper crown made from a butter wrapper on machine number three. It sat there twenty minutes before Briggs noticed. For twenty minutes everyone passing by forced a martyr's face. Little Joe bowed.

"Your Greasiness," he whispered.

A song began:

God save our grease,
the real Queen of steam,
long may she squeak,
and clog the regime...

Clive swore he had not made it, which meant he probably had. Sara knew the second verse before Briggs forbade the first. Greta pretended not to smile. Briggs did not understand. That was wonderful.

So he answered with a regulation. Of course. Briggs did not fight fire with water. He fought with forms. He announced a Moral Provisioning Programme. It sounded like a spiritual diet for work cattle. A table was placed on the platform, brown cloth over it, pamphlets, cardboard boxes, charts. Briggs stood behind them like a coffin salesman advertising patriotic lining.

"Every worker will receive an Ethical Packet."

"Can one eat it?" Clive whispered.

"If so, they will deduct it," Alfie said.

The packet contained quotations from Her Majesty, productivity charts, a patriotic prayer and a special box for undesirable thoughts. For a moment nobody spoke. A box for thoughts. Greta said he had invented a prison for air. I said a confession box for pagans.

On the cardboard front was written:

CAST IN DOUBT, RECOVER PURITY.

For a moment I truly lost my words. Me. Serious indeed.

Any unworthy, disloyal, unproductive or morally unclear thought was to be written down and placed in the box, to be collected and assessed by the Department of Discipline.

Joe raised his hand.

"What if someone cannot write?"

"Then he reports the thought to his superior."

"And if the thought is about the superior?"

Someone coughed magnificently.

"Then all the more."

"But to the same superior?"

"Questions should be necessary," Briggs snapped.

"How do I know if mine is necessary before I ask?"

It was perfect. Briggs told him to sit. Joe pointed out we were standing. Briggs told him to stand quieter.

Within hours a new paper appeared:

QUESTIONNAIRE OF UNDESIRABLE THOUGHTS

Did you today have a thought:

about overthrowing the system? ☐

about kissing someone forbidden? ☐

about eating something warmer than your own rage? ☐

about smashing a bottle over Percival H. Briggs's head? ☐

about the Queen probably never cleaning a gear? ☐

about work ennobling mainly those who avoid it? ☐

If you ticked everything: congratulations, you are still human.

The boxes received dead rats with notes, rude remarks about Briggs's moustache, pleas for a meal that did not look like punishment, and Clive's request for a description of purity, since he did not know where it had last been seen. Briggs grew pale at the edges. His procedure had begun biting his ankles.

He called a meeting and held up one of the boxes. Something sloshed inside. I did not want to know what.

"This is no longer a joke. This borders on treason."

Greta leaned to me.

"One more joke and he will melt."

"Was that joy?"

"Do not get used to it."

Briggs announced the factory would not tolerate mockery of patriotism, ethics, productivity, monarchy or his person. Clive murmured that the order was interesting. Maggie told him to be quiet. History, he said, was writing satire by itself.

When Briggs threatened dismissal for distributing vile content, I stood.

"Nell," Greta hissed.

"Mr Briggs," I said, "you say we laugh at the Empire."

"Do you deny it?"

"No. I wonder whether we started first."

The hall grew quiet, but not with fear. It waited.

"Perhaps the Empire is laughing at us. Perhaps these hymns, pamphlets, declarations and boxes are theatre. A paper curtain so we do not notice we have long been locked in a cage without bars."

"You think too much, Whitmore."

"And you too little, Mr Briggs. Especially for a man handing out boxes."

Someone snorted. One small fatal sound. Briggs had already lost. Not the factory, not power, not the ability to take bread from me. Something more delicate: seriousness. Power without seriousness looks like an old man in a hat too large shouting at rain. The next day the boxes vanished officially for sanitary reasons. We knew.

A week later someone informed. There is always someone loyal: a person who sells other people's words for importance and half a shilling. The information travelled upwards, to where paper weighs more than a person. Impropriety in the factory. Writing. Jokes. Satire. Laughter. It was enough.

Two black carriages arrived in the morning. Wilberforce stepped out of the first, tall, thin, straight as a rod for beating children, pale as paper that had never known sun or shame. From the second came Ainsley Lorne, shorter, solid, eyes smooth and empty as porcelain. Inspectors of Morality. The name sounded like someone had mistaken a sermon for a sentence. Briggs ran to them like a dog unsure if it would receive a bone or a kick.

"The establishment remains at your disposal," he said.

"An establishment is always at the disposal of order," Wilberforce replied. "The question is whether you are."

They searched everything. Lockers, bags, pockets, aprons, boxes, floorboards. They read poems, accounts, letters and prayers as suspiciously as pamphlets, because to men in authority every word written by a poor person sounds like conspiracy. Laughter stopped speaking, but it did not vanish. It hid.

Sara was suspended for active neglect of the hymn.

"Do you admit lack of enthusiasm?" Lorne asked.

"To what?"

"During the hymn."

"Sir, I have no enthusiasm even for breakfast, because usually there is none."

"Ironic attitude," he wrote.

"Hungry, rather."

"Hunger does not excuse unpatriotic facial expression."

Old Patrick was dismissed for the good of the productive atmosphere. Alfie raised a mug from somewhere, because Alfie had channels and perhaps an arrangement with the devil.

"To the atmosphere, Patrick. May it choke without you."

Then they came to me.

"Miss Eleanor Whitmore," Wilberforce said in a voice belonging not to a man but a function. "Come with me."

The room was airless and tasted of paper dust from laws that had never seen filth yet decided who would suffocate in it. Briggs stood in the corner like a wet dog that had heard the word bath. Wilberforce sat opposite. Lorne sat with his notebook, scratching endlessly as if every blink of mine were an offence.

"Are you the author of the so-called Declaration of Survival?"

"Does it read well?" I asked. "I should like to see the line of the establishment. Can one walk along it or must one sniff it like a hunting dog?"

"You find yourself amusing."

"Compared with you, I am an entire theatre."

"Did you write God Save Our Grease?"

"Certainly not. It sounds like the work of someone who never met syntax or shame."

"Do you know both?"

"Syntax, yes. Shame selectively."

They asked if I admitted writing the Declaration. I asked what I would gain. They offered fewer consequences, which sounded like the sentence one says just before more consequences. They threatened Sheffield, where there were shovels. I said a shovel at least does not pretend to be an idea.

"Does one need permission to think?" I asked. "And where does one apply? Office or altar?"

"Sarcasm obstructs truth," Wilberforce snapped.

"Perhaps that is why I use it."

At last Briggs spoke quietly.

"Eleanor... one word. Sorry. Everything can be smoothed over."

I looked at him for a long time. For one second I saw not monster, not overseer, not respectable clerk of suffering, but a small boy with straight back who once learnt that enough obedience earns the right to hurt others in the name of rules.

"Mr Briggs, there are words one must not say without guilt. Sorry without cause is kneeling before the stick before it has struck."

Lorne noted it. Immediate transfer in case of further incidents. No recommendation. I left alive, which judging by their faces was a temporary oversight.

That night I wanted to give Briggs a splinter. Not a wound that could be dressed, named and entered in a report. A splinter under fear. Something small, impossible to remove without tearing skin. When the hall emptied, I placed twelve little papers in the factory. Behind the notice board. Under the foreman's forms. In an empty box for undesirable thoughts.

NOTICE

Due to excess undesirable thought, immediate cessation of head possession is advised.

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF DISCIPLINE

Suspicious activity: workers continue breathing without written permission.

PATRIOTIC PRAYER FOR TUESDAY

God save the Queen. Us from Briggs. Briggs from thinking.

As I passed Edna in the dark, I touched her cold side.

"Sleep well, old hag. Tomorrow we pretend again that you rule."

A creak. Clive emerged from shadow.

"If this is a romance with a machine, I do not judge. But Edna seems a difficult woman."

"For mercy's sake, Clive. Do you want to kill me?"

"No. You have been managing that yourself for weeks."

He had his own paper:

BREATHING REGULATIONS FOR LOYAL WORKERS.

It was dreadful. And necessary. We hid it behind the duty rota.

"You know if they catch us, it will not be only warning."

"I know."

"Will you ever say anything else?"

"Perhaps after the revolution."

"And if there is none?"

"Then I shall at least have the reputation of a chronically informed woman."

He grew serious.

"Do not let them break you alone."

It was simple and therefore difficult. Because what we did was no longer mine alone. It had other hands, voices, risks. When rebellion stops being solitary, it becomes larger and heavier. You carry the chance that another person may fall because of your spark.

"I shall try."

"Too little."

"Everyone tells me that lately."

"Because it is true."

Next morning Joe found the first paper and nearly killed me with his lack of subtlety. Greta caught him by the collar before he shouted the roof off. The note passed from hand to hand. Edith. Maggie. Alfie. Clive, who read it like a newly discovered masterpiece though he had helped at night. Then Briggs arrived with freshly pressed seriousness and felt at once that something was wrong. Perhaps because nobody laughed. The silence of people holding back laughter has a different shape from fear. Rounder. Ready to burst.

"Who did this?"

Silence.

Alfie raised a hand.

"Mr Briggs, if someone has ceased possession of his head, he may be difficult to identify."

A strangled sound came from the back. Then the second paper fell from the foreman's desk as if paper itself had dramatic instinct. The foreman read it. And laughed. Short, quick, too late to hide.

"You as well?" Briggs hissed.

"It is absurd," the foreman said.

"And that amuses you?"

After a tiny battle between employee and man, fear and the undignified need not to kneel, he said:

"A little."

The hall exploded with coughing. Not laughter. Officially coughing. The whole factory had suddenly caught the same amusement. Briggs stood pale among people looking anywhere but at him. We had not won. Not nearly. Sara was suspended, Patrick dismissed, Joe frightened, Greta watchful, and I dangled on a thread between courage and stupidity. But that morning Briggs lost something no order could return: the sole right to meaning. Now the tone of the hall belonged also to whispers, papers, coughs, false hymns and laughter hidden under the tongue.

Fear likes silence. Laughter makes holes in walls.

After a while Briggs understood he could not catch laughter. Paper can be burned. Pockets searched. Notebooks taken. Aprons lifted if one's conscience lies low enough. But laughter has no signature. It lives in the throat, in the look, in the tremble of lips

when Briggs talks morality beside a machine that almost ate a child the previous week. When power cannot prove guilt, it punishes atmosphere.

Near the end of shift, when backs were so heavy one wanted to leave them at the machine and collect them next morning, Briggs called us together. Behind him stood Wilberforce and Lorne. Black coats, pale faces, men who did not enter a room but corrected it. Briggs unfolded a paper, because without paper he would have felt naked.

"By decision of management, after consultation with the Inspectors of Morality, measures must be taken to restore order, discipline and proper productive atmosphere."

Proper productive atmosphere. In plain speech: we had laughed too much.

He confirmed Patrick dismissed. Sara suspended longer. Joe watched. Alfie warned for persistent verbal irregularity, which sounded like a disease of the tongue. Clive moved nearer the foreman. Greta's conduct under review. Then:

"Eleanor Whitmore."

My name in his mouth always sounded like something stuck between his teeth.

"By order of management, you are transferred immediately to Section Four. Main boiler room. Without discussion. Without appeal."

Section Four. The boiler room. Not transfer. Exile. Everyone knew it. Under the belly of the factory, among furnaces, pipes, steam and men red-faced from heat. Air down there was wet weight. Sweat did not run; it boiled on the body. A person came out after shift as if cooked in her clothes.

Then he added that my wages were withheld for two weeks.

Two weeks. A rich man hears two weeks and thinks of travel, illness, perhaps waiting for a piano from London. A poor woman hears two weeks and counts bread, coal, rent, Mother's face over an empty pot, Father in the corner saying he knew it. And he would be right, which is the most unbearable thing fathers can do without leaving a chair.

I said nothing. Silence is sometimes the only contempt not punished at once. A joke can be incitement, a question rebellious attitude, an answer insolence. Silence must first be interpreted, and men like Briggs hate things that require thought.

"Nothing?" he asked. "No clever remark?"

I stayed silent. That irritated him. My first small victory that day.

"Hargreaves. Escort her."

The young overseer came. I could smell him before he touched me: sweat, grease, old tobacco and sour old grievances worn proudly. He seized my arm.

"Move, star of the stage."

I shook him off.

"I have legs. And sense. Both work."

That was when I should have shut up. I have never been good at should. He struck me in the stomach. Short. Hard. Not to break a rib. Not to leave a mark anyone important would have to see. To remind me of my place. The air fled me like from a punctured bellows. I bent, the world narrowed white, my knees went. Pain clenched inside me like a fist.

Greta shouted:

"Leave her, you bastard!"

Clive moved. Another overseer lifted a hand. One more step and you are next. Clive froze. Not cowardice. Courage has limits, and other people's bodies should not pay for our need of a gesture. His humiliation was almost worse than the blow.

Briggs watched. It was his punishment, done by another hand. The best violence for a respectable man. Clean enough to adjust cuffs afterwards and speak of discipline. Wilberforce did not move. Lorne wrote something. I thought if I ever wrote a prayer, it would begin: God save us from people who take notes during harm.

"To the boiler room," Briggs said.

I stood by myself. Slowly. Back straight, though my stomach burned and every breath felt like wire through the throat. I did not let Hargreaves touch me. Men like that feed on the victim's gaze. I would not serve him supper.

I walked through the hall, past machines I knew better than my hands, past Edna, my steel tyrant, now quiet as if waiting, past women with whom I had shared sweat and bread, past children with old eyes, past Clive apologising without words, past Greta.

She took half a step.

"Not a step," Hargreaves warned.

"Mind your hands," she said quietly. "One too many has touched the wrong person today."

"Want to join her?"

"More than you think."

"Greta," I said.

She looked at me. No tears. Greta did not waste water on her face. Fury, fear, and that terrible understanding when one person goes down and another must stay above pretending it is temporary.

"Do not do anything stupid," she said.

"You know me."

"That is why I say it."

We reached the hatch. The heavy metal cover was open. Heat breathed from below. Section Four. Boiler room. The heart of the factory. From below came the pulse of furnaces, the hiss of pipes, the metallic sigh of valves. It sounded like the factory's heart. Larger. Merciless.

"Down," Hargreaves said.

"Please."

"What?"

"You said down. Since I am transferred to hell, I thought there might be ceremony."

He reddened, but Briggs and the inspectors were watching, and public violence had limits when proper coats were near.

"Down, Whitmore."

I went down alone. Metal steps, narrow, wet with steam. They creaked under me as if protesting, but did their work. Like everyone here. The lower I went, the hotter the air grew. Less room for breath. The air thickened, stuck to my face, entered my throat like a wet rag. It smelt of coal, sweat, rust, hot metal and ground anger. Behind me the hatch closed heavily. Simple. Final. Like a full stop placed by someone who had not read the sentence.

The boiler room received me without greeting. As if saying: you are here. Too late to turn back.

I, Eleanor Whitmore, sent below like refuse that could not be burned upstairs. Briggs wanted to hide me under the factory. Instead, he had sent me to its heart.

CHAPTER III

Section IV

There are no mornings in Section 4. This is not a place where the day begins with anything sensible, with light squeezing through curtains, or with a human being who may, for a moment, pretend he has a choice. Here everything is one continuous strip, stretched to its limit, as though someone took time and began pulling it until it lost its shape and no longer had a beginning or an end, while shifts did not so much finish as dissolve into one another, like filth in water that can no longer be separated out. Weariness does not arrive. It is already here. It sits in the bones, squeezes between the ribs, settles in the neck like an old acquaintance you cannot throw out, even if you hate him. In time you begin to talk to it. Argue with it. Curse it under your breath, as if it might take offence and leave. It does not leave. It never leaves. There is no whistle here to tell you when you are to be a person and when you are to be a tool.

There is the howl of the furnaces, which does not stop for a moment, the hiss of steam cutting the air like a blade, the metallic rasp of a piston that sounds as if someone were strangling the machine and the machine were repaying the kindness. You do not so much hear the sound as feel it, as if it got under your skin and trembled along with your muscles.

And the smell. Oh, the smell is king here.

A mixture of sweat, coal, rotting grease, old socks and something else, something that cannot be named but is recognised at once. Fear. Old fear, worn through, digested by hundreds of people who drew it in with the air and breathed it back out again. It goes into the pores and stays. You try to wash it off, you scrub your hands until they are red, and still it returns. Always returns. Then you stop smelling it. Just as you stop smelling death when you stand beside a corpse too long and begin to wonder whether it is the corpse rotting, or you.

The men in the boiler room are like the pipes they tend. Thick, corroded, under pressure, ready to burst at the least convenient moment. Most of them are older than me by a decade, maybe two, though it is hard to tell, because here age is not counted in years, but in how much more you can bear before something inside you gives way. Some have no teeth left, their mouths sunk inward, as if someone had pulled out a piece of their faces. Others have eyes so empty they almost echo back at themselves, looking at you while seeing something entirely different, perhaps nothing at all.

From the beginning it was obvious I did not belong. It was not only that I was a woman, though that alone was reason enough for someone to try to put me level with the floor. It was that I did not lower my eyes. Not when I should have. Not for as long as they wanted. I looked straight ahead, even when my eyes stung from smoke, even when I saw in theirs something it would have been better not to see.

And they did not like that.

"What have we here? A new whore from the hall?" one of them threw out.

Bald, with a scar cutting across his forehead so neatly that it looked as though someone had once tried to hammer sense into him there and changed his mind halfway through. He smiled crookedly, showing gums where teeth ought to have been.

"Oi, doll, thought they'd give you a mirror in here, did you? Maybe a little chair and a cup of tea, so you don't tire those pretty hands?"

His voice was like worn sandpaper. Every word sounded as if it were being dragged over something sharp. Someone snorted. Someone else spat on the floor.

"Give her a week," added another, leaning on a valve that looked as if it might fall apart along with him. "Either she'll start begging, or she'll start crying. Both just as dull."

I stood there. I listened. I did not react. I do not give them that pleasure. It is the one thing here they cannot take from me unless I hand it to them on a plate. But I hear everything. I see too. I see how they look. How they measure. How they try to find the place where they can strike. And I feel every word trying to crush me like a hammer falling on a screw. Evenly. Methodically. Without feeling. Except I am not a screw. In time they stopped making the effort. They quickly grew bored of receiving no reaction. They left words behind and moved on to something simpler. They looked. Long. Stubbornly. As if with looking alone they could rub me away, dissolve me in all this filth, turn me into one more thing that did not stand out. They will wait in vain. Among this entire rabble there is only one other woman.

I noticed her only on the third day, which in itself was strange, because in a place like this new faces either vanish quickly or stand out at once. She did both at the same time. She was there and not there. Irish. I do not know what she is really called. Nobody uses surnames here, as if they were something one had to earn. They called her simply Red. Because her hair is like a brick after a fire. Not red in the pretty way. Red like something that survived the flames and is still smouldering. A thin, taut face, with sharp cheekbones that cast shadows even in that infernal light. And eyes. Eyes that did not belong in this place. Too keen. Too clear. As if they had not yet learned to look down. She spoke to no one. She did not laugh. She did not throw comments. She did her work. Shovelled coal, cleaned valves, wiped grease away, as though every movement were part of something larger that the rest of us had long since forgotten.

She walked faster than the others, but did not look like someone in a hurry. More like someone who did not want to be here one moment longer than she had to.

She is... different.

I approached her by chance, while we were scraping waste from beneath the main boiler. The worst work possible. Heat beat from the metal, the air trembled, and everything that had fallen to the floor was either heavy or sharp, or both. She scraped in silence. Her movements were quick, exact. She did not look at me.

For a while I did the same. The shovel struck the concrete with a dull sound. Coal slid into the bucket, black and glossy, as if someone had polished it for a joke.

"First time I have seen anyone here who does not stink of desperation," I said at last, quietly, so as not to make a performance of it.

She did not look. But her shovel stopped. Only for a moment. It was enough.

"First time I have seen anyone come here by choice," she answered.

Her voice was calm. Too calm for this place. No tremor, none of that roughness everyone catches here sooner or later.

"Not by choice," I corrected, pushing coal aside. "Out of spite."

She was silent for a second. Longer than was needed to ignore the answer. Shorter than was needed to dismiss it as worthless. She shrugged.

"Same thing, near enough. You pay for everything here. Even silence. Especially silence, if you do it the wrong way."

I snorted softly.

"I pay for talking. Dearly. But at least I know what I am paying for."

"And is it worth it?" she threw back, still not looking.

"I do not know yet," I answered. "But at least it is not dull."

The corner of her mouth moved. Barely. If I had not been watching carefully, I would have taken it for a shadow.

"Dull does not exist here," she said. "Only tiredness, and different ways of ignoring it."

"I prefer annoying it," I answered. "Tiredness, people, this whole business. See which one breaks first."

That was when she lifted her eyes for the first time. Green eyes. Not pretty in the way stories like to make eyes pretty. Sharp, rather. Like moss after a storm, crushed down, but still alive. She looked at me for a moment. Longer than she should have.

"And then they wonder how you ended up here," she said at last.

I do not know whether it was a joke, a warning, or something in between. Here everything is a little in between.

"Nell," I said, straightening and leaning on the shovel. "Worth knowing the name of someone who may soon set this section on fire."

This time she truly smiled. Briefly, crookedly, as if it were something she did not do often and saw no reason to begin doing now.

"Red," she said. "And do not ask why. And do not count on friendship."

"I never count on it," I answered. "But sometimes I get it free. The world has a sense of humour. Black, but still."

"The world has no sense of humour," she said. "We only try to persuade ourselves it does, so we do not go mad."

"Does it work?"

She looked at me a moment longer. Then she returned to work.

"Enough."

She left me with that word, as if it were something one could weigh and sell. She went on, faster than the rest, but no longer like a stranger. More like someone who had seen something similar before and knew how it ended. Or like someone who had no intention of letting it end the same way. That day the work dragged on longer. Or perhaps I felt it differently.

The shovel was just as heavy. The coal just as dirty. The air just as thick, so thick one had to chew it before it entered the lungs. The pipes still howled, the pistons still coughed, and people still looked at me as if they wanted to take me apart and see what I was made of. And yet something had shifted. Not much. Almost nothing. But enough to

notice the difference. Because I felt less alone. Even if it was only an illusion. And illusions, as it turns out, can sometimes be more useful than truth.

The sky was dark, as if ashamed of itself. Not the ordinary, workaday dimness one sees over the river at dawn, but something deeper, heavier, as though the sky itself understood what we were doing to one another down here and preferred not to look too closely. A thick layer of smoke hung over the chimneys, fat and motionless, as if someone had poured it across the heavens and forgotten to wipe it away.

Boiler Room No. 4 was exactly what it ought to have been. A pit. A place that did not try to pretend it was anything more. It swallowed me without asking, without warning, like an infernal throat that needed no invitations. Inside, the air was so dense one might have cut it with a knife and sold it by weight. It smelled of grease, burnt coal and something else. Something human. Old sweat, which had settled in and claimed the walls as its own.

But I was not broken.

Bruised, bent, tired to the bone so that every movement announced itself like an ill-bred guest, yes. But broken? Not at all. Breaking is a quiet thing. It is the moment you stop resisting. And I still felt something scratching inside me, as if it wanted to get out and make more noise.

I sat leaning against a rusting tank, the metal cold only by name, because it still burned through the thin cloth of my skirt. Rust crumbled under my fingers, leaving red dust on the skin, like blood, only more honest. My knee was scraped raw. Skin torn, sticky, stinging. Every time I moved my leg, I felt the wound open and remind me where I was.

And then, in all that, I felt something I had not felt for a long time.

Pride.

Not the pretty kind one can show at table and wrap in words. The raw kind. Quiet, seated somewhere deep beneath the ribs. The kind that says: you did it. And does not care what you paid for it.

Yesterday I had done something others only mutter about in dreams, when they are tired enough to forget they are afraid. I pasted words where they should not have been. Where their words always hung. Their order. Their lie. Mine were crooked, uneven, written quickly, as if someone were chasing my breath, but they were true. And truth, as it turns out, is more dangerous than fire.

The price was high. It always is.

Wages suspended, as if someone had decided breathing was a privilege that could be withdrawn. A supervisor's fist driven into my ribs with such precision that he clearly had done it before and knew exactly where it hurt most. I still feel his knuckles, as if they left their shape inside me. And then this exile. Section 4. A place where dreams do not so much die as slowly choke, drawing smoke in with every breath.

And still... I would not trade it for all the silence in the world.

Silence is comfortable. Warm. Soft as an old blanket. You can wrap yourself in it and pretend nothing is happening. Only then you wake up in the morning and you are still the same little cog, merely a little more worn down.

I came home late. Night had already chewed Liverpool, spat out the remains of light, and settled heavily between the streets. The lamps looked like tired eyes that had stopped truly seeing. The door creaked like an old conscience. I pushed it open quietly, as if that could change anything. As if silence could protect me. It could not. Mother was waiting. Mother always waits.

She stood with her hands folded over her apron, as if trying to hold herself together. In her eyes she had everything at once. Fear, exhaustion, something like reproach that had long since stopped being spoken plainly. She looked at me the way one looks at something that comes back too late and in too poor a state.

Like a ghost that had no right to return.

"Nell," she whispered.

My name in her mouth sounded like something that had to be swallowed, though it stuck in the throat and scratched.

"What now?"

I took off my boots. Slowly. Every movement was a separate bill to be paid. The skin on my feet throbbed, as if trying to flee the rest of my body. I set them by the wall, beside others that looked as tired as their owners.

"I pasted a few thoughts," I said. "True ones."

I moved a little farther, leaning on the table, because my knees had their own opinion about standing upright.

"On walls. On boards. Where their lie usually hangs."

She looked at me for a long time. Too long. As if trying to decide whether I was still her daughter, or merely a problem to be survived.

"And what did it get you?"

I smiled. Crookedly. Not from pleasure, rather from habit.

"Swollen ribs and a new place of work. Section 4. Hot as Briggs's soul."

She did not even twitch. No smile, no shadow of amusement. Humour, even the blackest kind, was a luxury she had long ago stopped allowing herself.

She leaned against the worktop. Her fingers tightened around the dishcloth, as though she could wipe away what I had said. As if words were stains.

"When will you stop provoking fate?"

Her voice was tired. Not angry. That was worse.

"When it stops being provoked by me?"

"Do not joke," she hissed. "There is no room for jokes here. Here we work. Here we keep quiet. Here we survive."

I looked at her. Truly looked. Those lines around her eyes were not from laughter. Those hands no longer remembered what it was not to hurt.

"Or perhaps that is exactly why we must speak?"

She sighed. It was a long, heavy sigh, carrying more years than I wanted to count. She turned away, as if a conversation were something one could end with the movement of one's back.

She was already about to leave when she stopped in the doorway.

"Your brother spoke too," she threw out. "And what did he get from it?"

I closed my eyes.

That was low. Even for her.

Dragging his death out each time I raised my voice was like battering an old wound with a frying pan. Loud, pointless and bloody painful.

"He died because he would not be a screw," I answered before I managed to bite my tongue. "And I am proud of him."

The silence that followed was heavier than smoke in the boiler room.

In the next room Father sat as he always did. Motionless. In the same position in which the world had left him when it decided he was no longer of any use. Paralysed, locked inside a body that had stopped obeying him, as if someone had suddenly cut all the strings.

He stared into the fire. Or into the emptiness. Sometimes they are one and the same.

I sat beside him. The board creaked softly under my weight. For a moment I said nothing. Words were unnecessary here, or perhaps I simply could not be bothered to arrange them.

I took his hand.

It was thin. Light. Like an abandoned glove someone had lost and no longer had the strength to look for. The skin was cold, almost strange. But when I held it a little longer, I felt something beneath it. A remnant. A shadow of the man he had been.

"I told them, Dad," I muttered. "At the factory. Everything. And more besides."

He did not answer. His eyes were open, but distant. As if he were looking somewhere beyond the wall, beyond us, perhaps even beyond himself.

Or perhaps I only wanted to think so.

Perhaps his eyelid moved. Or perhaps I wanted to see it.

Mother returned from the kitchen. She set a plate of soup before me. Water with a few vegetables in it, vegetables that looked as if they themselves were unsure whether they wished to be there. Steam rose lazily, carrying the smell of something that might once have been food.

She stood behind me. Straight. Stiff.

"But if they throw you out... do not count on coming back," she said. "I will not let you live here for nothing."

I turned and looked her in the eyes. Without fleeing. Without softening.

"Fine," I answered. "I will live for myself. And for him."

She flinched. Barely. But I saw it.

She turned and left.

I ate in silence. The spoon struck the plate with a soft clink that, in time, began to feel like a rhythm. Slow. Persistent. Like everything here.

That night I did not sleep.

My ribs hurt with every breath. I lay on my side, then on my back, then on my side again, as if changing position could change anything more than the place of pain. The ceiling was close. It always is when you cannot sleep.

Thoughts circled. One after another. Without order, without quiet.

I was planning.

Because once I had begun to speak, I had no intention of stopping. Words have a way of wanting more room once they are out. More air. And I was ready to give it to them, even if I choked in the process.

Today, in the boiler room, no one greeted me.

Not that anyone ever truly greeted anyone. But today was different. Glances shorter. Quicker. Some fleeing. Others quite the opposite, too long, too heavy, as if they meant to say: we saw.

I do not need warm welcomes.

I was given a shovel. Grease. A bucket. And a place by a furnace that looked like something even the devil would not want permanently.

Sweat poured from me in streams before I had properly gripped the tool. Pipes hissed as though they had their own opinion on our existence. Coal crumbled under my hands, sharp, dirty, leaving marks everywhere it touched.

Every movement was heavy. Repetitive. Meaningless. And in all of that I was silent. With a head full of words.

I heard them more clearly than the noise of the machines. They arranged themselves, one after another, as if they knew that sooner or later they would find a way out.

I moved closer to the wall by the furnace. It was hot, rough, covered with soot and old marks no one remembered anymore.

I dragged my fingernail over the surface.

Slowly. With pressure.

"There is no light here. But every spark hurts more."

The letters were crooked. Uneven. But they stayed. I drew my hand back and looked at what I had done. And I knew one thing. This was only the beginning.

Fourth day in the boiler room, and my hand already looked as if it had stopped belonging to a human being and had begun belonging to some badly made tool, first blunted, then scorched, then thrown into ash and ordered to keep working. Calluses grew on calluses, skin split where yesterday it had only been red, and where it was meant to split tomorrow it was already burning today, as if my body wished to warn me not to expect any mercy. I could barely see my nails anymore. They had vanished beneath grease, dust and that caustic swill that seeped from pipe number seventeen whenever some idiot yanked it too hard, as if steam could be taught obedience by force. It ate metal, rags and skin with the same calm. A beautiful quality. The justice of chemistry was greater than the justice of men.

The smoke bit like mockery. Not ordinary smoke, the kind that stings the eyes and makes you turn your head, but boiler-room smoke, heavy, greasy, stubborn, entering the throat like an insult that cannot be coughed out. Sweat ran down the back of my neck in thin streams, tickling, irritating, mixing with soot until one felt like one's own filthy candle, melting slowly but obstinately. And in the air something was thickening. Something that could not yet be touched or named, but hung between people like a badly stretched wire, ready to snap straight into someone's face.

I was not the only one who felt it.

The men had changed too. They stopped laughing. At least around me. It was not better. Laughter can be ignored, because it is cheap, predictable, and usually stinks of beer or cowardice. Silence is worse. Silence means they have started thinking. And when a man like that begins to think, you never know whether he will decide to leave you alone or, quite the opposite, finish the matter properly. Since yesterday they had been watching me like something that might explode or inform. I did not know which was the greater crime in their eyes. Probably both. In such men truth and powder share the same flaw. Both make too much noise.

Some looked with unease. Others with anger. Others still with that particular caution rats have when they smell a trap in the corner but do not yet know for whom it has been set. The one with the scar, that bald brute with a forehead cut as if someone had once wanted to split his skull and at the last moment decided it was not worth the effort, clipped me today with his shovel. By accident, supposedly. Too lightly to leave a mark, but hard enough to send a message. I understood it perfectly. I did not react. I did not even look. I merely shifted half a step, as if making room for the smoke. But Red saw it. And I think that was enough.

After work, while I was sitting by the tank, the same one people leaned their backs against when they wanted to rest from the world for three minutes and pretend rust was more human than the rest of the crew, she came over to me. For the first time of her own will. Not because we happened to find ourselves beside one another. Not because we traded half a sentence over a shovel and each returned to her own hell. She came deliberately. That was already something.

She sat sideways, hands resting on her knees, shoulders tense but face calm, as if she had learned to save movement even when she no longer carried anything.

For a while she said nothing. She looked ahead. So did I. In the boiler room you quickly learn that some conversations must be started from the side, because if you strike at the heart too quickly, everything shuts like a valve.

At last she spoke first.

"Why did you not bite back at them for what they say?"

She asked it calmly, but not lightly. Not out of curiosity. Rather as someone asks whether you are stupid, tired, or perhaps simply too proud to make the obvious move.

I turned a piece of grease-soaked rag in my hand and looked at my fingers. Black. Split. The splendid hands of a young lady.

"Because a shovel says less than a word," I answered. "And hurts for a shorter time."

Red nodded, as if it were not a good answer, but at least an honest one. Her mouth was dirtied with soot, her cheek crossed by a thin streak of black dust, but when she spoke, she spoke cleanly. Without that mumble, without the throat-clearing, without the need to prove with volume that she existed.

"Most girls who came here did not last a week," she said after a moment. "Some left by themselves. Others were carried out. Sometimes literally. Sometimes only in spirit. Then they still walked about the hall, moved their hands, did their work, but inside it was already over. I have seen it more often than I wanted."

I looked at her from the corner of my eye.

"And you?"

She shrugged lightly, but it was not a movement that dismissed anything. It was more like the movement of a person who does not want her own life to sound like a plea for pity.

"I had nowhere to go."

And that was all. No ornament. No self-pity. Dropped straight and hard, like a bone on the table.

We were silent a while. Smoke muffled sounds, bent them, stretched them, as though the world around us were speaking through a thick layer of wool. Somewhere someone dropped iron. Someone cursed. Steam puked from a pipe with a hiss. But all of it came as if from behind a wall. As though the world, for a moment, had forgotten we still existed. Good. I did not need its attention.

Red spoke again, quieter than before.

"And you?"

It was a short question, but it had more space inside it than many a sermon.

I sighed and leaned my head against the tank. The metal was warm, rough, stinking. Almost friendly.

"I did," I said. "I had a roof, I had walls, I had a mother who believed that if you bowed your head low enough, life might not notice you. I had a father who looked into the fire as if fire could still give something back to him. I had a place I could return to, but not one where I could breathe. So I preferred to go where at least I did not have to pretend I was wearing myself down against the system, when in truth I was only wearing down floors and my own tongue so as not to say too much."

The corner of her mouth moved.

"You tell it nicely to yourself."

"I have to," I replied. "If a person cannot tell the story of her own fall properly, all she has left is pain. And pain grows dull when it lasts too long."

She smiled then. Briefly, heavily, without softness, but truly.

"There is something in you that draws trouble."

I snorted softly.

"Or something that invents it."

"The second is worse."

"The second is more honest."

The afternoon dragged like an illness. There was an inspection. A walk along the web of pipes, though one could call walking a passage over a rope above hell, not what we did there among trembling metal, hissing steam and the heat rising from below like the devil's prayer. We had to go along the line, check joints, listen whether anything was thudding differently than usual, see whether the valves held, whether any pipe was beginning to speak in its own voice. Every mistake could turn a person into steam and a memory. That was the whole philosophy of the works. A mistake equalled a bomb, and a bomb did not ask who had children and who still had dreams.

They assigned me a supervisor.

One of those miserable dogs who dress as if a hat alone could make gentlemen of them, though straw still sticks out from under their cuffs. On his head he wore something he evidently considered elegance, while to me it looked like a Versailles hat

after a drunken brawl, and with it a cheap, badly cut jacket trying to pretend it was better cloth than it was. Every five steps he repeated the same thing, in the tone of a man in love with his own little power and now stroking it like a relic.

"Pace. Shovel three fingers higher. Not like that. Higher, I said. Three fingers. Three, damn you. See? Like that. Otherwise tap, tap, tap, and then my fist will correct your rhythm."

He said it with satisfaction. As if he were a poet who had just invented the finest line of his life, though he sounded more like an old clock with a damaged mechanism.

I walked before him, feeling his breath almost on my neck. The air was so hot that every inhale seemed a mistake. One had to set one's feet carefully, because underfoot everything was either slippery, brittle, or heated to a red rage. Pipe after pipe, valve after valve, hissing, knocking, the metallic rasp of a piston somewhere deep within, beating steadily like the heart of a monster that had long since stopped distinguishing what it devoured.

At one point my boot caught on an inspection flap. By a hair. Nothing, supposedly. Only a slight stumble. But the rhythm broke. And here rhythm was holier than prayer.

My heart struck my chest so hard that for a moment it drowned out the whole boiler room. I stopped. So did he.

He approached.

Slowly. With that particular care of cruel people who know they need not hurry, because the approach itself does half the work.

He looked me straight in the eyes.

"Again," he snarled. "Have you something to say to me?"

I took a step back. Small, instinctive, wrong.

He struck me on the shoulder. Not enough to cut the skin. Not enough for anyone later to point at a bruise and make a case of it. Just right. Exactly so the body would remember and paper would have nothing to write about.

Pain spread through my arm like fire across a dry rag. I did not bleed. I did not have to. Something in me had already cracked.

I lifted my eyes to him.

"No," I whispered. "Only legs that want to go forward."

I should have stayed silent. I know. A sensible girl would have kept quiet, swallowed it, hunched her neck, and thought something ugly only later at home, under a blanket or at the wall. But sensible girls rarely end up in Section 4. And if they do, not for long.

He looked at me for a while as if trying to recognise me. As if searching in me for something familiar. Fear, perhaps. Or the trace of a person who could be set in place with one blow. He did not find it. That enraged him more than the answer itself.

He screamed so suddenly that steam from a nearby joint trembled.

"Say nothing! Do you hear me? Nothing! Because next time all of you will be wondering what is worse, my fist or the pipe!"

All of you. A beautiful phrase. Tyrants always like to speak in the plural, as if history, the factory and the Lord God Himself spoke with them. Most often it is only their own cowardice speaking.

After the inspection I found Red sitting by a valve. She was wiping dust from the metal with the same precision with which some people wash the dead. Quietly. Without hurry. Without one unnecessary movement.

I stood beside her. My arm was still pulsing.

"Why did you say nothing?" she asked, not lifting her eyes at first.

I sat heavily beside her.

"Because sometimes silence calls louder."

She snorted.

"Shit silence."

"The loudest things usually are shit."

"That is true enough."

For a while she rubbed the rag over the valve until it creaked, as if protesting against excessive attention. Then she threw the rag aside and looked at me without evasion.

"But since you are here now... it is good to have someone who does not fold."

She said it as if casually, as though making a remark about the weather or the price of coal, but I heard how much it cost her. With people like her, trust does not arrive by walking. It arrives with a scrape.

Later she lay half on her side before the boiler, shovel by her leg, arms clasped around her knees. In that light, with soot on her skin and grease in her brows, she looked like someone hell had tried to eat and had been forced to spit out because she proved too tough.

"You may have noticed," she said after a while, "that one more outspoken unit from me and I end up on fish muck with the supervisors. Or worse. They will put me to watch the ones who no longer even have strength to swear."

"You are stronger than they think," I said.

She looked at me with something between amusement and irritation.

"Do not speak to me like a saint on a holy card. Stronger. Fine word. People like to use it to cover the fact that someone simply never had time to fall apart."

"Very well," I replied. "Then put it this way. You have not fallen apart yet. That is worth more."

She was silent for a moment, then nodded.

"And you have a choice."

"Do I?" I snorted.

"You do. And that is precisely why it is harder for you. Because those who have nowhere to go back to at least do not have to weigh each day whether the slavery they know is better than a new form of suffocation. You have a door. You simply do not want to accept that passing through it may mean something worse than staying."

I looked at her and shook my head.

"I know. That is why I do not topple pipes for nothing."

She laughed briefly. Dryly. Truly, for the first time.

Cedric Mowbray, whom everyone called Sir Cedric among themselves, though I do not know whether he had even a scrap of nobility anywhere outside his own opinion, was not a man one simply disliked. That would have been too light. Too ordinary. No, he was a man one did not risk describing even in thought, because thoughts have echoes,

echoes have ears, and ears in such a place usually end with a face at someone's boot. The name itself sounded like something that should hang above the entrance to a bank or a solicitor's office, not above a boiler room, but fate, as we know, most likes to joke when no one has asked it to.

He was tall, yet somehow collapsed in on himself, shrivelled from within, as if something had once broken him, but not enough to disable him, only enough that he would henceforth break others. He moved like a human broom handle. Hard, cold, stiff, made more for striking than for living. In the boiler room he ruled like the king of a medieval dungeon, if such a king wore grease under his nails instead of a crown and the smell of old violence on his clothes. With whip and whisper. With shouting and sudden silence. With a look after which a man instinctively straightened his back, though he knew it would do him no good.

No one knew his past. At least no one sensible said they did. But everyone had the same feeling when looking at his hands. That there was more than grease clinging to them. Something dark. Something that looked like old blood, or the memory of old blood. In the boiler room that was almost the same thing.

It was the third day under his command, and already I felt as if he fought with a hammer without using his hands. With his presence alone. With the mere fact of entering and making the air grow tighter. He did not look at people as people. He looked at them as machines just beginning to jam, needing something torn off, tightened or scorched so they would start working again.

That evening, after the shift, Red and I sat down under the brick wall behind the boiler room. The place was almost pleasant, if one lowered one's standards to the level of a rat or a worker, which often came to the same thing. It still smelled of grease, but at least one could breathe without dust sticking the lungs together from within. The sun was lowering and staining the smoke above the chimneys orange, as if the whole city were already smouldering and no one had yet raised the alarm.

We sat a long time without saying anything. Sometimes silence with someone is a burden. With her it was not. With her it was like a wound that someone had finally looked at without immediately saying it should be covered.

At last I looked at her.

"Will you finally tell me what happened that you ended up in England?"

She did not turn her head. She stared into the smoke, as though her whole past hung there in those dirty streaks. For a long time she said nothing. I already thought she would leave me again with half an answer, with that Irish stubbornness of hers that looked as if someone had sewn it from wire and ash.

But she spoke.

"I was fifteen when I was first caught," she said calmly. "I stole a piece of fish from the market. Not for myself. Mother had not eaten for two days, and when a woman has not eaten for two days she stops looking like a human being and starts looking like someone's guilty conscience. They caught me at the stall. The guard struck me so hard I came home with a split lip, blood on my chin, and meat that was probably fit only for a dog by then. Mother cooked it all the same."

I did not interrupt her. I did not even move. Stories like that must not be tugged at.

"And then?" I asked quietly.

She clenched her jaw.

"Then it was as usual. Worse. At school the priest was touching one of the girls. A small one. Quiet. The sort who apologised even when others trod on her hands. I saw it. Not once. Not twice. At last I said it aloud. In public. At Mass. I screamed it through the whole church until old Mrs O'Malley dropped her prayer book and my mother went as pale as if someone had just killed me, not her holy order of the world."

She looked at her hands.

"Father flew into a rage. Of course not at the priest. At me. Because with men it is often like that, easier to hate the mirror than the face it shows. He said I brought shame. That I was cursed. That if I did not stop, he would give me to the English and let them trouble themselves with me. And he kept his word. Sent me by ship to Liverpool. I was given a letter of recommendation to a factory, a little dry bread, and a farewell prayer. So the Lord might beat the rebellion out of my head."

I looked at her.

"And did He?"

Only then did she turn her face and look at me with a faint, tired smile.

"The Lord did not. But Sir Cedric tries every day."

I barked out a laugh. Short. Dirty. Necessary.

"Why the boiler room?" I asked.

"For my mouth," she answered at once. "I worked on the assembly line before. Less heat there, but more hands that believed anything in a skirt was part of the equipment. One foreman put his hand under my skirt. He did it as confidently as if ordering tea. I opened his brow with an iron hook. He did not even manage to complain properly, but three saw me. After that they said I was rabid. Unfit for normal work. As if normal work meant letting yourself be pawed with gratitude. Then a few stories I may tell you one day."

I snorted.

"A moving definition of order."

"Movingly convenient for them," she corrected.

Silence fell. Only the whistle of steam somewhere in the distance, the scrape of workers' boots returning to their holes, and that strange evening softening of the city, which was never silence, only a moment in which noise changed its face.

"Were you afraid?" I asked.

Red shrugged.

"Of course I was afraid. A person who is not afraid is either dead or stupid, and at the time I was planning neither. Only after a while it becomes strangely easy. Truly easy. Because once you understand they can take everything from you, and that everything was already poor, their threats suddenly stop sounding like sentence and start sounding like the refrain of an old song. Respect? I had none. Future? None of that either. Home? Left across the sea with people who preferred prayer to truth. So yes, I became a screw in a machine. But better to be a screw with a sharp end than a soft rag under a boot."

I looked at her for a long while. She had scratched hands, grease in her brows, soot at her temple, cracked skin across the knuckles, and a face that had learned to ask for

nothing. And yet in her eyes there was life. Not pretty. Not peaceful. But real. The sort one does not see in people broken all the way through. Perhaps she was broken. Who knows. In this world all of us were cracked somewhere. The only difference was whether a person still held her shape, or crumbled at the first touch.

I rose without a word and went to the brick wall. It was rough, warm after the day, as if it had soaked up work and curses. From my pocket I took a piece of chalk, the same kind we used for marking pipes, faults and places where something might one day kill us.

I put the chalk to the brick and wrote:

"Tyrants do not shout because they know the echo may betray them."

The letters came out uneven, a little worn at the edges, but legible. Enough.

Red came closer. Read it. Smiled under her breath, with that short, distrustful smile of hers, as if even amusement had to be rationed carefully.

"Pretty," she said. "But has the echo any courage?"

I turned to her.

"We shall see."

"That is a very dangerous word."

"The best ones are."

"And is that why you are still alive, or why you are about to stop being so?"

"One does not exclude the other."

She shook her head, but she was smiling now.

We parted slowly after that, each in her own direction. She towards Eastmoor Street, hands in her pockets and her step quick, springy, as if even after such a shift she would not give the street the satisfaction of having crushed her. I went to my little room above the tailor's workshop, where the walls were thin, the ceiling low, and the night smelled of soap, damp and other people's exhaustion.

I walked and thought only one thing.

That something from that conversation would stay with me for a long time. Not as a pretty memory, for there was no room for such things here, but like a splinter driven under the skin. Small, sharp, impossible to ignore.

And the echo?

The echo, I think, had truly begun to talk. And what was worst for them, I was beginning to feel that it no longer spoke only in my voice.

There was something almost sacrilegious in the fact that after so many hours of lifting, digging, scrubbing and keeping silent among coils of steam, soot and that infernal heat which takes from a person not only strength but the desire to possess a soul, one could still have enough stubbornness not to go straight back to one's hole, collapse face-first on the mattress and fall asleep in clothes reeking of the boiler room, but turn towards the pub, as if the day had not yet chewed one quite through. But a person can. That is perhaps his worst and at the same time most useful trait. He can go on when he should long since have fallen apart. Especially if he knows that at the end of that short road there waits a place where, for an hour or two, one may be something more than a cog, meat for work, or a pair of hands not paid for thinking.

I caught up with Red before she managed to turn into her alley. She was walking quickly, as always, shoulders slightly forward, as if the whole city might try to stop her at any moment and she assumed in advance that none of it would succeed.

"Red," I said before she had properly turned. "Come. I will show you a place where it does not stink of burnt skin and authority."

She narrowed her eyes. That look of hers always had something of a knife in it. It did not shine for decoration.

"Where?"

"Where no one counts how many times you spit before you say thank you, where a tankard is more honest than a foreman, and people at least lie to your face with a little style."

She looked at me for a while, as if weighing not so much the offer as me. Whether it was worth it. Whether it was a trap. Whether it was simply another of my stupid ideas that ended in laughter or bruises.

"Sounds suspicious," she muttered.

"Of course it sounds suspicious. If I told you it was a place full of virtue, order and clean tables, you would run at once."

The corner of her mouth moved.

"Lead on."

The Pickled Bishop was not a pub one entered through a door. One entered it through contempt for silence, tiredness and one's own dignity, because dignity in places like that was usually left on the threshold along with the mud. The front looked as if it had survived three fires, two knife fights and one failed sermon on morality. The sign was faded, crooked, and the holy bishop painted over the entrance looked as if someone had first drowned him in beer and then ordered him to listen to other people's sins without the right of refusal. The panes were cloudy with dirt and years, the walls weary, the doorframe battered by so many shoulders and kicked just as many times. A beautiful place. One of those that pretend nothing, because they do not have to.

Inside the light was weak and yellow, as if it had reached us from a time when electricity was still a rumour told by people who went to London too often and worked with their hands too little. The air smelled of beer, smoke, anger, sweat, wet wool and the memory of stale pie, which probably existed here more as an idea than a meal. The floorboards stuck to the boots, the tables were worn down by elbows, tankards and poverty, and the noise hung low beneath the ceiling like something alive, something that had been growing for years, fed on laughter, curses and other people's secrets.

When we entered, the noise dipped. Only for a second. Long enough for several heads to turn towards us, for a few regulars to judge who had come in, whether it was worth taking an interest, and whether the evening could still be made into some small scandal. Then everything returned to normal. Someone snorted with laughter. Someone knocked a tankard against the counter. Someone began arguing with someone else about something so unimportant that it was almost true.

They sat as always. Greta in her place, short, broad-shouldered, with hands that looked as if they could bend metal and still have strength to stroke you or strike you, depending on the mood. Her eyes were sharp. The kind that did not ask twice. Milly

beside her, thin as a badly made joke, with teeth like the keys of an old piano, uneven, stubborn and loud like herself. She laughed like someone who had already lost everything that could be lost and had therefore decided to win at least the noise. There were a few other faces from the old department too, profiles I knew better than their names, people of whom I would not have said they were close to me, but I would have said they were not dead inside, which in our world was almost a kind of tenderness.

"Well now," Greta muttered, setting down her tankard with a thud as if she had just placed a full stop after someone's fate. "Who dragged her head out from under the boiler?"

"Me," I answered, shrugging weariness from my shoulders as if I could leave it by the door. "And I have brought a guest from hell."

Greta moved her gaze to Red. Carefully. Without dislike, but without softness either. In this pub kindness never came in lace.

"Oh," she said. "Irish?"

Red lifted an eyebrow, so slightly that there was something offensively elegant about it.

"Last time I checked, yes. Though with the treatment here, give it a little longer and I will turn out to be a valve or a shovel."

Milly laughed so loudly that someone at the bar turned his head with the face of a man considering murder but postponing it.

Greta held out her hand. A firm grip. Even. No test of strength, because she did not need to show it. It was enough that she had it.

"Greta. Formerly from machine work, now by the grace of fate unassigned, which sounds better than 'temporarily useless', though the meaning can be similar."

Red took her hand without hesitation.

"Red. Boiler room."

"Boiler room?" Milly almost jumped on the bench. "That is not a place, that is a curse, only with more soot. Is the supervisor still alive, or has a miracle occurred?"

"Unfortunately," I replied, sliding onto the bench. "And doing well. Too well. He looks as if the very stink of sulphur preserves him."

"Which one?" Greta asked. "The bald one with the scar, or that long corpse in a hat who thinks he is aristocracy because he can say 'pace' with the face of an executioner?"

"Choose your favourite monster," Red muttered. "Both are still breathing and both apparently feel useful to the world."

"A pity," Milly said thoughtfully. "I have always hoped that one day furnace number four would simply fall too deeply in love with him and keep him for the night."

A tankard appeared before Red, though none of us had yet ordered anything. That is how such places worked. The pub recognised faces in need of alcohol before they had time to ask for it. The owner, old Briggs, not the factory one, but much less harmful, had an ear for despair and a talent for pouring beer where conversation without it would become too honest.

Red looked at the tankard with a shadow of surprise.

"Is it always like this here?"

"Yes," I answered. "Here you either get beer, or advice you do not want. Beer happens more often."

She took a sip. Grimaced barely.

"Tastes like wounded pride and an old barrel."

"So one of the better ones."

Milly leaned towards her, already visibly enlivened, as she always was when a new person appeared with a new story, or at least a new kind of bruise.

"And how is it there?" she asked. "Do they beat you every day or only on holidays? Do you get breaks for humiliation, or is it all included in the shift?"

Red set down her tankard and looked at her with that faint, almost invisible smile of hers, which looked as if an executioner had borrowed it from an actor.

"Only when we are good. When we are not, they try harder."

Greta snorted.

"Good answer."

Then she looked at me.

"And what are you doing here again, Nell? I thought you had taken offence at the world, us, alcohol and every place where people still have tongues."

I ran a finger along the edge of the table, scraping at a dried beer stain with my nail.

"I thought I had no reason to come. Then I remembered that here at least one may speak aloud, and if a person keeps silent too long, she starts to think everyone around her is right."

"Because sometimes they are," Milly put in.

"Not them," I replied.

Greta nodded slowly, as if she understood more than she meant to name.

"And what then? Will Red shout with us too?"

Red did not lower her gaze. That was precisely what I liked in her at once. She did not have that reflex the system hammers into people's necks faster than hunger.

"I do not yet know what there will be," she said. "But if need be, I will scream so loud the chimney shakes, and if that is not enough, I will scream a second time."

Greta laughed roughly, that short, hard laugh of hers that always sounded as if someone were breaking wood for the fire.

"I like her."

"Of course you do," said Milly. "She sounds like someone who could cause damage."

"Exactly why."

The evening stretched like heated iron. Heavy, slow, resisting, but capable of being shaped if one had enough patience and a little fire at hand. Conversations spread across the table, broad and disorderly, as they always do in a good place. About everything and nothing. About Cedric, who according to Milly was having an affair with furnace number four and defended access to it so fiercely because only there did he feel truly loved. About inspectors who had lately been circling the works like ghosts looking for complaints, though only from people who looked hungry enough to lie as requested. About a new recipe for nail soup, supposedly invented by the factory cook from lack of ingredients and conscience, the only flaw of the dish being that the nails were worth

more than the broth. Someone told of a girl from the spinning room who threw a boot at a foreman and struck him so accurately that he spent an hour trying to recover his dignity, though the boot had stuck in his soup pot.

Someone else insisted they kept the workers' souls in a jar in the pay office, because otherwise there was no explaining why every week a person returned for less than a beggar would get for a good expression.

And I watched Red.

Not foolishly or mawkishly. Not as a girl looks at someone she has suddenly decided to admire. Rather like someone who sees the first armour slowly fall away from another human being. That with each answer, each short cutting sentence, each swallow of that poor beer, she loosened a little. That her hands, until then always clenched as if even rest were a form of vigilance, began to lie more freely on the table. That her shoulders dropped the smallest measure. That sometimes she answered not only when she had to, but when she wanted to. It was a small change. Almost none at all. In another world no one would have noticed it. In ours it was a spark.

At one point Greta banged her tankard on the table and looked at Red with feigned suspicion.

"Right, Irishwoman, apart from beatings, rebellion and insulting supervisors, have you any talents? Do you sing? Cheat at cards? Can you look at a man in such a way he hands over money without asking?"

Red rested an elbow on the table.

"I can take a valve apart faster than most of your men can get out of their trousers, and I think that is a socially useful qualification."

Milly choked on her beer laughing.

"Oh, she stays."

"I never said she was leaving," I replied.

"And you, Nell?" Greta looked at me from under her brows. "Still writing on walls, or have you moved on to people?"

"Walls. People take offence too quickly, and brick at least has some dignity."

"Bollocks," Milly cut in. "Brick only cannot hit back."

"Which is precisely why it is a better listener."

Laughter rolled across the table. Brief. Rough. Real.

Then the noise loosened around the room for a while. Greta went for the next round. Milly was drawn into an argument at the next table about whether one could win against fate if one cheated brazenly enough. For a moment Red and I were alone, or as alone as one can be in a pub where everyone hears half, understands a quarter, and invents the rest for amusement.

I leaned my elbows on the table. She turned the nearly empty tankard between her fingers.

"And?" I asked. "Still running, or a little less now?"

She looked at me sideways.

"I am not running."

"Of course. You only walk faster than the rest so the world cannot catch you."

She shook her head, but there was something softer than usual in her eyes.

"Nell," she said quietly. "Are these your people?"

The question stopped me more than it should have. Because in times like these one does not easily say mine. People vanish. They are dismissed, beaten, moved on, die, leave, fall silent, stop being themselves, or simply do not come back one day. And yet I understood what she was asking.

I looked at Greta, who was already mouthing off at the barman though he had not yet done anything wrong. At Milly, laughing as if noise were a form of prayer. At the other faces, tired, imperfect, patched by work, but still capable of laughter, anger and that particular kind of loyalty that grows only where everyone is equally badly off and yet someone can still pour you a beer.

"Rather those," I answered after a moment, "who can still listen before they begin advising, instructing, or selling you for the promise of a few extra pennies. That is almost luxury."

Red moved her finger around the rim of the tankard.

"I would like..."

She broke off. The words hung between us, naked and uncomfortable, because people like us rarely say aloud what they want. Wanting is dangerous. First it makes space inside a person, then the world is delighted to trample it.

"What?" I asked calmly.

She shrugged, but this time without the defensive show.

"I would like to know how to talk like that. Just talk. Without weighing every word, without thinking whether someone will turn it against me later, without all this..." she turned her hand in the air, searching for the right phrase, "without walking around my own thoughts as if around spilt acid."

For a moment I looked at her, then snorted softly.

"You do."

She lifted her eyes.

"No, Nell. You do not understand. You enter a sentence like a fight. I spent half my life learning how to shut my mouth in time. It does not come off a person after one tankard and a few jokes about the boiler room."

"I am not saying it comes off," I answered. "I am saying you can. Only until now no one heard you, and that is not the same as not knowing how to speak. There is a difference between silence and being drowned out. Many people confuse one with the other, because it suits them."

She looked at me for a long time. She did not answer at once. In that gaze there was no longer the first blade, not entirely. Caution remained, the habit of distrust remained, but beneath it there was something else. A kind of quiet. Not dead. Not empty. The kind that stays under the eyelids long after a person turns her head away.

"And you?" she asked at last. "Who hears you?"

I laughed under my breath. Briefly. Without joy, but not without bitterness either.

"Depends on the day. Sometimes no one. Sometimes a wall. Sometimes one stubborn Irishwoman pretending she only came for beer."

That amused her. Truly. Not strongly, not broadly, but enough for me to see what her face looked like when, for a moment, it stopped defending itself.

Greta returned then with tankards and slammed them onto the table.

"Enough of those serious faces, or someone will think friendship is being born here, and then we shall have to throw you both out to preserve the reputation of the place."

"Calm yourself," I muttered. "If friendship were being born here, it would have died long ago from this beer."

"No gratitude, please," Greta replied. "This beer keeps half the district alive and the other half in a state in which it can still be endured."

Milly leaned out from behind her shoulder.

"And the third half?"

"The third half is you. You cannot be classified."

The evening rolled on, heavy and sticky, but strangely lighter than all the previous ones. Beyond the windows Liverpool guttered out in its own fashion, never ceasing to stink of smoke, canal and its own conscience. Inside The Pickled Bishop people drank, argued, laughed, cursed, invented new names for the world and old insults for one another. And I thought that perhaps this was exactly why such places existed. Not to give relief. Relief comes from sleep or death, depending on the day. A pub gives something else. Temporary permission not to harden all the way through. To sit at a table with people who know how much a day weighs and do not stupidly ask why a person is tired.

When later Red and I stepped out into the street, the night was damp, cooler than before, and smoke over the chimneys hung low like a dirty curtain. For a moment we stood side by side without a word. The pub was behind us, but its noise still sat in the ears, like the echo of something too human to lose at once.

Red adjusted her collar and glanced at me briefly.

"Thanks," she said.

One word. Nothing more. But spoken as if it cost her honestly.

"Do not get used to it," I replied. "Next time I may take you somewhere worse."

"There is nowhere worse than the boiler room."

"Oh, you are right. But there are places with worse beer."

She snorted softly.

Then she looked at me once more. Only for a moment. And again there was that quiet in it. The kind that does not end a conversation, but leaves a trace behind.

The kind that stays beneath the eyelids.

The next day everything began, on the surface, as normal, until the incident with the overturned oil container. It began with a trifle, a thing so small and stupid that in a normal world it would not even have deserved a curse, at most a sigh and a piece of dirty rag. But this was not a normal world, and Cedric was not a man capable of passing a trifle without making a ceremony of violence from it. He had already had a day full of nervous pacing, suspicious looks and that feverish vigilance of his, which was not strength at all, but fear dressed as authority. His sense of control resembled an old rope

pulled so tight that everyone knew it would soon snap, only no one was sure whose face it would lash open.

Red merely bent down to pick up the container. That was all. She was not guilty. She had not spilled it from stupidity, had not wasted it from idleness, had not tried to sabotage anything. Someone had left the damned thing underfoot, as everything was left here, because order in Section 4 was a myth, something spoken of only when one needed a pretext to strike someone weaker. But guilt had no meaning here. Guilt was for the church, the court, and people who could still afford appearances. In the boiler room only one thing mattered: who happened to stand nearest the blow.

Cedric moved between the rows like a dog that had scented blood before anyone had properly cut himself. Hunched, twitching, so laden with his own suspicion that he looked as if every rustle of cloth, every knock of metal, every too-quick glance might at any moment prove to be rebellion. He sniffed out trouble with the sick precision of a man who knows something is ripening but cannot find the source, and so begins to hate everything a little. He was waiting for the next sabotage. One could feel it in him. In the way he clenched his jaw. In how his eyes leapt from one worker to another, as though he wished to strip everyone of their thoughts. He knew we were planning something. That was already clear to him. He only did not know when, how, and who would be the first to dare step farther than the rest.

And it is not knowing that drives such men mad faster than betrayal itself.

When Red reached for the grease container someone had carelessly left underfoot, her boot caught the raised edge of a plate. That was all. A slight mistake. A moment of wavering. The container slipped from her hand and overturned, and the thick dark liquid spread over the concrete, seeping lazily into all the cracks and hollows that had gathered soot, filth and human curses for years. The concrete there looked like the face of an old fisherman. Furrowed, gouged, tired and too hard for anything to make much impression anymore.

For a fraction of a second there was only the hiss of the machine, the heavy breathing of the furnace and Red's one short cry, more surprise than fear. It was enough.

Cedric sprang from behind the corner so violently it was as if he had been waiting only for the signal. Like an enraged bull at last shown the proper colour before his eyes. He entered the scene with his face already red, already inflamed, as if he had prepared all his fury earlier and needed only a body on which to spend it.

"You again?!" he roared, coming at Red with that disgusting momentum of a man who loves having an opponent weaker, surprised and standing too close to the wall. "You useless piece of rubbish! How many times must I tell you we do not play here?! Think this is a circus? Think I will clean up after you like after some half-made little brat?!"

Red turned her head towards him. She was breathing fast, but when she answered, her voice was calm. Too calm. And perhaps that drove him into an even greater fury.

"It was an accident," she said. "I will pick it up, Mr Cedric. I am dealing with it. There is no need to make a show of it."

He did not want solutions. That was not why he had come. A man like him does not seek order. He seeks the moment in which he can remind himself he exists. And the easiest way he reminded himself was through someone else's pain.

He swung and struck her across the face with an open hand. Loudly. With force. So everyone would hear. Red's head snapped to the side, her body swayed, her boot slipped on the spilled oil, and for a moment I thought she would fall at once. She did not fall. She caught her balance by some miracle, cheek already reddening, hair stuck to her temple with sweat and soot.

Everything around us froze. It was not the first time someone had been hit. In Section 4 beating was like weather. No one liked it, but everyone took it into account when leaving home in the morning. Only this time it was different. This time she was hit in public, without a shadow of cause, without any attempt to preserve appearances. Not for an error. For being within reach.

Red clutched at her cheek. She had not yet managed to straighten, had not even drawn a proper breath after the first blow, when the second came down on her as a fist. Short. Heavy. Into the side of the face, nearer the jaw. She bent, groaned, instinctively covered her stomach, but did not fall. She did not give him that satisfaction. She stood unsteadily, hunched, with blood already gathering on her lip.

And then something in me broke.

Not metaphorically. Not prettily. Not in that literary way people use to tame the moment when blood becomes quicker than thought. Something simply gave way. Like a valve opened too far. Like the rope Cedric had been tightening all day. I felt it physically. In the jaw. In the shoulders. In the stomach. As if someone had put a hand under my ribs and turned everything half a revolution.

I threw down the rag I was holding. Without a word. It flew to the floor, soaked with grease and filth, useless like all their rules. I walked over. Not quickly. That was the worst part. I walked calmly, and every step sounded in my head more clearly than the noise of the machines.

Cedric stood over her like an executioner over a broken soul, ready for the next blow, already savouring his own advantage.

"Leave her," I said.

My voice was calm. So calm I almost did not recognise it. Cold as steel left in the rain overnight.

He turned slowly. Looked at me. His face was purple, the veins tight in his neck, his eyes shining with that sick mixture of rage and relief people have when they finally find a new target.

"You will tell me what to do?!" he screamed. "You vermin! You feminist scum! You vicious little whore with ambitions bigger than your wits! You are lucky you still work here! Lucky I have not knocked your teeth out and taught you humility!"

I looked at him and suddenly he seemed terribly small. Not in height. Not in body. In what he truly was. A piece of human rot smeared with authority he had been given only to show how little he deserved it.

"I am lucky I am still alive," I said. "But you have just lost yours."

I do not know whether he understood at once. Perhaps not. Perhaps all his life he had surrounded himself with people who always stepped back before he came close, and so it never occurred to him that someone might not do it even once. I reached for the shovel. It leaned against the furnace, heavy, steel, its handle slick with work and the hands of many people. A tool like any other. Innocent until it reaches the right hands.

Cedric took a step towards me, preparing to attack. I saw it in his shoulders, in the tension of his frame, in the way he lifted his hand. He probably thought he would be first again. That a threat would be enough, a roar, perhaps one blow. I gave him no chance.

I swung and struck him on the side of the head. Not with the sharp end. I did not want to kill him. Not yet. I wanted him to understand. I wanted him, on that floor, among oil, soot and his own blood, to grasp for one moment that another person's body is not a training sack for his frustration. The metal struck with a dull, disgusting sound, the kind that stays inside the skull longer than it should. Cedric crashed to the floor like a sack of potatoes thrown from a cart. Without dignity. Without majesty. Without all that miserable aura he had built around himself from the first minute of every shift.

He groaned. Bled. And then everything froze. Not literally. The machines still worked, steam still hissed, the piston still rasped deep within like an asthmatic monster, but for us time stood still. People stopped. Hands half raised. Shovels in the air. Eyes wide. Everyone looked, but no one yet knew whether he was looking at the end, or only at the beginning.

The cleaner caught her mouth. Not out of delicacy. Rather with that kind of disbelief that comes when someone finally does what everyone has secretly dreamt of for months, perhaps years. Lamb took a step as if he wanted to move, as if conscience or instinct ordered him to choose a side, but then he looked at Cedric lying in his own blood and suddenly remembered he was no hero. He stepped back. Like the rest.

No one came closer. Red sat curled on the ground, one hand to her cheek and blood on her lip. She looked at me as if she were not sure whether she was seeing me, or only her own dream of revenge in human form. And I stood there with that shovel in my hand, breathing hard, feeling my pulse hammering in temples, shoulders, fingers, feeling everything in me still trembling after the blow.

I looked at the crowd. Not at Cedric. At them. Because it is never only a matter of the executioner. The executioner will always find for himself a hand, an order, an excuse. The worst thing is the whole quiet herd around him, that mass of people lowering their eyes because it is easier, because children, because wages, because tomorrow, because perhaps he will not touch me. That is exactly what power such as his grows from.

"If any one of you ever again lets someone beat someone here," I said, loudly, clearly, so that each word crossed all that hiss of steam and roar of metal straight into their ears, "you are no better than he is. Do not tell yourselves later you had no choice. You had eyes. You had hands. You had a moment to do anything besides standing like a herd of wet rats."

No one spoke. No one even denied it. Cedric groaned and moved on the floor, trying to prop himself on an elbow. Blood ran down his temple in a thin stream, mingling with soot and spilled oil, making him look even more pitiful. Good. Let him look it. I turned my head towards him.

"Move once more and next time I aim for the back of your skull," I said quietly.

It was not a shout. Truly good threats never are. They are whispers after which a person believes at once. And then something happened. Something small, but important. Brett and Lamb, the same two who only recently had dragged people into interrogations, the same two who usually stood on the side of the fist when the fist had the proper title and a sufficiently loud tone, looked at each other. Only for a moment. Briefly. As if some sudden, shameful understanding had passed between them. Then both looked away. They did not come to help him. They did not defend him. They did not throw themselves at me. And in that small moment I saw more than in many grand words. Fear changes sides more quickly than people like to admit.

I lowered the shovel. I did not let it go, but I no longer held it high. I went to Red and held out my hand. Her fingers were dirty, trembling, rough with work and pain. She gripped me hard. I helped her rise. She swayed once, twice, then stood straight, though her face was pale and her eyes darker than usual.

For a moment we looked at one another from close by, breathing the same filthy air.

"You did right," she said softly. "I was afraid, but... you did right. If you had not stepped between us, he would have killed me one day. Maybe not today. Maybe in a week. But he would have killed me piece by piece."

I shook my head. I could still feel the weight of the shovel in my hands. I could also feel that after this there was no return to the old order. Not for me, and not for them.

"I am not afraid anymore," I answered.

And as I said it, I understood that it was neither boasting nor some pretty lie meant to lend me courage. Fear was still somewhere there. It had to be. Only it had stopped holding me by the throat. Now it sat inside me differently. Deeper. Quieter. Like an animal shut in a cage that still breathes, but no longer decides where I will go.

Behind our backs the boiler room began to breathe again. Someone moved a shovel. Someone cleared his throat. The machines returned to their indifferent work, as if nothing had happened, and yet everything had happened. Because there are moments after which a place remains the same place only in appearance. The walls still stand, the furnaces howl the same, soot gets under the nails with the same insolence, but something underneath has cracked and cannot be glued back together with the old fear. Cedric lay on the floor. Red stood beside me. And the rest, for the first time in a long while, saw that a person with a shovel can be more than hands for labour. She can be an answer.

CHAPTER IV

Holy Peace Is for Corpses

I had not even properly lowered the shovel yet, had not even given my hands time to forget the weight of iron, when the air in the boiler room changed its taste. You feel it before you see it. First the silence becomes different, tighter, like skin before a blow. Then the sounds begin to spread strangely, as if someone were smothering them from within, until at last something enters. Something that does not belong in that place, yet claims a greater right to it than all of us put together.

The Eastmoor town watch came in as if someone had opened the door to a slaughterhouse and let in men who had come to inspect the meat before buying. Four of them. Leather coats, heavy, soaked with rain and somebody else's authority; tall caps that added to their height, though not to their dignity. They walked with certainty, without hesitation, as if every step were a decision and every decision a sentence. Behind them came two policemen from the Dock Road station, the sort made of papers, stamps, and the polite lie that everything is being done according to law. Together they looked like a procession. Only a priest was missing, to say a prayer over a living body.

There was no need to ask why they had come. No need to guess for whom.

"Eleanor Whitmore?" said one of them, the taller one, with a face like an old boot: trodden down, cracked, and accustomed to nobody trying to clean it.

I did not answer at once. I looked at him for a second longer than was sensible. I wanted to see whether there was anything in his eyes beyond procedure. There was not. Only weariness and routine. The worst possible combination.

"By order of your superior and on the basis of witness statements," he went on, as though reading from a paper he did not have, "you are under arrest for assaulting an officer of industrial supervision."

The words fell heavily. Not because they surprised me. Rather because they sounded so ordinary. As if they were merely the next task in the day. A break for food. A change of tool.

The whole hall froze.

The machines still turned, the piston still rasped, the steam hissed as always, but the people stopped working. Motions halted halfway. Someone held a shovel in the air; someone else had a hand on a valve and forgot to take it off. Even the smoke in the chimney seemed to slow down, as though it too wanted to see what was about to happen.

Red was beside me before I managed to say anything. She did not come over. She appeared. As though she had known from the beginning that this moment would arrive and had only been waiting for someone to speak it aloud.

"You can't just take her!" she shouted, her voice cutting through the hall sharper than a steam whistle. "He struck her first! We all saw it! Every one of you stood here and watched!"

One of the guards looked at her with a disgust so pure it was almost elegant.

"Shut your mouth, girl, before we pack you up as well," he said calmly. "Irish women have made enough trouble here already. Do not add another."

Red went still. Not from fear. From fury.

I saw it in her eyes, in the set of her jaw, in the way her hands closed into fists until the knuckles went white. She knew she did not have the strength to stop them taking me. She also knew that if she took one step too far, she would end beside me, or worse. And for her that was worse than a blow.

I had no intention of shrinking either.

"Do I have a right to defend myself?" I asked, looking straight at the one with the boot face. "Or have you settled the sentence already and are now merely putting on a little theatre, so nobody doubts it all happened according to the rules?"

One of the policemen snorted, but said nothing. The shorter guard, with hands like spades and breath smelling of tobacco, came closer and gripped my arm. Hard. Too hard for a man only beginning a conversation.

"You have the right to sit quiet and not kick while you're being dragged," he answered. "That will do for now."

His fingers bit into my skin.

"Let go of me, you filthy cur," I hissed, and tried to twist free, more on principle than in any hope it would work.

"Ah. Resistance after all," he said, delighted, as if someone had handed him a present.

Then Cedric appeared.

Like an actor late for his own scene and trying to make up for it with an entrance. He had a bandage on his temple, badly tied, as if he cared more for the effect than for whether the wound healed. His clothes were still stained with blood, which I suspect he had left there on purpose, to make it seem fresher, more dramatic. He stood too straight, as though every muscle in his body were crying, look at me, look at me, I am the victim.

He pointed at me.

"That is her," he said, and his voice was sticky with satisfaction. "She attacked me without cause. She is dangerous. She incites the others. If you heard the way she speaks, if you saw what she does to people, she is no ordinary worker. She is a contagion."

I looked at him. And I saw something he probably had not meant to show. Not victory. Triumph lined with fear.

He knew he had crossed a line. He knew that now this was no longer only blows and shouting, things that could be swallowed by another day of work. This was a decision that leaves a mark, even if nobody names it.

"Cedric, you bastard," I said loudly, so everyone in that hall could hear. "You know it was defence. You were beating her. In front of everyone. And if you think this arrest will shut my mouth, if you think you can throw me into a cell and everything will go back to normal, then you have miscounted badly."

The guard jerked me harder.

"We're going."

"Have you anything to say?" I shouted, turning my head towards the workers. "Any of you still have a tongue, or did you hand it over with your first wage?"

Eyes fled. Nobody said a word. That hurt more than the blow. But it did not break me.

Only Red straightened. Fully. As if someone had suddenly lifted from her all the weight she had carried for years and left only what was underneath.

"If you take her," she shouted, and her voice did not shake once, "then there is no law left. Only violence. And we will remember that. Every one of us. Do not pretend this is justice."

The guard turned to her, raising his truncheon. For a second I truly thought he would strike her. He hesitated.

Maybe it was her stare. Maybe he saw that she was no longer alone, that something had begun to shift, though it had not yet been named. Or maybe he simply decided that one display would do for the day.

Lowering the truncheon, he only snorted.

"One more word and you'll ride with her."

They led me through the whole hall.

Their steps sounded louder than usual. Perhaps because no one spoke. Perhaps because everyone was listening. They sounded like drums. Like a march. Like something that needed no music to become a judgement.

I passed faces. Known. Strange. Tired. Ashamed. Furious. Each said something, though none made a sound.

Outside it was raining.

Of course.

It always rains when someone needs humiliating. As if the sky likes taking part, as if it wants to paste clothing to skin, mix dirt with water, and remind you that even the weather can choose the wrong side.

They put me on the horse cart they had come in. An old thing converted from a delivery cart, with boards creaking beneath the weight of men and histories nobody wrote down. It smelled of hay, damp, and fear. The old sort, the kind that sinks into wood and stays there for years.

They tied my hands. Not very carefully. As if they were certain I would not get anywhere anyway.

I sat there wet, filthy, with blood under my nails and pain in my shoulder reminding me of itself with every movement.

And I was proud.

Not the pride you show people. The kind you keep inside, like something sharp that will not let you curl up small.

Because I had not been silent. Because when it came to choosing between silence and a blow, I had chosen the blow. Behind me, by the factory gate, Red stood. She was not crying. She was not shouting now.

She stood straight and motionless, as if someone had driven her into the earth. But from the way she held herself, the way she lifted her head, the way she watched the cart carrying me away, I felt clearly that something in her had awakened.

Not anger. Not only that. Something deeper. Something that could not be shut back into the boiler room, or a home, or any cell. And then I understood that they might take

me. They might lock me away. They might try to silence me. But what had already been set in motion no longer belonged only to me. And it could not be tied with rope.

The cell stank of sweat, piss, and forgetting. Not the ordinary human kind of forgetting that comes after years and blurs faces, but institutional forgetting: cold, deliberate, built from damp, grime, and indifference, as if the place itself had been made so that a person first stopped being herself and only afterwards began to rot. It had no door, only bars. It had no window, only a narrow slit beneath the ceiling through which water seeped, drop by drop, with a stubbornness worthy of a better cause. It had not a shadow of justice. It did have two guards, who looked at me the way one looks at a sack of coal or a dead dog found by the tracks. Something to be moved, kicked, locked away, and forgotten.

They threw me onto the cold floor without a word, without ceremony, without even that poor politeness people sometimes offer one another simply so they can live more easily with themselves afterwards. The stone was wet, sticky with old filth, and so icy that for a moment it took my breath. One of them kicked me in the hip. Not hard. That was the worst of it. Not to injure. Just to remind me where I was, who stood, and who lay. The small, cheap gesture of a man who has never had the courage to be truly cruel, and so makes up for it with petty meanness.

"The clever one from the boilers," he muttered, leaning on the bars. "We'll see how long she keeps that tongue when she finally understands there is no audience left."

I did not answer.

Not yet.

Not because he frightened me. I simply had no intention of wasting words on a man whose face looked as if someone had made it out of damp bread and resentment. I stared ahead, breathing shallowly, because the stink in the air was so foul that every deeper draught felt like a personal defeat. Damp lived in the walls like disease, and from the corner came something old, sour, human. Something that had long since stopped belonging to one person and had become part of the place.

An hour later, perhaps two. In a cell time does not pass; it decomposes. They took me to the interrogation room. "Took" is a prettier word than the thing itself, because in practice one walked before me, one behind me, and their hands kept correcting my direction as if I were a badly loaded parcel sliding off a cart. The corridor was long and dim, the walls the colour of old saliva, and the echo of our steps sounded as though many people had been led through before and none had left anything behind but sound.

The interrogation room looked exactly as a room ought to look when designed by men who believe truth is best born in discomfort. Bare walls. A table with paint flaking from it, as if even the wood were trying to shed the place. Two chairs, and three men who from the first glance told you everything about the room.

Two stood. Big, heavy men, with necks broader than their understanding, looking as if they had been dragged straight out of a tavern for thugs, washed in cold water, and told that today, instead of beating men for debts, they would beat them for order. Behind them sat the third. Neat, shaved, with cuffs cleaner than his conscience should have

permitted, a gold watch and a signet ring that gleamed with every movement of his hand, as if even his jewellery wished to state that it belonged to someone better than all these people with blood on their boots. He was the worst sort of man. The sort who thinks he does not have to dirty himself in order to drown you in mud.

He sat straight, looked at some papers, and spoke in the tone of a clerk reading a coal bill.

"Eleanor Whitmore. Born in the year eighteen fifty-seven. Worker at Preston and Lowell Works, formerly in the sewing section under the supervision of Percival Briggs, currently employed in boiler room Section Four."

I said nothing.

I did not correct him. I did not ask where they had got their files. I did not even give him the small comfort of feeling the conversation had begun.

"Accused of assault upon an officer of industrial supervision, promotion of subversive activity, distribution of anti-imperial pamphlets, public insult of state officials, and painting walls with calls to rebellion."

I still kept silent, but I could feel something pulsing inside me. Not fear. Not now. Rather that familiar, heavy tension that comes when someone is arranging your life into clauses and expecting you to thank him for the care.

The man lifted his eyes from the papers.

"Your former supervisor, Mr Briggs, has provided a detailed statement," he continued, his voice smooth, almost courteous, as though he were about to offer me tea instead of ruin. "He claims that for months you have conducted agitation, provoked other employees, sown disorder, and knowingly undermined the authority of management. We also have witnesses who confirm that you distributed materials written in the hand of your brother, Tommy Whitmore, a known agitator shot by police in eighteen seventy-six."

The last part was deliberate. Careful. Considered. Like a hook dropped into water. They wanted to see if I twitched. If I bit my lip. If my breath slipped. If my brother, even dead, could still jerk me about.

I did not give them that.

But now I knew they had reached for everything. That they had been looking for a hook for a long time, rummaging through papers, names, schoolbooks, other people's memories, building this damned pyre not yesterday, but for months. Men of Cedric's sort do not invent revenge suddenly. They breed it.

The man moved his finger along another sheet.

"Your graffiti by the factory wall. 'The Empire is crumbling, brick by brick.' It matches handwriting found in your school notebook. The calligraphic analysis leaves no doubt."

I would have snorted with laughter if it had not been so pathetic. Calligraphic analysis. It sounded like something rich people played with by candlelight and port when they had run out of ways to justify their certainty.

I finally looked at him.

"So you have condemned me already," I said calmly. "Why the performance? For amusement? Do you want to watch a poor worker try to sound like a human being before you turn her into an example?"

He smiled. Coldly. Without a single wrinkle around the eyes. The smile of a man who cannot remember the last time he truly laughed.

"Because we want you to confess. Voluntarily. It always looks better in the papers. And it is more useful. As an example."

"And if I do not?"

He put the sheet down, folded his hands on the table, and leaned slightly forward, as if sharing a secret.

"Then it will take longer. And be dirtier."

I looked around the room. At his rings, their fists, the table that had probably seen more confessions than a church confessional. Then I looked back at him.

"You are already dirty," I said. "I have only dug deep enough to see you close."

That was enough.

One of the guards behind me struck me with an open hand on the back of the head. Hard. Without warning. For a moment the world tilted, the table slid aside, and my ears rang so sharply it was as if someone had put an enraged bell inside my skull. Then a second blow. The same movement, the same force, the same cheap satisfaction.

"Do not answer back, you pest," he hissed.

I went over sideways with the chair, hitting my hip painfully on the floor. Paint flaked from the table under my hand as I tried to brace myself. I tasted metal somewhere at the back of my throat, and that foul, familiar roar that comes just after a blow. I did not cry. I did not even think of it. Tears are for people who believe someone will hear them with the right kind of pity.

I lifted my head.

"Do what you like," I said. My voice was lower than before, a little scraped, but steady. "But if you let me out, the first thing I will do is write on a wall: 'I was here. And I spit on your fear.' If there is no wall, I will write it on your door. And if you forbid me chalk, I will scratch it with my nails."

For a moment nobody moved.

One of the two brutes snorted. The other glanced at the man at the table, as if asking whether he might hit me properly now. But the seated man only sighed, bored, almost disappointed, like a man confronted with a stubborn mechanism.

"Take her away," he said. "Let her think a little longer. People like her always begin to speak differently when left alone with pain."

Oh, they believed in that more than in God.

They left me in the cell until evening. Or longer. My body ached in so many places I stopped counting. My hip throbbed from the kick. My head pulsed dully from the blows. My arms were heavy, my neck stiff, the skin at my wrists scraped raw from rope. But my soul, my soul was sober as never before. It is strange how pain can sharpen a person when it does not get what it came for. Instead of breaking me, it only cleaned me. What was left was the hardest part.

Drops of water fell from the slit under the ceiling in a steady rhythm. Drip. Drip. Drip. It sounded like the worst clock in the world. Guards passed sometimes along the corridor, clearing throats, spitting, throwing scraps of words towards other cells. Somewhere farther away someone coughed so long I began to wonder whether a person could spit out all his lungs and keep living from habit.

Before midnight they threw two more women into my cell.

Literally threw them. One was shoved so hard she struck her shoulder against the bars and cursed before she properly found her feet. The other came in more quietly, though it was not gentleness. Rather the sort of caution a person acquires after too many nights spent between violence and a wall.

The first had a face cut by glass. Fine pale lines ran from cheek to chin, as if she had tried to win something with her nails and the world had answered with a bottle. Her hair stuck to her forehead; her eyes were dark, alive, and insolent despite exhaustion. The second said nothing. She only watched. There was something in that gaze that resembled hunger, but not for food. Attention. As if she had long ago learned that words were a luxury and watching was what remained to the poor.

The cut-faced one sat first, crossed her legs, and regarded me with the directness of someone who had no time left for polite beginnings.

"You the one from the boilers?" she asked.

"Yes."

"The one who clouted the overseer with a shovel?"

"If you ask in admiration, yes. If in condemnation, also yes."

She burst into a short, rough laugh.

"I saw your leaflets. The ones with the heart and key. Thought then that somebody finally had balls, even if the world would be terribly offended by it."

She sat beside me without asking. Close, but not pressing. Like someone who knows the price of shared silence.

The other, silent one, sat on my other side. Slowly. Carefully. She smelled of smoke and rain. She did not speak, but I felt her presence clearly, warm and watchful, as if the decision to sit beside me was already a kind of answer.

"What are you in for?" I asked after a while.

The woman with the cut face shrugged.

"Glass, as you can see. A tavern keeper tried to grab me by the throat, so I grabbed the bottle faster. It cut his hand and my face. They decided I was the brutal one. Touching, how men discover delicacy the moment they bleed."

The other still kept silent.

I looked at her.

"And you?"

She looked at me for a long while, then at the bars, then back at me.

"For nothing," she said at last, quietly. "Which is what most of us come here for."

And she fell silent again.

We sat afterwards in the half-dark, in that reeking hole where water dripped from the ceiling and from the corridor came the scrape of chain and somebody's sleepy curses, and suddenly the cell stopped being only the place where they had locked me. It was still

filthy. It still stank. It could still swallow a person if the person let himself be swallowed. But something else appeared between us. Not hope. I will not lie. Hope was too clean for that place. Recognition, rather. That brief, sharp feeling when you know the person beside you has not been rubbed away entirely either.

And in that silence, broken by dripping from the ceiling, the creak of bars, and the heavy breathing of the city sleeping somewhere above us without a scrap of justice, I felt I was not alone.

Not any more.

And if I was not alone, it meant they did not control everything, however much they enjoyed telling themselves otherwise.

And then I thought, with a cold calm that surprised even me, that this was only the beginning.

The cell stopped being a place sooner than I expected. After the first night you still think of it as something outside yourself: a filthy hole with bars, damp, and stink, something you can endure like bad weather or a fever. After the second, you stop. Then you are no longer sitting in the cell. The cell is sitting in you. It enters under your skin, into your throat, into the way you breathe. It becomes a test. Not of walls. Not of bars. Of you.

The guards did not have to say anything for a person to remember where she was. Their silence was louder than shouting. It had in it that particular, calculated violence of people who know the greatest humiliations need no words, because words sometimes give the other person the honour of an answer. They did not want answers. They wanted habit. They ordered us to sit. To wait. To watch time rot on the walls with the damp. When they brought food, they threw it on the floor, as if testing whether instinct was stronger than pride. When I said "thank you", they spat on the ground with the sleepy satisfaction of men convinced they had just put the world back in its proper place.

There were three of us. Me, Margaret, and Lizzie. Three bodies shut in one stinking cage; three pairs of eyes; three different ways of remaining upright, and yet each of us alone in her own night, because night in custody does not gather people together. It separates them more precisely, forcing darkness, shame, memories, and that cold which cannot be shaken from the shoulders between them. Night there was like a thin blanket. It did not warm. It only reminded you that something had been taken, and that even pity was rationed by someone else's mercy.

Margaret slept hard and badly, with one hand under her head and her jaw clenched as if even in sleep she were ready to bite someone. Lizzie hardly slept at all. She sat by the wall with her knees drawn up, her eyes wide, dry, alert, and stared into the dark so long that one began to wonder if she saw more there than a damp stain. And I listened to water dripping and to my own thoughts, which grew sharper with every hour, not weaker. I think that annoyed them most. Instead of softening, I hardened.

On the second day they called me for questioning again. Only the tone had changed. They no longer shouted. They did not need shouting, because shouting is for brutes and for those afraid they will not be heard. Now came the soft gloves. The more refined kind

of violence, which speaks calmly, looks long, and pretends it is offering rescue, while in truth it is only checking how cheaply you would sell your own spine.

The new officer sat behind the table as straight as if he had swallowed a broom handle and taken it for a sign of breeding. His beard was trimmed with a ruler, his hair slicked back, his nails too clean for a man working in a place soaked with other people's sweat and blood. A bureaucratic predator. The kind who does not strike first because he prefers the moment when the other side begins to break herself.

"Nell," he began, as if we were old acquaintances met by chance over tea, rather than in a room where paint-smell mixed with damp and threat. "Nobody wishes to make a martyr of you. Truly, there is no need. All you must do is say you made a mistake. That it was impulse. Unfortunate, yes, but human. And we shall help you. Perhaps even shorten your confinement. A girl like you should not waste her best years on stubbornness."

I stared at him without blinking. Not to impress him. The movement did not seem worth spending.

"I made only one mistake," I said. "Thinking men like you might have consciences, instead of only better-cut coats and prettier words for the same old filth."

For a moment he went rigid. Only that. But it was enough for me to see I had struck home. People with smooth manners hate being reminded that underneath they are still ordinary thugs, only better combed.

"Nell, consider this," he went on, now cooler. "You are young. You might yet make a life. Work, a home, a husband. Peace. These are not things a sensible woman despises. Stop playing with fate before you discover fate has no sense of humour."

I would have snorted if I had not been too tired to waste laughter on such commonplaces.

"I do not want a husband," I answered. "I do not want their houses, their plates, their silence at table, and their beds in which a woman is expected to be grateful she is allowed to grow old beside another person's ego. I only want you to stop breaking people's backs and then expecting them to thank you for it. That is not a grand fantasy. It is barely the beginning of decency."

He stood then. Slowly. Without hurry. Like a man who still wanted to believe he controlled the situation, though something was already slipping between his fingers. He came closer, leaned over me, and seized my chin. Hard. His fingers were cool, dry, disgusting. He squeezed the way one grips an animal's muzzle when one does not wish to hear it, only place it.

"You can be broken," he said quietly, almost gently. "Or forgotten. Choose."

I pushed his hand away. Not violently. Enough. Enough for him to feel he did not belong to me even for a second.

"You will not forget me," I answered. "Because every woman you put in here will speak in my voice, even if she does not know it yet. And that is what frightens you most."

This time he did not try to smile. His eyes darkened. He left, slamming the door as if he wanted it to finish what words had failed to do.

That evening a guard burst into the cell without knocking, without calling out, without any warning at all, only with his smell of cheap tobacco, sweat, and sadistic

routine. He opened the gate, grabbed Margaret by the arm, and flung her into the corridor as brutally as if he were tossing out a sack of rags, not a woman. She struck the wall with her shoulder, cursed, tried to turn, but he had already shoved her on.

Lizzie went pale. Truly pale, though I had thought there was no colour left in her to lose. She did not look at me. She looked at the floor, as though she knew the sequel better than she wanted to remember.

We knew what it meant.

It did not need naming. In places like that, the worst things have their own kind of silence. They require no explanation.

The guard turned in the doorway and looked at me with the lazy, vile satisfaction of a man who has just left fear behind him and now wants to see how it grows.

"You next," he hissed. "We'll see how long you answer back when you're naked before the bleach and the stick. All heroines remember what knees are for then."

The door shut behind him with a metallic crash.

I sat on the floor. Slowly. Not because my legs had failed, though they would have had the right. Rather because I did not want to give Lizzie the sight of trembling, if any lived in me. In my hand I held the chalk I had found earlier: a small, fragile piece of white, almost obscene in that place, as if someone had dropped a splinter of light into a gutter.

But I did not write at once.

First I closed my eyes.

And then something came that would be easiest to call a vision, though it had nothing holy about it. No angels. No whispers from heaven. No soft consolation for the afflicted. It was raw, sharp, revolutionary. I saw Red. Her face cut by shadow, the cheek that had so recently swelled after Cedric's blow, and that stare which had stopped asking for space and had begun to take it. I saw Greta, short and heavy as a hammer, with hands that could both embrace and split something in two. I saw the girls at the boilers, hair pasted to their necks with sweat, hands red from work, faces so young that the insolence of the world seemed larger. I saw boys pulling chains, children at the belts, women in sewing rooms with eyes only apparently extinguished, people at machines, people under machines, people who did not yet know one could stand because no one had told them that uprightness did not belong solely to gentlemen.

And then I began to write. Not only words. Signs. Slogans. Veins.

The chalk scraped on the wall, leaving white, uneven marks on the dirty plaster. Each letter was a small blow. Each movement of my hand said: I was here, I looked, I did not swallow your silence.

High on the cell wall, in great letters, I wrote:

SHE WHO DID NOT KEEP SILENT

Underneath I drew a key. A heart. The breath symbol, my own, simple, made of an arc and short lines, more a sign of life than an ornament. It was no longer only about rebellion. It was about memory. About leaving behind something that could not be wholly wiped away even when the wall became dirty and obedient again.

Lizzie watched me, hardly moving.

"Why?" she asked at last, softly.

I did not turn my head.

"Because they want us to disappear without a trace," I answered. "And I am tired of being someone else's dirt to clean away."

Then the guard came back. He opened the bars, stepped halfway in, and stopped. He saw the writing.

He stood for several seconds, motionless, as though unable to decide whether it offended or frightened him more. Sometimes men like him fear not great things, but small signs that say clearly they have not quite managed to crush another person.

Then, as if in a trance, he pulled out a rag and began to scrub. Furiously. With great sweeps. As if he wished to scrape away not chalk, but the very possibility that someone after him might name things differently from the regulations. White dust gathered on his hands, fell to the floor, the letters blurred, cracked, dirtied under the pressure.

But not all of it came away.

Something remained.

Not the shape. Not the full word. Only a trace. A shadow of letters. A pale scar on a dirty wall. The kind that does not vanish after healing, because the skin has once remembered the blade.

The guard stared a moment longer, breathing heavily, then threw the rag to the ground and left without a word. That was the most beautiful part. Even he knew he had lost something no report could record.

When the door closed, I turned to Lizzie and smiled. Not broadly. Not joyfully. Rather with that quiet satisfaction which comes when a person discovers she can become more expensive to her tormentors than they had calculated.

"Even if they leave me here for ever," I said, "I am already no longer worth the trouble to them."

Lizzie looked first at the wall, then at me. For the first time, there was something in her eyes beyond watchfulness. Something like acknowledgement. Or hunger for the same fire.

And then I knew. This cell was not an end. It was an echo.

And an echo always returns. Not immediately. Not gently. Sometimes weaker, sometimes twisted, sometimes bounced from so many walls that it barely resembles the first cry. But it returns. That is why people like them fear silence more than they ever admit. Because they know something remains in silence. And then it grows.

I noticed her for the first time when I was being brought back from interrogation, led along the corridor like something between a piece of evidence and a sack of potatoes, with an aching neck, a mouth dry from silence, and a head still ringing from all those words they had treated as tools, though they were more like blunt nails. She walked several steps behind the rest. A wardress with black hair, smoothly pinned under her cap, and eyes the colour of coal, but not the dead coal that lies in a bin. Coal just before flame, when nothing is visible yet and still one knows a moment will be enough. She kept to the back. She did not laugh with the others. She did not throw comments. She did not

spit. She did not strike. She watched. And there was something so out of place in that watching that I felt it at once, because in places like that people usually either look away, or fix their gaze on you to make sure you know you are only an object. She looked differently. As though she had not yet decided on which side of her own skin she wished to stand.

Then I saw her a second time. Margaret had just returned from the dark cell, that worse corner of hell where even screams echo more weakly because the walls are accustomed to them. Her face was swollen, her brow split so neatly that it looked torn not by glass or fist but by the shame of the place itself, and one cheek was already darkening from within, taking on that colour a person recognises too quickly if she has too often seen the effects of another person's power. Lizzie turned her head away. I raised myself on one elbow. None of the guards stirred. And then the same wardress came over, crouched beside Margaret, and gave her a cup of water. Without a word. Without the face of a saint. Without that cheap tenderness some people like to perform after cruelty so that they can sleep a little lighter. She simply gave water. And then she left.

That was worse than open kindness. Kindness can be suspected. That kind of gesture must be remembered.

The third time was too clear to pretend I had not seen it. I lay curled against the wall, trying not to think of my ribs aching with every deeper breath, the hardness of the floor, the fact that night would be long again, damp again, too aware of everything a person does not want to remember. Margaret slept half-conscious. Lizzie sat by the bars, silent as always, only her fingers clasped so tightly it seemed she was praying to her own bones. Then the door creaked.

She came in alone.

She did not speak at once. She did not even pretend she had come by order. She looked at me briefly, nodded, and then threw a blanket towards me. Thicker than the prison rags they used on us, heavier, less damp, smelling of matches, smoke, and something else, perhaps home, perhaps only hands that had once folded it with care.

I caught it by reflex.

"What is your name?" I asked quietly.

She stood a moment longer at the entrance, as if weighing whether an answer would be a mistake.

"For you, Moira," she replied at last.

Not "I am Moira". Not "my name is". Only "for you". Nice. As if a name were also something borrowed here, something not given for free.

I spread the blanket across my knees and looked at her more carefully. Her face was tired, but not dulled. Her mouth was compressed more from habit than anger. The shadows under her eyes did not come only from night shifts.

"You are not like them," I said.

The corner of her mouth twitched. Not a smile. Something closer to weary amusement.

"You think so?"

"I know. You look. They only measure and hit. Even when they are silent, they do it like a truncheon."

She fell silent. Then she stepped nearer, to the part of the bars where the corridor became blind to other eyes. She knew where to stand. That too said something.

"You have no idea what I was," she said quietly. "Before they gave me this uniform, I worked in a copper works. At the furnaces. At the vats. In noise so loud that after a year a person hears only half the world, and the worse half at that. Until my father fell ill, my brothers went to the army, and at home there were bills, a pot, and a mother who stopped believing God sent anything except another debt to pay. I had to choose. Remain prey, or pretend to be a hunter."

She said it without pathos. Hard. Like something chewed many times until it had lost flavour, but not weight.

"But you do not beat," I said.

She looked me straight in the eye.

"Not yet."

That "not yet" hung between us heavier than the whole sentence before it. Not a threat. Rather a sentence she had been reading aloud to herself for a long time.

I looked at her for a long while. Not with pity. She would not have endured that. Quite rightly. With something closer to cautious respect, the kind one has for those who stand with one foot on the wrong side, but have not yet cut the whole shame out of their hearts.

"So what are you doing here?" I asked.

"Watching."

"And what do you see?"

She did not answer at once. Instead she came one step closer, slipped her fingers under the cuff of her sleeve, and drew out something small, folded several times, so tightly it looked almost like a scrap of cloth. Paper. She slid it under the blanket in one quick movement.

"Remember the red-haired one?" she asked. "The one with you at the boilers?"

My heart jerked in my chest so suddenly that I was angry at myself for it.

"Red?"

"That is what they call her."

"What about her?"

"She is looking for you. Wisely. She is not running through the streets shouting. She is not throwing herself at the bars. She writes. Moves messages where no one looks, through sacks of linen, boxes of soap, dirty aprons for washing. This one reached me."

I seized the paper. My hands trembled more than I wanted to admit. Not from fear. From that other trembling that comes when something dead inside you suddenly turns out to be alive after all. I unfolded it carefully. The writing was crooked, the ink blurred, as if the letter had been written while running or in hiding, with a shoulder against a wall and one ear trained to every step. But the words were legible.

"We are holding the line. Greta is painting again. The boiler room is silent, but watching. Do not crack. Not yet. R."

I read it twice. Then a third time. Not because I did not understand. I only wanted it to stay in me longer before the world grew too hard again.

I closed my fist around the paper.

Moirira watched.

"If I am caught with that letter..." she began.

"They have already caught you," I interrupted softly. "In that uniform, in this corridor, in this place. You are already inside. But they have not broken me yet. That is why you are giving me a piece of your risk."

She frowned. In her eyes there was something between anger and recognition, as if she wanted to tell me I was ungrateful, while knowing very well that this was precisely why the letter should have come to me.

"Be careful with that tongue of yours," she muttered. "It will kill you one day."

"No. My tongue will only name what kills me. There is a difference."

She almost smiled. Almost.

"Red wrote one more thing," she said after a moment. "That you are not alone. And that if they have to, they will find a way for that mark of yours to go beyond these walls."

"Ours?"

"The chalk. The echo. You think nobody talks about it?" she said, quieter now. "Even here people look at that wall differently."

I glanced instinctively towards the pale stain left by the writing. The mark was still there. Barely visible, but present, like a light scar on dirty skin.

"That is good," I said. "Scars are more honest than uniforms."

To that she had no answer.

She turned and went towards the exit. Quietly. Without theatre. Like someone who has spent her life learning to pass through other people's pain without making noise. At the door she stopped for a moment, not looking at me.

"Do not make everyone choose between courage and survival as easily as you do," she said. "Not everyone has enough to pay with."

"I know," I replied. "That is why those who only pass the chalk matter too."

This time she looked. Briefly. Hardly. But without that first veil. Then she left. Without a word.

I sat for a long while with the paper hidden under the blanket, feeling its presence like a warm stone against my skin. Margaret moved in her sleep. Lizzie looked at me in question, but said nothing. Good. Not everything must be spoken at once in order to become true.

That was when I understood that in this fight there are not only those who shout, throw shovels, paint walls, and stand in the middle of the hall with their faces bare to the blow. There are others too. Those who stand aside and for years appear only part of the mechanism, and then one day hand over water, bring a better blanket, carry one word beyond a wall, or slip into another person's hand a letter for which they themselves may pay with their teeth.

Not every rebellion has a face burning with anger.

Sometimes it has black hair, eyes the colour of coal, and a hand that offers chalk without making any noise at all.

I did not know what hour it was. The guard did not say, because guards rarely share anything except the stink of tobacco, orders, and the conviction that a person lying on the wrong side of the bars should know only as much time as can be measured by hunger, pain, or waiting. The clock above the cell door had long since stopped. Its hands stood stubbornly at half past nine, like two dead legs in mud. Perhaps the mechanism had snapped. Perhaps someone forgot to wind it. Or perhaps it simply decided that in a place like this time had no honour anyway, so there was no point pretending.

But the court did not wait for clocks.

It waited for me.

They came for me without warning, like for an object finally entered in the correct column. First the scrape of the key, then the jerk of the bars, then a voice that did not need my name, because in places like this names are for paper.

"Get up."

I rose slowly. Not because I wanted to show them I was not afraid. I was afraid, of course. Only fools and the dead feel no fear, and I did not plan to become either before breakfast. But fear did not need to know it had power over my knees. I straightened my dress, though it was so filthy and crumpled I might as well have been arranging a funeral shroud pulled from a gutter. Lizzie watched me from the corner. Margaret sat against the wall, one hand near her cheek, swollen, silent, but present.

"Nell," Lizzie said, barely moving her lips.

I turned my head.

"What?"

For a moment she looked as if she wanted to say something great, something for the road, something that might outlive walls and bars. But life rarely gives people fine lines at the proper moment.

"Do not lower your eyes," she said only.

I smiled crookedly.

"I was never very good at that."

The guard jerked my arm.

"Enough tenderness."

"Steady," I muttered. "I will not infect you."

He tightened his fingers, but did not hit. A pity. I still had room on the other cheek.

The guards' boots struck the stone corridors like a metronome beating time for someone else's catastrophe. They led me like an animal for display. Hands shackled, hair tangled, face drawn with fatigue and dried mud from yesterday's rain, which would not come off, as if it too had decided it was better to cling to me than to the floor of the jail. I felt on my skin the salt of sweat, the old damp of the cell, and the metallic smell of chain, which always means the same thing: someone else has decided your hands are too free.

And still I carried my head high.

Not proudly in that elegant way ladies in expensive gowns move through rooms where everyone hates them but bows. Rather high like someone who knows that if she lowers it even a little, the world will at once try to press her neck to the earth.

As if I were going to a coronation, not a trial.

At the end of the corridor I stopped for a second by a window. Involuntarily. It was foolish, but almost human. Through the bars I could see a piece of the city. Roofs shining after rain, chimneys cutting the sky, thin trails of smoke rising lazily like the thoughts of people not allowed to think too loudly. Perhaps The Pickled Bishop was somewhere there. Perhaps Greta was already at her table, arguing with fate about the bill. Perhaps Red stood by the factory, or wrote another message on a scrap of paper, with her teeth clenched so hard her jaw ached.

Perhaps I would never go back.

"Keep your hands to yourself," one guard hissed, pushing me on. "You are not here to admire the view."

"Forgive me," I said. "I thought prisoners were allowed at least one last look at the city that destroys them so prettily."

"One more word."

"Only one? How generous."

He did not answer. He pushed me again.

The courtroom stank of formalin and old sweat. And something else. Something dry, heavy, stale. Perhaps contempt. Perhaps paper soaked with other people's sentences. It smelled like the wardrobe of a judge who long ago stopped believing in guilt and innocence and began believing only in order, because order never asks questions when it itself holds the whip.

They brought me in through a side door. The murmur struck me at once. Low, curious, muffled by wooden walls and heavy looks. People whispered the way they whisper in church or at an execution, which is to say with feigned respect and true greed.

On the benches sat men in wigs so white they might have served as flags of surrender, if only their owners knew how to surrender to anything except dinner. One of them, with brows like scrubbing brushes, looked at me as at a piece of meat placed on scales. Not with hatred. With assessment. That was worse. Hatred at least admits you exist.

He cleared his throat.

"The accused, Nell Whitmore," announced the clerk at the side desk, in the tone of a man who might as well be reading a list of missing umbrellas. "Transported from Industrial Factory Number Thirteen, Section B, on charges of subversive activity and sabotage."

Subversive. A beautiful word. It sounds like a man coughing while trying to pretend at Latin. Sabotage.

In their mouths it sounded almost like blasphemy. Like a curse spoken by a priest who later absolves himself because he had an important reason.

I sat on the accused's bench. Hard, rough, with a splinter jutting from the edge. They did not even pretend this place was meant for people. Perhaps rightly. In rooms

like that, a person remains outside the door, and inside come only files, charges, and the body that must somehow carry them.

The room held a mixture of elegant coats, uniforms, a few working women shoved at the back like unwanted footnotes, and several men who looked as if they had lost their way to a club where one could safely complain about the moral decline of the lower classes over expensive alcohol. Nobody clapped. A pity. Applause was all the theatre lacked.

But they looked.

Oh, how they looked.

Some with revulsion, some with curiosity, others with that delicate excitement of people who have come to see whether someone will be publicly ground down, so that later they can say it was unpleasant, but necessary. In a way, they were right. The theatre was beginning.

At the side I saw Briggs.

He sat upright, smiling as always, with his speckled beard and the eyes of a dog granted permission to bite. He wore a better jacket, likely for the occasion, though nothing could hide the fact that under it he was still the same man who liked another person's dependence almost as much as his own voice. When our eyes met, he lifted his chin slightly.

I did not smile back.

He had not earned it.

The judge looked at the papers. He turned several sheets with irritating slowness, as though my fate were a dull addition to his morning. He sighed. He actually sighed. A person might have thought he was the one dragged from a cell, beaten, hauled through corridors and seated on a bench, not me. But people in power always manage to tire of another person's suffering faster than its owner.

"Is the prosecutor ready?" he asked.

"Yes, Your Lordship," answered a tall, thin man who rose with such smoothness that it looked as if he had spent his whole life practising being a blade hidden in an elegant case.

His face looked as if it fed only on lemons, cold tea, and pangs of conscience carefully converted into arguments. Sharp cheekbones, thin mouth, calm stare. He did not look like a man who needed to raise his voice. Those are the most dangerous. Shouting betrays effort. He could probably destroy a person with a sentence delivered in a courteous bow.

He looked at me. I looked at him. And the game began.

"My Lord," he began, turning to the judge but speaking so that the room heard every word. "The matter before us today does not concern only an assault upon an officer of industrial supervision. Were this merely a single act of violence, an outburst of temper in a young working woman, one might speak of an unfortunate incident, of moral decline, of a sad but simple case of indiscipline. However, the evidence gathered by the prosecution clearly indicates that we are dealing with something broader, graver, and profoundly dangerous."

Of course. They always begin like that. If one girl strikes an overseer with a shovel, it cannot simply be one girl and one well-deserved blow. It must be a threat to the Empire, civilisation, and probably the quality of Sunday roast.

"The accused," he continued, "has for some time exhibited agitational tendencies. She has distributed writings of anti-imperial content, called for disobedience, undermined the authority of her superiors, and on the day of her arrest committed a brutal attack upon Mr Cedric Mowbray, an officer of industrial supervision acting in the interest of the factory's safety."

The interest of safety.

Cedric beat a woman because he cared about safety. Almost beautiful. If hypocrisy could turn wheels, factories would not need coal.

The prosecutor paused. A well-practised pause. The room leaned towards him, though nobody moved.

"We cannot permit places of work, the pillars of prosperity of our city and state, to become nests of anarchy."

Pillars of prosperity. Meaning chimneys that burned children's lungs, women paid just enough not to die too quickly, and men missing fingers who were then expected to be grateful that the rest of the hand was still attached to the arm.

The judge nodded as if he had heard something deep.

I sat calmly. My hands were shackled in front, so I could rest them on my knees. The metal cut into my wrists, but I held them still. I will not give them trembling. Not today.

"The accused," said the judge, looking at me over the papers. "Do you understand the charges?"

The accused. Miss.

For the first time in a long while someone called me by a polite form, and I had to admit that in his mouth it sounded more insulting than "vermin".

"I understand the words," I answered. "I have more trouble with the sense."

Someone in the room snorted, then immediately fell silent.

The judge narrowed his eyes.

"This is not a place for jokes."

"I noticed. There is no beer and very few honest people."

A disturbance moved through the room like wind over dirty water. The prosecutor raised an eyebrow. Briggs stopped smiling for a fraction of a second. Enough for me to enjoy it a little.

"The accused will be instructed in proper conduct," said the judge coldly. "One more remark of that kind and I shall have her removed."

"From the room, or from public life?" I asked. "Because you have already tried one."

The guard behind me shifted, but the judge raised a hand.

"Enough."

I was silent. This time.

The prosecutor turned towards the benches.

"I call Mr Robert Briggs."

Briggs stood. Naturally he did it as if carrying all civilisation on his back. He approached the appointed place, took the oath in a solemn, falsely calm voice, and I watched him thinking that lies too ought to have a smell. His would have smelled of wet wool, cheap soap, and old satisfaction.

"Mr Briggs," the prosecutor began, "please tell the court of the accused's conduct while working under your supervision."

Briggs sighed heavily. The sigh of a man suffering because he must tell the truth. A true artist.

"From the beginning she was difficult," he said. "Disobedient. Insolent. She stirred up the other girls. She asked questions that should not be asked on a factory floor. She challenged instructions. She spread claims that the management robbed workers, that the factory destroyed people, that women ought..." He hesitated, as if the sentence itself might soil his tongue, "ought to demand a voice."

Someone in the room murmured with outrage. Someone else shifted uneasily.

Oh yes. A voice. The most dangerous tool in a woman's hands, right after a shovel.

"Was the accused disciplined?" asked the prosecutor.

"Warned repeatedly. For her own good."

I smiled to myself.

Briggs saw it.

"Her transfer to the boiler room was a necessary measure," he added quickly. "It was intended to cool her temper and separate her from girls susceptible to influence."

Cool. In a boiler room. I must admit the man had a sense of humour. A pity it was accidental.

"Did you know her brother, Tommy Whitmore?"

The room grew quieter.

Briggs adjusted his cuff.

"I had heard of him."

"An agitator. Known for subversive activity."

"Yes."

"Did you observe a similarity in the accused's behaviour?"

Briggs looked at me. This time without a smile.

"Yes. The same venom. The same lack of respect for order. The same... influence upon others."

Influence. Like a disease. Like infection. As if a thought could be caught through touch. The judge wrote slowly. The prosecutor nodded, satisfied.

"Thank you. That will suffice for now."

Then, to my own astonishment and surely to the irritation of everyone present, I spoke up myself.

"May I ask the witness a question?"

The judge looked at me as if a stone beneath his shoe had just requested the floor.

"You are not counsel."

"Do I have one?"

Silence.

Beautiful, ugly silence.

"No counsel has been assigned to the accused at this stage of the proceedings," said the clerk dryly.

"How convenient," I muttered.

The judge pressed his lips together.

"One question. And I advise you to weigh your words."

I looked at Briggs.

"Have you ever seen me strike someone weaker than myself?"

Briggs blinked.

He had not expected that.

"That is not the point."

"The question was simple."

The prosecutor rose.

"My Lord, this is not relevant..."

"Let him answer," the judge said after a moment, probably more from curiosity than justice.

Briggs swallowed.

"No."

"Have you ever seen me force anyone to sign leaflets, paint walls, or say anything against management?"

"You did not have to force them. You manipulated."

"So, no."

"The accused will finish," barked the judge.

"One more," I said quickly. "Was I moved to the boiler room because I was dangerous, or because I spoke the truth aloud and you could not bear that a girl from the floor spoke better than your regulations?"

This time the room truly shuddered. A whisper ran through the benches, quick and nervous. Briggs reddened.

"This is insolence!"

"It is a question."

"Enough!" the judge struck with his gavel.

The sound spread through the room like a crack.

The guard seized my arm, but had no time to jerk me, because then a voice sounded from the back of the room.

"She is telling the truth."

Not loud. Not certain at first. But enough. Every head turned. It was Milly.

She stood at the back, thin, pale, hands clenched on the edge of the bench as if holding herself there not to fall or flee. Beside her Greta stared straight ahead, face of stone.

Milly swallowed.

"I saw them punish her for the leaflets. I saw Briggs follow her about the floor. And I saw others begin to speak only when she stopped keeping silent. That is not a crime. It is only terribly inconvenient for those who prefer us stupid and quiet."

"Silence!" roared the judge.

But it was too late.

Not because Milly said everything. She did not. She did not need to. It was enough that one person stood. One thin girl with teeth like piano keys and a voice trembling with fear, who despite that fear said: I saw.

The prosecutor turned to the judge.

"I move that this woman be removed from the room."

Greta rose then, slowly.

Oh, that was a different silence. Heavier. Greta did not need to shout. Her body did half the work.

"Try," she said.

Only that.

The guards moved, but hesitated after a few steps, because several other women rose from the benches. One after another. Not all. Not most. Enough for the room to stop being a comfortable theatre and become a place where the audience suddenly remembered it had legs too.

The judge hammered the gavel.

"Order! Order in the court!"

Order. They always cry for order when truth begins walking without permission.

And I sat on the accused's bench, hands in irons, face dirty, hair tangled, heart beating so hard it seemed to want to break my ribs from within.

The court was a stage. I was meant to be the corpse. But apparently someone had forgotten to tell the gravediggers that the dead had begun to rise.

"The next witness," the judge's voice cut through the room like a razor drawn over taut skin, "Cedric Mowbray, overseer of the boiler section."

The surname was enough.

Something moved in the room. Not body, not crowd, not benches. Something underneath. The kind of tension that appears when everyone knows a man is about to enter whose presence itself is testimony, only no one yet knows against whom.

The door opened and he came in.

Cedric.

The same Cedric whose face I had seen for days above the heat of the boilers, red with heat, distorted by shouting, bent over people the way one bends over a broken tool, not a human being. The same man who had dragged Red by the hair at the grate, who threw coal buckets as if he had horses or dogs beneath him instead of workers, who could silence an entire section with one look, because everyone knew that after the look usually came the fist, and after the fist the regulation explaining that the fist had been right.

Today he walked differently. Not like an executioner. Like a victim.

Or at least like a man who had spent the night before a mirror practising how a victim walks when he wants to be believed without too much effort. His step was slower, a little heavier, with that theatrical caution that asks for sympathy before the mouth even opens. On his forehead he wore a large bandage, white, slightly soiled, tied with such visible carelessness that it was shameless, as though he wanted it to occupy half the room and speak for him: behold suffering, behold order struck by a shovel, behold a poor representative of industrial virtue attacked by a hysterical girl with dirty nails.

I wanted to ask whether he had tied it so prettily himself, or needed a mirror and his ego.

He took the oath with outrage in his voice. A heavy, sanctified outrage of a man who believes that the mere fact anyone asks him to swear is an attack on the natural order of the world. As if truth were for others. For the poor. For workers. For women. He apparently considered himself credible for the simple reason that his collar was clean and his anger correctly arranged.

"Mr Mowbray," the prosecutor began, in a voice soft as velvet and about as useful for smothering filth, "please present your account of the events on the day of the assault."

Cedric drew breath. Slowly. Deliberately. First he looked at the judge, then at the prosecutor, and finally at the public. He needed an audience. He always did. Men like him do not strike only for pain. They strike also for those who watch. Power without an audience wilts in their hands.

"The accused Whitmore," he began slowly and carefully, as if carrying each word on a tray, "from the very beginning displayed troubling traits. Lack of respect. Arrogance. A tendency to challenge orders. Undermining the decisions of superiors. Behaviour unbecoming in a woman in any institution, still more in a workplace where safety depends on obedience, discipline, and the proper understanding of one's place."

One's place.

He need not have said anything else. In those two words sat whole factories, whole parliaments, whole churches, and all those cramped kitchens where women taught daughters that survival depends on how low one can lower one's eyes. "Unbecoming in a woman." In that one phrase lay the whole Empire, its rules, its hymns, its flags, and its stinking underbelly. Everything one must not challenge, even when it has long been drowning in shit.

The prosecutor nodded with feigned gravity.

"Did the accused specifically threaten workplace safety?"

Cedric did not hesitate for a moment.

"Absolutely. She failed to follow instructions. Delayed work. Distracted others. Organised the women, if one may call it that, though incited would be more accurate. She introduced into the section an atmosphere of disobedience. Encouraged sabotage. Particularly in that red-haired one, the Irishwoman with whom she had lately kept close. Red, they call her. An accomplice in disobedience. In any case, with a girl of that sort..."

He stopped.

He did not need to finish.

The room finished it for him. I heard it in the silence that remained. Irish. Poor. Red-haired. Too sharp. Not grateful enough. That was enough to build an entire guilt in their heads.

I felt my fingers tighten on the edge of the bench. The irons gave a quiet clink.

"And the incident itself?" asked the prosecutor.

Cedric turned slightly, so that his bandage showed even better.

"There was tension. The accused and her companion behaved provocatively. Oil had been spilled, which in the boiler room might have created a fatal danger. I attempted to

restore order. Firmly, but necessarily. The accused suddenly raised a shovel. Without warning. Without cause. She struck me on the head with all her strength. I lost consciousness. If not for the swift reaction of other workers, I might not be alive today."

At the last sentence he placed his hand on the bandage. Of course. Another moment and he would ask the room for a minute's silence in honour of his own survival.

He even began to pretend at slight dizziness. Closed his eyes, swayed a little, like an actor in a travelling theatre playing a dying king, though he more closely resembled a drunk who had lost his chair. The room stirred softly. Several heads nodded with concern, that elegant variety of concern which costs nothing and looks well on the face.

And inside, I felt something boil.

Not because he lied. Cedric's lies were as predictable as the stink by a canal. It boiled in me because they wanted to believe him. The whole room leaned towards his version as towards a warm fire on a cold evening, because that version allowed them to keep order. The executioner became victim, the worker became contagion, and violence became official duty. Simple. Convenient. Disgusting.

"Had you prior conflicts with her?" the prosecutor continued.

"No," Cedric answered at once. "I was firm, but fair. I always followed regulations. I never acted from personal dislike. But her purpose was not work. She came to destroy. Destroy discipline, destroy trust, destroy order. People like that do not want better conditions. They want chaos."

Firm, but fair.

I nearly felt a tear of emotion. Somewhere very deep. Probably in my heel.

"Thank you, Mr Mowbray," the prosecutor concluded. "That is all."

The judge was already writing with his pen. Slowly, methodically, with the face of a man not so much listening as arranging the sentence in his head and choosing prettier words for it. I watched that movement. I watched the pen travel over the paper as if each scraped mark were a nail in the lid of the coffin already chosen for me.

And then I did it. Without leave. Without asking. Without the whole courteous farce in which one must request permission to possess one's own throat. I simply spoke. Loudly. Sharply.

"And Red? Did she attack you too, before you dragged her by the boiler?"

The room froze.

Not quieted. Froze. There is a difference. Silence can be obedient. Freezing is involuntary. It comes when truth suddenly enters a room uninvited and for a moment nobody knows where to look.

"Silence!" shouted the judge, striking the gavel. "The accused will be silent, or she shall be removed from the court!"

But I was not silent.

I could not be.

Because if I did not say it, no one would. Red was not standing before me. Moira could not step out of shadow. Greta and Milly had already risked their share. And all the rest, all those with eyes full of fear and hands full of work, were still learning that the tongue too can be a tool.

So I went on.

"Tell them, Cedric. Tell them how you dragged her across the floor as if she were a sack of coal. Tell them how you grabbed her by the hair when she tried to stand. Tell them you smiled. Tell them your justice always begins where someone else's chance to defend herself ends."

Cedric reddened. Not the theatrical flush of a victim. The true one. Dirty. The one that crawls up the neck when a person feels someone undermining the image he has so carefully put up for sale.

"Lies!" he roared. "Vulgar lies! She attacked the system. She attacked the very foundation of order. I was merely carrying out my..."

"Brutality," I finished for him.

A murmur passed through the room. Brief, nervous, quickly smothered. The judge struck the gavel again.

"Guards, quiet the accused!"

Two men moved towards me. Heavy boots, heavy hands, heavy heads. They grabbed my arms, one on the left, one on the right, so hard their fingers bit through fabric into bruised flesh. They jerked me back, but did not silence me in time.

"Ask him!" I cried, turning my head towards the benches, towards the wigs, the coats, the holy expressions pinned to dirty consciences. "Ask how many people he beat before someone finally struck back. Ask why he fears a girl with a shovel more than his own God."

"Enough!" thundered the judge.

Perhaps enough.

Perhaps they would drag me out at once.

Perhaps they would write it down as another disruption, another proof of disobedience, hysteria, working-class disease, whatever fitted the paper.

But then I looked at Cedric and saw it clearly. His face was no longer confident. No longer triumphant.

That bandage, that theatrical pose, that polished role of injured man had begun to crack at the edges. His eyes were restless. They fled, once to the judge, once to the prosecutor, once to the public, as if checking whether they were still on his side, or whether some plank under him had begun to creak.

And perhaps my hands were shackled.

Perhaps they held me by the arms.

Perhaps that room belonged to them, with their gavel, papers, guards, and ridiculous white wigs looking like mould cultivated on a sense of superiority.

But his face told me one thing.

He was the one afraid now.

"The accused may speak," muttered the judge.

He said it as if he were not giving me a right, but a scrap from a plate, something greasy, cold, unwanted, which he would have ordered cleared away in another moment. If he could, he would have served me that "voice" on a silver tray, wearing the expression of a man performing the highest act of mercy, and then immediately had both tray and me thrown out, so the room might smell of his order again.

I stood.

The irons clinked softly at my wrists. It was a small sound, but it moved through the room like a blade over glass. I did not fix my hair. I did not wipe the dried dirt from my cheek. I did not smooth my dress. I had no intention of looking better for them. They were to see exactly what they had made. A factory girl, filthy, bruised, exhausted, with eyes that refused to go out merely because someone wore a wig and called himself law.

I saw them all.

Those in front, come to judge me. With gold studs, stiff collars, and faces polished by other people's labour until emptiness reflected in them. They sat there drooling over a system that fed them silence, order, blood, and the sweat of people like me, and then allowed them to believe they were decent because they did not have to hold the whip personally. I saw those at the back too. Workers. Mothers. Children pressed to skirts. Thin faces, grey with dust, tired of a life beginning before dawn and ending only when the body refused further participation in the spectacle. They looked afraid.

But a few looked differently. With hope. And that was worst for them.

"I will not defend myself," I began.

At first my voice was calm. Too calm. Like cold water before boiling.

"Because I am not the one who should be sitting here."

Voices died. The prosecutor looked up from his files, as though papers had suddenly stopped being shield enough. Mowbray snorted, of course, because men like him always laugh when they have nothing intelligent left to say. But nobody spoke.

So I continued.

"I only did what nobody else had the courage to do. I raised my voice when I was told to be silent. I asked a question when I was told to look at the floor. I stopped the hand of an executioner when he was beating an innocent woman, because he knew the boiler room was full of people too hungry, too tired, and too terrified to take one step. Yes, I struck him. I struck a man who had spent his life learning that other people's bodies were tools on which to spend his mean little power. And I would do it again."

A stir went through the room, but I did not slow. I did not want to leave them space for breath. Breath had long ago been taken from us in halls, boiler rooms, sewing rooms, and cellars. Now they could feel for a moment what that was like.

"I know that, to you, this is a crime. Because a crime to you is any woman who does not lower her head quickly enough. Any worker who does not kneel before the order has even been given. Any child who, instead of dying quietly beside a machine, dares cry too loud. Any word not approved by a lord, a factory owner, or a bishop with fingers clean from holy water and dirty from other people's poverty."

"The accused..." the judge began.

I turned my head towards him so sharply that even the guard behind me flinched.

"Be silent, my lord!"

The words struck the room like a stone through glass.

"You have a title, a wig, and a gavel. You have a bench, papers, seals, people who rise when you enter and fall silent when you lift an eyebrow. But you have no idea how human sweat smells at four in the morning, when the body has long been begging for sleep and the machine demands one more hour. You do not know what the cry of a hungry child sounds like when it cannot understand why its mother's hands are torn to

blood and the pot still holds only water and salt. You have never seen a body after three days of work without sleep, so tired a person begins to envy the dead because at least no one orders them up for another shift. And yet you want to judge me?"

Someone at the back drew breath. A woman covered her mouth. One juror lowered his eyes. Not for long, but he lowered them. I saw it. Small victories are victories too, even if they fit inside one blink.

"This whole Empire of yours," I went on, feeling my voice grow in my chest as if it no longer belonged only to me, "is theatre. A facade. A great polished wall of crests and flags, standing on the bodies of those you cannot even name. You speak of civilisation, but civilisation in your mouth means a cheap curtain hung over a slaughterhouse window. You speak of order, but your order is children coughing dust, women fainting at machines, men coming home without fingers, without lungs, without hope, yet graciously permitted to come back the next day and serve your prosperity again."

The judge hammered with his gavel, but the sound drowned beneath my words.

"You speak of God when you need to silence us. Of law when you need to lock us away. Of morality when a woman refuses to be touched, beaten, or placed in a corner like a broken chair. You speak of work as if it were holy, but only when it is done by our hands, not yours. You live on the backs of people you do not even allow to speak in their own names. I speak. And that is what hurts."

The guards moved.

I saw them from the corner of my eye. Heavy shapes, hands ready to pull, to silence, to restore order. They had not reached me yet. I had a moment. Sometimes a person's whole freedom fits into a few sentences. Then one must speak as if the throat were the last place on earth they had not occupied.

"You are not afraid of me," I said, and now I looked not only at the judge, not only at the prosecutor, not only at Cedric, but at everyone. "Not really. I am too dirty for you, too poor, too female, too ordinary for you to count me worthy of true fear. You fear what I mean. That I am proof someone from below can stand, even if you have trodden on her neck all her life. That a factory woman can say 'enough' and not burn up from the mere insolence of the word. That the hell you build from clauses, contracts, whips, prayers, and starvation wages may begin to crumble from one sentence."

I drew breath.

They were close now.

So I shouted:

"I do not consent!"

The room answered with silence. But it was no longer their silence. Not obedient. Not dead. This silence had a pulse.

Then they seized me.

Hard. One by the arm, one by the neck, a third jerking the chain so the metal bit into my wrists. Pain cut through me, but I did not lower my head. Not now. Not after that.

The last word had to be mine.

"And the fact that I am here," I said as they dragged me down, as the judge reddened, as Mowbray stared at me with the face of a man who had just understood that

the wound on his head was nothing beside what had got beneath the skin of everyone around him, "is not my shame."

They nearly lifted me from the bench.

I managed to turn my face to the room.

"It is yours."

And then, among the workers at the back, someone struck a fist against the bench. Once. Not loudly. Not heroically. Enough. Then a second. Then a third.

And as the guards hauled me out of the court, the sound of those blows followed me over the wood like the first uncertain rhythm of something they did not yet know how to name.

I already knew. It was not the end of the hearing. It was the beginning of drums.

They led me into the corridor the way one removes something that is no longer convenient to look at. Without ceremony. Without words. Only hands on shoulders and the same old rhythm of boots on stone, reminding a person that here even the echo walks on command.

The first blow came quickly. A truncheon into the ribs, into the place already sick of pain. Air fled my lungs like from a torn sack. The second was slower, more considered, as if testing how much more I could take before folding in half and giving them that satisfaction. I did not.

"You think you are somebody?" one of them hissed, face close to mine, smelling of tobacco and something rotten that had nothing to do with food. "We'll see how brave you are without an audience."

He struck again. This time in the back. I felt pain spread through my body slowly, heavily, like grease poured into a rusted machine. The second guard laughed softly, without joy. More from habit than pleasure.

"Women like you always end the same," he added. "First the tongue, then the tears."

Someone spat on me. Saliva ran down my cheek, mixing with sweat and dust. I did not wipe it away. I would not give them that gesture. Let it stay. Let them know that this is all they have.

I stood. Not straight like a lady, but hard as something that refuses to break though it ought to have long ago. Every blow said one thing: you must learn. Every silence of mine answered: I already have. Only not what you wanted.

After several minutes of their little private justice, someone shouted from behind:

"Lift the bitch. Back to court."

They lifted me though I had not fallen. They gripped harder than necessary, as if wanting to remind themselves they still could. They led me back through the same doors, the same corridors, only I was a little heavier with pain and they a little lighter for having shown themselves who ruled.

The courtroom had grown stifling.

Not because anyone moved. No one moved. The air had simply stopped, as if it had decided not to take part in what was coming. Even the light seemed heavier, pasted to the walls with the smell of sweat, paper, and old power.

The judge wiped his brow.

Not from hesitation. From duty. From the same place from which come wig-adjusting and coughing before a sentence. His whole posture said one thing: let us do this quickly, before someone thinks this is about anything more than order.

I stood in my place.

Irons on my hands, metal eating into skin, dirt under my nails that would no longer come out, bruises from the guards spreading beneath my dress like silent maps of violence. But my head was high.

Not for honour. For resistance. Because if I must fall, it will be because of truth, not obedience.

The judge looked at the papers as if searching there for courage. As if something between the lines would allow him not to think that judging people was still more than reading a shopping list.

And then he began to read.

"Having considered all evidence... having heard the witnesses... and having taken into account the conduct of the accused..."

His voice did not tremble. It was level, dry, practised. Perhaps there had already been many like me. Perhaps for him this was another case, another number, another girl mistaken in believing that a voice was something more than an ornament. Or perhaps he had long ago stopped seeing people. That is probably most likely.

"...the Manchester municipal court finds Nell Whitmore guilty of numerous breaches of public order, including assault upon a superior of an industrial establishment, incitement to rebellion in the workplace, agitation against the Crown, destruction of state property, and public insult of representatives of authority."

Each word fell heavily, like a brick dropped into water. And with every brick I felt something in me grow.

In my mind I turned "assault" into "defence".

"Incitement" into "beginning".

"Agitation" into "truth".

"Insult" into "courage".

With every "crime" of theirs I became larger. Stronger. More dangerous in their eyes. And yet I was only a girl who could not bear silence. Perhaps that was why I frightened them so much.

"Accordingly, this court sentences the accused to twenty years of forced labour in the colonies of the British Empire. Date of deportation: within seven days."

Twenty years. Colonies. Seven days. The words were short. Simple. Clear. Heavy as the chains I already felt around my wrists. The room did not react.

Even the flies stopped buzzing. Even the wood stopped creaking. Even breaths went quiet, as if everyone feared that if the air moved, the sentence would become even more real.

Then I heard a sound. Quiet. Breaking. It was my mother.

She sat alone, a little to the side, as always. Her hands were clasped so tightly that she seemed to be trying to hold back the world which was slipping through her fingers. She did not scream. Did not lunge forward. Did not weep so everyone could see. That is

what she had been taught. Crying is allowed, but quietly. Suffering is allowed, but decently. Dying is allowed, but without scenes.

But her eyes.

Her eyes said everything.

She looked at me as if she saw me for the first time. And at the same time as if she had always seen me. In that look was everything that had ever been between us and everything we had never said. The fear I had known since childhood. The anger of which she was ashamed. The disappointment that came not because I was wrong, but because I had gone farther than she had ever dared to think.

And something else. Pride. Small. Hidden. Shy. But it was there.

A silence stretched between us. Thick. Heavy. In it hung one question she had never asked and I had never answered.

Why did you have to go so far? The answer was simple. Because someone had to.

Mowbray sat with his arms folded. Smiling. Broadly. Certainly. His smile was like a wound left open so it would not heal. He had won, he thought. Because he no longer had to explain why he beat. It was enough that I had been sentenced. In his world, a verdict was proof of innocence.

I looked at him. He did not look away. But something moved in him. Perhaps a shadow. Perhaps only my wish. But I saw it. For a second. And it was enough. The judge looked at me one last time.

"Does the accused wish to add anything?"

He need not have said it. The question was part of the ritual. Like the gavel, like the wig, like all those words that pretend justice is a process, not a decision made earlier over supper.

I lifted my head.

I spoke calmly. Quietly. But without a trace of mercy.

"I do not wish to."

A pause.

"But I shall."

I looked at them all. At the judge, the prosecutor, Mowbray, the people in front, the people at the back, my mother. Like an audience that had come to see an execution and had not expected the victim to stand up and speak in her own voice.

"This is not a court," I said. "It is theatre."

I felt the guards tense behind my back.

"And I have just stolen your stage."

They moved.

The chains clinked. Hands drove into my arms. Someone hissed in my ear to shut up. Another shoved me towards the exit.

But before they turned me, before they tore me from that place which wished to swallow me and spit me out as an example, I still managed to look at my mother.

One last time. And in that look there was everything. I am not sorry. I do not regret it. It is not over. I am still breathing. And when they led me from the room, I felt everything inside me. Pain. Anger. Fear. And something else. Something they could not name, because they had no word for it. I did. Lack of remorse.

The temporary cell in Manchester magistrates' court was like a tomb built not to bury the dead, but to teach the living slowly how to behave once all they had left was a body and the memory of their own voice, enclosed in brick soaked with damp and rust, narrow as a metre and perhaps three in length, without window, without light, without air that did not carry smoke and screams, and whose only connection to the world was the crack under the door and a barred vent through which no life entered, only its used, distorted remainder.

A smear of damp ran across the floor, stubborn, greasy, as if it had its own will and the memory of all who had sat there before me, spilled once and never dried again, though outside summer was burning and the sun must have spread over the streets like gold I had never touched. The walls were marked with everything a person can use to leave a trace when everything else is taken: nails, soot, blood, scraps of food, fragments of words beginning in anger and ending in no space or no strength, lines, scratches, counted days broken off somewhere, names without endings, as if someone at the last moment had forgotten what they were called.

In the corner stood a metal bowl meant for water, though there was none, and a bucket serving as everything a person despises until forced to use it. The smell in the air was no longer even a smell, but something that entered under the skin and stayed there, a mixture of rotten wool, mud, sweat, and pain, so obvious that after a while it ceased to be noticed, as one ceases to feel one's own wounds when there are too many.

And yet that was not the worst.

The worst was the silence, heavy and sticky, clinging to the body like a dirty layer that cannot be rubbed off, a silence that was not absence of sound, but its corruption, as if everything that could have been said had once been said here too loudly and now echoed only in the head instead of going out.

I sat beneath the wall, feeling my back protest at every movement, the skin on my wrists burn from the chains that had earlier bitten into me with the patience of something that knows it need not hurry because it will win anyway. In spite of all that, my mind was alert, taut, focused, like an animal that cannot allow itself to close its eyes even when the whole body screams for rest.

I did not sleep. I did not cry. I counted.

Breaths, one after another, slowly, stubbornly, as if each were a decision that I had not yet surrendered what lived in me. Steps beyond the door, recognising weight, rhythm, intention, learning them as others learn the alphabet. The beats of my own heart, uneven, sometimes too quick, sometimes too heavy, but always going on.

I knew they would not break me. Not like this. Not with this.

When, after a time I could no longer name hours or days, the door creaked, I recognised the sound at once, as one recognises one's own name in a crowd, because it was different from all the others, less brutal, less indifferent.

Moira.

She entered without a word, as always, making no event of the gesture, handing me a scrap of cloth wrapped around a piece of bread that looked more like evidence than food, hard, dry, but real. There was neither haste nor theatre in her movements. Only a decision.

"Smuggled," she said quietly, almost soundlessly. "Do not say it came from me."

I nodded, asking no questions, because I knew the answers would change nothing, and in her eyes there was enough for all of it: that she saw, that she understood, that she was not entirely on the other side.

I unfolded the cloth slowly, feeling my hands begin to tremble slightly, though not from cold, but from that strange tension that appears when something living passes through a wall.

Inside was a note. Small, folded so many times it was thin, as if it had tried to hide itself. Crooked writing, uneven, shaken. I knew it.

"We will not leave you. R."

I smiled, feeling something in me straighten, as if for a moment my spine no longer belonged to that place, and my teeth closed on the cold, which was no longer only cold, but a response.

Red was alive. Red was acting. Red had not let go. And that one sentence was heavier than the whole sentence passed on me.

Everything in that cell had a metallic taste. The water, when it came, tasted of rust and stone, the air was damp and dead, and silence settled into the bones, entering the body like a second skin that cannot be removed. Perhaps for that reason, after three days, I stopped feeling fear, not because it had disappeared, but because it had become part of the same order as pain, hunger, and exhaustion, another thing to be carried.

I did not know what was happening outside. I did not know whether Red was safe. I did not know whether my mother still sat at the same table. I did not know whether Briggs slept peacefully. I did not know whether the Empire was already preparing a place for me at the end of the world. But I knew one thing. I was not alone. Then came the thoughts. Not gentle. Not courteous. Entering me like into an old cupboard I had never wanted to open. Why then? Why the shovel? Why without hesitation? Others had been beaten too. Others had fallen too. And I had not reacted before. It was Red.

It was something in her eyes, something that refused to go out even when the body was already surrendering. That pride which had no right to exist in such a place, and yet was there, heavy and alive, as if someone had driven it into her in defiance of the whole world.

I had not known her long. But I knew her step. Her voice. That smile that apologised for nothing.

And perhaps that was why, when I saw someone trying to break her, something in me could not stand it, because her pain stopped being only hers and became something I could not bear.

Before, I had not understood why I never looked at men the way other girls did, why their words bounced off me as off a wall, why I did not feel what they called something important.

Now I was beginning to understand. Red moved me. Moira steadied me.

And somewhere between them, in that cell, in that silence, in all that filth of the world, something was beginning that I did not yet have the courage to name. Something that was neither weakness nor escape, but another form of resistance.

Because if a person in such a place can still feel, can still see another person not as a tool, not as a threat, but as something more, it means she has not yet been disarmed.

And I had not been disarmed. Never. That was the most dangerous thing.

Something changed, and it was not obvious, nor something one could catch in a single glance or name without hesitation, but rather a slow, disturbing shift in the very air of the place, as if the prison, which until then had breathed heavily but predictably, suddenly began taking shorter breaths, like a body that senses coming pain and does not yet know from where the blow will come.

The atmosphere thickened, not in any poetic sense, but almost physically, like wet fog settling on shoulders and entering the lungs, forcing a person to breathe deeper though every draught brought more unease than relief. I had the impression that even the walls, until then indifferent and dead, had begun to hold something back, as if reluctant to release the sounds that struck them.

I heard no concrete words, because words in that place were rationed goods, used only when someone had to be humiliated or ordered. But steps, steps betrayed everything the tongue refused to say.

Until now they had been uniform, dragging, like tired dogs which had long ago stopped being alert because they knew their mere presence was enough, that bars and fear did all the work for them, and they were only an addition to a mechanism which functioned perfectly without them.

Now something in them changed. Not subtly, but in a way one could feel in the chest. Instead of that old lazy regularity, there was nervousness, acceleration, the weight of steps taken faster than necessary, as if someone wished to make up distance he did not yet understand, and sometimes even small stumbles, little errors that had not happened before, because routine had been their greatest strength.

I heard a boot strike stone too hard, a metal object fall from a hand and clatter against the floor, followed by a quick muffled curse, as if the very fact that something had gone wrong was already a shame that must not be shown.

And when the door opened even for a moment, for someone to pass something in or glance inside, I saw their faces, not fully, not clearly, only in pieces. It was enough. They were different from before, closed as always, but not indifferent, not empty, tense as if something crouched beneath the surface which they were trying to hide at any cost.

They were not calm.

That was new.

Then Moira came, and she was the final proof that what I felt was not merely invention from a head tired of silence, because Moira never changed without reason, never allowed herself a gesture that could be read as more than routine. Yet that day, when she entered the cell, her presence was different from the first step.

It was not that she looked different, for her face was still as controlled, her movements sparing, her glance brief, as if she did not wish to prolong it a moment more than necessary. But when she gave me the bowl of water and our fingers touched for a fraction of a second, I felt in that touch something that had not been there before: tension, the faintest tremor, as if her body knew something she did not yet want to admit even to herself.

She looked at me.

Not fleetingly, not indifferently, but directly, in the eyes. The look lasted a little too long, long enough to cease being accident and become a choice that at once had to be taken back, because she pressed her mouth shut as if wanting to say something and stopping herself at the last moment. She left the bowl and turned away faster than usual, leaving without a word.

It was enough.

I needed no more.

People do not change like that without reason, especially in a place where every gesture is controlled and every emotion can be used against you. If someone like Moira allows herself the shadow of hesitation, a tremble in the hand, a look that says more than it should, then something is coming.

I shivered, but not from cold, because the cold here was constant, predictable, familiar. I shivered from what began arranging itself deep under my ribs, slowly, heavily, like a thought one does not want to finish but which will find a way anyway.

Perhaps there would be a search.

Perhaps they would move me earlier, without warning, without time to prepare, as if they wanted to catch me between breaths.

Perhaps someone had found something, something from those years, something that should have been buried with my brother.

Perhaps Briggs had said more than usual. Perhaps they had decided the example had to be stronger. Or perhaps... No.

I did not allow myself to finish that thought, but it kept returning, stubbornly forcing itself between the others like a splinter that cannot be pulled out.

What if someone had claimed me? What if someone were planning something stupid? What if Red... I clenched my jaw, feeling the tension travel through my whole body. She should not. She could not.

But then I should not have raised the shovel either, and I had done it without a moment's hesitation, so why should she be wiser, more careful, less given to risk, when I had seen with my own eyes that she was made of the same material as I was?

I leaned my head against the wall, feeling beneath my skin its roughness and cold trying to smother what was beginning to kindle inside me, and understood that this was not hope, not yet, but instinct, pure, primal, the same instinct that makes an animal run before it sees the fire, and a person hold her breath before she hears the blast.

The steps beyond the door quickened again, and this time came whispering with them, muffled, nervous, as if the guards themselves feared their own words. I could not hear everything, but one word broke through clearly, heavy and meaningful.

Tomorrow. Then a curse. The second sentence was quieter, but enough to catch.

"Just let it not be like Leeds."

I did not know what had happened in Leeds, but I did not need to know. The tone was enough to tell me it had not been anything good, anything peaceful, anything that ends without blood or without a scream.

Before, I liked to know, to have control, to understand where I stood and what lay ahead. Here I had only instincts left, and instincts, though they give no answers, force one thing: alertness.

Tension.

Breathing deeper, as if one might soon have to dive underwater and not know when one would surface again.

And that is how I breathed. Deeply. Slowly. Carefully. Like someone who already knows something is coming and does not intend to let it arrive unnoticed.

That night something bent in the order of the world, not suddenly and not in a way one could point to, but slowly, as if an invisible hand had turned something deep below the surface of reality, making everything that had until then been at least somewhat predictable begin to lose its shape. The air in the cell thickened and tightened so much it was as if someone had stretched it through barbed wire and left it there too long, until every breath stopped being natural and became an effort that cut from within.

I did not feel sleep, though my body was tired. I did not feel cold, though damp still sat in my bones. I felt only tension, which had no single source but spread inside me like slowly heated metal, expanding until it touched everything alive in me. Even before I rose I knew this was not an ordinary night, that something had already begun though no one had spoken the first word.

I lay still for a while, listening to that strange silence which was not silence, but the suspension of everything between one event and another, as though the world had held its breath and waited for someone to release it first. At last something in me could not bear it, and I sat up suddenly, before I had time to think what I was doing, guided by the same instinct that had once made me raise the shovel before reason spoke.

The steps in the corridor were unlike any I had heard before. They did not fit any change of guard or routine I had learned. They were too quick, too quiet, and yet too awkward, as if someone tried to move carefully and still could not hide the haste that betrayed him at every step. For a moment I could not decide whether they sounded more like flight or pursuit, and the second thought was worse.

I froze by the door, feeling my whole body tighten of itself, trying to make its presence smaller, less noticeable, though I knew there was nowhere to hide in that cell. In that silence I heard my own heart so clearly it was as if someone struck a metal bell beside my head, heavy, rhythmic, relentless.

Then from the corridor came a whisper.

Not a word in the full sense, not a sentence one could repeat, but my cell number, spoken low and nervously, as if someone was not certain he had found the right place, or

knew too well and therefore dared not speak louder. In that one sound there was something that made me hold my breath so violently it hurt.

My muscles tightened without my consent, as though my body tried to vanish, flee, become a shadow leaving no mark, though it had nowhere to go. I listened, trying to catch the smallest movement, every shift of air that might tell me more.

I heard metal rustle, not the ordinary clink of a key at a guard's belt, but something more desperate, faster, almost clumsy, as if a hand were searching through several keys at once and losing patience with every second.

Then came a dull crash. Not the grand theatrical blast that blows windows out and brings walls down, but a short, heavy impact, like wood against a gate or iron against a beam, somewhere outside, perhaps at the main passage, perhaps in the courtyard, perhaps where the prison touched the world and for one moment had to admit it was not as impenetrable as it liked to think.

Then came a scream.

Human.

Short, cut off, clumsy, full of naked panic impossible to fake or rehearse, because when a person truly fears for life, the voice stops belonging to reason and returns to something older, animal, ugly.

I did not know whether it was a guard or a prisoner, and that not knowing struck me harder than it should, because for one second I understood that in darkness everyone sounds alike when slaughter begins.

Then everything came at once, so violently that it was as if someone tore open a sack full of noise and poured it through the corridors.

An alarm wailed from deep in the building, long, painful, as though some beast locked in the walls had suddenly taken a knife under the ribs and could not stop moaning. The sound ripped the silence so brutally I felt it under my tongue, in my teeth, in my skull, where it began vibrating with my blood. Bars in the walls shook under the running of many people. The lock of my cell trembled slightly, as if it too had frightened itself with what was coming, and along the corridor went steps, not the even, bored, official ones, but broken, disjointed, too quick, too heavy, too human.

Someone was running.

Someone else stumbled and cursed.

Someone shouted an order which evidently no one obeyed, because another crash followed, nearer, stupider, chaotic, as if a person had run into a wall or knocked over something not meant to be knocked over.

I drew breath so sharply it hurt my chest, and immediately felt the familiar, vile grip of panic, the cold claw closing beneath the ribs, beginning to ask questions faster than a person can answer them.

Riot? Execution? Sabotage? Transfer? Trap? Had they come for me? For all of us? Had someone truly been mad enough to attack the Manchester magistrates' prison, or had the Empire itself decided to put on a display that night because, apparently, trial and sentence were not enough to teach a poor girl her place?

I closed my eyes for one second only and leaned my back against the cold wall, feeling through the thin cloth of my dress its damp, roughness, and dirt, as though the

wall tried to pull me back into stillness. But I could not stand still any longer, because beneath my feet I felt the building tremble, and in the air, even through the stink of the cell, there was beginning to be smoke.

Then I heard a voice.

Not a guard's voice, not the dull, fat certainty of a man with keys at his belt, not the voice of a clerk who can turn suffering into a formula, but a man's voice, irritated, nervous, sharp, with an accent so clear my heart jerked in my chest before the meaning reached me.

Irish.

"English bastards, open cell nineteen! Now! Before they make mince of us!"

Someone answered him at once, lower, younger, with less fury and more tension in the voice, as if the owner held a weapon for the first or third time in his life and did not yet know whether he feared using it more, or not having to.

"You have the key. Use it. Or it'll be the last thing you hold in your hands."

I did not breathe. Not because I forgot. Because everything in me suddenly stopped on one word: key.

Beyond the door, metal scraped again, closer, clearer, no longer somewhere in the belly of the building, but here, by me, by my cell. I heard someone struggling with the lock, first impatiently, then more brutally, the key entering crookedly, turning in the mechanism, steel resisting, because even dead things sometimes defend the system more zealously than living people.

"Turn it all the way, you idiot," someone hissed. "All the way, not like you're stroking a bride."

"Shut your gob, Seamus, or I'll give you this key and you can dig your brains out with it."

The lock groaned. Once. Twice. Then gave.

The door of my cell swung open violently, heavily, as if someone had opened the jaws of a dragon which had held me in its mouth for days and suddenly, whether from mercy or accident, decided to spit me out.

First I saw smoke, thick, grey, forcing itself in low and fast, crawling along the floor and then rising higher, biting eyes and throat, bringing with it the smell of burning, scorched oil, wet wood, sweat, and powder.

Then shadows.

Several shapes, blurred in the half-dark of the corridor, moving too fast, too nervously to be guards.

And then her.

Red.

She stood in the doorway as if the night itself had spat her out of the fire, sweating, dirty, hair stuck to her temples and cheeks, blood on her sleeve whose source I did not yet want to know, her face pale under streaks of soot and her stare so hard that for a second it seemed that if someone shot her straight in the chest, the bullet would have to consider whether it was worth trying.

She did not look like a heroine.

Heroines in cheap tales have wind-tossed hair, clean profiles, and light arranged so suffering sits prettily on their faces.

Red looked like a girl who had run through hell, kicked the devil in the knee, and come back because she had forgotten to fetch someone.

Behind her stood several lads, young, barely grown, perhaps twenty, perhaps less, dressed like workers in dirty shirts, waistcoats, heavy boots, with faces on which work, hunger, and fear had already done what normally takes years. One held an axe close against his body, as if afraid that if he moved it any farther his hand would begin to shake. Three had guns, old and poorly cleaned, probably taken or stolen, and their fingers were indeed trembling, but their eyes were not.

The eyes were ready. That was the most frightening thing. Not courage, not fury, not shouting. Readiness.

Red did not smile, did not throw a joke, did not say I looked well for a woman sentenced to the colonies, though in other circumstances she would probably have managed it. She only looked at me as one looks at a person who has one more second to choose life.

"Come on, Nell. Or you'll die here."

I did not ask. Not because I had no questions. I had a whole hell of them.

Who had come? How many? Had Red planned it? Where was Greta? Where was Moira? Who had died? Did my mother know? Did this have any chance of succeeding? Were we all about to die in a corridor stinking of smoke and piss?

But there are moments when questions are a luxury, and that night I had no money even for breath.

I threw myself forward, stumbling over my own feet, because after days in a cell my legs did not immediately believe they were meant for running again, not for sitting and suffering. My knee buckled treacherously, my shoulder hit the doorframe, the world swayed for a moment, but one of the lads caught my arm and dragged me sideways so roughly I hissed with pain.

"Hold yourself, sister," he said through his teeth. "No one here carries ladies in his arms. The ladies stayed in the elegant part of town."

"Thank God," I rasped. "I always took poorly to good manners."

I do not know whether he heard, but for one second the corner of his mouth twitched beneath the soot.

Smoke burned my lungs, pressed into throat and nose, forced tears from my eyes, though I had no intention of admitting they were tears, because a person in the middle of a prison escape truly does not need an argument with her pride. Someone handed me a piece of damp cloth and shouted to press it over my mouth, so I did, tasting dirty water, soap, and something metallic.

We ran through a corridor that had stopped being a corridor and become the throat of some great sick animal, full of smoke, screams, shadows, boots slipping over wet stone, and people who had finally stopped knowing where their place was.

The first body lay just beyond the bend. A guard. He was not breathing.

His eyes and mouth were open, as if he had still wanted to say something, perhaps an order, perhaps a curse, perhaps a plea, but life had left him faster than he could finish anything.

The second body moved.

A man clutched his throat, fingers slick with blood or saliva, rasping, trying to catch air, his boots scraping stone in that absurd, pitiful movement a person makes when the body is still fighting though the matter has probably already been decided.

Someone kicked him in the ribs to move him out of the passage. I do not know who. Perhaps Red. Perhaps one of the lads. Perhaps Moira. Because Moira was there.

I saw her at the next door, pale as lime, shaking, hair escaping from under her cap, but with keys clutched in her hand so tightly they seemed not pieces of metal, but her own heart. Her hands trembled, yet when she put the key in the lock, she did it surely, quickly, with the precision of someone who had watched people being locked away too long and had at last learned how to open.

"One more cell on the left!" Red shouted.

"There's no time!" answered the lad with the axe.

Moira turned to him with a face so sharp that for a second she seemed almost a stranger.

"Then make time, damn you!"

The axe moved.

Not into a man, not this time, but into the wooden slat by a side door which someone had tried to bar from outside. Once, twice, it struck. Wood split with a dry crack, and from the corridor ran a woman half-naked, hair flung over her face, holding a shoe under her arm as if it were a weapon.

"Where?" she screamed.

"Behind us, if you want to live!" Red shouted back.

The woman ran. In moments like that a person does not know names. Only directions. Left, right, forward, do not stop. At the end of the corridor someone fired.

The sound was deafening in the enclosed space, shattered against the brick and returned to us multiplied. The bullet struck the wall so close to my face that chips of plaster sprayed my cheek and mouth, leaving the taste of lime and dirt.

"Down!" someone shouted.

I did not go down.

Red shoved me sideways so hard that my hip hit the wall, while with her other hand she dragged one lad's arm lower, correcting the position of his weapon before he fired blindly.

"Not at the ceiling, Seamus, unless you mean to kill God!" she snarled.

"If he's English, gladly!"

He fired. I did not see whether he hit. I did not want to know.

We moved on, each step a fight against my own body, because hunger, bruises, days without sleep, and prison damp suddenly decided to remind me of themselves all at once, like old creditors who had heard I was trying to leave town.

The corridor turned, then narrowed by the steps leading down, where the smoke was thicker and the air hotter. Someone must have set fire to something at the entrance,

a store room perhaps, a cart of hay, perhaps the gate itself, and now fire was eating wood with the enthusiasm of a poor man let into a bakery.

"The courtyard!" shouted Moira. "This way!"

I heard the pursuit behind us.

Clearly this time.

Heavy boots, orders, coughing, curses, someone shouting to shut the west gate, which was fairly funny considering the west gate was apparently burning like the ambition of a local councillor before an election.

We burst into the courtyard, and the cold night air struck my face together with smoke, sparks, and ash falling from above like dirty snow.

The courtyard was chaos.

Not the beautiful chaos written about by people sitting by a fire, but real, ugly, stinking chaos, in which someone screams, someone bleeds, a horse rears, a boy with a pistol cries while loading the weapon the wrong way round, someone tries to drag a barrel under a gate, and someone else shouts that not that way, you stupid fucker, the dogs are there.

We passed two more bodies, one curled under the wall, the other stretched on its back in a puddle that could have been water or blood, perhaps both, because the night no longer wished to distinguish.

Sparks flew from the gate.

Someone had set it alight, that was clear, but the flames were not meant to destroy it at once, rather to do what fire does best: take away people's certainty about where the exit is and where death begins. Guards on the other side shouted at one another, coughed, tried to throw wet sheets, but smoke blew straight into their faces and horses in the traces reared like mad things.

Then from around the corner came a cart.

Old, creaking, ugly as sin and about as sturdy, drawn by two horses with eyes so wide they looked as if they understood anarchy better than most men in Parliament. One horse had foam at its mouth, the other bled slightly along the side, probably from a blow or a scrape, but both tore forward with that desperate energy of animals who know that if they stop, someone will turn them into meat, leather, or memory.

On the driver's seat sat Greta.

And God, if anyone had ever wished to paint a patron saint of fugitives, quarrels, the poor, and very bad decisions, he should have painted Greta then, with hair escaping from under her scarf, face blackened by smoke, reins wrapped around one hand and a revolver in the other, teeth bared in a grimace that might have been a smile but might equally have meant she was about to bite someone.

"Move faster, damn you!" she shouted. "I didn't hire this palace for the whole night!"

"Are you driving it or trying to kill the horses?" the lad with the axe shouted back.

"One does not exclude the other!"

Red seized my arm, pulled me towards the cart, and I felt the ground leave under my feet, because adrenaline does strange things to the body. First it gives strength, then demands payment.

"Get in!" she shouted. "And don't ask who died!"

I did not ask. I did not want to. Not now.

I grabbed the side of the cart. The wood was wet, rough, full of splinters. One drove under my nail, but I did not let go. Someone pushed me from behind, someone else pulled me by the hand, and at last I fell inside, striking my knee on a board so hard that for a second I saw a flash of white.

There were already two girls in the back.

One cried so quietly that her crying was almost more frightening than a scream, because her face was wet but her eyes were empty, as if she herself did not know where the water came from.

The other had a broken head. Blood ran from her hair along temple and neck, soaking into the collar, but she sat upright, stubbornly, hands clenched on the bench, as if she had decided that if she could not stop the bleeding, at least no one would take her uprightness.

Moira threw herself at the wheel and clambered in just behind me, heavily, awkwardly, without a trace of her usual silence, no longer a wardress, no longer a piece of the wall, but a woman who had just cut her own life in half and had no idea which half would bleed more.

Someone fired.

The bullet cut the air with that disgustingly clean whistle which always seems too elegant for a thing designed to make holes in people, and struck somewhere in the wood by the wheel, tearing splinters out.

The horses neighed, Greta swore so filthily that even in the middle of an escape I thought Milly would have been delighted, then the reins cracked in the air, the cart jerked so violently that Moira fell on top of me, the girl with the broken head groaned, someone outside screamed to keep low, and we moved.

We did not drive.

We moved like something shot from a sling, like a drunken sin on wheels, like a last chance knocked together from planks, sweat, stolen courage, and a very doubtful understanding of mechanics.

The cart raced across the courtyard, wheels hammering the stones so hard that every turn sounded like the announcement of disaster, the axle groaned, the boards creaked, the horses tore forward, Greta shouted at them, at us, at the guards, at God, and probably at the state of British roads, and looking at the whole contraption I was almost certain that if a bullet did not stop us, ordinary physics would, which apparently could also be loyal to the Crown.

We passed the burning gate so close that heat struck my cheek and smoke for a moment covered the whole world. I saw only orange flashes of fire, black outlines of people, and sparks flying up like furious insects.

Someone jumped onto the back of the cart at the last moment, one hand catching the board, then the other. The lad with the pistol tried to pull him in, but another shot must have struck him in the arm because he cried out and dropped the weapon, which clattered onto the boards near my foot.

"Leave it!" Red shouted when I bent for it. "Keep your head lower!"

I obeyed, which in itself was a miracle, because my head usually had a rather cool relationship with instructions.

The cart burst through a side passage. I do not know who opened it or when. Perhaps Moira, perhaps Greta, perhaps someone already dead. Suddenly the rhythm beneath the wheels changed, the courtyard fell behind us, and the city opened before us: dark, wet, stinking, with narrow streets running between warehouse walls, workshops, workers' houses, and all those places where poverty sleeps lightly, always afraid someone will come after it with a bill.

I did not look back. I did not want to see who lay there. Who bled. Who remained.

But not looking did not help, because imagination is a vile creature and can show a person everything even with eyes closed.

Red sat opposite me, though "sat" is too generous, because she was gripping the side with one hand and pressing the other to her ribs, as if something hurt or as if she were trying to hide a wound she did not yet want to show me.

Sweat ran down her face, cutting pale tracks through the soot. The blood on her sleeve was dark, almost black in that light. And when she finally looked at me through the smoke, dust, and jolting of the cart, there was no triumph in her eyes.

There was no relief either. There was something far worse. Knowledge of the price.

For the first time since I had known her, Red said nothing, though she might have thrown something sharp, stupid, necessary. She might have called me a stubborn idiot. She might have said I looked like a corpse, but more mouthy. She might have done anything to turn fear into a joke.

She did not. She did not need to. Not that night.

That night words were too small, too clean, too easy to lose between shots, wheels, and screams. Everything that mattered had already been said in smoke, blood, an open door, and a hand reaching towards me.

The cart raced on, faster and faster, too fast for its rotten wheels and our shabby hope, and I held on to the boards, feeling splinters, sticky sweat, and my own blood under my fingers, and I understood that this night we were not only escaping prison.

We were escaping the life they had written for us. And that meant every breath from now on would be stolen. Perhaps that is why it tasted sharper than freedom.

CHAPTER V

The Mill at the Edge of the Map

The place had been prepared beforehand, because no one in possession of a sound mind breaks a woman out of a magistrate's cell only to stand with her in the middle of the road wondering which way to run, although, to be fair, after that night I had begun to suspect that sound sense had long since abandoned our company and left behind only muddy boots, a few bullets and a stubbornness large enough to shift half a city, should half a city have the poor judgement to stand in our way.

We had somewhere to go, at least for a few hours, perhaps for the night, perhaps until the first bark of a dog, the first over-curious farmer or the first constable who, instead of dozing by the stove, decided to pretend he served the Crown with something more than his belly and his dislike of effort. The place lay several miles outside Manchester, beyond the city, if one may say that of the ruin of an old mill beside an overgrown track which looked as though it had led nowhere for years and was rather proud of the fact. We had shaken the trail before anyone had truly set off after us, or so Greta claimed, and Greta drove the cart through side streets, mud, field paths and half-swallowed lanes with the certainty of a woman who had spent her whole life dreaming of nothing else but racing her own death by night, with a revolver in one hand and a cartload of escaped women behind her, over roads made, apparently, by people who hated wheels, horses and the human spine.

The cart bounced in the ruts, creaked, groaned and several times produced such a sound that I was certain our grand escape was about to end in a ditch under a broken shaft, with Greta calling physics an English whore, but somehow we went on. We only slowed when the lights of the city had fallen away behind us and there was nothing but darkness, wet fields, strips of mist lying low over the ground, and that smell of northern England which cannot be mistaken for anything else: rain, coal, horse-sweat, rotting leaves and the lives of people who, even in the countryside, are not given silence by the world, only its cheaper imitation.

The old mill rose before us suddenly out of the black, like the remnant of a bad dream. Brick torn by time, windows boarded shut, the roof holed and twisted, but still holding enough not to kill us at once, which at that moment I considered almost aristocratic courtesy. It looked like a place where a person might hide, die or start a new life, depending on who found the door first. Its walls were scorched in patches, the brickwork split, weeds pressed between the courses with the perseverance of the poor forcing their way into a bakery after scraps, and in the yard lay pieces of the old mill wheel, beams, broken buckets and something that might once have been a gate and now served chiefly as a warning against excessive faith in human workmanship.

Beneath the mill there was a cave, though it was more like an underground wound than a natural refuge, low and wet, cut partly through stone and partly through brick, with its entrance hidden behind a collapsed wall and a pile of rotten boards. One had to pass through sideways, head bowed, as though the hiding place itself wished to remind

every soul entering it that freedom, if it exists at all, very rarely arrives with a straight back. Once, Red told me later, those cellars had served as a house for an Irish network, and I understood at once why she and the boys knew the place with such certainty, why Callum found the loosened stone without searching, why Finn knew where to leave the weapons and why Seamus, despite cursing under his breath the entire way and assuring us the mill stank worse than the conscience of an English judge, moved through the dark as if returning to a home he had never wanted to see again.

Inside, a fire was burning. It was close, smoking, too small to warm us properly and too smoky to pretend at comfort, but its light was all we had, and in such moments a person begins to value even a fire that bites the eyes more than it helps. The flames caught on wet walls, faces, pistol barrels, bloodstains which in that orange light looked nearly black, and reminded us that we were alive, breathing, not yet packed back into a cell, a ship or a grave. That, one had to admit, was a kind of progress, though happiness still required dry clothes, an honest doctor and a world in which one did not have to blow open gates in order to be treated as a human being.

We were silent for a long time, because after a night like that words do not come at once, and if they do, they are usually so stupid that it is better to let them die in the throat. One of the girls sat by the wall wrapped in a blanket, shaking the way a body shakes when it has not yet understood that it is no longer running. Another, the one with the split head, allowed Moira to wash the wound with dirty water from a tin bowl, clenching her teeth so hard the muscles jumped in her cheeks. Greta prowled near the entrance like an angry dog, listening, checking the pistol, adjusting the screen of boards and now and then muttering curses apparently directed at all state institutions, several saints and one especially ungrateful mare that had nearly overturned the cart at the last bend.

Red sat opposite me.

Sweating, bloodied, tired to the marrow, her shoulders hanging a little lower than usual, as if only now, with the door behind us covered and the world shut out for a few hours by stone, wood and stupid hope, she had allowed her body to admit that it was only a body, not iron, not a torch, not a curse flung in the face of the Empire. Her sleeve was torn, blood marked her wrist, and soot lay along one cheek, not hiding her pallor but sharpening it. Yet her eyes, those damned eyes, for which more than one sensible person might have signed their own death warrant without reading the small print, had not changed at all. She looked as though all of this made sense. As though a prison escape, a burning gate, dead guards, Moira's betrayal, an old mill and our band of exhausted, bleeding people were pieces of a plan which had always had the right to succeed, though reason, history and the state of British roads all held rather different opinions.

She handed me a flask.

I did not ask anything at once, because first I had to remember how a throat works when it is not being used for screaming, coughing or swearing. I drank, and the stuff struck my tongue and gullet like fire, vile, cheap, sharp, probably illegal and almost certainly capable of taking rust off hinges, so naturally in that moment it tasted like the finest drink in the world. I drew in smoke from the hearth until my chest stung, and only

after the alcohol's heat had spread beneath my ribs and my hands had stopped trembling enough for me to pretend it was not fear, did I ask:

"How the devil did you do it?"

Red took a crumpled cigarette from her pocket, bent and tired as the rest of us, put it between her lips, leaned over the fire and lit it from a strip of burning wood. For a moment the flame lit her face from beneath and made of her something between a holy martyr and a very bad decision, and I already knew her well enough to suspect that, of the two titles, she would accept only the second.

"Greta," she muttered after a while, blowing smoke from the corner of her mouth. "She was the key. Not the pretty symbolic kind you would immediately write something very clever and very dangerous about on a wall, but a real filthy key to Moira, because she was the only one who could get near her when she came out for breaks, collected rations or pretended not to hear the guards telling each other over coffee who needed 'settling down' that day."

Greta snorted from the entrance without even turning round.

"The key, am I? Lovely. All my life I wanted to be a burglary tool. Mother would have been proud, had she not died of disappointment earlier."

"She passed the message," Red went on, ignoring her with the practised ease of long acquaintance. "She risked more than she should have. More than anyone had the right to ask of her."

I looked towards Moira, who was kneeling beside the wounded girl and pressing a rag to her head, her face tight, pale, stripped of the official mask she had worn in the prison like a second uniform. Now she looked younger and older at once, like someone who had suddenly lost her place in the world and did not yet know whether she ought to mourn it.

"But Moira... why her?" I asked more softly, though I did not know whether out of caution towards her or towards the very thought that someone on the other side of the bars might have a conscience larger than a fingernail.

Red rubbed her forehead with dirty fingers, leaving another smear of soot.

"Because she could not watch any longer either. Greta said Moira was not sleeping, that she came back from work with the face of someone leaving behind more than locked cells, that once she punched the wall half the night until the neighbour came to ask if she was murdering her husband, and apparently she answered she had no such luck. I knew if I gave her something to believe in, not a sermon, not some grand plan to redeem the world, but a concrete thing, one woman, one time, one key, she would do it."

"And she did," I said.

Moira lifted her head but said nothing.

Red nodded slowly.

"And she did."

Silence settled between us, heavy but not empty, more like a blanket laid over a wounded body, rough, uncomfortable, necessary. The fire spat resin, though the wood looked so old and wet it should not have had resin left in it, and one of the boys, the one with the axe, sat down by the wall and began wrapping his hand in a piece of shirt, because only then had he noticed he had cut it almost to the bone.

"Callum, Finn, Patrick, Seamus," Red said after a while, indicating the boys one after another with her chin, as though she were introducing family at a table and not a gang of armed Irishmen sitting in a cave beneath a ruined mill. "My lads. From Ireland. The old network. I belonged to them once, before I became tired enough to pretend at sense and stupid enough to think that, if I stopped meddling, the world would kindly stop finding me."

Seamus, thin, with a nose crooked as a badly written promise, raised two fingers to his brow.

"A pleasure to meet the lady who nearly cost me a key, a leg and the last of my faith in planning."

"Faith never served you for anything," said Finn, sitting nearer the entrance with a pistol across his knees. "You always replaced it with stupidity and luck."

"And as you can see, it works."

"You are still alive, so God evidently has worse business tonight."

Red looked at them in such a way that both fell quiet, though Seamus still managed to mutter something about the English God probably taking bribes anyway.

"I was young," Red continued, looking now into the fire and not at me. "Younger than them. Foolish. Angry. I thought revolution was something you could carry in your pocket like a stone, pull out at the right moment and throw through the right window, and then the whole world would suddenly understand it was meant to stop being cruel."

"And then?" I asked, though her face had already told me not to expect an answer easy to carry.

She drew on the cigarette so deeply it was as if she wanted to burn something inside herself.

"Then a girl died."

No one spoke.

Even Greta stopped circling the entrance.

Red stared into the fire for a long while, and when she began again, her voice was calm, but not dead, which was precisely why it hurt more.

"My girl. I do not know what to call her so it sounds honest, because those times had no good words for us, and the bad ones belonged in other people's mouths, so say only that she was mine, though she never belonged to anyone, not even me. Her name was Maeve. She could laugh in such a way that for a moment a person believed the world might still be acquitted, which was complete nonsense, but pretty nonsense, and I was weak for pretty nonsense then. They took her after a failed arms run. She should not have been there. I should have. Before we could get her out, it was done."

I swallowed.

The flask in my hand suddenly seemed heavier.

"Red..."

"No," she cut in quietly, without anger. "Do not make that face. I have no strength left for pity. Not even yours. Especially not yours."

I closed my mouth.

Sometimes even I could.

"After her, I could not stand it," she said. "I left the network. Stopped taking messages, stopped carrying parcels, stopped believing every sacrifice had meaning just because someone would write its name on a wall afterwards or sing about it drunk. I worked, drifted, lived like everyone else, if one can call that daily standing before machines that try to eat you without swallowing a life. But they never stopped. Callum once told me that if I ever needed anything, he would find me before I managed to shout for it."

The man sitting a little farther off, older than the rest by perhaps a few years, with dark hair and a face tired in the way one night does not make, only a whole life in the shadow of pursuit, turned slightly.

"I also said if it was foolishness, I would save you first and kill you myself afterwards," he muttered.

"I am still waiting," Red replied.

"The night is young."

"And he found you," I said quietly.

Red nodded.

"He found me."

For a while there was only the fire, one girl's cough and the distant, barely perceptible rush of wind through the holes in the mill roof. My body began, slowly, to understand that it was no longer in a cell, and, like the ungrateful creature it was, instead of rejoicing, it immediately remembered every bruise, scrape, blow, hunger, exhaustion and pain in my ribs, which apparently decided that an escape was an excellent opportunity to lodge an official complaint.

"I gave them the plan," Red said, as though now, since the worst had been said, she could return to easier matters, such as violence, logistics and treason. "Observations. Changes of watch. Who drinks, who sleeps, who goes with women, who fears smoke, who always leaves his keys on the right hip because he is a right-handed idiot with too much faith in a belt. Service entrances. The pattern of lights. Corridors where they carry dirty sheets, because no one ever searches laundry as thoroughly as weapons. Moira passed a map from inside, incomplete, but enough. Cart and horses were ready two days earlier, hidden by a cooper's yard whose wife is Finn's cousin, and Finn's cousin apparently hates the English more than she hates her own husband, which proved useful."

"Margaret says that makes her a sensible woman," Finn put in.

"Margaret says every woman who hates her husband deserves a medal and a kitchen of her own," Greta replied.

"The place?" I asked, though I already knew part of the answer.

Red looked around at the wet walls, old beams and dark corners where anything might be sitting, from a rat to a memory.

"The mill. It was once used for smuggling arms. Then people. Then arms again. Then for a few years it only grew mould, which was probably its most legal period. It has an underground passage to the ditch by the old canal, useless for anything larger than a person crawling like a very determined worm, but if we must, we go out that way."

"If we must?"

"Nell, after what we have done, 'if' is a very optimistic word."

I drank again from the flask, though I am not sure whether for courage or because my throat was scraped raw by smoke and I wanted to finish it off with something equally vile.

"How long did it take?"

Red looked into the fire.

Her face was hard as brick, but her eyes betrayed something she could not quite hide.

"Ten days. Ten days of planning, watching, passing messages through people who might lose work, teeth or life for it. Three nights almost without sleep. Two lads beaten on the way because someone had to draw off the patrol near Dock Road. One woman pretending to be drunk to pull a guard towards the wrong gate. One horse bought cheap because its former owner said it had 'character', which proved to be a polite phrase for trying to murder anyone who touched the reins. And two minutes' margin for error."

"Two minutes?"

"One minute and forty seconds, if Greta counted badly."

Greta snorted.

"I count perfectly. The world is badly arranged."

No one laughed aloud, but something in the air eased for a moment, as though even the darkness under the mill had to admit that black humour is sometimes the only hygiene available to the working class.

I was silent for a long while, holding the flask in both hands because suddenly I did not know what else to do with them. I looked at Red, at her blood, smoke, exhaustion, at the way she tried to sit straight despite the pain, and I felt that the question in my throat was neither clever nor practical, but if I did not ask it, it would begin to choke me from within.

"Why?" I asked at last. "Why did you do it?"

Red shrugged.

Of course she shrugged. If she could have hidden her heart behind a gesture, she would have done it at once and then insulted the gesture for being too sentimental.

But her voice trembled. Not much. Enough.

"Because I could not watch the light go out of your eyes."

The fire crackled, as if the wood did not know whether to burn or split.

The silence between us became heavier than the prison walls, heavier than the sentence, heavier than everything I had tried to hold inside myself over the past days, and suddenly I understood that what sat between Red and me was no longer gratitude, not merely shared anger, not even only that strange, awkward pull I had tried to name a hundred things except the right one.

It was a decision.

Her decision.

A risk chosen consciously, step by step, over ten days, through sleeplessness, fear, people who might die, through Moira, Greta, Callum, Finn, Patrick and Seamus, through the burning gate, the blood on her sleeve and the dead guards in the corridor.

No one does such a thing for just anyone.

No one stakes their own life, old wounds, other people's contacts and the remains of safety on one throw merely because they like someone's character.

I said nothing. Not because I had no words. I had too many. Only none seemed honest enough.

So I sat opposite her with the flask in my hands, in the ruin of the old mill, underground, in smoke, among people who had just done something unforgivable, and I looked at Red as though only now I had truly seen her.

And she looked away first. Not from shame. Not from fear.

Rather because there are things easier to survive when one does not look at them too long and too straight.

At some point one of the Irish lads, the same one who had spent most of the evening silent at the top of the mill, perched somewhere between the remains of the roof and a rotten beam with a makeshift spyglass to his eye, fashioned, I think, from an old brass cylinder, a shard of glass and a prayer that had long since stopped being Catholic, came down to us so fast that the first thing I heard was not his voice but the thud of his boots on the rotten stairs, too heavy, too urgent, not belonging to the careful silence we were trying to keep in the ruin, as though silence might shield us better than stone, old walls and a few pistols held by boys who, with every breath, looked less like revolutionaries and more like very young people who had just realised that history does not smell of ink and grand words, but of smoke, sweat, horse dung and fresh blood.

He entered the underground room without knocking, without clearing his throat, without any of that small human courtesy which, in normal times, lets one pretend a man is not dropping into someone else's fear like a stone into a bucket. And from his face I knew that whatever he had seen was not an accident, nor something to be dismissed with a shrug. His cheeks were reddened by cold air, hair stuck to his forehead, and in his eyes there was the gleam that appears not when people are afraid, but when fear has just moved from the future into the present and at last something has to be done with it.

"We have a problem," he said without greeting, stopping by the fire, whose smoking light caught the soot on his face and made him look for a moment like a miner pulled from a collapsed shaft. "A big one."

Silence fell in the ruin, but not the earlier worn-out, heavy silence of people who had escaped and were trying for a few moments to pretend the world behind them would not set off with dogs, lamps and paragraphs of law. This silence was sudden, sharp, immediate, the kind made when everyone stops breathing at the same instant and begins, in their head, to count every mistake they might have made.

"I imagine so," I replied before anyone else could speak, because apparently my tongue still considered it had the right to lead me to the gallows with dignity and a little malice. "How much time do we have?"

The lad looked at me briefly, with the unpleasant honesty of someone who no longer had the strength or desire to wrap anything in soft cloth.

"An hour. Maybe two, if we have luck, and after tonight I would not assume the Lord is sitting at our table dealing cards in our favour. I saw lights from the road by the marshes, first two, then five, perhaps more, and they did not look like farmers coming back from the tavern, unless farmers have suddenly learned to move in formation and

carry lamps for searching verges. The port guard knows already. The police have likely had word too, because there is movement from the city that was not there an hour ago. So far we are outside their nose, but that will not last. They want to make an example of you, Nell. And of all of us, if they can."

My name in his mouth sounded strange, not like a girl's name but like the name of a problem to be carried through canals, mud and checkpoints before it turned into a common funeral. For one brief, ugly second I felt something that was not even fear, but the cold prick of knowing that every person in that room was breathing harder because of me, though I had not invented truncheons, courts, colonies or overseers whose hands found women's faces faster than their own consciences.

"What does Callum say?" Red asked, and there was no panic in her voice, only a hardness that cost more than she wanted to show.

Greta, who until then had stood at the entrance with the revolver hanging by her thigh and the expression of a woman ready to shoot the enemy and anyone who got in the way through stupidity, jerked her chin towards the Irish lads sitting under the damp wall. They came over without a word, like men who had already had too many conversations beginning with "we have a problem" and ending worse than planned. Callum was the calmest among them and therefore the most worrying. His brows were drawn, his face seemed made of brick, rain and old disappointments, and when he crouched by the floorboard on which someone had sketched a rough map in coal and knife marks, he did it with such practicality that one might have thought he was discussing a route for delivering potatoes, not the flight of people hunted by half of Manchester.

"The nearest way out is the canal to the river," he said, dragging a dirty finger along a line on the board that looked like a scar. "From here through the scrub to the old spillway, then under the embankment, then along the canal, where the water stinks so badly even tracking dogs may begin to doubt the purpose of their calling. If we get a boat, we can try for the river and before dawn reach nearer the port. One of ours knows a captain who does not ask for papers if he is paid enough, or if someone presses a knife convincingly enough against his sense of business."

"When does he sail?" asked Red. "And where the devil do we get a boat, because I assume it is not lying wrapped behind the mill with a ribbon from Our Lady?"

Seamus gave a nervous snort, but no one laughed, because the joke stood too close to the truth.

"The ship sails tomorrow evening," Callum answered, not lifting his eyes from the map. "From the lower warehouses, so far as we know. We can take a boat from the service jetty on the canal. There are two, perhaps three. One leaks, one is chained, one is used by the flour men, if it is still there. Finn knows the watchman there. Meaning he knew his sister, which is probably worse than not knowing him, but it may help if the man does not decide to put on morality at two in the morning."

"If they catch us before then..." began one of the girls, the one with the split head, her voice thin but dry, as if crying had burned out of her earlier and left ash.

"They will hang us," Greta finished with the simplicity of a woman saying it would rain tomorrow. "Or not hang us, depending on how civilised they wish to look. Perhaps

first they will put us in a cell, then make us sign papers, then send half to the colonies, the other half to the grave, and write that the rest died of fever, moral decline and an improper attitude towards state property."

"Thank you, Greta," Seamus muttered. "As always, you bring a little sunlight to the conversation."

"I leave sunlight to people who do not have the police up their arse."

A silence followed, broken only by the crack of wood in the fire and the heavy, uneven breathing of people trying to look ready, though each of them, in thought, was quietly saying farewell to some version of themselves that might yet have gone home, closed a door, washed hands and pretended nothing had happened. I looked at the map, at that ridiculous world of a few black lines that were meant to lead between life and capture, and I wanted to say the whole thing was madness. Only after an escape from a magistrate's prison, a burning gate and bodies in a corridor, the word madness had lost something of its former usefulness.

I rose slowly, feeling at once how my body reminded me it was made not of declarations, but of bruises, hunger and muscles that had been working on credit for many hours. Still I straightened, because in such moments a person may have no food, sleep, plan or honest chance, but may still have a posture, and sometimes that is enough to keep others from falling apart for a moment.

I looked at them all: Red sitting motionless with a cigarette dying between her fingers, Greta at the entrance, Moira in the half-shadow with her hands clasped so hard she seemed to be stopping them from shaking, Callum, Finn, Patrick and Seamus, the girls from the cart, all those tired, dirty, frightened and furious faces. I thought that if the Empire truly wanted something to fear, it should not fear me alone, not Nell Whitmore with a shovel and too long a tongue, but this very picture, these people joined not by an ideal but by necessity, injury and the very practical awareness that separately we would go under the knife, but together we might yet ruin someone's evening.

"That means we have less than a day," I said calmly, though inside something tore at me like a horse before the slaughterhouse. "Less, if those lights are truly coming for us and not for someone else, and since the world is rarely kind enough to let other people's catastrophes pass our door without knocking, let us assume they are coming for us. We must organise ourselves. No panic. Count people, weapons, water, food, the wounded and those who can still run. If we start flapping now like hens before a fox, they may not even need the police. We will present ourselves to them, tied with ribbon and apologising for the inconvenience."

"Easy for you to say," Seamus broke in, jerking his head up, and in his eyes flashed not cowardice, but the anger of a man who is afraid and hates that anyone might see it. "They are after you. You are the one they hunt, the one they want to hang on the tongues of newspapers and set before the workers like a dead sermon. We can still slip away, split, disappear into the districts, go back to old holes, pretend we were never here. But no, now we are all bloody ruined, because someone decided one girl with a shovel was worth half a city on fire."

Several people shifted uneasily, as if his words had spoken aloud what some of them had feared thinking, and for a brief moment the fire seemed louder, the underground

room tighter. Red's eyes lifted, sharp and immediate, but I raised a hand before she could cut him apart with words, because that question belonged to me, whether I liked it or not.

"So you want to leave?" I asked quietly.

I did not raise my voice. I did not need to. Besides, sometimes a calm question does more to a person than a shout, especially if it strikes the very place he is trying to cover.

Seamus looked at me for a long time, face drawn, suddenly younger, more boyish beneath all the soot, rage and attempt at hardness, and for a moment I thought he would say yes, that he would go, that he had had enough, that he did not want to die for another person's cause. The worst of it was that I could not have hated him for it, because no normal person wants to die for another person's cause, and certainly not at two in the morning in a ruined mill, with smoke in the air, blood drying on a sleeve and someone carrying lamps in the distance.

But he did not answer.

He looked away first.

Callum cleared his throat, not loudly, but enough to retrieve the conversation before it fell into accusation.

"We cannot split," he said. "Not now. Perhaps if we were alone, perhaps if this were only us, perhaps if this were an ordinary job, but not after what has happened. Now you are ours, whether you like it or not, and I do not mean that prettily or romantically, only practically. If they take you again, no one will risk this a second time, because there will be no second chance. They will ship you, bury you, or break you so thoroughly that even if the body comes back, the rest will remain wherever they put you. So we go together."

Red nodded slowly, her eyes never leaving the map.

"What is left of the plan?"

Callum's finger moved along the drawn line from the mill to the canal, then to a fork near the old bridge, where someone had marked a cross and beside it an awkward sign which might have meant a descent, a hatch or a very badly drawn coffin.

"The plan was to sit here until dawn, rest, dress the wounded, then move in small groups. But since the lights are closer, that plan can be shoved somewhere even an English judge would not inspect without a warrant. We move tonight. In an hour, best of all, before the circle tightens. Through the copse, then down to the canal. We take a boat from the service jetty. If it is locked, Patrick opens it. If it is guarded, Greta talks."

Greta lifted the revolver.

"I have a very persuasive manner of conversation."

"If the boat has holes?" I asked.

"We plug them with rags, prayer and Seamus, since he talks too much anyway," Finn said.

"Very funny," Seamus grunted. "I shall die as a cork. Mother always said I had potential."

Moirá rose then from the corner, slowly, as though only now finding the strength to step into the centre of the conversation, and came nearer the fire. Her face was pale, tight, and her dark eyes carried the kind of fear that no longer seeks escape, only punishment. For a moment she looked at me, then at Red, then at Callum, and when she

spoke her voice trembled but did not break, which is sometimes more painful than weeping.

"This is all because of me," she said. "If I had not helped, if I had not given the map, taken the keys, told you when they changed watch, perhaps Nell would still be in prison, yes, but you... you might still be free. Greta could go back to her people, Red could vanish, the lads could stay in the shadows. And now everyone who was at that gate, everyone who gave a hand, everyone who even breathed beside me has a target on their back."

Red looked at her hard, without a trace of that softness people sometimes mistake for compassion, and which Moira probably would not have accepted anyway.

"Do not say such things," she said. "Not now, and preferably never again, because if you start balancing conscience like the till in a company shop, you will always find it was better to do nothing. That is the lie people like them feed us. That if you sit quiet, you are innocent. That if you look but do not touch, you are not taking part. That if you hold a key and do not open a door, you are only doing your work. Your conscience saved our lives. At last someone on your side had to open her eyes, even if she also opened a cell and several very inconvenient problems."

Moira nodded, but the fear remained in her eyes, deep, stubborn, grown into her through years of wearing a uniform in a place where, to survive, a person had to look away a little each day. I went to her, though every step reminded me I was more bruise than woman, and for a moment I did not know whether to touch her, thank her or merely stand beside her, because sometimes beside is the most one can give another person without taking the last shreds of their dignity.

"If you had not helped," I said quietly, "I would be sitting in a cell now, waiting for the ship on which they would make me a warning to every girl who breathes too loudly. So if you insist on blaming yourself, Moira, choose something more sensible. The state of British justice, for instance. Or men's fondness for clubs. That will occupy you for the rest of your life and be nearer the truth."

Her mouth twitched, almost a smile, but not quite.

"You are dreadful even after a prison escape."

"I try to maintain a standard."

"You do."

Red looked away, but I saw her face ease for a moment, slightly, almost invisibly, as though that small, foolish piece of conversation had given her half a breath in a world trying to take all of them from us.

Then we began to gather things. Quietly. Quickly.

Without all the unnecessary gestures people make when they still have time. Someone killed part of the fire and left only embers so the entrance would not smoke more than necessary. Finn counted bullets and cursed under his breath, because the number evidently offended his sense of safety. Patrick wrapped weapons in rags so they would not catch the light. Greta checked the horses, or rather went above for a moment and returned with the information that they stood, snorted and bore us a grudge, which under the circumstances she considered satisfactory. Moira tore cloth into bandages. Red adjusted her belt, hid her cigarette, checked the knife tucked into her boot and avoided

my eyes so thoroughly that I began to suspect she would rather return under fire than talk about what she had said by the flames.

And I watched it all, feeling the invisible clock begin ticking again, not in a cell, not within the magistrate's walls, but here under the mill, among people with filthy faces, trembling hands and very little time.

Everyone knew we were going into the dark.

Everyone knew someone was already following our trail.

Everyone had the same question in their eyes, only no one wanted to say it, because once spoken it would become too real.

Who would not live to see dawn?

We went down into the canals before the sun had managed to rise over Manchester, although underground that made no difference, because there darkness knew no clock, made no distinction between dawn and midnight, and showed no mercy to eyes accustomed to fire or to lungs which, after prison damp, mill smoke and a whole night of flight, blood and bad decisions, wanted even a little air fit for life and received instead a stench so thick and ancient that for the first few steps I felt I was not breathing, but swallowing something dead.

It smelled of mould, rotten meat, slick stone, rat fur, standing water and that disgusting sweetish decay which always pretends to be only a smell, though in truth it is an entire condition of existence, something that pours into the nose, mouth, skin and hair, stays under the fingernails and reminds a person that cities have intestines, and intestines are never pretty, even if above them stand town halls, courts, churches and houses of people who speak of morality with such zeal one would think they had never seen where their own filth drains.

The water in the canals did not flow. It stood, heavy and dark, like a corpse in a puddle, ruffling faintly under our steps, our breathing and the drops falling from the ceiling, each striking the surface with a quiet, stubborn tap, as though someone far away were counting time for us, though none of us had any longer understood whether we had much left, little, or only as much as fits between one shot and the next.

The walls on either side were wet, furred with growth, black grease, rusty streaks and old soot. When I dragged a hand along them for balance, under my fingers I felt something alive or pretending to be alive, cold, slick, sticky, so that I immediately wanted to wipe my hand on my dress, though after the last few days the dress itself looked like something a sensible person would wipe their boots on only in desperation.

Metal walkways ran above the water in narrow, uncertain strips, ringing beneath our steps with a thin, treacherous sound, as though they had long waited for a chance to remind someone that human hope very often rests on a rusted screw, a badly laid beam and a prayer muttered too late.

Callum went first with a torch, bent slightly, alert, shoulders tight, head turning every few steps as if he could read things in the darkness the rest of us could not see. The flame in his hand trembled nervously, throwing broken shadows onto the walls, stretching and shrinking and leaping over the wet bricks like the figures of people who had died here earlier and still could not find the way out.

Red went just behind him, her face pale in the orange light, a knife at her belt and one hand ready by instinct for movement, as though every sound might become the beginning of a fight. I walked behind Red, close enough to see the tension in her shoulders, the streaks of soot on her neck, the wet strands of hair stuck to her skin and the small, almost invisible way she turned her head from time to time to check that I was still behind her, as if after pulling me out of prison she no longer trusted any world that might swallow me again.

Behind me came Greta, heavy and sure, revolver hidden but available faster than many curses. Then Moira, who in the dark seemed even more silent than usual, her face taut, eyes taking in everything as though every bend in the canal were another decision that could not be undone. After her came Finn, Seamus, Patrick and the rest, all trying to tread quietly, though in that cursed place quiet did not exist. Every step echoed from the walls, every breath came back larger, and every brush of metal against brick sounded as if someone had struck a hammer into the middle of the skull.

The canals led us through a twisting labyrinth that did not look like the work of men, but like something the city had vomited out in fever, with passages too low, then too narrow, then suddenly opening into filthy chambers full of damp and old wooden props, where the air stood so heavy the torch-flame dimmed, as if even fire had had enough of breathing what we breathed.

In places we had to stoop so low that my back protested and my knees immediately remembered the cart, the cell, the blows from clubs and all the other favours the Empire had lately laid upon my body. Elsewhere we had to squeeze sideways, feeling the wet walls touch both shoulders at once, as though the canal wished to test us, stop us, warn us or simply eat us by degrees, because perhaps even the underbelly of Manchester was tired of people forcing themselves into it with their tragedies.

"Three crossings more," Callum muttered without turning, and his voice sounded flat and strange in the tunnel, as if immediately swallowed by brick. "Then the little bridge and the drop to the dead tunnel. The lads with the boat wait there, unless they decided sense is prettier than loyalty."

"How long?" Red asked quietly, with no spare words, though there was that strain in her voice which said that every minute now had the weight of a body.

"Twenty minutes, if the roof does not fall, no one twists an ankle, no guard decides to prove he has more zeal than brains, and Seamus does not start talking loud enough for Liverpool to hear."

"I am moved, Callum, that even in a tunnel full of shit you find room for my talents," Seamus grumbled from behind.

"Your talents can be smelled," Greta said under her breath. "Which here is an achievement deserving a monument."

Someone gave a brief nervous snort, more to loosen the jaw than from amusement, and for one second I thought this was how we truly looked, not like heroes, not like great rebels from posters no one had printed yet, but like a group of dirty, frightened people joking about the stench in the canals beneath Manchester because otherwise we would have to start screaming.

Red glanced back at me, briefly and carefully, and in the torchlight her eyes seemed calm, perhaps too calm, like water covered by a thin skin of ice while the current beneath still pulls and tears downward. Her hands were tense, ready, fingers slightly bent, as if the body ran ahead of thought and was already preparing for a fight that had not yet come.

I said nothing.

I breathed through my mouth, because my nose had long refused to take part in the performance. It did not help. The stench was not a smell one could avoid, but a state of the world, the spilled truth of a city whose upper side carried the names of factory owners and whose lower side collected everything those gentlemen preferred not to see: sewage, rats, carrion, rotten food, sweat, fear and a little human hope which, as it turned out, could descend even here if someone drove it hard enough.

"Afraid of heights?" Greta whispered when the walkway trembled under our feet more than before and we had to cross over a wider channel where the water below was so black the torchlight did not reflect from it, but disappeared.

"Depths, rather," I replied, moving carefully after Red. "And people."

Greta laughed softly, dryly, with little joy but some appreciation.

"Fear of people is a sensible fear. Shame they do not teach it in schools."

"Schools teach obedience."

"Exactly. That is why there are so many corpses with good spelling."

I wanted to answer, truly I did, because my tongue was itching, but then something happened as quickly and as slowly as disasters do, when one sees every detail and has no chance of stopping any of it.

Patrick, the red-haired lad walking a few paces behind Finn, put his foot on a grating that looked like all the others, wet, dark, rusted, apparently firm, and in that same instant the metal beneath him groaned low and long, like an animal struck in the belly.

"Do not move!" Callum shouted, but it was already too late.

The grate broke.

First one bar, then another, then the whole construction gave way under Patrick with a hideous grinding crack that ran through the tunnel like the sound of a spine snapping. The red-head howled in pain, a short, hoarse cry in which for one second there was all the astonishment of a man who had only just been part of an escape and had suddenly become its burden.

Red seized my arm and yanked me back so hard I nearly lost my balance. I saw Patrick vanish into the dark, not falling straight but striking sideways against an iron support, turning, trying to catch the air, the grate, anything, until his fingers scraped across the edge of the metal and slid down.

A grind. A crack. An impact. Then a silence so short it was more a held breath than silence. And a splash. Heavy. Dirty. Final.

"Patrick!" Callum shouted, throwing himself to the edge so violently Finn had to catch his coat to keep him from going down as well.

No one answered.

"Patrick, for fuck's sake, answer!"

The echo repeated his voice maliciously, breaking it into pieces and handing back something that sounded less like a name and more like a curse.

For a while there was only water dripping, our breaths and a distant movement somewhere in the tunnels, perhaps rats, perhaps pursuit, perhaps the city which even underground never stopped grinding people.

Red dropped to one knee at the edge, almost lying on the wet metal, and shone the torch down. She held it so low that sparks fell into the darkness, and for a moment the fire lit what lay beneath us: a deeper drain, perhaps an old service channel, half flooded with black water, with beams, iron and something that might have been a sack or a body, because in such places the imagination very quickly stops distinguishing one from the other.

"There," Red said through her teeth. "He is alive. But he is not moving."

"We cannot get him out," Finn said at once, too quickly, the way people speak when they do not want to be cruel but know truth will not speak itself. "We cannot. Not with that grate, not without a ladder, not with them behind us."

Callum turned on him, face twisted with fury and fear.

"We are not leaving him!"

"Callum..."

"I said we are not leaving him!"

"And I am saying if we get stuck here, we shall leave everyone, only later and in larger pieces," Greta cut in, brutally, without decoration, but not without pain, because there was something hard in her voice precisely because otherwise it might have broken. "If we stay here more than half an hour, they catch us. Then Patrick will not be the only one who needs pulling out of a hole, except no one will have anything left to pull with."

Everyone looked at me.

I do not know why.

Perhaps because I was the centre of that whole misfortune, the sentenced woman through whom the night had acquired fire, the prison smoke, and people a reason to risk their lives. Perhaps because in the courtroom I had spoken as though I knew anything about courage, and people have the ugly habit that once someone sounds certain, they expect answers from her even when she is barely standing. Perhaps simply because no one wished to be the first to say: we go without him.

I looked down.

Patrick lay in the dirty water, partly on his side, partly against something I could not see, breathing shallowly and unevenly. One boot sat at such a wrong angle that I knew his leg was broken before he said it. His face was white, hair wet, mouth open, and when the torch shifted I saw him try to lift a hand, only for the hand to fall back into the water.

"Patrick," I said, softly at first, then louder, trying to keep my voice from betraying what was happening inside me. "If you can speak, listen, because I will not repeat myself and you look like a man with very little patience left."

A groan rose from below.

"We are not leaving you," I said. "But you must move. You must help us pull you out, because you are not a sack of flour, though after tonight we all look almost as elegant."

Something that might have been laughter turned into a cough.

"Fuck," Patrick rasped from below, voice torn by pain and water. "My leg is broken..."

"Never mind," I answered, though of course it minded, minded like hell, but sometimes one must lie as plainly as if telling the truth. "Give us your hands."

Red was already unwinding the rope Callum carried over his shoulder, long, wet, rough, probably used earlier for things I did not wish to know, and Moira braced her back against the wall, set her feet to an iron beam and took the far end of the line, her face tight and white, her hands steady. Greta stood behind her without a word, Finn and Callum took the middle, Seamus fell to his knees at the edge and started feeding the rope down, swearing with such invention that if we survived I really ought to write at least half of it down for future generations.

"Tie it under your arms!" Callum shouted. "Under your arms, do you hear?"

"I hear, you Irish funeral bell!" Patrick wheezed. "Only I have one leg in pieces and water up my arse, so give me a moment!"

"You have half a moment!"

The rope dropped once, twice, too short. Then Red moved nearer the edge, taking more risk than she should, so I caught her by the belt and held her without asking permission, because if she may drag me out of prison without warning, I may keep her from falling into a canal like an idiot with a romantic instinct for suicide.

"Do not let go of me," she hissed.

"I was not planning to. I have not paid my debt yet."

"It was not a debt."

"Argue later."

Patrick caught the rope only on the third attempt, or the fourth, I do not know, because each second stretched like wet cord, until at last he managed to get it under his arms, badly, clumsily, enough, and then we pulled.

Slowly.

Too slowly.

The rope cut into our hands, slipped in the damp, metal under our feet groaned in warning, and every sound Patrick made drove into my skull like a knife, because I knew each movement scraped broken bone against something it ought not to touch, each tug might rob him of consciousness, and every moment cost us time we did not have.

"More!" Callum shouted. "Again!"

"Pull, do not pray!" Greta barked at Seamus.

"I am doing both!"

"Then stop the second, because it is clearly interfering!"

Patrick struck his shoulder on the edge and howled so loudly the echo carried his voice far down the tunnel. For a moment I truly thought we would lose him, because his body slid lower, the rope jerked, Moira lost her balance and Red almost pitched forward, but then Finn threw his full weight onto the line, Callum braced his foot against a beam, Greta caught Moira round the waist and hauled with her, and I held Red, feeling the cloth of her clothing bite into my fingers.

"Once more!" I cried, not knowing to whom. "Together!"

We pulled.

All at once.

And Patrick at last rolled over the edge, wet, pale, shaking, his face twisted with pain and his leg set at such a revolting angle that one of the girls turned aside and vomited straight into the canal.

For a moment no one moved.

We breathed hard, all bent, sweating, filthy, our hands red from the rope, while Patrick lay among us alive, though his breathing was shallow, torn and full of pain that needed no name.

"We have to carry him," Red said, kneeling beside him and checking his face as though she could force him not to die by looking. "Help me."

"Red, he will slow us down," Finn said, quieter this time, and that quiet was worse than the earlier protest.

"I know."

"They will catch us."

"I know."

"So..."

Red lifted her head.

"If you want to leave him, say it in a full sentence."

Finn opened his mouth. Closed it. Greta shook her head.

"Beautiful. A gang of idiots with morals. The worst kind of gang."

"Better than a gang of cowards," Callum muttered, hauling Patrick under the arms.

"Cowards run faster, at least."

"Shut up and take his legs."

We went on. Slower. Heavier.

Callum and Finn carried Patrick, then Seamus and Greta changed with them, because Red had to go ahead with the knife and I beside her, though every step made my own body feel like a badly stitched sack of suffering. The tunnel seemed longer now than before, more hostile, more aware of our weakness, and the echo of our steps no longer sounded like a cautious march, but like something lame, uneven, wounded.

But we went together.

And perhaps that was the most unreasonable thing of all.

Then, far behind us, from a place I could no longer distinguish among the bends, I heard the first whistle.

Short. Piercing. Official. It belonged to none of us.

Everyone froze for the fraction of a second, then moved faster, though Patrick groaned, Moira covered her mouth with her hand and Red looked ahead as if she wished to burn a road open by sight alone.

The guard was close. This time it was not a feeling. It was pursuit.

The whistle ran through the canal like a blade slipped between ribs, short, piercing, official, disgustingly sure of itself. For one heartbeat we all stood fixed to that reeking tunnel, wet bricks, metal walkways and black water, then something in us moved at once, brutally, without beautiful words, without a plan fit for song, simply with the primitive order the body understands faster than the soul: go, go on, one more step, even on broken legs, even with blood in the mouth, even over another person's groan.

Callum and Finn lifted Patrick under the arms, Seamus took his legs as carefully as he could, though care in such a place was a joke told by someone who had never carried an injured man over slippery iron. We went on, slower than before, too slowly, definitely too slowly. Every step contained effort I could hear in their breathing, in short, choked curses, in the way Patrick tried not to scream and so produced worse sounds, half groan, half growl, like an animal caught in a trap and knowing that if it howls it will bring wolves down upon itself.

Margaret walked behind Moira, face pale and still bruised from what they had done to her in the prison, but her eyes were no longer empty, not now that fear had a shape and moved somewhere behind us in uniforms, whistles, lamps and all that legal brutality which people in power like to call restoring order. Lizzie kept beside her, silent as a shadow, one hand pressed to her side, the other clenched around a length of iron she must have picked from the ground earlier. Though she looked as if one hard gust might knock her down, there was such determination in her fingers that for a moment I thought poor people always carry some weapon, even if the world leaves them only rusted metal and teeth.

"Faster," Red hissed without turning, for she now walked just behind Callum, bent and alert, torch held low and knife ready in her other hand. "If they hear we have slowed, they will run."

"And if we run with Patrick, we shall leave him in three parts," Finn answered through his teeth, lifting the wounded man's weight with such effort that the veins in his neck stood out like ropes. "Choose your catastrophe, Red, we have a sale on today."

"We have no time for your married squabbling," Greta growled from behind, guiding Margaret and Lizzie through the narrowest stretch, where the walls pressed so close that one had to turn sideways and wet brick scraped breast, elbow and cheek. "If either of you must be clever, do it later, preferably after breakfast and only if breakfast is not the last meal before execution."

"You always know how to lift the spirits," I muttered, catching a cold pipe when the plank under my foot gave unpleasantly.

"You will have spirits behind you in a moment if you do not move that proud arse, Nell."

I wanted to answer, truly wanted it, because under normal conditions I would never have let such an opportunity die without a decent burial, but then a second whistle sounded behind us, nearer, sharper, flung around by the tunnel so that for a moment one could not tell whether the pursuit was still far or just beyond the next bend. All words died on my tongue, which was probably the first proof in months of some higher power.

We moved faster, if that crippled, uneven progress could be called speed. The canal narrowed and dipped, carrying us lower, deeper, into a place where the air became warmer, heavier and wetter, as though the city itself were beginning to sweat over our heads. The water to the left shifted lazily, dark and thick, sometimes carrying something rounded and indistinct which I preferred not to identify, because in a flight a person ought to limit the number of things that may remain in nightmares forever.

"Callum," Moira said, for the first time in a while, her voice quiet but strained. "If they came in by the main descent, they will try to close the canal at the east bridge."

Callum glanced back at her.

"How do you know?"

"Because I would."

For a second no one spoke.

It was one of those sentences reminding all of us that Moira knew not only locks, corridors and watch changes, but the way of thinking of the men now hunting us, and that this knowledge was more unsettling than a pistol, because a pistol can be knocked from someone's hand, while memory stays under the skin.

"Is there a way round?" Red asked.

Moira hesitated, then pointed aside, to a low, nearly invisible opening half hidden by rusted grating and clumps of something that looked like the city's rotting hair.

"There is a drain. Old. Not on the maps. At least not the ones they show outsiders. It runs under the tannery and on to the gutter by the warehouses. But it is low."

"How low?" Greta asked.

Moira looked at Patrick.

"Too low to carry him normally."

Callum cursed softly, heavily, without decoration, like a man who has just seen not an obstacle but a bill he has no coin to pay.

"If we take the main tunnel, they may cut us off," Moira said, each word seeming to cost her physically. "If we go through the drain, we lose them for a while, because they will not expect anyone to be stupid enough to use it."

"That sounds like a route perfectly suited to our company," I muttered.

Red looked back over her shoulder, and despite the filth, smoke, pursuit and Patrick hanging half-conscious between Callum and Finn, I saw in her eyes a shade of amusement, brief and unforgivably human.

"Can you manage?" she asked me quietly.

She did not ask if I was afraid. That would have been insulting. She did not ask if I wished to. That would have been ridiculous. She asked whether I could manage, as though she knew that sometimes this is the only form of tenderness one can allow when men with guns are behind.

"Have I a choice?"

"No."

"Then I shall manage."

Margaret gave a weak snort behind me, and when I turned I saw her wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, trying to look less frightened than she was.

"Very comforting," she said. "We shall die in a hole even the maps do not know."

"Maps are for people who believe the world can be controlled by paper," Lizzie said, speaking for the first time in a while, softly but so soberly that all of us looked at her for a moment. "We are going where paper does not look."

Greta clicked her tongue in approval.

"Well, there. The silent one can speak."

Lizzie shrugged.

"I save words for when they are worth it."

"Wise. I should try that."

"You would not manage," Red and I said almost together.

If the situation had not been so hopeless someone might have laughed, but instead Callum made the decision with one short movement of his hand and told Finn to help pull the grating aside. The metal resisted, of course, because in this city even rust had the character of a clerk, but after several jerks, a blow from an axe and one very personal curse from Seamus, the grating gave with such a screech that all of us froze, listening to see whether the pursuit had heard.

A voice came from behind.

Distant, but clear.

"This way! The tracks go this way!"

"Inside," said Red.

There was no more room for discussion.

Callum went first, bending so low he almost disappeared into the opening. Then Finn and Seamus began dragging Patrick in, which proved a torment for him and for all of us, because the drain was low, wet, with walls so tight we almost had to crawl on our knees, and the injured lad had to be moved carefully, piece by piece, like a sack of glass that might crack still further at any moment. Every groan he made travelled through the tunnel and came back to us distorted and multiplied, until for a while I felt the canal itself was groaning with him.

Red went in before me, I after her, then Margaret, Lizzie and Moira, with Greta closing the rear, because Greta was one of those people who apparently preferred to stand between death and the rest of the world, chiefly so she could insult death directly to its face.

The drain was worse than the main canal.

This should not have surprised me, but a person always carries a scrap of stupid hope that the bottom has some end, and then life shows them a cellar beneath the bottom and orders them to crawl through it.

It stank of tannery, rotting hide, lime, urine, old fat and that particular blend of chemicals which does not merely scratch the throat, but makes a person suspect that if she survives, her lungs will write a separate letter of complaint. The ceiling was so low I kept striking my head or shoulder. My knees slid in mud. My hands landed in something cold and soft whose name I had no wish to learn. Ahead I saw only Red's back, tense, moving steadily, stubbornly, like the only point in the world that had not yet decided to fall apart.

Behind us, Margaret's breathing became heavy, faster.

"I cannot," she whispered suddenly. "I cannot, there is no air."

Lizzie immediately put a hand on her back.

"There is. It only stinks like a factory owner's sin."

"Lizzie..."

"Look at my hands. Not the walls. My hands, do you hear? One knee. Then the other. Like prayer, only less useless."

Margaret coughed, groaned, but moved on, and I felt something strange, almost warm despite all that cold, because a woman who usually said less than a shadow was

keeping another sane in a pipe full of stink while men with clubs drew nearer behind us. If that was not courage, then I truly no longer knew what was.

Suddenly a crack came from behind. Then voices. Closer. Too close.

"They are in the drain!" someone shouted. "Lamps here!"

Greta turned in the tight tunnel as much as she could, which was itself a small miracle of anatomy and fury, then hissed:

"Move faster, because I am about to have to shoot someone where there is not even room to swing properly."

Callum cursed from the front.

"Fifty yards!"

"In your mouth that sounds like fifty years!"

Red reached one hand back without looking and caught my wrist. Not hard. Not dramatically. Simply so that I knew she was there.

That touch lasted a second, perhaps less, but in that close, choking pipe, amid the stench, shouts and crawling pursuit, it was more real than every sentence ever passed on me.

"We go," she said.

"We go," I repeated.

Then the first shot roared behind us in the drain, so loud the whole tunnel shook like a beast's throat and brick dust fell over our heads.

The bullet struck somewhere above Greta, ricocheted sideways, Lizzie cried out, Moira fell onto one elbow, and Greta turned her head with such calm that for a moment she almost looked majestic.

"Oh no," she said. "That is quite enough."

Her revolver rose.

She could not aim properly, not in that cramped darkness, not in smoke, not blind, but Greta evidently belonged to that order of women who can insult fate by intention alone. She fired once, then again, and the noise struck the walls so monstrously that I went deaf in one ear. Behind us someone howled, someone cursed, someone drew back, and that one moment was enough.

Callum shouted from the front:

"Exit!"

We crawled out of the drain one by one, dirty, wet, coughing, looking more like things spat out by the city than human beings, and before me opened a low chamber beneath the tannery, full of old barrels, rotting skins and light, real light, pale, grey, predawn, leaking through a grille high above us.

I had never thought anything so ugly could look like a promise.

But then it did.

Callum and Finn dragged Patrick onto a drier piece of floor. Red pulled me after her. Margaret nearly fell into Moira. Lizzie came out last before Greta, and before Greta herself left the tunnel she turned once more and shot the lamp someone was carrying behind us.

There was a cry. Then darkness. Then fire, small, sudden, vicious.

"Will that stop them?" I gasped.

Greta looked at me, filthy, blackened, revolver smoking in her hand.

"No."

She put the weapon away.

"But it will spoil their morning."

Red lifted her head towards the grey light.

"The canal is close."

Callum nodded, though his face was grim.

"Close, but now they will know where we came out."

Patrick groaned from the floor.

"If anyone plans to leave me, could they at least do it with a prettier view?"

Seamus bent over him.

"Shut up, Patrick. You have just had a luxury tour through the shit of Manchester and still you complain."

"Service dreadful."

"No tip, then."

And then, despite the pursuit, despite the pain, despite dawn beginning to betray us, several people laughed. Briefly, dirtily, desperately.

I did too. Because sometimes laughter is not joy. Sometimes it only means a person has not yet agreed to die.

Patrick began to fade before anyone said it aloud, and perhaps for that reason we all pretended not to see it for the first few minutes, because in flight one learns very quickly which truths can be carried at once and which must be put off until later, even if later never comes.

He lay for a while on the damp boards beneath the tannery, his face white as lime, the edges of his mouth turning blue, his breath short and torn, as though each draw of air were a separate negotiation with a body that had had more than enough of revolution, canals, pursuit and people telling it to hold out a little longer. Blood seeped from under the makeshift bandage on his leg, dark, sticky, stubborn, soaking into the cloth of his trousers and the dirty rag Moira pressed with the face of someone who understands she is doing too little and too late, but has no right to stop.

"He is losing too much blood," she said quietly, but in that silence, among barrels, rotten hides and the smell of lime, it sounded almost like a sentence. "If we carry him on like this, he may not even reach the boats."

Patrick moved his head as though to protest, but managed only a hoarse breath and something that, with great courtesy, might be called a curse.

"Do not talk about me as though I were already a sack of meat," he rasped. "I can still hear. Unfortunately."

Seamus crouched beside him, trying to smile, though his face was so tight that the smile looked like a badly stitched wound.

"Good, because if you die before the boat, I swear I shall throw you into the canal for lack of manners."

"If you throw me in that canal, I will come back as a ghost and stink under your bed."

"You stink already. That is no threat."

A few people snorted, but the laughter was short, nervous and ugly, more to avoid hearing our own fear than because anything in that situation was truly funny. Patrick's head fell to one side. His eyes closed for one second too long, and Callum instantly bent over him, slapping his cheek lightly.

"Do not sleep, Patrick. Not yet."

"Do not order me about like my mother," the wounded man muttered, but his voice was weaker than before, thinner, as though he were draining away with the blood.

We had to move, though every sensible creature would have preferred to stay where we were, plug the hole in his leg, let the lungs rest and not push on through a city now waking with the unpleasant awareness that someone had undermined its order during the night. The problem was that sensible creatures rarely enter stories of this kind, and if they do, they usually die in the first act, leaving the rest to us, idiots with morals, bruises and too little ammunition.

We went on through the back of the tannery, then through a collapsed corridor where the walls stank of wet hide, lime and the sweetish odour of things that had once been alive and now served industry, which was exactly what half the workers in that city did, only without the nuisance of paying them wages. Callum and Finn took Patrick under the arms, Seamus held his leg as gently as a man could who had spent his life learning more about striking than tending, and every few steps Patrick lost his breath, clenched his teeth and made a short, throttled sound that said more than a scream, because a scream at least has strength in it, and this was only a body trying not to come apart in front of witnesses.

The two women pulled from prison came at the back, the one with the cut face and the silent one who held the rusted iron bar close to her as if it were a relic or a promise. I saw they were looking round more often, not for pursuit but for some chance to leave. They did not say it at once, but their bodies spoke before them: shorter steps, glances down side alleys, tension in the shoulders that came not only from fear of the police, but from the growing conviction that perhaps now, before the boats, before they bound their fate to Irishmen, to Red, to me and this whole damned performance, they should run another way, scatter into the city, hide among women with baskets, laundries, workshops, yards and kitchens where poverty has so many faces that one more may pass unseen.

At last the woman with the cut face caught my arm, not hard, rather as one catches a person who must be stopped for a moment before it is too late.

"We cannot go with you," she whispered, and that whisper held so much effort I understood at once she had been carrying it inside herself for some time. "The boat, the port, the ship, the Irish, the guns... all that sounds like a road straight to the rope. We can disappear. I know a woman in Ancoats, she sews by night, takes girls without questions if they have hands and are not coughing blood. We can go there. Now. Before it is too late."

The silent one stood beside her, pale, dark-eyed, mouth tight.

"She is right," she said, and when she spoke her voice was calm, too calm, as if she had hidden all panic deeper so it would not disturb the sentences. "In prison we were

going to die slowly. With you we may die quickly. The difference is not as great as I should like."

Red stopped in front of me, turning only enough to take them both in. There was no anger in her face, which surprised me, because Red usually treated fear as a personal insult, but this time she looked as though she understood too well to strike at once with words.

"If you go alone, they will have you before noon," she said. "Not because you are fools. Because now they will be looking for women. Dirty, injured, without papers, after a night in which the magistrate's gate burned. Every constable will want to show he has eyes. Every informer will want to earn. Every housewife afraid for her own roof may sell you for less than the price of a decent loaf."

"And with you it will be safer?" asked the cut-faced woman, showing teeth in something that did not even pretend to be a smile. "With you, with her, with a wounded lad and a cartload of people half of Manchester is probably describing over breakfast by now?"

"No," I answered before Red could. "It will not be safer. Only more honest, because at least we shall know someone is walking beside us, not round the corner with a knife and a price for our heads."

They both looked at me, one with anger, the other with that quiet, severe thoughtfulness she had carried in the prison even when she said nothing.

"I am not ordering you to stay," I added, though each word tasted of rust. "I have no right. No one here has. If you want to go, go now, before we reach the boats, because after that each decision will drag more people behind it than yourselves. But if you go, go together, keep to the side streets, ask no one for pity and trust no one with clean hands."

The woman with the bar looked towards a narrow crack between walls, where pale morning light had begun to seep, and for a moment I was certain they would go, both of them, that I would see only their backs vanishing into the mist above the canal and then for the rest of my life, if any life remained, I would wonder whether they reached safety, whether someone betrayed them, whether they died or lived under different names.

Then Patrick groaned so softly I almost missed it.

It was not a cry of pain, rather the sound of a man losing contact with the world and trying to catch hold of anything, a dirty wall, his own name, a curse. The cut-faced woman looked at him, then at us, and clenched her jaw.

"Damn you all," she said. "I am not leaving an injured lad, even if he is Irish and will probably make a personality out of it."

Seamus raised his head.

"That is the kindest thing an English woman has said to me in years."

"Do not rejoice. I was not speaking to you."

The silent woman sighed, adjusted her grip on the iron bar and followed us without another word, which I took for consent, prayer or sentence, since in circumstances like these the three differ mostly by tone.

The way to the canal led through the rear of the tannery, then a collapsed warehouse where old hides hung from hooks like dead banners of lost wars, through a narrow yard filled with ash and horse dung, then under a low brick arch where we had to fold almost

in half, dragging Patrick carefully, pausing whenever he lost consciousness for a few seconds and returned with a curse or a cough, as if he did not mean to give death the satisfaction of a quiet entrance.

Manchester was waking above and around us, but not beautifully, not with that sentimental dawn known from poems, where birds sing and dew shines on grass, but in the working-class way, grimy, with coughs behind thin walls, doors cracking open, women in shawls carrying buckets, men spitting into gutters, children who looked too tired to be children, and chimney smoke rising uncertainly, as though the city were only warming its lungs before another day of eating people.

We moved along a blind alley, then down between warehouse walls, where the stone underfoot was wet, green with slime and treacherous. A narrow strip of canal appeared suddenly to our right, dark, still, falsely innocent, with water so black it did not reflect the sky, but looked as though it kept every secret of the city at the bottom and surrendered none willingly. Beside the bank stood a low port building, more shed than warehouse, with a sagging roof, iron-bound doors, a small thick-glass window and a lantern hanging near the entrance whose yellow light was dangerously alive for an hour when everything should still have been pretending sleep.

Two men were near the building.

One stood by the door, truncheon at his belt and pipe in his mouth, broad-shouldered, heavy, with the face of a man who considered himself owner of the night because someone had given him a key and told him to guard another man's property. The second sat on a crate by the jetty, wrapped in a coat, hat drawn low, but I saw the glint of a barrel leaning against the plank beside him. They did not look like soldiers, more like port watchmen, men hired for little money to guard things worth more than their lives, which is always an excellent method for growing brutality in a person who formerly had only boredom.

We stopped in the shadow of an old wall, crouched between barrels smelling of tar, stale beer and fish which long ago ought to have been refused any further career. Patrick sagged to the ground, head rolling sideways, and Moira at once put fingers to his throat.

"Alive," she whispered. "But weakening. We must dress him properly, now, not in an hour."

"There will be rags in the building, rope, perhaps spirit, perhaps clean water," Callum said, watching the watchmen from under his hood. "And clothes. If it is a transfer point, they keep spare coats for the night men."

"And probably registers, seals, perhaps papers," Moira added. "If we are lucky."

"Luck has had a very peculiar taste lately," Greta muttered, crouching beside me and checking her revolver. "How many? Two?"

"Two here," Finn answered. "I do not know whether anyone is inside."

Red looked at the boats by the bank, two small craft chained to posts, rocking faintly on the dark water, one lower and wider, fit for carrying several people and perhaps a wounded man, the other narrower, quicker, but with a board at the stern split so clearly that even at a distance I saw that if that boat had a character, it was suicidal.

"The lads take the boats," Red said. "Quietly. No shots if we can avoid it. Greta, Moira, the building."

Moira looked at her quickly.

"Me?"

"You know the way such men work. Where they look, where they keep keys, how they react when they hear an order. And Greta..."

"Greta has the personal charm of a cattle-hammer," Greta finished gravely. "At last someone appreciates my upbringing."

The plan arranged itself in a handful of whispers, short, rough, with no room for pretty declarations. Callum, Finn and Seamus would go low along the bank, slipping among crates, cut the chains or find the key if the watchmen proved less stupid than they looked. Red would stay between us and the quay, ready to step into the middle of any uproar, which was for her an almost natural place. I, the two women from prison and Patrick were to wait in the shadow, although waiting while others risk their necks for you is one of those tortures the codes never describe, because codes are written by men sitting comfortably.

Moira and Greta went first, not straight at the watchmen, but from the side, like two women returning from a night shift, stooped, exhausted, heads down, so ordinary in that working dawn that for a moment even I nearly believed them. Moira moved a little ahead, swaying slightly, as though drunk or worn out, and when the watchman at the door turned his head, Greta tripped theatrically over a crate and swore so loudly the man with the pipe snorted with amusement.

"What are you doing here?" he barked, but he did not draw his truncheon, which was the first sign that he had judged them a smaller problem than they were in reality, and men, as is well known, very often die from things they consider small.

"Looking for the laundry by the quay," Moira said in a voice so weak and tired that it chilled me, because she sounded exactly like a woman taught by the system to ask for little and apologise for existing. "We are lost. She... she has been drinking."

"I have been drinking?" Greta objected with such talent that, under different circumstances, I would have applauded. "You drank too, only you carry it worse."

The watchman snorted and stepped forward.

"Get out of here. This is not a passage for women."

"Nothing ever is a passage for women," Greta murmured, taking another step. "Not even a door, if there is an idiot on the other side."

That moved him. The pipe shifted in his mouth, his face hardened, his hand went to the club, and in the same second Moira moved so fast and cleanly that for a moment I saw not the guard from the cells, not the woman with trembling hands, but someone who had watched, learned and waited for years without even knowing she was waiting. She caught his wrist, twisted it, drove her elbow under his ribs, and Greta struck him from the side with something heavy, perhaps the butt of the revolver, perhaps a length of metal drawn from under her coat. The man folded to his knees with a dull groan, as though outrage had not yet made room for pain.

The second watchman rose from the crate, reaching for the gun.

Red moved at once, but she would not have reached him.

The silent woman from the prison, standing beside me, hurled her rusted iron bar at him, not beautifully, not with the accuracy of a ballad, but hard enough and true enough

for the metal to strike his forearm. The gun slipped. The man swore. Greta was on him before the curse had finished.

He fought longer than the first, tried to shout, but Greta drove a fist into his belly, Moira caught his collar and Red hit him across the temple with the flat of the knife handle. He collapsed against the crate and slid down, breathing through his teeth.

"Alive?" I asked before I could stop myself.

Greta looked at him, then at me.

"For the moment. If he begins making noise, I shall reconsider."

There was no time for more. Callum and the lads were already at the boats. Finn knelt by a chain, working at the lock with a pick and the expression of a man attempting to persuade the British Empire by personal insult alone.

"This one floats!" he called in a half-whisper. "The other too, but if someone leans hard we go to the bottom and must pretend we always wanted to be herring."

"You have always been close to herring," Seamus replied.

"Shut up and cut the rope."

We broke into the port building through a door Moira opened with the key taken from the first watchman, though opened is a generous word for something Greta assisted with her shoulder and a curse. Inside it smelled of damp canvas, rope, old paper and cheap tobacco. There were crates, hooks, sacks, three filthy coats, a heap of rags and a bottle of something clear enough to make a person suspicious.

Greta lifted it.

"Medicine," she announced.

"Is that spirit?" Moira asked.

Greta sniffed.

"Something that will kill germs or the patient. Perfect."

We dragged Patrick inside and laid him on a table so hard and dirty that even death might have asked for clean sheets. Patrick, who had tried to joke earlier, now barely held consciousness, and when Moira poured alcohol over the wound he arched with a sound that was no longer human enough to pretend otherwise.

"Look at me," Moira said to him, bending over him. "Not at the leg. At me. Breathe, do you hear?"

"Do not order me..." he began, but his voice broke.

"I will order you if it keeps you from dying of stupidity and blood loss."

"That is... very womanly of you."

"One more word and I shall set this leg with pleasure."

Greta tore cloth into strips. I held the lantern, though my hand shook so hard the light crawled over the walls like frightened insects. Moira worked quickly, not prettily but effectively. She bound his thigh above the wound, pressed on the dressing, splinted the leg with two planks and a belt, then tightened the knot with a jaw set so fiercely I almost expected her teeth to crack.

Meanwhile the Irish were managing the boats by the bank, which sounded simple only to someone who had never tried, after a night without sleep, to move stolen craft through chains, mud, fear and the serious objection of wood that had not been

maintained since some king was still young and other people's death still fashionable in a different hat.

"First boat takes the wounded man, Moira, Nell and two of the girls," Callum decided, returning to the door. "Red, you too. Second boat takes the rest. Greta, you lead the second."

"Touching trust," Greta said, tucking the bottle of alcohol into her pocket as though it were the highest medical equipment.

"It is not trust. It is fear."

"Even better. Fear is more honest."

We took from the building everything that could be taken without turning flight into a house removal: coats, caps, gloves, canvas, a little rope, a bundle of papers Moira snatched from a shelf, and several things whose use none of us knew but which looked as though they might become useful if the world continued being imaginative in its cruelty.

Moira pulled on an old port coat and cap, hiding her hair, and at once she stopped looking like a prison guard and became another tired worker in the half-light, which said a great deal about the value of uniforms and the stupidity of those who believe them holy.

She came to me and pushed a cap into my hands.

"Hide your face."

"Do I look that bad?"

"You look like a woman they will lie about in tomorrow's papers. That is enough."

"Kind of you to keep your gift for compliments."

"I have no time for better ones."

When we left the building, dawn was nearer, not bright yet, but present as a dirty paling at the edge of the sky. Patrick was moved first, carefully, though every movement still pulled a soft groan from him. Then the two women climbed in, then Moira, then me, then Red, who settled opposite with the expression of someone who would rather argue with a cannon than sit quietly in a boat.

For several seconds no one spoke.

There was only water knocking against the sides, wood creaking, breath, the distant waking of the city and somewhere, far away, the first shout of a man who had just discovered his morning had been ruined.

Red looked at me from the other side of the boat. Her face was partly hidden under a scarf, but the eyes were the same.

"Ready?" she asked.

I looked at the water, at Patrick, at Moira clutching the bag of dressings, at the two women who still could not quite believe they were outside prison, and at the narrow black route before us.

"No," I said. "But row."

We began to move, if that slow, creaking passage over black water could be called moving. Our oars cut the surface with as little noise as tired human beings can manage, which is to say not enough to please God, but perhaps enough to fool men who had not yet finished cursing in the wrong building.

The canal was narrow and black, squeezed between the backs of warehouses, low walls, blind workshop fronts and old bridges blackened with soot. Above us Manchester was beginning another day, lighting its fires, clearing its throats, drawing wages from bodies before the bodies had decided whether they were alive.

Callum's boat went first, a little ahead, his body bent over the oar, face tight as though he counted not strokes but chances. Greta sat in the second boat, revolver under her coat, looking less like a passenger than a threat temporarily placed on water. Seamus whispered insults at the oar every time it caught the side. Finn told him to shut up. The oar seemed to agree with Finn.

Red sat opposite me, an oar between her knees, ready to take it if we had to move faster or fight. Moira worked over Patrick, checking the bandage with hands still steady though her face had gone grey. The two women from prison sat close together, and Lizzie kept the iron bar beside her like a sceptre for a kingdom no one wanted.

We were heading towards a hiding place near the port, a place closer than any person with faith in safety would have liked, but far enough, Callum said, to vanish beneath the city's noise. Once, smugglers had used it. Then gamblers. Then prostitutes. Then sailors who wished not to be found. Then Irish labourers, Welsh miners, English deserters and every other creature civilisation preferred to misplace rather than acknowledge.

Now, he claimed, the place had changed its skin but not its nature. It was no longer crowded, loud and dangerously alive every night, but it still had walls that knew how to keep their mouths shut. At that point I would have accepted a cupboard, provided it did not report us to the Crown.

The oar dipped into the water with a small splash and I felt the boat twitch beneath us, uncertain, as though trying to decide whether it wished to save us or drown us for its own amusement.

I looked at Red, then at Moira, then back at the water, and the longer I was silent the stronger grew the feeling that if I did not say something now, the words would sink into me and rot there.

"Red," I said quietly, almost a whisper, as we passed under a low bridge and the shadow covered us for a moment entire.

She looked at me at once, perhaps too quickly.

"What?"

And that what was so entirely hers, rough, ready for a fight, as though even gratitude might prove a trap.

I swallowed, tasting smoke, canal and that vile alcohol with which we had earlier tried to convince Patrick's body not to leave him.

"Thank you," I said. "For the cell. For the gate. For coming back when every sensible person should have run as far away from me as possible and thanked heaven for the use of her legs."

For a second she stared without moving. Then her jaw tightened slightly, as always when feeling came too close to the surface.

"Do not turn it into a song," she muttered. "Songs end badly. Someone always dies in the third verse."

"I am not making a song."

"You sound as though you are about to."

"I am trying to say something ordinary, which in my mouth apparently sounds like a call to rebellion."

"Everything in your mouth sounds like a call to rebellion."

"It is not my fault the world is so badly made that an ordinary sentence immediately offends it."

The corner of her mouth moved, but she did not let it become a smile.

"I did not pull you out so you would thank me."

"I know."

"I am not good at these conversations."

"I know."

"And if you are about to say you owe me your life, I shall put you out of this boat and tell Callum you fell."

"You could not. You put too much work into stealing me from prison."

"Exactly why it would be irritatingly uneconomical."

We looked at one another for a while in the half-dark, while water whispered against the hull, Patrick breathed shallowly, Moira pretended not to listen and listened to everything, and the dawn pressed pale fingers between the warehouses.

"All the same," I said more softly, "thank you."

Red looked away first, towards the black water on my side of the boat.

"Do not go out," she said after a long moment. "That will do."

Nothing more.

And perhaps because of that, it hurt more than a whole monologue.

I turned to Moira, who sat beside Patrick and pressed both hands to the dressing with such concentration that it seemed she was trying to hold his soul in place through his thigh.

"Moira," I said.

She did not look at once, as if the name, spoken here outside prison, did not yet fully belong to her.

"Yes?"

"Thank you too."

Her fingers tightened on the bandage.

"Do not thank me."

"Everyone has a problem with that today."

"There is nothing to thank me for."

"That is an exceptionally stupid sentence for a woman who stole keys from a prison and helped make a very expensive nuisance of a magistrate's building."

At last she looked at me, and in her eyes I saw not pride, not relief, but the heavy, unpleasant shadow of guilt that does not leave simply because one door has opened the right way.

"I was on their side too long," she said quietly. "Too long opening doors in the wrong direction. One night does not mend that."

"No," I admitted. "It does not."

She flinched, as though she had expected comfort and received truth, which always has worse manners.

"But one night may be a beginning," I added. "Beginnings are rarely clean. Usually they stink of smoke, blood and canal."

Moira looked at me for a moment, then lowered her eyes to Patrick.

"If he lives, perhaps I will begin to believe in beginnings."

"If he lives, he will be unbearable."

Patrick, who was evidently not as unconscious as he looked, moved his lips.

"Already... unbearable."

Seamus, from the second boat a few yards away, heard only a fragment and immediately leaned towards us.

"Confirmed! Since childhood!"

"Shut up... boat cork," Patrick muttered.

"You see?" I said to Moira. "Alive. Unfortunately for everyone."

This time Moira almost smiled. Almost. There was more hope in that almost than in half the sermons I had heard in my life.

We went on, closer to the port, though not yet into its living heart, where cranes, ships, warehouses, ropes, sailors, curses and money made a creature large enough to swallow people whole and still complain of hunger. Callum slowed at a fork, lifted his hand, and both boats slid almost soundlessly into a narrower canal partly hidden by the leaning backs of warehouses and a rotten screen of barrels.

He knocked on the wood in a particular rhythm: twice quick, once slow, then twice again. For a while nothing happened. Then from behind the barrels came the scrape of metal, and a voice asked one word in Irish, which I did not understand, but which made Red exhale as if a hand had loosened from her throat.

"They still remember," she said.

"Or someone with a gun enjoys music," Greta muttered from the other boat.

The barrels shifted with a slow, heavy scraping, revealing a narrow entrance under the warehouse, leading into a place whose existence no honest map would confess.

A hiding place. It did not look like salvation. More like the throat of something old, dirty and not entirely dead. But it was hidden. It had walls. It had people inside who did not immediately shout for police. In my life, that was practically luxury.

"Welcome to the chapel of all the Empire's naughty children," Seamus said softly. "Please do not touch the walls, unless you want to carry three kinds of disease and one historical memory home with you."

Red looked at me.

"We rest here. Briefly."

"Briefly sounds like luxury lately."

"Everything is luxury when men with whistles are chasing you."

The boats nudged gently against the jetty. A hand reached out of the dark, first for Callum, then for Red, then for me, and when I set my foot on the wet boards I felt my legs nearly give beneath me.

I did not let them.

Not yet.

Because in that place, that old refuge of smugglers, gamblers, prostitutes, sailors, Irish labourers, Welsh miners, English runaways and all those people civilisation swept aside so it might admire its own polished boots, I felt something for the first time since the cell.

Not safety. Not peace. But possibility. And possibility, when for days a person has had only a sentence, is almost a miracle. An ugly miracle. The best kind.

CHAPTER VI

Port Prayers

We went in one by one, because the entrance was too narrow for any dignity to squeeze through beside a human being, and perhaps that was why each of us left it somewhere on the way, on the wet landing between crates smelling of fish, tar and old wine, ducking beneath a low beam that had clearly done more over the years for human humility than all the sermons ever preached in Manchester put together.

The hideout was not a room, but the whole underground throat of the building, running beneath the warehouse and partly under the neighbouring house, with corridors cut through brick, timber partitions, secret lockers, niches full of old sacks, barrels and boxes in which there might have been anything from dried fish to stolen weapons. One felt at once that the place had not been made to be pretty, comfortable or legal. It had been made to survive a raid, a betrayal, a fire, hunger and men who would sell their own mother for the right price, provided the buyer did not ask too insistently about the state of her teeth.

The air was heavy, but not like the prison air. That stink had belonged to confinement and humiliation. Here, under the port, dirt mixed with movement, with life, with people who might be thieves, smugglers, fugitives, liars, drunkards and saints only when no one was looking, but who at least breathed on their own account. It smelled of wet timber, peat smoke, spilled beer, cheap whisky, salt, sweat, old clothes and something sharp and sea-borne, breaking through the layers of the city like a reminder that somewhere out there existed water wider than a canal and a world larger than a sentence.

There was no crowd there, not the sort one expects when hearing the word den and at once picturing a hundred suspicious faces, drunken singing and a woman with a knife between her teeth, although I did not rule out the last. In the main room there were perhaps a dozen people, some at the tables, some against the walls. Two women stitched something with a thick needle. An old man slept with his cap over his face. A sailor without a boot cleaned a knife with the calm of a man for whom the blade was his only friend, and in the corner a boy of perhaps twelve shuffled cards with the expression of someone who had long ceased to believe in childhood but still enjoyed cheating adults.

When we entered, the conversations did not stop abruptly, but smoothly, as if silence here were part of the regulations and not a sign of fear. A dozen pairs of eyes moved over us quickly, practically, without unnecessary pity: over the blood on Patrick, our wet coats, Red's face, me, and Moira, whose borrowed dockside coat did not quite hide the old way she held her shoulders, that damned trace of uniform which remains in a person even after the uniform itself has vanished.

Callum took two steps forward and lifted a hand in a brief signal. Then a man came out from the side room, and from the first moment he looked like the one who decided when doors truly opened and when a person remained on the wrong side of the port's teeth, no matter how much the others might shout, drink, lie or die around him.

He was Irish, though he did not need to open his mouth for that to be plain. He had grey hair at the temples, a dark beard cut short, and a face furrowed by lines made not by age alone, but by sea, smoke, losses and too many decisions taken at night. When he walked, he limped slightly, but in a way that did not lessen his strength. It added menace. A person knew at once that if he had survived this long with a lame leg, he had probably made up for it with something much worse.

"Callum O'Daly," he said, his voice low and rough, with an accent thick as a mooring rope. "The last time I saw you, you swore that if you ever needed my cellar again, it would mean you had either lost your mind or fallen in love with a doomed cause."

Callum breathed through his nose, which in a man like him might have been laughter.

"Captain Doyle. As you see, the world dislikes granting a man the pleasure of choice."

"The world enjoys making fools of men," Doyle replied, letting his gaze move over our group. "But you always helped it along with the zeal of a priest at somebody else's funeral."

Seamus emerged from behind Finn, trying to look less filthy than he was, which, given the state of his face and coat, was an ambitious and doomed undertaking.

"Captain, good to see you."

Doyle looked at him without blinking.

"Seamus, if I see you well, it means I have gone blind."

"Warm as ever."

"Dirty boots as ever."

Finn nodded curtly. Patrick managed to raise a hand from the improvised stretcher only enough for it to look more like a twitch than a greeting. And when Doyle saw the wounded man, he stopped jesting as quickly as one blows out a candle on hearing the watch at the door.

"Lay him on the table. Mary, bring clean water, if such a thing still exists in this cursed city. Eamon, close the canal entrance and tell the lads upstairs that if they see strange lanterns, they are not to play heroes. They are to knock twice on the pipe and disappear. Heroes make handsome corpses, and I have enough corpses in the air tonight."

Movement returned to the room at once, not chaotic, but practised, as if these people, few though they were, had learned over the years how to answer danger without wasting questions. Questions come later, if one is lucky. Two women sprang up for water and cloth. The card boy vanished behind a curtain. The bootless sailor shifted crates against the wall to make room, and someone brought a lamp which cast a yellow, brutal light over the table, under which Patrick looked worse than he had in the boat.

We laid him down carefully, though every careful movement ended in a strangled groan, and Moira bent over him at once with a concentration so total that the room, Doyle, the port, the pursuit, this whole den and half the Empire seemed to cease existing. There was only the wound, the blood and a man who had to be kept on this side. Greta stood beside her, tearing another shirt into strips without being asked, and for

one strange second the two of them looked like a pair of very grim midwives, except that instead of a child they were trying to pull Patrick out of death's arms, and death, like every vile old spinster, disliked giving up what it had already claimed.

"He needs a doctor," Moira said, without taking her eyes from the leg. "A real one. Someone who can set the bone, clean the wound, stitch this properly."

Doyle snorted, not at her, but at the very idea of honest medicine being available to people like us.

"A real doctor costs real money and asks real questions. But I know a Welshman who was once a surgeon's mate at a mine, before he decided men underground died too often and men above ground not often enough. I will send for him. If he still drinks in the same hole, he will come. If not, someone worse will come with a needle."

"That does not sound comforting," I muttered.

Only then did Doyle truly look at me, the way a man looks when he has heard of a problem and now sees that the problem has a face, bruises, wet hair and eyes far too alive for someone who ought to have been broken.

"And you are the girl from the magistrate's jail."

"Depends which version reached you first," I said. "In the papers I shall probably be a monster, in court I was a plague, and in prison a boiler-room whore. Personally I prefer Nell, but I understand simplicity lacks spectacle."

A low murmur passed through the room, somewhere between laughter and warning. Doyle looked at me for a moment without expression. Then the corner of his mouth shifted by the smallest degree.

"Sharp-tongued. That matches the description."

"Descriptions can be unfair."

"In your case they seem restrained."

Red moved to stand beside me, not too close, but close enough for me to feel her presence like a wall placed on my side.

"She cannot stay here long," she said. "You know that, Doyle."

"I know more than I like," the captain replied, moving to the table on which lay a map of dockside canals, quays and warehouses, stained and dirty, but carefully preserved. "I know half the city will be looking for her before the sun clears the chimneys. I know the magistrate does not enjoy having his bars turned into decoration for an escape. I know that if they come here with dogs, lanterns and a good reason, all of us will have a very short morning."

"How much time?" Callum asked.

Doyle ran a finger over the map, stopping near a tangle of quays, side canals and warehouses close to the port.

"A few hours, if they are lucky and we are not. Perhaps the whole day, if the port watch searches the roads first and the police decide you made for the north or the factories. This place is hidden, not magical. Those who do not know it will not find it easily. Those who know what to look for will sooner or later knock at the wrong doors until they reach the right one."

The two women from the prison sat on a crate by the wall, wrapped in drier coats someone had handed them without ceremony. The one with the cut face held a cup of

hot water in both hands, as if she did not trust warmth not to be snatched away. The quiet one, with the iron bar finally set beside her foot, watched the people in the room carefully, without wonder, but without that earlier tension ready for flight.

"We will stay," said the cut-faced woman suddenly, before anyone could ask. "If you will take us."

Doyle looked at her, then at the other, and did not make that dreadful face men make when they hear a woman's we, as if about to explain that the world has other plans.

"Can you work?"

"We can survive," said the quiet one.

The captain nodded, as if that qualification were sufficient, and in this place probably higher than any letter of recommendation.

"We shall see. We need hands for washing, sorting goods, kitchen work and carrying messages, if your legs are faster than your fear. But the rules are simple. You bring no one here. You tell no one where you are. You do not ask names unless a person gives them freely. And if the watch knocks, you know nobody but your own shadow."

"Sounds fairer than prison," the cut-faced woman muttered.

"Prison has the vice of pretending to be fair," Doyle said. "We at least know what we are."

Finn, Seamus and wounded Patrick were staying too, although Patrick would have stayed even had he wished to go, because his leg now had more to say than his character. This place was their world, or at least one of its old rooms. It knew their curses, debts, old defeats and probably several corpses no one wished to mention before supper. Finn began speaking with a man by the barrels about weapons and whether ammunition could be moved to another hiding place if necessary. Seamus found a cup, poured himself something whose smell could have stripped paint from a door, and declared that if he was to die, he would rather do it somewhere the liquor did not pretend to be tea. Patrick, pale and half-conscious, heard this and whispered that he hoped Seamus died first, so it would be quieter.

Callum would remain as well, at least for now. Without him this place, the lads and the whole Irish route would have been for us like a map without a key, full of marks that meant something, only not to us. He did not need to announce it. He simply stood beside Doyle, bent over the map and began speaking of the port watch, quays, shipping movements, people one might pay and people one must not trust even while their own mother wept.

Then came my turn, though nobody said it aloud.

I felt it in their looks, in the way Red was silent too long, in the fact that Greta had stopped commenting on everything and was suddenly studying her hands as though she might find an answer there she did not wish to see. Moira stood by the bandage table, still in the borrowed coat, her face tired and pale, and I think for the first time since the escape she had no specific task to save her from thought.

"Nell cannot stay here," Doyle said calmly, without cruelty, which did not make the sentence easier. "Not longer than a few hours. Perhaps until dusk, if luck decides to behave indecently. Her face will go through the city. Her name will travel faster. If they

find her here, they will not burn only this hiding place. They will burn the whole net. Irishmen, Welshmen, sailors, women, message boys. Everyone."

I said nothing. It is difficult to argue with a truth that does not need a raised voice.

Red lit a cigarette. I do not know where she found it. Her pocket, the air, the same place she kept all her bad ideas. For a while she watched the glow at the end of it before looking at me.

"Then perhaps it is time to go back to Ireland," she said.

The words hung between us differently from the rest. Not yet like a plan, more like a door opened in a wall I had not known had doors at all.

"Back?" I repeated, because of course I had never been there, so Ireland could not be a return for me, only something foreign, green, misty and full of stories people carried in their voices like wounds.

Red shrugged, but the gesture was weaker this time, less defensive.

"For me, back. For you, disappear. At least for a while. A ship can be found from the port, not necessarily the one we first spoke of. Doyle knows people. Callum knows people. Ireland is not safe, do not be a fool, but the English have more enemies there than eyes, and a woman with a new name may breathe longer there than Nell Whitmore with a sentence and half Manchester at her heels."

Doyle watched Red carefully, as if hearing something more than logistics in her proposal.

"It is not a bad direction," he said. "Difficult, but possible. Depends on the ship, the weather and whether the girl can keep her tongue behind her teeth for more than three minutes."

"She cannot," Greta and Red said almost together.

"Your faith moves me," I replied.

"It is not faith. It is experience," Greta said.

Moira was silent.

I looked at her, because somehow I could not avoid it. There was something closed in her face, not hostile, but lost, as though it were only now reaching her that breaking out of prison had been merely the first step and that beyond it there was no straight road, only branching paths, each taking something different.

"And you?" I asked quietly.

Moira raised her eyes.

"Me?"

"What will you do?"

For a moment she did not answer. In that pause I heard everything she did not say: the prison that could no longer be her place, the uniform to which she could not return, the people who would call her traitor, and these new ones to whom she did not yet belong.

"I do not know," she said at last, and those two words sounded more honest than any declaration that night. "I cannot go back. That I know. If they catch me, they will show no mercy. Betrayal from inside always hurts them worse than rebellion from below. But where am I to go? What am I without keys, without a uniform, without doors I know how to open?"

Greta, who until then had pretended to be deeply interested in a bottle found on a shelf, snorted softly.

"Welcome to the club. I do not know who I am without the factory, without my bench in the pub, without being able to tell someone he is an idiot on my own ground."

"You can do that anywhere," I said.

"I know. That is why I am still alive."

Red looked at Greta, then at Moira.

"You can stay here. For a while, at least. Doyle needs people with heads on their shoulders. Greta can organise half a district without asking its permission, and Moira knows the guards, procedures, magistrate, habits. That is worth more than three pistols and a prayer."

Doyle lifted an eyebrow.

"Do not hand out my place like soup at a charity kitchen, Red."

"I would not hand out soup at a charity kitchen. Too much paperwork."

The captain stared at her sternly for a moment, then snorted.

"But she is right. Both of you could be useful. Briefly. Until things grow too hot."

Greta folded her arms.

"I adore being useful. It almost sounds like a compliment, only spoken by a man whose tongue has rusted on orders."

"And you sound like a woman who will cost me more trouble than rent."

"Usually, yes."

Moira did not smile, but something in her shoulders lowered, not relief exactly, more a brief suspension of sentence.

I looked at Red and felt that beneath all this talk of ships, hiding places, Doyle's people, Ireland, ports and pursuit flowed something else, something more personal, which neither of us wanted to name before witnesses, because naming things in company makes them heavier.

"Would you take me with you?" I asked before sense had time to kick me in the ankle.

Red looked at me for a long while. Longer than was safe.

"I came for you once in a prison," she said finally. "A ship seems almost courteous by comparison."

"That was not an answer."

"It was a very good answer."

"Red."

Her face hardened, but her eyes did not.

"Yes," she said quietly. "I would take you. If you wanted. If we live to the ship. If you do not do anything stupid on the way, which, let us be honest, is the weakest point in the plan."

"Me? Stupid?"

"Nell."

"Very well. That is fair."

And then came silence again, but different this time, less stifling, though not light. We all understood that this was not a peaceful conference over a table. It was the

arrangement of future lives between one pursuit and another, while Patrick lay with his leg wrapped in rags, two prison women tried to decide whether they had just found a place to vanish, three Irishmen returned to the old criminal world like to a badly smelling home, Greta and Moira stood on the borders of their former selves, and I was to be taken out of the country which had wanted to transport me first, only on my own terms.

Doyle tapped the map.

"Good. The plan is this. Until dusk, nobody leaves without my word. The wounded man stays under care. The prison women stay here and learn to be silent in a useful way. The lads with Callum check the port, but without heroics, because heroics stink of reports. Greta and Moira remain inside until we decide whether they are more useful with people, papers or lies. And you, Nell Whitmore, stop looking like Nell Whitmore before anyone beyond this room feels the urge to recognise you."

"Easy," I said. "I always dreamed of becoming someone else, only I never had time to choose something respectable."

"Choose something boring," Doyle said. "Boring people live longer."

Red glanced at me and this time truly, if faintly, smiled.

"That will be the hardest part of the plan."

I meant to answer her, but Patrick stirred on the table and groaned. Moira bent over him at once. The room returned to motion. Doyle began issuing more orders, someone slid the hidden canal entrance shut, someone else brought a bowl of water, and from outside, through brick, timber and dockside fog, came the distant whistle of a ship.

It sounded like a promise. Or a warning. By then I could no longer tell one from the other.

Only after Doyle gave a handful of sharp instructions and the people in the hideout began moving around us without the curious nervousness of accidental witnesses to another person's misfortune did I understand that for a moment, a short, dirty, fragile moment, we had stopped being fugitives driven through night, canals and our own breath. We had become bodies needing water, food, dry clothes and a little space before the world threw us back into its jaws.

There was nothing beautiful or ceremonial in it. No one spread white cloths before us. No one asked whether we took tea with milk. Mercifully, no one pretended our presence was a romantic act of resistance which would look well in a cheap newspaper or on a halfpenny leaflet outside a church. They gave us bowls of thick soup smelling of onion, barley, bones and something that might have been meat if a person possessed enough optimism or enough hunger, and I possessed enough hunger not to ask questions that might insult both the cook and my bowels. Bread was thrown onto the table with it, dark, heavy, a little stale, but real. And real bread after prison water, canal stink and a night of flight is more than food. It is proof that the world has not finished chewing you yet.

At first we ate in silence, greedily, ugly, without manners and without shame, because manners are very fine at the tables of people who have never had to choose between pride and a growling stomach. Greta slurped her soup with the seriousness of someone taking part in a military rite, and when one of the women from the hideout handed her another piece of bread, she nodded and muttered:

"If it is poison, at least it is warm. I appreciate that."

The woman did not smile.

"We save poison for guests who pay less."

"A sensible house."

Patrick was moved into a side room, where the Welshman whom Doyle called a surgeon's mate with a tone suggesting the word doctor might insult everyone present arrived half an hour later with a bag, the face of a drunk, the eyes of a man too sober by half, and hands so steady that even Moira stepped aside without protest. We heard the setting of the leg through the wall, although they tried to hold Patrick down and wedge a leather strap between his teeth. His cry cut through the hideout once, then again, and then stopped abruptly, as if pain had torn his consciousness from his body and flung it into a corner. Seamus sat at the table pale beneath the dirt, pretending to be fascinated by the bottom of his cup. Finn sharpened a knife already sharp, and Callum stood by the door with his arms folded, staring at the wall as if he meant to frighten it.

Then came water for washing, in two large bowls, rags, soap rough enough to scour sin from a wall rather than filth from skin, and clothes hauled from chests: working skirts, men's shirts, waistcoats, a few kerchiefs, thick stockings, two coats and old boots in various sizes and stages of decay, yet still better than bare feet on the road. Washing after all that was strangely intimate, almost shameful, though shame ought to have died somewhere between the cell and the canal. I washed soot, sweat, blood, prison dirt and the remains of that guard's spit from my face, which for a long time I had not even wanted to touch with a rag, as if wiping it away meant admitting it had truly been there. The water in the bowl turned grey, then brown, then nearly black, and I looked at it with some foolish, empty amazement, because a person sometimes only sees after washing how much of somebody else's world she has been carrying.

Moira helped the quiet prison girl clean the cut on her shoulder. The woman with the slashed face sat on a crate and allowed one of the local women to tend the wounds with glass or needle, hissing like a cat in a sack, but not drawing back once. Greta changed behind a partition and came out in an oversized man's shirt, sleeves rolled, with the expression of someone who had just discovered a new reason to hate the world.

"If one more person tells me men's clothes are comfortable, I will push them into the canal," she announced. "The pockets are better, I admit. That is probably why they rule the world. They have somewhere to keep the bribes."

Red vanished for a while behind a curtain of heavy cloth. When she returned, she wore a dark skirt, a plain shirt and a man's waistcoat too large in the shoulders, yet oddly right on her, as though all her life she had taken from other people's things only what was necessary and fitted the rest by force of character. She had washed her face, but not entirely. A line of soot remained at her temple, which she either had not noticed or had accepted as part of her beauty, and I had no intention of correcting it. Her hair, still damp, was tied low. When for a moment she raised her hands to adjust her kerchief, I saw a bruise on her side, dark, spreading, ugly. I said nothing. She saw that I saw. She said nothing too. Between us lay too many things by then to settle with one sentence.

Doyle allowed us to rest in a side room, less smoky, with a low ceiling, two benches, a heap of blankets and a small hearth where the fire did not so much warm as remind us

that cold was not the only possibility. People scattered to their tasks. Callum went with Doyle to check news from the port. Finn and Seamus sat with Patrick. Greta and Moira were called to the table where they discussed false papers, clothes, exits and whether they looked more like widows, workers or women no sensible man should stop after dark. The two prison women sat together by the wall, eating a second cup of soup slowly, no longer like hunted animals, but not yet like people who believed they had found shelter.

I sat by the low wall near the hearth, wet hair wrapped in a borrowed scarf, wearing a shirt that smelled of someone else's smoke, and for a while I could do nothing but hold the bowl in my hands. The warmth of it entered my fingers, and I thought perhaps this is how a person begins to fall apart after escape: not with screaming, not with weeping, but by being given soup, a clean rag and a moment of quiet, whereupon the body asks whether it is allowed now, whether it may begin to tremble.

Red sat opposite me after a time, without asking, without her usual ostentatious certainty, quietly, as if she did not wish to frighten either me or herself. For a long while we were silent, listening to footsteps beyond the wall, muffled voices, Patrick's cough and the distant drone of the port coming through timber and brick like the dream of a giant sleeping in mud.

"You look better," she said at last.

I looked at her from beneath the scarf.

"You lie worse than usual."

"It was meant to be polite."

"Politeness from you sounds like a warning."

"Fine. You look like someone dragged out of a grave who has not yet grown used to air."

"Ah. There is the tenderness."

The corner of her mouth shifted, but this time she did not immediately run into a joke. She looked at the fire, then at her own hands, clean only in part, because under her nails still lay canal filth and probably blood, and then she said quietly:

"I thought that when I saw you out of the cell, it would be easier."

"And is it?"

"No."

I did not understand at once, so I waited. There was something about Red that made it unwise to hurry her in those rare moments when she truly began to speak. Most of her life she had used words like knives, stones or smoke screens, so when she suddenly tried to use them like hands, she did it cautiously, almost clumsily, and therefore more truthfully.

"Do you know what is worst?" she asked, but did not wait for an answer. "When they sent me out of Ireland, when the ship pulled away, I did not cry because of my father. Not even because of my mother, though I saw her on the shore, small and bent, with a scarf to her face. I cried because I thought perhaps I really was what he said. Perhaps something in me was made wrong. Perhaps a proper daughter is silent when she must be. Perhaps a proper girl does not shout in church, steal fish, provoke men and spoil order. I cried because for a moment I believed that if everyone tells you you are a problem, then maybe the problem truly bears your name."

Her voice trembled on the last word, only just, almost invisibly, but to me it was like a crack in glass.

"Liverpool did not take me in," she went on. "Liverpool choked on me and spat me into a factory. The first weeks were... God, Nell, I could not even understand properly what they wanted from me. They spoke quickly, laughed at my accent, shoved me, told me to do things I did not know, and when I made mistakes they beat me or cut my pay. I slept in a corner at a woman's place, paying her a few pence for floor space, and she considered it charity because she did not let the rats sit on our faces too often. That first winter I had one dress, one pair of boots and a hunger so fierce I began to understand saints who saw visions. After three days on water and a crust, a person sees things too. Fewer angels, more bakeries."

She tried to smile, but the smile fell apart before it could take shape.

"Then I fell in with bad company. Or good. It depends who writes the report. We stole a little. Carried parcels no sensible person opened. Served as eyes, ears and legs for men who had wars with the English, the police, the rich, and sometimes one another, because the poor can hate each other with enormous dedication, especially when they have no strength left to hate the right people. I was fast, small, furious, and almost nobody imagined a girl with a basket might carry anything more than laundry. So I carried things. Letters. Money. Ammunition. Once a knife wrapped in a nappy. A very touching picture of motherhood."

This time I snorted quietly despite myself, and she looked at me, her eyes alive for a second.

"I was not good, Nell. I do not want you making me into some poor girl with a clean heart and dirty hands. My hands were dirty, and sometimes my heart was no better. I lied. I stole. I ran. Once I left a boy with his head split behind a warehouse, because if I had helped him they would have caught us both. I still do not know whether he lived. Sometimes I tell myself he did, because a person must have some lies or go mad. Then there was Maeve. I told you. The girl who laughed as though the world might yet be acquitted. After her, I left the network. Or tried to. One never truly leaves such things. One only stops answering messages, until one day a message finds you anyway in a boiler room, in the shape of a girl looking at a supervisor as if she has already seen his funeral."

I did not know whether to laugh or weep, so I did what I knew best. I was silent and looked.

Red leaned forward a little, elbows on her knees. Her face moved nearer to the fire, warmer, more human, less armoured.

"This sharp tongue of mine," she began more quietly. "It is not courage. Not always. Sometimes it is only a mask. Quick, sharp, convenient. If you speak first, others have no time to ask what you fear. If you joke about a wound, no one checks whether it still bleeds. If you look as though you care for nothing, people stop trying to see what truly moves you. And it worked. For years it worked wonderfully. Men grew angry, women shrugged, supervisors wanted to break me, but at least no one noticed how tired I was of pretending I needed nothing."

She looked straight at me then, and that was when the room, the fire, the people beyond the wall, the port, the pursuit and even my own escape seemed to draw away, leaving only her and words that had finally stopped pretending to be knives.

"And then you stood in front of me," she said. "Not beside me. Not afterwards. Not with a bandage, advice, or that vile pity people offer like cold soup. You stood between me and him. With a shovel in your hands, with eyes so full of anger that for one second I truly thought you might kill him, and do you know the stupidest thing? I was not frightened of you. I was frightened of what I felt."

My heart struck harder.

"What did you feel?" I asked quietly.

Red turned her eyes away for a moment, as though gathering strength not to answer, but to make the answer true.

"That someone had chosen me," she said. "Not out of duty. Not because I was family, a cause, a banner, part of a plan. Just me. Me, filthy, angry, Irish, inconvenient, too loud, too sharp, carrying a history no sensible person would keep near them. You did not stop then to decide whether I was worth it. You simply could not bear that someone was breaking me. And Nell... no one had ever done that for me before."

The words settled between us softly and heavier than all the shouting of that night.

"No one?" I asked, and regretted it at once, because that is the sort of question a person asks when the heart is stupider than the mind.

She shook her head.

"Not like that. People have helped me, of course. Callum helped. Greta helps in her ugly way. Maeve... Maeve loved me, though then we had no good words for what we did with our hearts when the world told us to hide them. But no one stood in front of me in the moment of the blow. No one decided my body was worth risking something for. That if someone beat me, the matter was not closed between me and pain. You did that. And when they locked you away, when they dragged you out of the hall and I stood under the gate unable to do anything, I felt something inside, as if someone had split my ribs from within and put fire there. Not a grand idea. Not revolution. You. And that was far more dangerous."

I could not answer.

Truly.

I, who could insult a supervisor, judge, guard and the whole Empire in one sentence, sat there like an idiot with a bowl on my knees and my throat so tight every word seemed too small, too stupid, too poor.

Red must have seen it, because she smiled faintly, without triumph.

"Well. I found a way to shut you up. A pity it required raking through the whole of my pathetic life."

"It is not pathetic," I said at last, hoarsely. "It is terrible, filthy, unjust and stubborn as you. But not pathetic."

"That may be the prettiest compliment I have ever received."

"I can try a worse one, if you like."

"No. Leave that one. It has enough mud in it to sound honest."

For a while we were silent again, but this silence was neither empty nor heavy. It sat between us like something exhausted that could finally stop pretending. The fire cracked softly. From the side room came Moira's muffled voice, then the scrape of a chair. Someone beyond the wall cursed in Irish, and somewhere farther off Doyle gave orders to people who knew how to hide tracks better than many a respectable family hid sins.

I set down my bowl and shifted closer, not enough to frighten her, but enough not to speak across the whole width of the room.

"I was frightened too," I said.

Red looked at me sharply.

"Of what?"

"Of the fact that when he hit you, it hurt me more than it should. That when you fell, I felt something I did not feel with the others. Not because their pain was smaller. Only because yours reached deeper in me somehow. In the cell I tried for a long time to explain it to myself as anger, justice, pride, my whole fine arsenal of words that lets me avoid looking where something truly bleeds. But the truth is, Red, I could not bear the thought of you going out. Not you."

Her face altered almost imperceptibly, but I knew her better now than I had at the beginning. I saw how she held her breath, how her fingers stopped worrying the edge of her sleeve, how something in her gaze softened and immediately tried to defend itself.

"Nell..."

"I do not know what to call it," I interrupted softly. "And perhaps not today. Perhaps not here, between soup, blood, old smugglers and a port that smells worse than Briggs's ambitions. But I know that when I sat in that cell, I thought of you. Not as a cause. Not as a comrade. As someone who had got under my skin and never asked permission."

Red looked at me for so long the fire sank lower.

"That is very unreasonable," she said at last.

"I know."

"Dangerous."

"I know."

"Stupid."

"That I have suspected for some time."

This time she smiled truly, briefly, painfully, but truly.

"You are impossible."

"And yet you came for me in prison."

"Apparently I have terrible taste in decisions."

"And women?"

She froze for the smallest fraction of a second, then lowered her eyes, but did not move away.

"Perhaps," she said quietly. "But for the first time in a long while, I do not regret it."

That sentence entered me deeply and quietly and stayed there the way certain things stay, things a person will later take out of memory on the worst nights to check whether they truly happened.

We did not touch then. We did not kiss. Nothing so simple, nothing so easy to describe. Between us still lay the whole night, the sentence, Ireland, the port, Patrick groaning behind the wall, Moira without a future, Greta without a plan, Doyle with his map, and the world which would start looking for us with fresh zeal after dawn. But we sat nearer than before, in the warmth of the small fire, in borrowed clothes, our faces washed only enough to reveal exhaustion, and for that one moment we did not have to pretend we were made only of anger.

We were fear too. Scar. Hunger.

And something delicate, which in such a world ought not to have had the right to live, and yet breathed between us stubbornly, quietly, without permission.

Like us.

Only when Doyle spread a map on the table, so old, stained and creased it looked more like a hide peeled from some dead city than an object meant to save anybody's life, did I understand that our prison escape had only been the first stupid, bloody step. The real question was no longer whether we could get out of Manchester, but how far one had to run before that city, with its chimneys, bars, courts, supervisors and all its elegant machinery for grinding poor people down, would finally stop breathing down one's neck.

The map lay between us, held down by a knife, a cup and an iron key whose origin I preferred not to know, because in this place every object had a story, and most stories ended in blood, prison or a woman saying she saw nothing though she had seen everything. Doyle stood over it with his hands on the table. Callum leaned beside him. Red sat at my right, silent, tense, her tiredness fighting something far more stubborn in her face. Moira stood a little farther off, as though still unsure she had any right to take part in this conversation, even though without her there would have been no conversation at all. I would still have been rotting in a cell, while the others might at most have told each other by the fire how badly they had wanted to act.

Doyle traced a finger from Manchester towards the west, slowly, carefully, as though he were not following a map but an open wound.

"You will not go to Liverpool by the main road. Main roads are for fools, merchants and people who believe the police sleep when they are not standing over them with clubs. The railway is out. Stations will be watched, tickets checked, and every conductor will be more patriotic than usual this morning, because patriotism comes very easily to men who have been promised a reward. That leaves the canal, side branches, cargo boats, warehouses and people who see only as much as they have been paid to see."

Greta sat on a crate by the wall, bowl in hand, wearing the face of a person who distrusts plans precisely because she has survived too many of them.

"Sounds like a pleasant excursion," she muttered. "By canal, among rats, with a woman wanted for treason, a former guard and an Irishwoman whose face says arrest me even when she is silent. Perhaps we shall hire a band as well."

"I will save the band for your funeral," Doyle replied without looking up. "If you behave, I will let you choose the hymn."

"I have not behaved since I was twelve."

"It shows."

Red did not smile, though a few hours earlier she would likely have stuck some spiteful remark into that like a knife into a table. Now she only watched the map, that thin line towards Liverpool and then farther, over water and the Irish Sea, towards Dublin, as though it were not a route but a memory she did not wish to touch barehanded.

"Who?" she asked briefly.

Doyle understood, because people like them wasted few words on obvious things.

"Captain Malachy Keane," he said. "An old bastard. Sails a cargo ship between Liverpool and Dublin. Officially he carries machine parts, cloth, barrels of oil, tools. Sometimes things not in the papers. Sometimes people who accidentally find themselves in the wrong country with the wrong name. He knows me from the days when we were both younger, stupider and convinced a bullet could be fooled if one ran quickly enough."

"Can it?" I asked.

Doyle looked at me with dry calm.

"No. But youth is a beautiful disease until it leaves scars."

Callum tapped the map at Liverpool.

"Keane sails tomorrow evening?"

"If he does not change his mind, die, get stopped or take offence at the money, yes."

"A lot of ifs," said Greta.

"Welcome to adult life," Doyle said. "It consists mostly of ifs and bills."

Moirra, silent until then, stepped closer to the table. She wore the borrowed coat, her hair tucked under a cap, her face still pale but less shattered than before, as if clean water and half a bowl of soup had reminded her that the body could still be a tool, not merely evidence.

"If they follow me," she said quietly, "they will not be looking only for Nell."

Everyone looked at her.

She disliked that. I saw it in her shoulders, the way her fingers gripped the edge of the table. But she did not retreat.

"I betrayed the magistrate. I took out keys. Passed messages. Helped open cells. They may call Nell a rebel, a troublemaker, a threat to order, but they will call me a traitor. And traitors from within they hate most, because they remind them their wall has cracks. If I stay here, even under Doyle's protection, sooner or later someone will recognise me. The guards know my face. The police know my voice. In the prison there are men who would give my description so exactly, to save their own skin, they could draw me on a wall."

Red watched her carefully, but without the old hardness.

"You want to come with us."

Moirra swallowed.

"If you will take me."

Greta set down her bowl with a soft knock.

"Do you know what you are stepping into? Ireland is not a charity home with a pretty view. This will not be a stroll over green hills, with little birds, mist and Red telling you poetic rubbish about the homeland. You will be a fugitive in a strange place, without

papers, without work, without any guarantee that the first man promising help will not sell you for the price of boots."

Moira looked at her calmly, and for the first time something almost hard appeared in her face, not despair, not anger, more the sobriety of a woman who had finally stopped pretending she had anywhere to return to.

"Here they will hang me sooner."

Greta opened her mouth as if to answer, but this time said nothing. It was almost touching. Or alarming. Greta's silence always looked like the beginning of violence.

I looked at Moira and felt something strange and uncomfortable, as if the world were changing shape faster than I was ready to accept. Not long ago she had been a guard on the other side of the bars, a woman with keys, a uniform, a face hidden behind duty. Then she had given me a blanket, a letter, water, and finally opened a door. Now she stood by the table asking not for forgiveness, not reward, not even gratitude, but for a place in the boat, in the flight, in the uncertainty which for people like us was the nearest thing to freedom.

"I am going with Red," I said.

The words left me more calmly than I expected, and perhaps that was why everyone heard them so clearly. They did not sound like a theatrical declaration or a grand confession drowned in cheap music. They sounded like a fact. Like something that had sat beneath my ribs for a long time, waited for me to stop dodging, and finally found its way to my tongue.

Red turned her head slowly.

She did not look surprised. More like someone who had feared hearing it precisely now.

"Nell..."

"Do not tell me it is unreasonable," I cut in. "I know. If you wanted a reasonable woman, you should not have dragged me out of prison. I could have stayed there and ruined their walls with slogans."

Doyle snorted.

"At least she knows some of her limitations."

"Not all," Red muttered.

I looked at her longer than circumstances allowed. People moved behind us. Patrick groaned beyond the partition. Someone knocked on pipes to signal the watchers. In the port, whispered talk of the magistrate's escape was probably already beginning to stir, and suddenly I had the sense that through all this filth, noise and pursuit there ran one thin, straight line.

To her.

"I cannot stay in England," I said more softly. "They will find me. If not today, in a week. If not in Manchester, then in Liverpool, Leeds, London or some hole where someone reads my name on a poster and decides the hunger of his own children matters more than another person's life. I have no home here now. No work. No name I can use without danger. And even if I had, I do not want to go back to a world where I must apologise for breathing too loudly."

Red was silent.

So I went on, because apparently once I begin destroying my own life, I prefer to do it thoroughly.

"But it is not only that. I am not going only because I must. I am going because I want to. With you. To Ireland, to hell, onto a ship, into a new name, into something I do not yet understand. I do not promise to be easy, quiet or sensible."

"That would be suspicious," Greta murmured.

"But I am going," I finished, not taking my eyes from Red.

For a while the silence was so thick even Doyle could not force a bitter comment into it, which I took for a small miracle and probably another sign that the world truly was leaning towards disaster.

Red looked at the map, then at me, then at Moira, as if weighing the burden of each decision in her mind. I knew that expression. She was not a woman who easily accepted another person's dependence, because dependence meant responsibility, and responsibility meant the possibility of loss. She had already lost enough for every new person near her to be not merely closeness, but danger.

"If you come with me," she said at last, slowly, "there will be no turning back. In Ireland there are people who remember my name, my mistakes, my old debts. There I will not only be Red from the boiler room. There will be those who see the girl from the parcels, the knives and dead Maeve. Those who think I have come back too late or for the wrong purpose. And those who would happily sell the English not me, but you, because you are a reward with a face."

"Sounds hospitable."

"Nell."

"I know," I said. "I am not a child."

"Sometimes you are worse. Children can at least be bribed with sugar."

"So can I, if it is very good."

Despite herself she smiled briefly, then grew serious again.

"Fine," she said. "You will come with me."

It did not sound like a romantic promise. It sounded like a sentence I had wanted to hear. Moira exhaled softly, perhaps with relief, perhaps with fear.

"And me?" she asked.

Red looked at her, then at Doyle.

Doyle scratched his beard and sighed like a man who had long known his day would be foul but had hoped the foulness might stop at a reasonable level.

"Three women in one passage make more noise than one," he said. "Especially if one is a wanted rebel, the second an Irishwoman with a past, and the third a former guard who could very politely tell the authorities where we keep our dirty secrets."

"I will not tell them," Moira said.

"I trust you about as much as I trust my reflection in a canal, but that is still more than I trust most people. The problem is not what you say willingly. The problem is what they pull out of you if they catch you."

Moira went pale, but did not look away.

"That is why I have to disappear."

Doyle watched her for a long time with that cold assessment of men who have survived by measuring usefulness faster than pain.

"Can you read?"

"Yes."

"Write?"

"Yes."

"Imitate a hand?"

Moirá hesitated.

"I have seen enough forms to know how they ought to look."

"Open locks?"

"Not all."

"Lie calmly?"

She looked at him, and for the first time something almost hard entered her face.

"I worked in a prison."

Doyle nodded.

"Then you can."

Greta laughed dryly.

"Well, look at that. A job interview among criminals. All that is missing is where do you see yourself in five years."

"In five years?" I asked. "Alive. That seems ambitious."

"Too ambitious," Doyle muttered. "But I appreciate the insolence."

The captain bent over the map again and moved his finger from the hideout towards Liverpool.

"You will get to Liverpool not as passengers, but as goods beside goods. Before dusk today a canal boat leaves here with barrels of dye and boxes of tools for a workshop in Runcorn. There you change transport. You will not go through the main quay, because they may already be asking there. From Runcorn my people will take you by cart towards Liverpool, warehouse side, where the port cares more about cargo than faces. Keane is due to sail tomorrow evening on a cargo ship to Dublin. Officially machine parts, cloth and barrels of oil. Unofficially, he will take three women as loading help, if he is given papers dull enough to make a man yawn."

"Dull papers," I said. "At last, something at which I can fail."

"That is why you will not speak," Doyle answered at once. "You will cough, look down, and pretend life has crushed you too thoroughly to leave room for an opinion."

Greta snorted.

"That will not work. She has opinions even when she is silent. You can see them in her eyebrows."

"Then we shall cover her face."

Red looked at me with a shadow of amusement.

"A widow?"

"No," Doyle said. "Widows invite pity, and pity invites conversation. You will be workers transferred to Irish contract work, kin to a woman in Keane's crew, filthy, tired and not worth the time. It is safest to look as though nobody has ever found you interesting."

"Cruel," I said. "I have spent my life trying to look like a problem."

"And that is why we must now dress you as a solution."

Moira bent over the map.

"If the port watch receives Nell's description, they will look for a young woman, bruised, dark-haired, perhaps with Irishmen. We must change more than clothes. Hair, way of walking, perhaps a bandage over the face."

"A bandage?" I asked.

"Illness frightens people more effectively than weapons," Moira said. "Especially poor illness. Nobody wants to touch a woman who looks as though she might die on their hands and create paperwork."

Doyle smiled faintly.

"The former guard begins to think like a smuggler. Moving."

"Do not flatter her too much," Greta muttered. "She will become manager."

Moira looked at Greta strangely, and for a brief moment I thought that between them too there was something neither could yet name, not tenderness perhaps, not attachment, but that peculiar thread which forms between people who have passed through fire together and neither wishes to admit the other helped her breathe.

"And you?" Moira asked Greta. "What will you do?"

Greta went still.

The question hung in the air heavier than it should have, because everyone else had either decided or been assigned to a decision by wounds, past and pursuit, and Greta still stood between roads, too free to be fitted easily into a plan and too bound to us to pretend it was not her affair.

"I..." she began, then stopped and grimaced, as if hesitation itself tasted vile. "I do not know yet."

Red watched her more gently than usual.

"You can come with us."

Greta snorted by reflex, but this time without force.

"To Ireland? With you? And what would I do there? Frighten sheep? Teach the locals how to swear properly in English?"

"You could live," I said.

"That sounds suspiciously impractical."

"Greta."

She looked at me, and there was something tired in her eyes, almost sad, fitting her usual face so poorly that I wanted to look away.

"Someone has to stay," she said quietly. "Those two prison women do not know this place. Patrick cannot walk. The lads will keep low if they have any brain between them, though none has been detected in Seamus, perhaps medicine will catch up. Doyle has his own affairs. And Manchester... Manchester is not finished. Someone has to make noise elsewhere while you try to vanish. Someone has to make them look for Nell in the north, not west. Someone has to stay and lie so ugly they believe it."

I said nothing. Not because I had no answer, but because she was right. And being right can be more cruel than being wrong. Moira watched her with tension.

"That will get you killed."

Greta shrugged.

"Many things have tried. Competition has been poor so far."

"Greta."

"Do not look at me like that, guard. I will start thinking you are worried, and then I shall have to do something stupid to restore the world's order."

Moira lowered her eyes, but did not deny it.

Doyle struck the map with one finger, bringing the talk back to things that could be drawn, bought, hidden or forged.

"By evening we shall have papers. Nell gets a new name. Moira too. Red... Red should stop being Red for a few hours."

"Impossible," I murmured.

"I know," Doyle said. "That is why I shall give her a hat."

Red stared at him with contempt.

"Try it and I will come back solely to strangle you."

"Touching. I miss you already."

The plan began to take shape. Not beautifully, because plans like ours are not born beautiful. They are patched together out of necessity, lies, old routes, people who owe favours and the kind of courage that often looks very like bad bookkeeping. Someone measured Moira's shoulders for a coat. Someone told me to loosen my hair, then immediately told me to cover it because apparently my face alone was already enough of a public inconvenience. Red argued with Doyle over a name, lost, argued again, won half of something, then threatened to throw the papers into the harbour if anyone attempted to make her sound like a saint.

There was a brief dispute over whether I should be renamed Mary, Ellen, Jane or something so dull that even a priest would lose interest. In the end Doyle chose Nora Vale, which Greta considered too pretty and Red considered too gentle, and I considered acceptable because it sounded like a woman who might murder someone quietly if cornered.

Moira became Anne Ward, because Doyle said no official ever remembered an Anne Ward unless she owed him money. Red was given the name Ruth Kavanagh and made a face as though it had been pulled from a drain.

"Ruth?" she said. "Do I look like a Ruth?"

"At the moment you look like trouble in a waistcoat," Doyle answered. "Ruth is an improvement."

"I refuse."

"You may refuse when the police ask your real name. Until then, you are Ruth."

"If I die as Ruth, I shall haunt you."

"If you die as Red, I suspect you will haunt everyone."

For a while, while the papers were being scratched into existence by a woman with a narrow face and astonishingly quick fingers, I watched the room settle into its practised rhythm. Messages came and went. A boy disappeared through a trapdoor and returned muddy to the knees. A woman took away my old coat and brought another, faded brown, smelling of smoke and onions. Someone cut my hair shorter at the front to alter the shape of my face and wrapped a bandage along my jaw as if I had a fevered swelling.

I was told not to scratch it, not to speak, not to lift my head too much and not to make any jokes near a watchman.

"Cruelty," I said.

"Survival," Moira replied.

"It feels the same."

"Often."

As afternoon dragged on, the hideout grew warmer, louder and strangely more alive. Not safe, never safe. Safety was for people with locks that worked in their favour. But alive. Someone found an old fiddle under a bench, wrapped in cloth and forgotten in dust. I thought at first it was only another relic of someone's debt or drunkenness. Then Red saw it.

Her face changed so quickly I nearly missed it. A flicker. Recognition, grief, amusement, and something that might once have been joy.

"Do you play?" I asked.

"No," she said.

Greta looked up.

"That means yes."

"It means mind your business."

"That also means yes."

Red pulled the instrument from beneath the wall with a care I had hardly ever seen in her, dusted it with her sleeve and snorted.

"There you are, Manchester and surrounds. Even in a smugglers' hole one may find something more musical than Seamus after whisky."

Seamus raised his head from his cup.

"I never sing after whisky."

"True. The sounds you make are nearer agony."

A few people laughed, cautiously, experimentally, as if still checking whether laughter was allowed after all that had happened. The fact someone began was already a small rebellion against terror, and lately I had learned to respect all small rebellions. Red examined the fiddle, turned the pegs, drew the bow lightly across the strings once, twice, three times. The first sound that came out was so miserable that Greta lifted her head at once.

"If you want to kill us before the police do, say so. It would be a waste of a good escape."

Red looked at her with the dignity of an offended queen of the quay.

"Shut up and listen. It is an instrument, not your conscience. It needs a moment."

"I need a moment too. Preferably far away."

"Greta," I muttered.

"What? If it starts howling, even the dead will wake."

Red did not answer. She only adjusted the instrument under her chin, set the cigarette aside, spat to one side, corrected the bow, and then something happened which I had not expected of her at all, though increasingly I discovered that with Red nothing was what it seemed at first. She played. Not clumsily, not with effort, not like someone who once tried a little and remembered two poor chords, but truly played. Surely, softly,

with that slight tug in the rhythm found in songs from ports, taverns, decks and nights when a person has nothing left but water, liquor and longing, and turns those things into music to stay sane.

The room fell silent at once. Even Greta. That bordered on miracle.

The first notes were not merry, but they held that strange warmth which does not smooth pain, only lets it sit at the table and stop growling for a while. Red moved the bow so naturally it was as if she had not found the fiddle after years, but merely set it down yesterday and returned to it after a brief walk through hell. Then she raised her eyes, looked somewhere above our heads, perhaps towards her own memories, and began to sing.

Not with a pretty voice, because pretty voices are for girls in clean dresses and people who have never had to shout over a harbour wind, but with a true one, a little rough, warm, low, carrying salt and smoke and road and something so delicate a person feared to touch it.

"Let us sail where the Irish shore
waits green beyond the foam,
where after storm and bitter night
a heart may still find home.
If you stare into the dark
and carry cold within,
then over sea, through wind and grief,
I'll find that shore again.
Think of me once, when life is hard
and all your candles thin,
let us sail where the Irish shore
lets us be ourselves again."

She sang, and I watched her and had the sense once more of seeing someone entirely new, though she was still the same woman who could throw a man against a wall with one look, curse like three docks and fight dirty when required. Now, from under all of that, something older and deeper emerged, something she must have carried since before she was Red from the boiler room or Red from the network, when she was some girl, perhaps tired, perhaps hungry, but still believing music could carry a person farther than her own legs.

Callum closed his eyes and moved his head slightly with the melody. Finn, who usually looked as though he had been born with a frown of distrust, sat calmly against the wall, gazing into the fire. Seamus, astonishingly, neither chewed nor talked nor spoiled the moment with his face. One of the prison women wiped her nose on her sleeve and pretended the smoke stung her eyes, not something more human, because the habit of denying tenderness is among the poor nearly as common as lice. Moira stood by the door, partly in shadow, hands clasped before her, and watched Red with such careful, calm and moved attention that for a second I thought all of us, each in our own way, were holding on to that one melody like to the edge of a boat in rough water.

When the song ended, Greta cleared her throat theatrically and said:

"Very well. Annoying. You can play."

Red lowered the fiddle and lifted an eyebrow.

"Thank you. That is the warmest thing I have ever heard from you."

"Do not get used to it. I still think you have the face of someone who would steal her own aunt's boots."

"If they were good boots, naturally."

"Exactly my point."

This time the laughter was louder, fuller, less nervous. As if a few minutes of music had truly punched a hole in the weight that had sat on our backs since they dragged me from the cell. Doyle, who had returned to the room halfway through the singing and stopped by the door with the expression of a man undecided whether to appreciate the moment or immediately insult it, shook his head.

"Splendid. I save people, forge documents, organise passage across half the country, and my hideout becomes a damned music hall."

Red set the fiddle carefully against the wall.

"Do not worry, Doyle. If we are caught, I will mention in my testimony that you also patronised the arts."

"In that case I may drown you myself on the way."

Then someone produced a bottle. Then another. There is always a bottle when people are preparing for a road that may prove longer, worse or last. There were no crystal glasses, no silver goblets, no toasts spoken by people who practised speeches before mirrors. Doyle poured into chipped cups, mismatched glasses and one pewter beaker that looked as though it had survived more fights than many a policeman. The liquor was strong, cheap and burned the throat with a shameless honesty one rarely finds in sermons.

"Very well," Doyle said, standing by the table. "We drink quickly, because there is no time for sentiment, and briefly, because half of you become philosophers after a second cup and the rest become idiots. To those who stay. To those who go. To the ship not sinking, the port not shitting itself, and the police believing, for a little while, that the world remains under control."

"So we drink to a miracle," Greta muttered.

"We drink to practice," Doyle replied.

He raised his cup. So did we.

"To the living," Callum said.

"To those still breathing," added one of the prison women.

"To Patrick not dying on the way and spoiling the mood," Seamus put in.

From the side room came Patrick's weak, furious voice:

"Die yourself, you prick."

That, I think, amused everyone most.

I drank. The liquor went through me like something fiery, malicious, unpleasant and honest. My head swam slightly, but pleasantly, enough for my body to stop counting bruises for a moment. Red stood beside me with a cup in her hand, and when our shoulders touched lightly, neither of us moved away. Moira drank slowly, with the caution of people who do not want to lose consciousness because they have only just

recovered their own life. Greta tilted her cup as if challenging the world and grimaced afterwards as though the drink had personally insulted her.

"That is not whisky," she declared.

"True," Doyle said. "Whisky is for people who can afford it."

"And this?"

"Proof that poverty has not stopped us from burning our throats."

After the toast, everything suddenly quickened, as farewells do, especially those no one wants to call farewells. Someone brought coats. Someone rolled the map. Callum checked weapons, Finn the lantern, Seamus the sack of food, Moira the new papers tucked deep beneath her stays, and Red once more adjusted the belt at her hip and tied her hair tighter, as if cutting away by one movement the last scraps of stillness. The two prison women said goodbye awkwardly but honestly, looking at us as one looks at people known too briefly to love but long enough to fear for. Greta finished what remained in her cup, set it down, and for one second I wanted to embrace her, though I knew this would probably end in a dislocated shoulder and an insult, so I confined myself to a look.

"Do not get caught," I said.

"You either," she replied. "Because if you survive all this only to be arrested by some drunken constable in Liverpool, I shall personally come back from Manchester and throttle you."

"I feel loved."

"Let us not exaggerate."

Red put on her coat, lifted a bag and looked at me.

"Ready?"

I was not. Of course I was not. I was tired, bruised, hunted, hungry for normality and far too attached to a woman who could sing of Ireland as though she sang of something lost and still her own. But since life had dragged me by the hair towards things I was not ready for so many times already, I decided I might as well pretend.

"No," I said. "But let us go before you start playing again and make everyone cry."

"Greta nearly did."

"Tell anyone and I will rip out your tongue," Greta growled.

"You see?" Red murmured. "That is how she shows feeling."

Doyle opened the rear door of the hideout. Wet night air flowed in, smelling of water, tar, silt and the distant port, and with it returned everything waiting outside: the road, the risk, the boat, Liverpool, the ship, Ireland, the pursuit and the rest of this damned world. Behind us the fire cracked for a moment longer, as if the hideout wished to remember that for one hour it had been not merely shelter but something almost warm.

Then we went out.

And truly set off.

We left by a rear passage which did not look like a door, but like one of those rotten dockside wounds in timber a person passes without thought, because one grows accustomed in that part of the city to everything being wet, rotten or half dead. Only when Doyle slid back the hidden bolt and the boards yielded with a soft groan did I

understand that the entire place had been built not so much of brick and beams as of secrets, half-truths, old debts and people who had learned to vanish so well that even the city sometimes forgot it had swallowed them.

Outside, the air was cold, damp and heavy with the port, carrying the smell of tar, salt, rotting rope, horse dung, wet sacks, fish and smoke, that whole miserable, stinking symphony of the waterfront which, oddly, seemed almost fresh after the cell, the canals and a room full of people trying not to think about their own deaths. Night still clung to the city with claws, but in the east the sky was beginning to pale with a dirty grey light that promised no day, only reminded us that work, pursuit and misfortune also keep opening hours. Fog hung over the warehouse roofs, low and greasy, moving slowly between the chimneys like the ghost of an old factory unable to find the road to the cemetery.

We walked one behind another, close, without talk, because Doyle had said clearly we were to reach the canal boat like shadows, not like a funeral procession with ambitions of fame. And although my relationship to orders is usually somewhat suspect, this time I saw no point in argument, since every foolish remark might end in a bullet, a club or a return to the cell from which I had been drawn at too great a cost to waste it on the need to say something spiteful. Red walked before me, her face partly hidden by kerchief and collar of the borrowed coat, which made her less visible but not less dangerous, because even disguised as a tired worker she carried that particular tension that would make any man opposite her instinctively check whether he had an exit behind him.

Moirra walked behind me, a little stiffly, in a cap too large for her and with a bag pressed to her side as though it held not rags, false papers and scraps of bandage, but the last proof that she was no longer the woman with keys at her belt. Behind her came Callum, and farther back one of Doyle's men, a short, stocky sailor with a face so indifferent one could seat him at his own funeral and never know whether he was pleased with the attendance.

Greta escorted us only to the first turning between the warehouses.

She had not said earlier that she would stop there, because Greta evidently considered clear warnings about important things to be soft, suspicious and probably French. She simply halted in the shadow of a wall where last night's rain still sat in the cracks of the paving, and cleared her throat in the manner one uses not before a farewell, but before a curse too good to waste.

"Right," she said quietly. "I go no farther."

I turned at once, though I knew. I had known before, because she had told us at the map, told us in the way she avoided looking towards the things that meant tomorrow, told us in that hard, ugly readiness of hers to remain where it would grow hottest. And yet hearing it in a dark alley, between one warehouse wall and another, hurt more than I cared to admit.

"Greta..."

"Do not start," she cut in at once, raising a finger. "If you now give me some speech about gratitude, friendship or how we shall meet again, I swear, Nell, I will make such a racket that the police will find us themselves just to end the scene."

"I was going to say you look dreadful in that coat."

She stared at me for a second. Then her face cracked into a brief, real smile so rare that if I had any talent for religion, I might have taken it for a sign.

"So do you. You look like the widow of a failed smuggler."

"According to plan, then."

"Unfortunately."

Red stopped beside me but said nothing, which was either a remarkable act of respect for the moment or proof she did not trust her own voice. Moira stood a little farther back, eyes fixed on Greta, and in that look I saw something so unbearably human I felt almost ashamed to witness it, because not everything born between people during an escape should immediately be held up to the light like wet laundry.

Greta came to me first, took my shoulders and squeezed hard, without an embrace, without tender hugging, more as one checks whether a crate is properly shut before travel.

"Listen, you sharp-mouthed plague," she said quietly, and in that plague there was more warmth than in many a family blessing. "You survive. Not because you are special, because you are not that special, though unfortunately you do have a talent for making trouble on an industrial scale. You survive because they very badly want you not to, and I dislike such people getting what they want."

"That sounds almost like love."

"Do not spoil it."

"I shall try."

"Do not try. Do. And stick with Red. Though if she starts thinking she knows best about everything, tell her Greta said to shut her mouth and think."

Red lifted an eyebrow.

"I hear you."

"I know. That is why I speak clearly."

Moira took a step forward, then stopped, as if she did not know whether she had the right. Greta looked at her and sighed with exaggerated weariness.

"Come on then, guard, before I change my mind and decide farewells are for people with soft spines."

Moira approached slowly.

For a while they stood facing one another in awkward silence, one with a face too hard, the other too careful, both looking as though they would rather survive another flight through canals than name anything aloud. At last Greta held out her hand. Moira took it. It was probably meant to be an ordinary, practical goodbye, a handshake between two women who had found themselves on the same side of a catastrophe. Except the hands stayed together one second too long.

"Do not get caught," Greta said.

"You either."

"I have experience."

"In being caught or not being caught?"

"In coming out of trouble by the worse side."

Moira smiled faintly.

"Thank you."

Greta grimaced at once.

"Disgusting word. Do not use it at me without warning."

Then she turned to Red, nodded once, the sort of nod that did not need to say look after her because both sides understood it perfectly, and disappeared into a side lane with Doyle's stocky man, who was to lead her to another exit, another hideout and another lie designed to pull part of the pursuit away from our road. I watched until the dark swallowed her outline, and for one moment I wanted to run after her, though I did not know why. Perhaps to stop her. Perhaps to hear her say something foul once more, only so I would not have to feel the tightness in my throat.

"We go," Callum said quietly.

And we went.

The way to the canal boat led through the back of the port, through places belonging neither to day nor night, full of abandoned crates, wet nets, coal heaps, wooden trolleys and barrels so densely arranged that a person might hide among them or die and no one would notice the difference for a week, provided the body did not begin to stink worse than the rest. In a few windows lights burned, weak and dirty yellow, dimmed, indicating not people who wished to look out, but people forced to work. Somewhere a dog barked. Somewhere someone coughed so long and hard I imagined the cough itself might walk into the street and ask for separate wages. Far off, from the larger quays, came the single whistle of a ship, low and drawn out, as if the sea itself sighed impatiently at once again being expected to take human dramas aboard.

At last we reached a narrow descent at a blind stretch of canal, where beneath a low jetty waited a cargo boat, long, dark, squat, loaded with barrels and covered with tarpaulins. It did not look like a road to freedom. It looked like something used to carry dye, wet timber, dead hopes or people best not shown in daylight. In other words, it suited us perfectly.

The man watching the boat, thin as a nail and with one cheek cut by an old scar, stepped out of shadow and looked at Callum.

"Late."

"Good to see you, Brennan."

"I did not say good."

"You never do."

"Because it seldom is."

Brennan glanced at me, then at Red, then at Moira, and for a moment his gaze lingered on my face too long, making all the blood in my body stand to attention. Red shifted half a step, not demonstratively, but enough to put herself between me and that gaze.

"Doyle said three," Brennan announced.

"There are three," Callum replied.

"One looks like trouble."

"Only one?" I asked before I could stop myself.

Callum closed his eyes for one brief second. Red hissed something under her breath that sounded like my name spoken as a sentence, and Brennan stared at me in grim astonishment.

"That one talks."

"Unfortunately," Red said.

"Keep her under the cloth, then. Talking cargo draws attention."

"I am charmed," I said.

"No," said Callum. "You are silent."

We climbed in under the tarpaulin, between barrels of dye and tool crates whose corners seemed expressly designed to find ribs, bruises and whatever else hurt. It was dark beneath, close, smelling of damp canvas, rope, dye, mice and the sourness of old water. Moira crouched beside me, Red near the slit where a little air came through, one hand on the hidden knife. Callum spoke with Brennan above, low and fast, then the boat shifted beneath us, groaned softly, and began to move.

For a while I could not tell whether we were progressing or whether the world itself was sliding past us in the dark. Water slapped the hull. The boards creaked. Somewhere above, Brennan muttered to the horse or to fate. The air beneath the cover grew quickly warm and stale, and I thought that if freedom smelled like dye, damp rope and terror, then it was still an improvement upon prison.

"You all right?" Red whispered.

"Define all right."

"Breathing."

"Mostly."

"Then be grateful."

"I am. In my own revolting way."

Moira shifted beside us.

"If anyone stops us, let me cough first," she whispered. "Not you, Nell. You sound too much as though you want to argue with the disease."

"I have strong opinions on illness."

"Precisely."

The boat went on without stopping for some time, but the tension did not drop. It merely changed shape. Through cracks in the planks I sometimes saw fragments of the world: dirty boots on a landing, a woman in a scarf carrying a basket, a boy pissing into the canal with the expression of king of his own morning, a dog nosing at barrels, the grey sky between roofs. Everything was ordinary. That was the cruelty. Our lives were breaking apart, burning, changing name and direction, and the city woke as if nothing had happened: to work, smoke, bills, prayers and other people's suffering, which is always easier to bear than one's own.

After hours that might also have been one very long curse, the boat began to slow more often, and the voices above us grew more cautious. Brennan told us not to move for any treasure in the world, even if we heard shots, screams or the Queen herself demanding tea. Then the boat turned into a narrower branch where the smell of the water altered, less factory, more mud, and through the gaps under the tarpaulin came a different light, broader and clearer, meaning the city behind us was thinning.

When at last we were allowed out from under the sheet, my legs were so numb that for a moment I felt certain I would become the first person in history to escape prison only to be defeated by her own knees. Red slipped out first, looked around quickly, handed a hand to Moira, then to me, and I came onto the deck squinting in the grey daylight. We were beside a small landing hidden behind a row of willows, near a few low buildings that looked like workshops or stables, with a narrow muddy road leading west beyond them.

A cart was waiting.

Not as dramatic as the one Greta had driven from the magistrate, not as rickety or insulting to mechanics, but still old enough for me to regard it with deep distrust. It was covered by a sheet, beneath which lay barrels, sacks and crates. Beside it stood a man with a red beard, a broad hat and the expression of someone who by nature trusted nobody and by profession was required to do so even less.

"These are them?" he asked Callum.

"These are them."

"Three?"

"Three."

"Doyle said one would be trouble."

Red and Moira both looked at me by reflex.

"This is beginning to offend," I said.

The red-bearded man measured me with his eyes.

"She does not look quiet."

"She is not," Red said.

"Can she pretend?"

"With great danger and a small audience."

"So no."

"So we will watch her."

"Splendid," the man muttered. "Always dreamed of transporting a living indictment."

They loaded us into the cart among tool crates and sacks smelling of grain, dust and mice, which clearly had their own opinions on transport. Brennan went back to the boat. Callum clasped his hand and passed over coins or something wrapped in cloth, and for a moment I thought how many hands, coins, hidden signs and unlawful favours must exist under the surface of every city for people like us to have even one route of escape. The official world had its courts, police, seals and orders. We had people who spoke little, took payment without witnesses and sometimes, for reasons known only to their own conscience, did not sell you at once.

The cart set off.

The road to Liverpool was to take the rest of the day and part of the night, at least according to the red-bearded man, who introduced himself as Owen in a tone suggesting that if we used the name too often, he would regret the courtesy. We did not go straight, of course, because straight roads are for people without sentences, pursuers and Red at their side. Owen took us through fields, side tracks, small settlements, edges of woods and places where mud seemed to have political plans of its own. We sat beneath the

cover, with a little more room than on the boat, though still close enough for every rut in the road to become a communal experience. Moira dozed in snatches, never deeply, waking at every sharper jolt. Red sat by the opening, cutting a piece of bread Doyle had given us with her knife and handing it round in thin pieces as though issuing ammunition.

"Eat," she said, pressing mine into my hand.

"You order me about very often for a woman who says she is not fit to command."

"This is not command. This is making sure you do not collapse before Dublin, because then all my work goes into the mud."

"How romantic."

"I have my moments."

I chewed the bread. It was hard, sour and marvellous.

"Do you think Greta will manage?"

Red did not answer at once. She looked through the slit in the cover at the passing fields, wet, brown, cut by hedges and low walls, with a sky above them so pale it seemed washed of hope.

"Greta always manages," she said at last. "She is one of those women who could stand in a burning room and complain the fire had been laid badly."

"That is not an answer."

"No."

"Red."

She sighed.

"I am afraid for her. Happy?"

"No."

"Nor am I."

Moira opened her eyes.

"She stayed to draw attention away?"

"Yes," Red said.

Moira looked aside, her fingers tightening on the cloth of her coat.

"I should have stayed with her."

"No," Red answered sharply. "You should disappear. She knows that."

"That does not make it easier."

"Nothing is easier. Some things are necessary and some are merely stupid. We must learn the difference before overwork kills us."

For a while the cart rolled in silence, and I listened to the clatter of wheels, the splash of mud beneath them and the distant cawing of crows circling over a field like black punctuation marks in a badly written day. I was beginning to understand that escape is not one event, not a door opened in the night, not a run through smoke, not a boat leaving a bank. It is a condition which enters a person and makes itself at home, teaching her to distrust silence, distrust light, distrust people who look too long, and even her own name if someone says it too loudly.

In the afternoon we passed the first patrol.

Owen noticed it before we did. Before I saw anything through the slit in the cover, the cart slowed and he began to whistle under his breath like a man with nothing to hide

except the entire meaning of his existence. Red immediately told us to lie low between the sacks. Moira pulled the scarf across my face and began coughing, first quietly, then harder, so convincingly that even I recoiled by instinct. When voices approached the cart, Owen said something about a sick cousin, dye, work near Liverpool and that if the gentlemen wished to look under the cover, by all means, but one of the women had fever and was spitting, and he would not take responsibility for what came out on anyone's skin.

The men hesitated exactly as Moira had predicted.

The disease of the poor had the remarkable quality of frightening men in uniform more than healthy poverty did. A healthy pauper could be beaten. A sick one might leave something on you no order could wash away.

One of the patrol lifted the sheet only enough to see Moira curled in the dimness, coughing into a rag, me with my face bandaged, and Red bent low enough to look like a tired worker, not a woman who had sung about Ireland the previous night and rescued me from a cell.

"Move on," he said at last, disgusted.

The cart did not start for several seconds, but none of us beneath the cover moved for a long time.

When we were far away, Moira stopped coughing and rested her head against a crate.

"I hate this," she said quietly.

"What?" I asked.

"That I know how to deceive them because for years I stood on their side."

Red looked at her seriously.

"Use that knowledge before it uses you."

Moira received it in silence, but I saw the words remain in her, as some sentences do, not comforting, but giving something to hold.

We reached Liverpool after dark, when the sky was black and the port ahead of us shone with hundreds of blurred lights reflected in the water like broken gold. The city sounded different from Manchester. Not only the rasp of factories and the coughing of chimneys, but the creak of masts, shouts of sailors, thud of crates, ropes striking wood, drunken singing somewhere far off, and the dull, ceaseless breath of the sea, which even in the harbour seemed larger than anything a human being could build on its edge. It smelled of salt, fish, tar, coal, filth and the promise of escape, though port promises are like drunkards' promises: loud, warm and very often not worth the price.

Owen stopped the cart by a side storehouse near the quay, where Keane's man was already waiting, small, bald, with eyes so watchful they looked as though they never slept at the same time. He led us through a back door into a dark warehouse and told us to sit quietly, keep away from the windows and light no lamp without a cover.

"The captain will come before dawn," he said. "Or he will not."

"Comforting," I muttered.

"If he comes, you will live a little longer. If he does not, you will have to invent something else. That is how the port works."

The door closed behind him. We were left in the dark, three of us: Red, Moira and I. Liverpool breathed behind the wall. And somewhere among ships, ropes, warehouses and men who did not ask for papers when the price was right, the last crossing waited for us, before Ireland ceased to be a word and became land.

CHAPTER VII

Rocky Road to Dublin

The warehouse where they left us was one of those places that had no character of its own, because for years it had taken in other people's goods, secrets and miseries until it had become nothing but a shell of timber, brick and darkness, smelling of salt, wet ropes, old dust, mice, fish, tar, damp canvas and that sort of fear which does not scream, but sits quietly in a corner because it knows that sooner or later everyone will look at it.

The three of us sat behind a high row of crates marked with numbers and company names, which probably had everything in perfect order on paper, though, looking at the state of the port, the people and the world in general, I was beginning to suspect that "order on paper" was only an elegant way of hiding the fact that somewhere, someone was lying with better ink.

Red took the place nearest the door, of course, because it was in her nature to put herself between danger and the rest of humanity, even when she pretended she was only doing it because she trusted nobody with a knife except herself. Moira sat by the wall, her back against a crate, her face partly hidden under a cap, but I could see that she was not asleep, although her eyelids dropped every few moments. She would not allow herself to sleep, as though sleep were a luxury for the innocent or the stupid, and that night she had ceased to be either.

I sat between them, my knees drawn up under my chin, in someone else's skirt, someone else's shirt and someone else's coat, with a new surname I had not yet been given but which was already waiting somewhere in the dark like a pair of shoes after a dead woman.

Beyond the wall, Liverpool lived.

Not like Manchester, not with that suffocating factory wheeze of machines that seemed to grind time along with people, but differently, wider, dirtier, with the breath of the sea behind it and a thousand small noises making up the port night: barrels rolling over boards, the shout of a man who had just lost patience or money, drunken laughter cut off too quickly, sailors calling to one another, ropes snapping taut, masts creaking, water slapping against the quay and the distant whistle of a ship that sounded like something between a promise and a warning. From time to time lantern-light slipped through the gaps in the boards and moved across the floor in long, narrow strips, as if someone outside were trying to find us with their fingers.

"Don't fall asleep," Red whispered after a long while.

She was not looking at me, but towards the door.

"I'm not asleep."

"Your head was dropping."

"My head has been lodging complaints about working conditions for days. That does not mean it has been granted leave."

"Nell."

I sighed softly.

"I know."

Moira stirred by the wall and looked at us from beneath her cap.

"You can sleep for a little while," she said. "I will keep watch."

Red turned her head towards her.

"You look as if your own shadow could knock you over."

"I worked in a prison. I learned not to fall over when standing was required."

"That is not the same as running."

"No," Moira admitted. "But waiting is similar."

There was more in that one sentence than I wanted to hear, and Red must have felt it too, because she did not answer at once. She only looked at Moira in a way less sharp than usual, almost attentive. We were all beginning to understand that we had escaped from different places, even though our feet were now on the same road. I had fled a cell, a sentence, and a life written by men who wanted to send me to the far end of the world because I had dared to possess a tongue. Red had fled a past that was coming back to her with Ireland.

Moira had fled the uniform, the keys, her own former indifference, which probably hurt her worse than any wound. Three women in a warehouse, each in borrowed clothes, each carrying something that could not be packed but had to be borne.

"Captain Keane," I said after a moment, more to stop the silence eating us than because I truly wished to talk. "What is he like?"

Red snorted softly.

"I don't know him well. I saw him once, maybe twice, years ago. He is one of those men who can smile in such a way that you immediately check your pockets."

"Splendid. Exactly the sort of man I wanted to trust with our lives."

"Doyle trusts him."

"Doyle trusts people the way I trust old bridges. I cross because I must, but I do not write poems to them."

"Keane has debts," Red added. "That is better than character. A debt can be recalled."

"So can character, if it is bad enough."

Moira drew her knees closer.

"Does the ship sail straight to Dublin?"

"If nothing changes," Red replied.

"And do things change often?"

Red looked at her with the shadow of a smile.

"At sea? In a port? With smugglers? Almost never."

Moira closed her eyes for a brief moment.

"Was that meant to reassure me?"

"No. It was meant to prepare you."

For a while we sat again in silence, though this time it was no longer quite so tight, because exhaustion was starting to spread through me slowly, heavily, almost sweetly, like an illness a person does not want but has no strength left to push away. Somewhere beyond the door someone passed, their steps paused for a moment, then went on, and all three of us stopped breathing with such perfect agreement that it almost amused me.

The port taught its own rhythm. Not the factory rhythm, where the machine dictates how the body must live, but the rhythm of people who must know when to look invisible.

Time dragged without mercy.

I do not know whether an hour passed or two, because in a dark warehouse time had no face, only weight. At last, somewhere far off, a bell rang, maybe ship's bell, maybe church bell, maybe ordinary metal struck by a man with his own reasons, and immediately after it we heard three short knocks at the door.

Red rose first.

Moirira stood too and took up the bag.

I got up more slowly, because my body had decided that since it had survived prison, escape, sewers, boat and cart, it could now take offence at being vertical.

The knocks were repeated. Two quick. One long. Then silence.

The door opened from the outside, but not wide. First came the lantern-light, low and yellow, held near the ground, then the man, small and bald, the same one who had brought us here, and behind him someone larger, broader in the shoulders, in a heavy sailor's coat, with his hat pulled low and a face that looked as if wind, salt and life had been trying to wear it away for years and had only managed to make it more suspicious.

"Well now," said the newcomer, taking off his hat and sweeping his eyes over us. "Doyle's three little doves. One mouthy, one silent and one with the face of someone who carried keys for too long."

Moirira stiffened.

Red took a step forward.

"Keane."

Captain Malachy Keane looked at her more closely, and then something like recognition appeared in his face, though not warmth. More caution.

"Red Gallagher," he said slowly. "I thought they had either hanged you or you had finally grown sense."

"As you can see, I disappoint people consistently."

"That was always your talent."

"And yours was taking money for things you later forgot."

Keane smiled broadly, but the smile did not reach his eyes.

"I remember everything I was paid too little for."

"Doyle says you have a debt."

"Doyle says many things. Most of them in a tone suggesting he still commands a ship and not a cellar full of misfortunes."

"Do you have a debt?" Red repeated.

Keane sighed, tucked the hat under his arm and looked at us again, this time without pretending at lightness.

"I do. And if I were wiser I would have paid it to someone less troublesome. But a man does not choose his creditors, only the sins that lead him to them."

The bald man shut the door behind him.

The warehouse grew tighter.

Keane went over to the crates, set the lantern on one of them and pulled three folded papers from his pocket, tied with a thin cord.

"Right. Listen carefully, because I will not repeat myself, and if any one of you forgets her own lie, I will throw her overboard before the mouth of the river. On my ship I am called captain, not miracle-worker."

He handed the first paper to Red.

"You are Nora Flynn. Widow of a dock worker from Cork, going back to family. You have a disagreeable character, so there is little for you to act."

"Touching."

He gave the second paper to Moira.

"You are Ellen Ward. A relation of my cook. You were meant to work at the washing, but you are pale, so we shall say you have been ill and are still not worth touching. If anyone asks, you cough. If they ask more, you faint. If they ask still more, Red insults them before you have to answer."

Moira accepted the paper with both hands, as if it were something more fragile than an ordinary forgery. The captain gave me the third paper. He looked at me the longest.

"And you..."

"I am guessing I cannot be Queen of France."

"With that tongue you would not keep the crown till breakfast. You are Anne Doyle. A distant relation of a man who does not exist, which makes him the safest family you will have for the next few days. You have fever after work in a dye house. Your face stays partly covered. You speak little. Better yet, not at all."

"Everyone is very consistent in trying to take away my greatest talent."

"That is precisely why you are still alive only by accident," Keane replied, "and through the stubbornness of several people with a dramatically poor sense of risk."

Red folded her arms.

"When do we board?"

"In an hour. Not by the main ramp. Through warehouse six, with a lot of cloth and crates of tools. There is night loading, people will be busy, and those who are not have been given a reason to look elsewhere. You will pass between the barrels, then through the lower deck. You will sit in a locker by the hold until we are out of port. Once we are clear, you will be placed among the women in the kitchen and laundry. Officially, you do not exist. Unofficially, if there is an inspection, you are the dullest creatures on the Irish Sea."

"And if someone still knows?" Moira asked.

Keane looked at her.

"Someone always knows."

That was not the answer I wanted to hear, but apparently it was the true one.

"The question," he went on, "is whether he knows enough to risk his own skin. Doyle has paid. I am settling a debt. Several people will stop seeing for an hour. One port guard will develop a stomach complaint at a very convenient time. Two others will be counting barrels, whose number will not agree, because we have made sure they have a more pressing concern than three women in coats."

"It sounds almost professional," I said.

"Girl, I was smuggling people before you learned to insult adults."

"So, a long time."

Red nudged me with her elbow.

Keane looked at her.

"Is she always like this?"

"Worse when hungry."

"Is she hungry?"

"Always."

The captain sighed so heavily that he seemed suddenly to understand he was taking aboard not three women, but walking proof that God had a sense of humour and very little compassion for sailors.

"Give her something to chew before she ruins the operation."

The bald man vanished behind the crates and came back with a piece of bread and cheese wrapped in cloth. I took it without offence, because my dignity had lately been very busy with matters of greater importance and decided that cheese was not an enemy worth fighting. I ate slowly, though my body demanded I devour everything like a rat in a bakery, while Keane explained the details of boarding, the gestures we were to answer to and the people we were absolutely to avoid, especially a young officer named Briggs, which made me almost choke on the bread.

"Briggs?" I asked sharply.

Keane raised an eyebrow.

"You know him?"

"I have bad experiences with that surname."

"Not family, as far as I know. This one is from the sort of Briggses who were born with clean fingernails and the conviction that the sea ought to salute them as well. He dislikes Irishmen, women and people with more brains than himself, which is a very broad portion of mankind. Stay away from him."

"That is something I can do with many men."

"Excellent. Make it an art of silence."

Red leaned towards me and whispered:

"If he throws us overboard because of you before we even get on the ship, I shall be very disappointed."

"At least you will die with a woman of rich vocabulary."

"I would prefer a woman who can cross a port without commentary."

"Do not demand miracles. Keane said he was not a miracle-worker."

Moira, to my surprise, covered her mouth with her hand and seemed to be laughing. Quietly, almost soundlessly, but still. It was so strange, so fragile, that for a moment I felt something like pride, as if we were not only running away, but also recovering small, useless pieces of ourselves which the system had meant to scrape off.

Keane gave us a few minutes to change and settle into our new parts. Moira tied a scarf across my face so that it covered part of my cheek and mouth, leaving my eyes lowered like a woman ill, tired and preferably not worth conversation. Red adjusted my cap, tucking my hair beneath it, and her fingers brushed my temple a little too gently for ordinary disguise.

"Remember," she said quietly. "You are Anne."

"Sounds dull."

"That is the point."

"Does Anne have opinions?"

"Anne has a fever."

"Can fever have opinions?"

"Nell."

"Fine, fine. Anne is silent."

Moira handed me the paper.

"If anyone asks where you were born, say Preston. If they ask about your mother, dead. If they ask about your father, unknown. If they ask about work, dye house. If they want details, cough."

"That is a very sad life for someone who has existed for five minutes."

"The sadder it is, the fewer people want to listen."

Red looked at Moira with approval.

"You are becoming worryingly good."

"That may be the worst compliment I have ever received."

"From Red, that is almost a bouquet," I said from under the scarf.

Keane clapped once, softly.

"End of the little play. We go."

The warehouse door opened into the night and the port came in at once, with all its noise, cold and smell of water. We followed Keane one by one, heads lowered, shoulders stooped, like three women with a long day of work behind them and an even worse journey ahead, which, paradoxically, meant we did not need to act very much.

We went through a narrow passage between warehouses, then through a gate where two of Keane's men were rolling barrels with such convincing effort that even if the contents had been corpses instead of oil, no one would have had the heart to stop them. We passed the first lantern, then the second, stepped into the movement of the port, into night loading, into shouting, creaking, wood striking wood, sailors' curses and fog, which made everyone a little less distinct and therefore, thank God, a little safer.

And then I saw the ship.

She was not beautiful. There was none of the elegance of vessels painted in books for boys who dream of the sea because they have never had to work upon it. She was heavy, dark, bellied, with masts and a funnel, with a deck full of crates, ropes, barrels and people moving in the gloom like shadows obeying orders. On her side, partly veiled by soot and mist, was the name: Saint Brigid.

Red stopped for a fraction of a second. Almost no one would have noticed. I noticed.

"What?" I whispered.

"Nothing."

But her eyes said something else. She looked at the ship like a door leading not only to Ireland, but to everything she had left, buried, betrayed, mourned and once sworn never to touch again.

Keane glanced back at us.

"Heads lower. Now you are dull."

I lowered my gaze. Dull, sick, quiet Anne Doyle. For the next few minutes she had to survive. Nell Whitmore could return later. If the sea allowed.

We moved towards the ship in an order that did not look like order at all, only ordinary port confusion, because in places such as Liverpool everything that wanted to survive had to learn to pretend to be chaos. Keane went first, slightly bent under the weight of his own coat and authority, which he wore not like an ornament but like a hidden knife. Behind him two men rolled barrels, one cursing a rope, the other a cart wheel, someone to the side carried a crate of tools, and the three of us blended into that small, filthy procession like the rest of the cargo, only more breathing and considerably more likely to spoil the whole undertaking.

My head was lowered, the scarf covering part of my face, my eyes fixed on the wet planks of the quay, over which hundreds of people had walked, perhaps thousands, each leaving there a little mud, tar, blood or poverty of their own, so our traces meant nothing, or so I tried to tell myself. The port was alive so insistently it was almost obscene: men shouted at one another through the fog, horses snorted beside carts, chains grated in blocks, somewhere nails scattered and someone immediately sent after them a curse longer than a prayer, from the deck of another ship came a woman's laugh, hoarse, tired, not entirely merry, and above all of it hung the smell of sea, tar, coal, cheap rum and fish that had apparently died with a great sense of duty, because they were still working for the atmosphere of the city.

Saint Brigid stood by the quay, heavy and dark, larger close up than she had seemed a moment before, her side wet with mist, ropes thick as workers' arms, funnel dirty with soot and the deck full of shadows moving in the half-light. She was not beautiful, but beauty had long seemed suspicious to me. Things with too much charm usually exist so that someone else can pay for their upkeep. This ship looked honest in her ugliness. Like something that did not promise safety, only the possibility of carrying you from one danger to another for the right price.

Two men stood by the gangway.

One of them, broad, with a red beard and his cap pulled low, looked like a sailor who would not consider death a reason to stop working if the loading still had to be finished. The other was younger, in a better coat, with pale gloves and the expression of a man who should never stand in a port, because a port takes such men as a personal insult. This had to be the officer, Briggs of the clean fingernails and the conviction that the sea should salute him, and when I saw him from the corner of my eye, my whole body tightened so treacherously that Red, walking beside me, nudged me almost invisibly with her elbow.

Do not look.

She did not need to say it.

I looked even harder at the ground, until all I could see were my own shoes, borrowed, too large, scuffed, but blessed in their anonymity.

Keane stopped by the gangway as naturally as if the entire situation were just another irritating point in the night's work.

"You are late with your inspection, Mr Briggs," he said before the other man could open his mouth. "I am beginning to think you truly care about my cargo."

The young officer lifted his chin.

"We have received orders to check additional persons coming aboard. After the events in Manchester."

The word Manchester drove into me like a hook.

Moira coughed at once, dryly, convincingly, with such timing that if I had not been terrified I might have congratulated her on her stagecraft. Red lowered her head still further, feigning exhaustion, though I knew her hand had already found the knife beneath her coat.

Keane sighed theatrically, as if God Himself had sent him not fugitives but paperwork.

"Manchester is far away, and my barrels are here. If your zeal can wait until tomorrow, I shall be grateful. But if you insist on holding up the cargo now, please do. I will happily explain to the owner that his dyes did not sail to Dublin because a young officer decided to look for revolution among laundry women."

Briggs looked past his shoulder, straight at us. Not for long. Long enough.

"Are these women crew?"

"Temporarily."

"Documents."

Keane handed them over with the face of a man surrendering something legal, dull and offensively uninteresting. Briggs unfolded them slowly, too slowly, drawing out every second like someone who might not know what he was looking for but greatly enjoyed the act of looking. The lantern-light fell on his face. He was young, perhaps thirty, perhaps less, with a smooth cheek, fair brows and lips pressed into a thin line which, in men like him, often passes for discipline, though in truth it is usually a lack of imagination.

"Nora Flynn," he read. "Ellen Ward. Anne Doyle."

My new name sounded flat and strange, like something borrowed from the book of the dead.

"Which one is Anne Doyle?"

Keane answered immediately.

"Sick."

"I did not ask what she is."

"But I answer before you ask stupidly. It saves us both time."

The red-bearded sailor by the gangway lowered his eyes, but I saw the corner of his mouth twitch. Briggs either did not notice or decided that pretending not to notice was more dignified.

"Let her show her face."

Everything in me froze.

Moira coughed harder, this time so violently that she bent double, and Red immediately held her by the elbow, drawing enough attention away that several men looked at her with disgust and cautious fear of illness. Keane did not move an inch.

"If she removes the scarf and coughs dye-house blood over your boots, I will not clean them."

Briggs tightened his jaw.

"It is a compulsory inspection."

"It is also compulsory that I sail before the tide turns. One of those things keeps men in work, the other keeps you convinced you are important. Guess which interests the owner of the cargo more."

"Captain Keane."

A sharper note entered Briggs's voice.

Keane leaned towards him a little, not threateningly, but with the kind of calm possessed by a man accustomed to storms, fights and officials, which are three varieties of the same nuisance.

"Mr Briggs, on my deck there are people for work, not politics. If you want fugitives, search the docks, the taverns and the beds of those with enough sense not yet to have risen from them. If you want to delay my ship, fetch your superior and sign the proper paper. If you want to look sick women in the face, first ask yourself whether you truly have the stomach for it."

It was insolent.

So insolent that for one brief moment I felt something like respect for Keane, though I still would not have trusted him with a spoon if the spoon might have value on the black market.

Briggs stared at him for a long time.

Then he looked at me.

He could not see my face properly, only the shadow beneath the scarf, lowered eyes, hunched shoulders, hands clenched on the edge of the coat. For a second I had the absurd impression he might recognise me not by my features, but by the anger that, despite everything, must be leaking somehow through cloth and pretence. Anger is my family crest. I have never been able to hide it entirely.

Moirá coughed once more, this time so ugly, wet and convincing that Briggs stepped back half a pace.

"Bring them aboard," he said at last. "But if the captain carries anyone not entered in the register..."

"If I carry anyone not entered in the register, I certainly will not tell you at the gangway," Keane replied.

Red twitched, as if she had to hold back laughter, which at that moment could have killed us all faster than a bullet.

Briggs returned the papers.

"You sail before dawn."

"That was the plan before you nearly made it interesting."

Keane nodded to the red-bearded sailor, and the man stepped away from the gangway.

"Aboard," Keane said, now without jokes.

We went up.

Red first, still leading the coughing Moira, then me, with my head so low that I saw only the next planks of the gangway, wet, dark, slick, leading from England onto a ship that might become salvation or a floating coffin. Every step was hideously loud inside my head. The wood creaked beneath my shoes. Water slapped the side. Someone spat behind us. Someone else shouted to move the damned crates. The port went on, because ports do not stop for anyone's fear. They will grind you, carry you, or throw you overboard, but they will not fall silent out of respect.

Once we were on deck, Keane did not let us pause. He led us at once downward, through a narrow companionway smelling of tar, wet wood, old smoke and human closeness, past coils of rope, barrels and two sailors who looked at us only once and immediately returned to their work, which was the most beautiful kind of indifference I could imagine. We went below. The air was warmer and heavier there, and the lamp-light swung with the ship's movement, throwing yellow stains on walls, beams and the faces of people moving in the half-dark.

Keane stopped by a small door beside the hold.

"You sit here until we are out of port. No talking, no peering out, no heroic ideas. If you hear an inspection, you are ill. If someone opens the door without my voice, Red may kill him, but quietly."

Red nodded.

"That, at least, sounds reasonable."

"I know. Beautiful things happen to leave my mouth too."

He opened the door. The space was small, low, full of sacks, ropes and one spare sail rolled in the corner. It was not more comfortable than the hiding place under the tarpaulin, but it had doors, walls and a temporary absence of Briggs, so it seemed almost luxurious.

We went inside.

Keane paused on the threshold.

"If we survive the sailing, someone will bring you water and something to eat. If not, at least you will not die hungry, because knowing Doyle, he certainly stuffed something into your pockets."

"Do you always comfort people like an undertaker in a bad mood?" I asked from under the scarf.

Keane looked at Red.

"She truly cannot be silent."

"I warned you."

"Not enough."

He closed the door.

We were left in half-dark.

For several seconds none of us moved, as though we were still afraid that if the body decided we were safer, it would betray us at once with breath, a tear or a collapse onto the floor. Only when I heard Keane walking away down the passage, his steps mingling with the other sounds of the ship, did I allow myself to sink onto a sack by the wall.

Moira took off her cap and rested her head against a beam.

"I thought he would make you take off the scarf."

"So did I," I said.

Red sat on the floor opposite the door, of course, with a knife in her hand, as if the mere fact that we were on a ship did not release the world from its duty to try to kill us.

"If he had insisted, Keane would have made a row."

"And if a row had not been enough?" Moira asked.

Red looked at the knife.

"Then another would have begun."

I said nothing.

Through the thin wall I could hear steps on deck, men's shouts, the weight of cargo being shifted above us, the dull knocking of barrels and chains, and beneath all that a deeper sound from the ship, quiet, working, as if Saint Brigid were breathing slowly before entering the sea. Suddenly I felt that I truly was on a ship. Not in a cell, not in drains, not in a hideout, not on a cart, but on a ship that was about to sail from England.

England.

The country that had borne me, spat me out, sentenced me, beaten me, starved me, tried to silence me, and now, if all went well, would lose me through its own port negligence.

"Nell," Red said softly.

I looked at her.

"Yes?"

"When we sail, you may cry. But only then."

I smiled weakly.

"How gracious."

"I do not want you wasting a dramatic moment in a sail locker."

"You are right. My tears deserve a better stage."

Moira closed her eyes.

"I think I left mine in prison."

Red looked at her more gently than usual.

"They will find you later."

"Is that a threat?"

"More an experience."

A bell suddenly rang on deck, then Keane's shout, louder than the others, hard, brooking no argument. The ship shuddered beneath us. Somewhere ropes moved, someone cursed, someone else answered with laughter, then came a stronger jerk, as though all the wood, metal and human life bound into one hull had decided to tear itself away from the quay.

We froze.

Saint Brigid began to move off.

Not at once, not violently, not with that fine heroic motion probably described by people standing on dry land and waving handkerchiefs, but heavily, with the groan of ropes, the slap of water, the creak of wood and a great many curses which sounded like the most honest prayer of the port.

But she was moving. I felt it under my feet. Under my bones. Under my heart. Red closed her eyes for one second. Moira pressed her hands to her mouth.

I sat motionless, the scarf still over my face, in a borrowed name, borrowed clothes, on a ship peeling me away from the country like a scab from a wound.

And I did not cry. Not yet. But I breathed as if for the first time in many days I was not doing it by someone else's permission.

For a long while we sat without speaking, listening to the sounds of the ship pulling more and more clearly away from the port, the quay, Liverpool, from that whole stinking, heavy, furious England which for years had believed it had the right to hold us by the neck simply because it had enough walls, bars, regulations and men in clean collars to call violence order.

There was nothing noble in it, at least not at first, because the ship did not depart like a dream, but like an old tired beast dragged out of the mud by the tail, creaking, groaning, jerked by ropes and orders. And yet every one of those sounds, every dull blow of water against the hull, every strain of wood, every sailor's shout and every tug beneath our feet said one thing: we are moving.

We are really moving.

On deck there was chaos, but working chaos, purposeful chaos, with more order in it than many a court, because here people at least knew that if they made a mistake, the sea would not sentence them in Latin, but take them at once, without wig, protocol or moral pretence. I heard feet running overhead, crates being shifted, blocks creaking, the dull thud of boots on planks, Keane's shout cutting through the other voices like a knife through old cloth, and beneath it all another sound was growing, lower and wider, one I knew neither from drains, factory nor prison.

The sea.

I had not yet seen it from the deck, had not felt the wind on my face, had not looked at the line of water opening before the ship, and yet I knew it was close, because the air in the locker began to change. Salt pushed even through boards and hold, and the ship moved differently from the canal boat. It did not slip over dark, standing water like a thief in someone else's house, but began to rock beneath us, deeper, wider, as if under the wood there was suddenly no canal, but something alive, immense and utterly indifferent to human dramas.

Moira sat hunched against the wall, bag on her knees, and for a long time stared at one place, as if she were trying to find in that small, airless space a point that would not move. But the ship had other opinions on steadiness, and from time to time her face grew paler still and her eyes larger.

"If you vomit, do it that way," Red said quietly, indicating the far corner with her head. "Those are old ropes. They have lost at life already."

Moira closed her eyes.

"How kind that in the worst moments one can count on your care."

"That was care. If I were cruel, I would tell you to aim at Nell."

"Very funny," I muttered from under the scarf. "I too am delighted by this family atmosphere."

Red glanced at me from the corner of her eye.

"You do not look seasick."

"I look sick of civilisation entire. The sea is merely an addition."

"That might help."

"Civilisation?"

"The sea."

I did not answer at once, because although my tongue was already itching for some spite, as it always did when things became too serious, something in me fell silent at that word. Sea. That vast, dark space between one country and another, between sentence and uncertainty, between Nell Whitmore, condemned factory girl from Manchester, and Anne Doyle, sick woman on paper, who was meant to step ashore in Dublin and pretend she was not carrying an entire burning city inside her.

"Were you afraid on your first crossing?" I asked Red more quietly, more for myself than for conversation.

For a moment I thought she would not answer. She sat opposite the door, knife still in her hand, though she held it now less as a weapon and more as a person holds the last familiar object when the rest of the world is changing shape.

"Yes," she said at last. "But I pretended not to be. I was fifteen and too proud to admit I feared water, England and my own life, so I stood at the rail, green as dead lettuce, and looked at the waves as if they should be afraid of me."

"Were they?"

"No. I vomited on a sailor's boot."

Moira snorted so suddenly it almost turned into a cough.

Red lifted an eyebrow.

"It is not funny. He was a very serious sailor. He had a beard like a wet mop and told me Irishwomen brought bad luck."

"And what did you say?" I asked.

"That if he did not move his boot from beneath my stomach, I would personally prove him right."

This time I laughed, quietly, briefly, but truly, and that laugh frightened me more than some screams, because it was out of place, completely unreasonable, torn from some former world in which people laughed not in order to avoid dying, but because something really was funny.

Red looked at me for a second and did not turn away. She said nothing. She did not need to.

The ship jerked harder, and from above came a crash, as if something heavy had been dragged over the deck. Moira instinctively seized the beam by the wall, and I felt my stomach rise into my throat, not from fear this time but from a motion my body, accustomed to factory halls, cells, earth, stone and cart wheels, did not understand at all.

"Oh no," I said. "If I vomit, I am blaming the Empire."

"For what exactly?" Red asked.

"The totality."

Moira, pale as she was, shook her head.

"Do you ever stop?"

"Apparently I almost stopped before the court, but the guards decided to carry me out before I destroyed the architecture."

"Not only the architecture," Red muttered. "The judge looked as if he had swallowed his own wig."

For a moment silence fell, this time less cramped, less defensive, almost soft, and I thought that if one could be free in a locker by the hold, with false papers, in borrowed clothes, hunted by police and sick from the rocking, then freedom was not a beautiful or clean thing at all. It was more like stolen breath. You take it quickly while no one is looking and pray the next one comes too.

Footsteps approached along the passage.

All three of us fell silent at once. Red raised the knife. Moira clenched her hands on the bag. I adjusted the scarf on my face and lowered my head, letting Anne Doyle, that poor, sick, very dull woman, step in front of me like a curtain.

The steps stopped outside the door.

Two short knocks.

Then Keane's voice:

"Do not stab. It is me."

Red lowered the knife only an inch.

"That is exactly what someone who does not wish to be stabbed would say."

The door opened a crack and Keane put his head inside, looking first at Red's knife, then at me, then at Moira, as if judging whether his decision to carry us had been a mistake, a catastrophe or merely a very tiring debt.

"We passed the first inspection," he said. "Briggs remained on the quay, may the sea deny him offspring. They may stop us before the mouth, but if wind and bribes keep their direction, we shall be beyond the worst in an hour."

"Beyond England?" I asked before I could stop myself.

Keane looked at me oddly.

"Girl, England has long fingers. The sea only makes them try harder."

"Are you always so effective at murdering hope?"

"Hope that cannot take a little bruising will not survive the sea anyway."

He pushed a small bundle and a tin cup of water inside.

"Bread. Cheese. Water. Do not come out. Do not look out. If anyone asks, you sleep. If anyone enters, you are ill. If anyone tries to be a hero, Red knows what to do."

"Nice to know my role is clear," Red said.

"Your role has always been clear. The trouble is it usually ends badly for furniture."

"Furniture deserves it."

Keane snorted and closed the door.

The food was simple, hard bread, cheese with a smell so strong it could probably discourage a minor inspection by itself, and water that tasted of barrel, but it was water, so I drank it with the gratitude of someone whose standards had lately been noticeably lowered. We divided the food into three parts, and Red, of course, tried to give me the larger, which I noticed immediately.

"No," I said.

"Eat."

"You eat too."

"I ate earlier."

"When? Between breaking into prison, the drains and threatening people with a knife?"

"I manage my time efficiently."

Moirira took the piece of bread from Red's hand and pressed it back into her palm.

"She is right. Eat. Both of you. I am not dressing two fainting idiots in the middle of the sea."

Red looked at her in surprise, then at me.

"She is becoming bolder."

"Your fault. You are a bad influence."

"So are you."

"I inspire."

"Crimes."

"Sometimes one needs a specialism."

Moirira closed her eyes, but this time the hint of a smile appeared on her face, and I felt something strange and dangerous: not peace, not yet, but the tiny possibility that among all of this, between the three of us, something like a shared rhythm might form. Not a family, because family is a word burdened with too many duties, wounds and people who use blood as a chain, but something else. A temporary alliance. Three women thrown out of their own places, now sailing towards a country where none of them could be entirely sure who she would become.

The ship rocked harder, and from above came a shout:

"Lines free!"

Then another voice:

"Mouth ahead!"

Red went still.

Moirira opened her eyes.

I felt my heart begin to beat faster, not from fear this time, or not only from fear, but from something far harder to bear.

We were nearing open water.

The Irish Sea.

The road from which there would be no jumping off, no turning down a side alley, no hiding in a yard or slipping between warehouses. Once the ship sailed out, we would be entrusted to wood, iron, wind, a captain of doubtful morality and a sea that did not know our suffering and, worse still, probably had no intention of taking an interest in it.

Red leaned slightly forward, as if listening for something deeper than the sounds of the deck.

"You will feel it soon, when we leave the river," she said quietly. "The ship will work differently. The water will be wider. Heavier."

"It sounds like something meant to comfort me."

"No. Only to warn you."

Moirira swallowed.

"I have never been to sea."

Red looked at her, and for the first time that day something almost warm entered her face.

"Then hold on to something, do not trust your stomach and do not stare too long at the horizon if it starts running away under your feet."

"And if I vomit?"

"Then you are officially a traveller."

I do not know how many minutes passed before the ship truly changed, but I felt it suddenly, with my whole body, as if there were no longer a road beneath us, but space. The rocking became deeper, rounder, less predictable, the wood groaned differently, the air beneath the door grew colder and saltier, and somewhere above us men shouted louder for a while, then their voices began to dissolve into something greater, into a roar that had not been there before.

The sea. Real sea. Not canal. Not river. Not dirty water by the port. Sea. Red closed her eyes. Moira seized the beam.

I pulled the scarf from my mouth, because suddenly I had to breathe more fully, though the air was still heavy, the locker narrow and the future no less uncertain than before.

I did not cry, but something in me broke quietly, without drama, like a thin skin of ice under the first step.

England was behind us.

Still close, still able to reach us, still undefeated, but no longer under my feet.

And although I knew that ahead of us waited not paradise, not safety, not a new life tied with a green ribbon, but Red's Ireland, with its ghosts, debts, wounds and poverty of its own, for one brief moment I felt something so sharp and impossible that it almost hurt.

Not happiness. Not relief. Rather freedom in its ugliest, most honest form. The sort that does not say, you are safe. Only, they have not caught you yet. I do not know when I truly understood that we were sailing.

Not when the ship broke away from the quay, because then everything was still noise, orders, ropes jerking and that dreadful tension in the belly which says that one mistake can put you back beneath the boot. Not when Keane shut us in the locker by the hold, where it smelled of wet canvas, cheese, old wood and the fear of three women pretending to be someone else. Not even when the rocking deepened and the air began to taste of salt.

I understood only when the port cries died away above us.

Not entirely, because a ship is never silent, certainly not such a ship, old, heavy and eaten through by labour. But suddenly, among the creaking beams, the waves striking the hull and the dull steps of sailors, the city noise that had been the background sickness of my whole life was missing: carts, curses from the quay, dogs barking, the clatter of hooves, distant factory sirens, people selling something they had probably stolen or been robbed of themselves. In its place came a sound wide and indifferent, unlike anything I had known from Manchester, Liverpool, the boiler room or prison, and that sound held neither anger nor pity, only vastness.

The sea did not sound like freedom. It sounded like something that did not care whether you survived. Perhaps that was why it immediately seemed more honest than people.

The ship rocked harder, so that Moira, despite all her bravery and prison discipline, went abruptly pale and clutched the beam as if trying to persuade it to remain part of the land. Red glanced at her and silently moved the cup of water closer to her knee.

"Do not drink too much," she said. "Small sips. And do not think about the motion."

Moira looked at her with that particular hatred a seasick person can feel towards someone offering good advice.

"How am I to avoid thinking about the motion when the whole world is pretending to be a giant's cradle?"

"Focus on something steady."

"Nothing here is steady."

"I am," Red said.

Moira lifted her eyes, and I looked at Red too, because she had said it so plainly that for a moment it sounded almost improper. Not a boast. Not a joke. A fact she wanted to convince herself of as much as us.

"You?" I muttered. "A woman who broke into prison, escaped through drains, sang in a smugglers' hideout and is now sailing to Ireland with a wanted rebel and a former guard?"

"Compared with the sea, I am a rock."

"A very mouthy rock."

"The best kind."

Moira closed her eyes, but this time her mouth twitched, and I felt that tiny smile, almost invisible in the half-dark of the locker, was more fragile than the false papers in her bag. The smile of someone who does not yet know who she will be tomorrow, but for one second is not only who she was yesterday.

We sat like that for a long time, listening as Saint Brigid pushed through the night waters, each movement of the ship possessing a strange, heavy logic. First the lifting, then the dropping, then a slight tug sideways, as if the sea were testing whether it could not throw us out of our own thoughts. My stomach was not delighted by this acquaintance, but it held itself better than the pride of many men I had known, so I counted that a success. The head was worse. The head had too much space for the things silence began pulling out one by one.

Mother at the table. Father staring into the fire. Briggs with his face like a humiliated cockerel. Cedric falling after the shovel blow. The courtroom. Greta vanishing into the alley. Patrick on the table, pale and wet with sweat. Red in the cell doorway. Red with the fiddle. Red saying no one had ever stood before her in the moment of a blow. I closed my eyes, but the images had no intention of being courteous.

"Nell," Red said softly.

"Hm?"

"You are breathing as if you are trying to strangle someone from the inside."

I opened my eyes.

"Perhaps myself. I have not decided yet."

"Bad idea. Too many people have wasted time on you."

"That sounds like a very practical reason to live."

"Practical reasons are the best. Romantic ones kill quicker."

"Said the woman who went back to prison for another woman."

Red looked at me sharply, but without that old retreat into anger.

"It was not romantic."

"No?"

"It was stupid, dangerous, badly planned and cost us almost everything."

"So romantic by working-class standards."

Moirá made a quiet sound that might have been laughter or the beginning of another wave of nausea.

Red leaned her head against the locker wall and shook it slowly.

"You are impossible."

"You say that more and more often."

"Because I keep discovering new levels."

I wanted to answer, but then the ship jerked harder and from above came the sudden thud of hurried steps, quick, uneven, not like before. All three of us fell silent at once. Red raised the knife, Moirá took the bag, and I automatically pulled the scarf back over my face, as if Anne Doyle might step before me again and receive the first blow.

The steps stopped by the door. No one knocked. The handle moved slowly.

Red changed position almost soundlessly, and suddenly she was no longer a woman sitting on the floor, but a shadow with a blade, ready to open someone's throat if he proved to be the wrong man.

The door opened the width of a hand.

In the gap appeared the face of a young boy, maybe thirteen, maybe fourteen, thin, freckled, with eyes too large for the rest of his face and a cap pulled so low it almost covered his eyebrows. He looked first at Red's knife, then at us, then back at the knife, and swallowed.

"Captain said I was to bring water," he whispered. "And that if the red-haired one tries to kill me, I am to say I am too young for a funeral."

Red did not lower the knife.

"The captain says a great deal."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Do not call me ma'am, or I shall feel guilty for your future."

The boy slipped inside sideways, holding a jug and a small bag that smelled of dried meat or something similarly sad. He closed the door behind him quickly, but not noisily. He had the way of moving I had seen in children who work too early: cautious, quick, always ready to spring away from a blow even if no hand had yet been raised.

"What is your name?" I asked before I thought whether Anne Doyle ought to ask anyone anything.

The boy looked at me.

"Tom."

The name hit me so unexpectedly that for a second I had no air. Tommy. My brother. Mother's voice. Old grief, which needed no invitation.

Red noticed. Of course she noticed. She said nothing.

"Tom what?" Moira asked gently, probably sensing too that the name hung in the air a little too heavily.

"Nothing. Just Tom. Captain says surnames are for people who are easy to find."

"Wise captain," Red muttered.

Tom shrugged, as if he did not yet have an opinion, but life had already begun pushing one into his pockets.

"He said in half an hour you may be able to come up on deck for a moment. One at a time. And only if no one will see. The sea is calm, but the wind may change. And Mr Briggs..." He stopped, as if the surname itself had splinters.

"What about Mr Briggs?" Red asked.

Tom looked at the door.

"He did not stay in port."

The locker suddenly grew colder.

"What?" Moira asked.

The boy lowered his voice even further.

"He came aboard before we sailed. Supposedly only as far as the inspection point at the mouth, then back by pilot boat, but people say he does not trust the captain. He is sitting by the officers' cabin now and asking about the crew."

All three of us looked at one another.

Briggs was on the ship.

Not the one from my factory, not that humiliated overseer with the face of a man who badly wished to be larger than he was, but the name and the office were enough to make something in me stand to fight at once. Because people like him differed in faces, age, smell of soap and height of collar, but inside they had the same small shrine to order, before which they would gladly sacrifice other people's lives.

"Keane knows?" Red asked.

Tom nodded.

"He knows. He told me not to tell you, because you would make faces."

"And yet you are telling us."

Tom straightened a little.

"Because you would make a worse face if you found out too late."

Red looked at him for a while, then at last lowered the knife.

"You are not stupid."

"I try. On a ship stupid people fall overboard or become sailors forever."

"Nearly the same thing," I said.

Tom looked at me with faint curiosity, but Red immediately handed him the little bag back.

"Go. And if Briggs comes below..."

"Knock three times on the pipe by the stairs," he said. "Captain already ordered it."

"Good boy."

Tom grimaced.

"I am not a dog."

"Even better. Dogs bark."

This time the boy smiled briefly and vanished through the door as quickly as he had appeared.

Once we were alone, none of us spoke for a while. The jug of water stood between us like a very small, very inadequate symbol of survival.

Moirira broke the silence first.

"If Briggs starts checking the crew, he may reach us."

"Not if Keane stops him," Red said.

"And if he does not?"

Red looked at the door.

"Then we stop him."

I did not like that we, because it sounded true.

I sat more carefully, adjusting the scarf, and felt the whole weight of the journey sharpen into something more dangerous. A moment ago the sea had been the space between us and England. Now England was sitting on the ship with us, in a better coat, with papers and the right to ask questions.

"So we have not escaped yet," I said quietly.

Red looked at me, and this time she did not joke.

"We escaped land. That is not the same as escaping them."

Moirira ran a hand over her face, so exhausted that for a moment she looked older than Doyle.

"If there is an inspection, I can speak. I know their language. Their words. I can pretend to be a frightened worker, that I do not understand why anyone is questioning me, that illness..."

"No," Red interrupted.

"Red..."

"No. You stood on their side once. If you speak too well, they will start wondering where you learned it."

Moirira closed her mouth. That hurt. I saw it. Red saw it too and regretted it at once, though she did not know how to say so.

"I mean," she added more quietly, "that you are more dangerous to them than you look. And if they notice that, we are finished."

Moirira lowered her eyes.

"I understand."

"No, you do not," I said before I could bite my tongue. "She is trying to say you are useful, so she has to insult you, otherwise it might sound like care."

Red looked at me with murder in her eyes.

"Anne Doyle is very ill and ought to be silent."

"Anne Doyle would die of boredom after five minutes of your communication."

Moirira looked at us for a moment, and then, to my astonishment, laughed. Quietly, wearily, almost without sound, but truly.

"You are awful."

"It is our main strategy," Red said.

Somewhere above us the wind struck the sails or canvas, and the ship heeled gently. The locker groaned. The water outside the hull grew louder, as if the sea had drawn

nearer and was listening to our conversation with the amusement of something that had seen thousands of escapes and did not consider any of them particularly exceptional.

For the next hour we sat ready, shifting only enough to stop our legs going dead entirely. Tom did not return. Neither did Keane. That was the worst of it. A person can bear noise, can bear shouting, can even bear gunshots if they know from which side they come. But waiting, when someone named Briggs is on the same ship and may descend the stairs at any moment, has its own special, official variety of torture.

At last we heard three knocks on the pipe. Once. Twice. Three.

Red sprang up at once, without a word, placing herself by the door. Moira took the jug, as if she might pretend to be giving water. I lay down on my side on the sacks, pulled the scarf higher and curled my body like someone sick, weak and utterly unworthy of history.

Footsteps in the passage. Two voices. Keane. And Briggs.

"The hold as well?" Briggs was asking. "Since you have nothing to hide, Captain, it should not present a problem."

"My ship has plenty to hide," Keane replied calmly. "The crew's privacy, the poor state of certain ropes, a cook who believes salt is a universal seasoning, and my growing impatience. None of those concerns you."

"Open it."

The steps stopped outside our door. Red tightened her grip on the knife. Moira bent over me as if adjusting my scarf, but her fingers trembled. The door opened. Lantern-light entered. Through the gap in the scarf I saw Briggs's boots. Clean. Of course clean. Clean boots are always suspicious on people walking through a dirty world.

"What is in here?" he asked.

Keane answered in the tone of a man being informed about his own ship.

"A locker. Ropes. Sails. Three sick women you have already seen, but if you want to add their coughs to your collection, be my guest."

Briggs stepped inside. One step. Then another.

Red stood by the wall, head lowered, shoulders stooped, but I saw the knife hidden in the fold of her coat. Moira leaned over me and began speaking quietly, nervously, like a woman telling the sick that they must breathe.

"Anne, steady. Steady. Do not move."

Briggs stopped above me.

I felt his gaze.

I felt it through the scarf, through my closed eyelids, through all my skin, like a cold tool.

"She does not look like a dye-house worker," he said.

And then I knew it was not over.

"She does not look like a dye-house worker," Briggs said, and in that one sentence there was no longer simple suspicion, no small official caution of a man wanting to return to land with the sense of a duty well done, but something far worse: certainty, cold, cramped and pleased with itself, like fingers closing on a throat.

I did not move.

I was not allowed to.

I lay on my side, the scarf pulled over my face, my body folded into that pitiful imitation of illness I had considered clever only moments before, and now I felt everything, absolutely everything, beginning to fall apart because of one sentence spoken by a man in boots too clean. The locker suddenly grew more airless, though the air was the same as it had been a second before, heavy with damp, rope, canvas and fear. Only fear, once named, ceases to be a shadow under the wall and starts sitting on a person's chest.

Keane did not answer at once, which was a bad sign in itself, because Captain Malachy Keane belonged to that breed of men who usually had a reply ready quicker than an honest man could think of the question.

"Mr Briggs," he said at last, slowly, calmly, but with a shade of warning in his voice, thin as a blade slid under a fingernail. "You are very close to making yourself into a trouble that cannot be covered with papers."

Briggs did not turn to him.

He was looking at me.

I felt that gaze. It was not curious. It was not even particularly intelligent. It was proprietary. That is how people look who believe the world has been divided into those who may ask and those who must answer, those who have the right to remove scarves from women's faces, and those permitted only to hope they do not lose teeth in the process.

"Let her show her face," he said.

Red did not twitch, but I saw, because I could see her even without looking, that her body shifted by that one almost invisible measure which meant readiness. Her fingers were at the knife. Her shoulder loose. Her head lowered. If Briggs touched me first, Red would spring at him like fire at dry straw, and for a moment, for that one damned moment, I felt something almost absurd: anger that she might risk her life for me again.

Moira bent over me, pretending to adjust the scarf, and her hand, cool and trembling, touched my cheek through the cloth.

"She has fever," she said softly, but this time her voice did not sound like a plea, only like the last thin plank laid across a precipice. "She should not be moved."

Briggs looked at her.

"And you speak like someone who worked with registers."

Moira froze.

It was a small thing. Almost nothing. One sentence, tossed out as if in passing. But in the locker it struck like a hammer. Keane shifted by the door, Red slightly lifted her head, and I felt my heart begin to pound not quickly, but heavily, as if each beat were trying to break through my ribs and flee overboard.

Briggs took a step closer.

"The papers are false," he said. "I do not yet know whether badly forged or merely prepared in haste, but false. Nora Flynn has a Cork entry, but that woman's accent is from Galway or thereabouts, and people from Cork do not swallow words like that, even when they lie. Ellen Ward..." He looked at Moira and smiled faintly. "...has hands that did not work at washing, but at keys, papers and locks. And Anne Doyle?"

He stopped above me.

"Anne Doyle does not exist."

The silence that followed was so full of tension that even the ship seemed for a second to stop working, though of course that was impossible, because ships have no pity for dramatic moments, any more than courts, factories and men with ambition greater than sense.

Keane stepped inside with one stride.

"Briggs."

"Let her take off the scarf."

"Leave this locker."

"Captain, if you are hiding persons wanted by the authorities of the Crown..."

"If you intend to recite the law to me on my own ship, at least do not do it in a locker. The ropes have more experience of the sea than you and may feel insulted."

Briggs at last turned his head to Keane, but only for a moment.

It was enough.

Moirá moved faster than anyone could have expected from a woman who a moment earlier looked as if she was holding all her strength between clenched teeth. The jug stood by her knee, tin, heavy, half full of water, utterly ordinary, almost ridiculous in the situation, until her hand closed on the handle and her arm swung in a short, brutal arc.

She struck Briggs in the head. Not beautifully. Not elegantly. Not like heroes do in stories, where violence has rhythm and meaning.

She struck him like a woman who had spent years watching men with keys beat others and finally understood that some doors are opened not with pleas, but with a heavy object aimed at the right skull.

The jug caught him just above the ear with a dull, wet-metal sound that went under my skin at once. Water burst over the wall, over his collar, over Moira's hands. Briggs made a strange, brief movement, as if trying to remember what legs were for, then his eyes rolled upwards and he collapsed sideways onto the sacks of rope with such a crash that the whole locker answered with a creak.

For one second no one breathed.

Not even Moira.

She stood with the jug in her hand, water dripping from the tin onto the floor, face white as chalk and eyes wide open, as if only now had it reached her that she had truly made that movement, that her hand, not Red's, not mine, not any of the boys', but her own hand had just knocked an officer of the Crown to the floor of a ship sailing for Ireland.

"Oh fuck," she whispered.

CHAPTER VIII

The Ambitions of a Young Officer

Red reached Briggs first, dropping to her knees beside him with a knife in her hand and checking his breath, though I could not tell whether she did it out of concern or out of hope that she would not have to do it a second time.

"Alive," she said shortly.

Keane closed the door behind him with such care that the care itself was more frightening than a slam, then turned to us with the face of a man who had just watched his neatly arranged problem become a fire on deck.

"Have you all gone completely mad?" he hissed.

"He was about to recognise me," I said, sitting up sharply and pulling the scarf from my face, because with him lying unconscious at my feet, continuing to pretend I was Anne Doyle seemed theatrical even for me.

Keane pointed at Briggs, and his hand trembled, not from fear, but from a fury held back so hard it was almost elegant.

"He is a port officer, girl. An officer. Not some drunken watchman from a side jetty you can shove under a crate and pretend has fallen asleep. He has a name, a posting, people who will notice when he vanishes, and worse, he has an empty cabin someone may very soon go looking for him in."

Moirra let the jug slip from her hand. It hit the floor with a clang. She flinched as if the sound had struck her harder than it had struck the boards.

"I... I did not think..."

"That is plain to see!" Keane snarled, then immediately lowered his voice, because even his panic had a sailor's discipline. "Christ, Doyle will kill me. No, worse, he will tell this story in that damned calm voice of his until I want to drown myself."

Red rose slowly.

"There was no choice."

Keane turned on her.

"There is always a choice."

"Is there? Which one, then? Let him take Nell's scarf off? Let him drag Moira into the corridor and ask how she knows the registers? Let him go back on deck and announce that Captain Malachy Keane is carrying three women on false papers?"

"I could have talked him round."

"Not this time."

"And you know that best, of course."

"Yes," Red said sharply. "Because I looked him in the eye. He already knew."

Keane clenched his jaw.

He did not answer at once.

That was the worst of it, because when a man like him falls silent, it means he may just have heard the truth, and he dislikes it very much indeed.

A dull thud sounded in the corridor, someone shifted something heavy, then the laughter of two sailors moved away towards the stairs. Every head turned towards the door. Briggs lay on the sacks, breathing shallowly, blood seeping from beneath the hair by his ear. There was not much of it, but enough for my imagination to see all the rest at once: the stain on the floor, the questions, men running below deck, Keane bound for smuggling, Red with a knife, Moira with a traitor's face, and me in irons again, perhaps this time without a courtroom at all, because the sea has many virtues and one of them is that it can swallow evidence without a record.

"We have to hide him," Moira said.

Her voice had gone quiet, but hard. The pallor had not left her face, yet something other than shock had appeared in her eyes. Decision.

Keane looked at her as if he wanted to say something very unpleasant, but restrained himself, because unfortunately she was right.

"Tie his hands," he said. "His mouth too. If he wakes and starts yelling, I will have mutiny, inspection and the shortest captain's career since my cousin tried to sail to Belfast with a hole in his hull and faith in Saint Patrick."

Red was already cutting a length of rope.

"Nell, help."

For a second my body did not want to move, as if it were still lying in its role of sick Anne Doyle and had not received the message that the performance had ended with a very literal blow to the head. Then I knelt beside Briggs and caught his wrist. His skin was warm, his pulse clear. Alive. Too alive for our peace, too unconscious for any explanation. Red tied his hands with a practised ease that reminded me her past contained far more than factory work and singing to a fiddle. Moira tore a strip of cloth and pushed it between Briggs's teeth, and her hands only began to tremble when she had to touch his face.

"I did not kill him," she said softly, more to herself than to us.

"Not yet," Keane muttered.

Red shot him a hard look.

"Do not help."

"I am helping by not throwing the lot of you overboard."

"Very noble."

"No, practical. Corpses surface in the wrong places."

Briggs moved suddenly, giving a muffled groan beneath the cloth. Moira recoiled on instinct, and I felt my heart climb into my throat. Red pressed the flat of the knife to his chest, not cutting him, merely reminding the world that options still existed.

"Quiet," she hissed. "Sleep on, Mr Clean Boots."

Keane swore under his breath, went to the door, opened it a crack and looked out into the corridor.

"We may have ten minutes before someone notices Briggs has not returned above. Less, if he has a friend. Though looking at him, I would wager subordinates rather than friends."

"What do we do with him?" I asked.

Keane shut the door and turned to me with an expression suggesting my question was proof of a very charming, very dangerous ignorance of maritime problems.

"That depends whether we wish to be smugglers, kidnappers or murderers before breakfast."

"Is there a fourth option?"

"Prayer. But lately it has poor results."

Moira knelt beside Briggs again, now more carefully, examining the wound at his temple.

"If he survives and we say he hit his head going below deck..."

Keane snorted.

"Bound? Gagged? It would have to be a very complicated fall."

"If we untie him, he tells the truth."

"You see? You learn quickly."

Red looked at the captain.

"Is there somewhere we can lock him until we are further out?"

Keane was silent a moment.

Too long.

"There is a little locker by the anchor chains," he said at last. "Tight, cold, and no one goes there during a crossing unless something has gone very badly wrong. But moving him there means crossing the corridor. If anyone sees..."

"We say he is drunk," I said.

Everyone looked at me.

"What?"

Keane narrowed his eyes.

"Go on, though I admit with reluctance that I am curious about the direction of this disaster."

"He is an officer, yes? Young, ambitious, no doubt convinced of his own decency. So if anyone sees him unconscious, we say he got drunk during the inspection, tripped, cracked his head, and the captain had him escorted away to spare his embarrassment. People would rather believe in a man's disgrace than in a conspiracy. Especially if the disgrace is funny."

Keane stared at me in complete silence. So did Red. Moira slowly turned her head.

"That... could work," she said.

"Of course it could," I replied. "Men drink, fall over, make fools of themselves, and the world immediately finds excuses for them. Let us finally turn that beautiful tradition against them."

Keane let air out through his nose, and something appeared on his face that might have been admiration, though I would not have wished to embarrass him with the word.

"Doyle was right. You are a problem."

"I am beginning to treat it as a profession."

"Good. We do this. Red and I carry him. Moira walks beside us and looks concerned. You..."

"I what?"

"You stay silent."

"The plan had one weak point."

"Girl, if you open your mouth in that corridor, I will personally put you in a barrel of salted fish and send you to Cork as punishment for every sense God gave man."

"I accept the terms."

Red bent over Briggs, checking the knots.

"And if he wakes on the way?"

Keane took a small bottle from his pocket.

"Then a sedative."

Moira looked at it suspiciously.

"What is that?"

"Something sailors take when a tooth hurts more than life. Do not ask what is in it. The contents probably wish to remain anonymous."

"It could kill him."

"It could also fail to kill him and allow him to kill us. The choice, as ever, is delightful."

Moira pressed her lips together, but did not protest.

We made ready in such haste that I still do not know how no rope slipped from our hands, no board creaked too loudly, and Briggs did not choose the exact moment when I was fixing my scarf and trying not to look like a woman who had just taken part in the abduction of an officer to regain his senses. Red and Keane lifted him beneath the arms, arranging his weight between them, Moira took the lantern and set her face into a mask of frightened but helpful concern, while I was to follow with the bag and silence, which everyone clearly considered the most difficult part of the operation.

Keane opened the door a fraction.

The corridor was empty.

"Now," he hissed.

We went out.

Briggs hung between Red and the captain like a man completely drunk, which did not require particularly fine acting, because unconsciousness has much in common with drunkenness, especially among men who enjoy waking each morning convinced that the world owes them an apology for their headache. His boots dragged on the boards, his head drooped on his chest, and the bandage Moira had hastily made looked like the result of a fall, if one looked quickly, from a distance, and had no desire to ask questions.

Unfortunately, on ships there is always someone with a desire to ask questions.

A sailor came out from around the corner carrying a bucket and froze.

"Captain?"

Keane did not even stop.

"Mr Briggs has discovered that rum and stairs are not friends. You did not see this."

The sailor looked at Briggs, then at Keane, then at Red.

"Did not see what?"

"Exactly."

"Will he live?"

"If he is less lucky, yes."

The sailor nodded with the full understanding of a man of the sea and stepped back against the wall.

We went on.

Two bends of corridor, one descent lower, then a narrow passage by the hold where the ship rolled harder and the air was colder and wetter. Briggs moved once, making a low, muffled sound behind the gag. Red at once tightened her grip on his arm.

"One more moment, fancy man," she whispered. "You are about to have a cabin of your own."

Keane opened a low door by the anchor chains. Inside it was dark, cramped, and stank of iron, salt and old grease. A perfect place for a problem that, for the present, was not meant to be a man.

They pushed him in carefully, though not with excessive tenderness. Moira knelt by him and checked his breathing, the wound, the knots. Her face was pale, but her hands no longer trembled so much.

"He cannot stay like this all night," she said.

Keane looked at her.

"He will not. Once we pass the checkpoint and are too far out to turn back easily, I decide whether to hand him over to the pilot, sell his drunkenness as an accident, or lock him up until Dublin and pray that when he wakes he has more headache than memory."

"That is risky."

"Splendid of you to notice, Miss Whitmore. I thought this was a peaceful parish outing."

Red went out first, I behind her, Moira last. Keane shut the door and slid the bolt. For a moment we stood in the dark corridor, listening as the ship worked around us, the sea struck the hull, and the unconscious officer of the Crown breathed in a place meant for chains.

The captain turned to us slowly.

"Now," he said very quietly, "none of you does anything without my order. No jugs, no knives, no improvised acts of revolutionary creativity."

"Moira started it," I said automatically.

Moira looked at me, outraged.

Red covered her face with her hand.

Keane stared at me for several seconds, then said:

"If we survive this voyage, I shall personally put you ashore in Dublin and sail back at once, before you can ask whether the ship has feelings."

"Does it?"

"That is precisely what I mean."

And despite all the horror, despite Briggs locked among the chains, despite the pursuit that could still catch us on the water, Red suddenly burst out laughing.

Briefly. Nervously. But truly. Moira smiled as well, though she looked as if she might faint at any moment.

And I thought that if anyone ever asked how our journey to Ireland began, I would have to answer honestly: with false papers, nausea, a captain in debt, an officer stunned

by a jug, and three women who apparently could not even flee without creating another problem.

Which, all things considered, was entirely in character.

Before Keane allowed us back to the storeroom, he stopped once more by the door to the cramped chamber with the anchor chains, looked at the bolt, then at us, then at the bolt again, and sighed so heavily that he might have been calculating how many years of his life had been cost by Doyle, old Irishmen, women with hands too quick for their own good, and this whole damned affair, which had begun with a prison escape and now had an unconscious Crown officer lying in its hold.

"One more thing," he muttered.

"What now?" Red asked, instantly alert, because after a night like that every "one more thing" sounded like the announcement of another catastrophe.

The captain did not answer at once. He drew a flat bottle of dark glass from inside his coat, pulled the cork with his teeth, sniffed the contents and grimaced as if even his own liquor had a criminal past.

"If we are pretending young Mr Briggs has discovered the charms of rum, he may as well smell like a man who made that mistake with enthusiasm."

Moirá looked at him with a mixture of horror and professional disgust.

"You cannot pour alcohol down an unconscious man's throat. He may choke."

Keane held the cork between his fingers and looked at her the way one looks at someone who, in the middle of a fire, remembers the principles of proper heating.

"With all respect for your suddenly awakened medical conscience, that man may, within minutes, lead us all to the rope. If a little rum makes him stink of his own moral collapse instead of our treason, I am prepared to risk his delicate dignity."

"I said he may choke."

"I will not pour him a bucket, only enough for God and the first passing sailor to smell the evidence."

Red leaned one shoulder against the wall, though tension remained in her eyes.

"Do it carefully. If you kill him, the problem gets heavier. Literally and politically."

"Thank you for the lecture, Gallagher. If ever I forget that corpses are troublesome, I shall remember your gentle wisdom."

He opened the door only wide enough to slip inside, and we, since none of us apparently had strength left to pretend we did not want to know, looked in after him. Briggs lay awkwardly curled among the thick coils of chain, his hands tied, his mouth stuffed with cloth, his face pale in the weak lantern light and blood dried at his hairline. All his former official dignity had been stripped from him so thoroughly it was as if someone had undressed him of his uniform without touching a button.

Keane knelt beside him, took the gag out only for a moment, tilted his head to one side with the skill of a man who had seen more drunk, wounded and half-dead bodies aboard ship than many a doctor in a hospital, and poured a few careful drops into his mouth, no more, truly no more, though in my imagination the rum immediately became another sin added to the list of things for which no one would ever absolve us. Briggs coughed by instinct, his face twitched, his throat swallowed some of the spirit, the rest

ran down his chin and soaked into his collar, leaving a sharp, sweetish smell of cheap rum, strong enough to cover the metal of blood and fear.

Moira clenched her hands, but did not protest a second time.

Keane pushed the cloth back between Briggs's teeth, not so deep this time that it would hinder his breathing more than necessary, and studied him with cold appraisal.

"There," he said softly. "Now he looks like a young officer with too much ambition and too little head. At least that is a story people will gladly believe."

"Because it is almost true," I murmured.

Keane turned his head slowly.

"Eleanor, if you open your mouth once more near my problem, I shall begin to suspect that the police are not the greatest danger to this crossing."

"Only now?"

Red caught my sleeve and tugged lightly.

"Come, before he really throws you into the sea."

"He will not. He has risked too much to carry me."

Keane shut the door and slid the bolt with such calm that it sounded more like a promise than a precaution.

"Girl, the sea is vast and I am a practical man. Do not test the union of those two facts."

We went back along the corridor towards our storeroom, quicker this time, more carefully, with that peculiar tension that follows a catastrophe not because it is over, but because it has only begun to breed. The ship was still at work, but now every sound seemed suspicious to me: every footfall might be a man going to look for Briggs, every laugh might belong to someone who had just discovered an irregularity, every creak of a door might open the way to our ruin. The ship was moving harder now, deeper, and through cracks in the boards came colder air, smelling of salt, wet iron and that broad, indifferent world waiting beyond the hull.

Keane shut the storeroom door behind us and stayed inside, which at once made the space feel half the size, for the captain was the sort of man who occupied a room even standing still, with other people's guilt, his own irritation and the clear conviction that everyone around him was one step away from doing something idiotic.

"Listen carefully," he said, lowering his voice. "Briggs was meant to go down to the checkpoint by the mouth of the river, inspect papers, complain, stare at my ship as if he understood it, then board the pilot boat and return to port. The boat will come alongside before we are properly in open water. If he is not there, they will ask. If they ask too loudly, it gets ugly. If it gets ugly, we shall all be very busy dying."

Moira sat down slowly on a sack, as if her knees had finally remembered that collapse was an option.

"We could say he fainted."

"We could. We could also say he met Saint Patrick and decided to become a monk. The question is not what we can say, but what people with orders to look suspiciously will believe."

Red leaned back against the wall.

"So we make them unwilling to look for long."

Keane looked at her.

"And here begins the part I dislike very much."

"Which one specifically?" I asked. "There are several."

"The one where I consider further lies instead of throwing the whole problem in the chain locker overboard."

Moira snapped her head up.

"No."

Keane looked at her coldly.

"That was not a proposal, merely information on the direction of my thoughts. Please appreciate that I am still resisting them."

"We are not killing him," Moira said.

Red was silent for one second too long.

I looked at her.

"Red."

"I did not say we would."

"But you thought it."

"I think many things. I keep most of them in reserve for the safety of the world."

Moira stood up, pale but suddenly furious, and there was something striking in it, because before this her anger had been turned mostly inward, against herself, against her guilt, but now it came out, weak perhaps, still trembling, but real.

"If we start killing everyone who might betray us, how are we different from them?"

Keane raised an eyebrow.

"In effectiveness, I should hope."

"No."

"Miss..."

"No," she repeated, stronger. "I struck him because he was going to betray us. It was... it was necessary. But I will not stand by and watch us murder an unconscious man, even if that man would gladly hand us to a court. If I am to run, I am not running in order to become their reflection."

Silence fell in the storeroom.

Red looked at Moira for a long moment, then slowly put the knife away.

"Good," she said. "We do not kill him."

Keane pressed his lips together.

"How noble. The sea adores nobility. It usually turns it into food for fish."

"Captain," I said quietly, "what if we make him more of an embarrassment than a problem?"

He looked at me reluctantly, which lately seemed to be his constant expression in my presence.

"Speak. Briefly. For once."

"If the pilot boat asks where Briggs is, say he is drunk and ill, that he struck his head, that he is unfit to climb down a line or cross to a boat. The more humiliating it is, the less his people will want to make it official in front of the crew. Men like him are terrified of ridicule. More than sin. More than death."

Keane was silent. Red looked at me closely. So did Moira.

"And if they demand to see him?" the captain asked.

"You show him from a distance. Stinking of rum, with a bandage on his head, half-conscious, mumbling through the gag, which of course you remove first if you want it to look less criminal. Seat him in a corner, have two sailors hold him up, someone says he vomited for half an hour and ruined the captain's boots. No one will want to take him into a small boat in that state if the sea is beginning to move."

Keane looked at me longer and longer.

"You have a very troubling understanding of male vanity."

"I grew up among men who had more of it than money. I had to learn."

Red gave a quiet snort. Moira sat back down, though she was still breathing too quickly. Keane rubbed a hand over his face.

"That may work."

"That sounded almost like a compliment."

"Do not grow used to it."

The ship heeled slightly, and from above came new shouting, clearer, sharper, different from the usual labour of the crew. Keane's head turned instantly towards the door.

"Checkpoint," he said. "Sooner than I thought."

My heart dropped somewhere low, near the stomach, which had already had a great many responsibilities of late.

The captain opened the door, but before he left he turned back to us.

"You three stay here. If you hear shouting, you do not come out. If you hear a shot, you do not come out. If you hear me call Red, then, and only then, you come out, Gallagher, and may God help everyone on the way."

"God usually arrives late," Red said.

"That is why we have you."

I do not know whether it was a compliment, an order or an act of desperation. Keane probably did not know either. He left. The door closed.

We were alone, and above us Saint Brigid slowed, changing rhythm, as if she too knew she was drawing near to a place where one wrongly spoken sentence could send us back to England or straight to the bottom.

For several seconds none of us moved.

Then Moira buried her face in her hands.

"I hit him," she whispered.

Red sat beside her, not yet touching her, but closer than before.

"Yes."

"An officer."

"Yes."

"With a jug."

"Quite effectively."

Moira raised her head and looked at her with something between horror and disbelief.

"Are you trying to comfort me?"

"I have little practice."

"It shows."

"But if I must try, I will say this: if you had not hit him, we would be finished. So you may hate yourself now if you absolutely must, but do it later. We need you here."

Moira pressed her lips together.

Her eyes shone, but she did not let the tears fall.

I leaned forward, rested my elbows on my knees, and listened to the sounds above us: heavier footsteps, muffled voices, one order from Keane, then the answer of a stranger, farther off, carried by the wind.

The pilot boat was alongside.

Briggs lay bound in the dark locker by the chains, smelling of rum and trouble.

We sat a few corridors away, pretending there was still such a thing as control over the situation.

And the sea beyond the hull beat patiently against the ship, as if it had all the time in the world to see which of our lies would sink first.

Above us the noise grew suddenly louder, but not in the ordinary port fashion to which I was beginning to grow accustomed, where every sound has its function, the rope groans because it is being hauled, the barrel thuds because someone is rolling it, a man curses because life has once again proved badly organised. This was different, sharper, more upright, as if an invisible wall had risen on deck between those who had the right to ask and those who had to answer very carefully.

The ship slowed further.

I felt it in the boards beneath me, in the deeper, heavier tilt, in the way the vibration of the hull changed rhythm all at once, as if Saint Brigid, that old, dirty, stubborn beast to whom we had entrusted our lives, had been caught by the collar by water, wind and human authority, and now had to pretend she had nothing to hide, though in her belly she carried three women with false papers, an unconscious officer among the anchor chains, and a captain who increasingly resembled a man running a tavern during a fire.

Moira sat beside Red with a face so pale that in the storeroom gloom she looked almost cut from paper, only her eyes were alive, wide open, filled with that terrible awareness which comes after the deed, when the hand has already done what it had to do and conscience only then begins to take off its coat and sit opposite you.

Her hands rested in her lap, but her fingers trembled, not violently, not theatrically, rather faintly and without stopping, as if they still held that jug, as if the weight of metal, water and impact had remained in them longer than the object itself.

Red sat beside her, half-turned towards the door, head slightly tilted, listening to the steps above. I watched the two of them and felt that in that cramped, reeking storeroom of ropes, sailcloth and cheese whose smell could topple a minor monarchy, something more human was happening than all the politics they had tried to teach us with a baton.

"If he starts talking when they show him," Moira whispered, "if he comes round and tells the truth..."

"He will not," Red cut in.

"How do you know?"

"Because if he comes round, he will have pain in his head, rum in his throat, a gag in his memory and two of the captain's men at his shoulders. Even if he mumbles something, no one will want to understand it."

"People in power always want to understand things that may be useful to them."

"No, Moira. People in power only want to understand what lets them feel they still control the room. A drunk officer with a split head is not information. He is shame. And shame is hidden faster than evidence."

Moira closed her eyes for a second, as if she wished to believe it, but belief did not yet have enough room in her to sit comfortably.

"You know this from experience?"

Red smiled briefly, without mirth.

"From observation. And from the fact that men are astonishingly similar when they try to pretend nothing has happened."

I wanted to say something, of course, because my head immediately supplied three possible comments, each worse than the last and therefore tempting, but then from above came a stranger's voice, deeper than Briggs's, rougher, borne down by the wind and the cracks in the boards.

"Officer Briggs was to come down to the boat before the mouth of the river. Where is he?"

Moira went rigid. Red lifted a hand, telling us not to speak. We fell silent.

In the storeroom quiet, every sound from the deck became larger, clearer, almost visible: the footsteps of several men by the rail, a rope knocking against wood, the slap of the pilot boat against the ship's side, someone's cough, a brief sailor's curse, and at last Keane's voice, calm, rough, weary, as if this whole situation were not a threat to life, but another idiotic inconvenience in the schedule of a man already overworked.

"Your officer discovered that the sea begins before Dublin, not after it."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means he took poorly to rum, stairs and his own ambition, in whichever order you prefer. He has split his head, stinks like a tavern after wages, and is not presently fit to be moved between ship and boat unless you want to lose him on the way and explain later why he returned to Liverpool in the form of a wet hat."

"Captain, this is not amusing."

"Nothing aboard this ship has been amusing since you came aboard with extra inspections."

For a moment there was only wind and water.

Then the stranger's voice, more cautious, more suspicious:

"I want to see him."

Red cursed without sound.

Moira opened her eyes.

I felt all my insides tighten into one small, very unreasonable knot.

Above, Keane answered only after a pause, and that pause was long enough to contain the whole life of a person with weaker nerves.

"Of course you want to see him. People always want to look upon another man's humiliation before deciding to pretend concern."

"Lead on."

Footsteps moved. Not towards us. Lower. Towards the chain locker.

Red stood immediately, so smoothly it seemed she had been merely pretending to sit, and moved close to the door. Moira rose too, but Red caught her wrist, not hard, but firmly.

"No."

"If something goes wrong..."

"Your face will mend nothing. Stay."

"I struck him."

"Exactly why you stay."

Moira looked as though she wanted to pull free, but she did not. She only stood there, breathing fast, eyes fixed on the door as if she could burn through the wood by will alone and see what was happening in the corridor. I stood as well, more because sitting had suddenly become unbearable than because I had any idea what I might do except get everyone into worse trouble.

From the corridor came the distant scrape of a bolt.

Then Keane's voice, lower, but still audible, because the ship carried sound through wood like gossip through a working-yard.

"Here you are. Only do not stand too close. If he vomits on your uniform, I will not be responsible for the direction."

Someone muttered in disgust.

Then silence.

I imagined Briggs seated, or rather sagging, between two sailors, a bandage round his head, rum on his collar, his face pale, eyes perhaps shut, perhaps half-open, all his dignity so completely wrecked that even if he ever tried to reclaim it, he would always smell cheap spirits in the attempt. I imagined the officer from the pilot boat looking at him and trying to decide whether he saw conspiracy or the shameful failure of a younger colleague.

I wanted to pray, but I never trusted institutions which had so often worked against me. Instead I clenched my fingers around the scarf and promised myself that if we came out of this alive, I would not insult anyone connected with the sea for at least an hour. Perhaps half an hour. One should not make excessive vows under pressure.

"Is he conscious?" the stranger asked.

"More than I would wish," Keane replied. "Less than your regulations probably require."

There was some movement. Briggs made a sound. Not a word. More a slurred, muffled, painful noise. Moira covered her mouth with her hand. Red froze by the door.

"What is he saying?" someone asked.

Keane answered at once, in the tone of a man very tired of another man's lack of imagination.

"Likely apologising for disgracing the uniform, but rum makes contrition sound like a dying calf."

"He said something about women."

My heart rose into my throat.

"Of course he said something about women," Keane replied without the smallest pause. "Have you ever seen a young officer in rum who talked of philosophy? If so, keep him for science. This one has spent the last quarter hour mumbling about the woman who coughed at the gangway, the stink of the port and someone stealing his glove, though both gloves remain upon him. Touching symptoms of character decay."

Someone gave a snort of laughter. Not Keane. Some sailor.

That mattered. Laughter on a ship can turn tragedy into anecdote faster than truth can turn lie. If the crew began to see Briggs as a drunken fool, they would fit every next detail to that version with the gratitude of men granted entertainment during work.

The stranger's voice did not laugh.

"He should return with me."

"In that state?" Keane was almost offended now. "Man, the pilot boat jumps like a flea on a preacher, and we are about to come into rougher water. If you try moving him, he will split his head a second time, fall, fill your boat with the contents of his stomach, and then you will have to explain why you returned to your superiors something less useful than what you took."

"He is an officer of the Crown."

"He is a man with a lump on his head, rum on his breath and a stomach weaker than his ambition. I shall put him in a berth, see that he breathes, and set him down in Dublin or send him back on the first ship once he can walk down a gangway without compromising the navy, the port and his mother."

Again, silence. Long. Unbearable.

Something struck above deck, someone shouted, the pilot boat knocked against the hull, and I had the feeling that all of Saint Brigid was rolling not on waves, but on a single question: would they believe it or not?

Then the stranger said:

"I shall file a report."

Keane sighed.

"Please do. Reports are like poor prayers: no one likes writing them, but everyone pretends the world will collapse without them."

"He is to return at the first opportunity."

"If by then he has not joined a monastery out of shame, I shall see to it."

Footsteps moved away from the chain locker. Red let out her breath so quietly I almost missed it. Moira leaned against the wall as though her bones had suddenly deserted her.

I still stood with the scarf in my hand, feeling my legs go soft while my head, cursed thing, kept working and already found a fresh cause for fear.

"Report," I whispered.

Red looked at me.

"What?"

"He said he will file a report. That means Briggs's name, the ship, the inspection, the women on board... all of it may get back to Liverpool faster than we reach Dublin."

Moira closed her eyes.

"If they connect it with Manchester..."

"Then we have less time after we land," Red finished.

The door opened so abruptly that all three of us flinched.

Keane stepped inside, shut it behind him, and for several seconds simply stood there, one hand on the frame, wearing the face of a man who had just sailed through a very narrow gap between life and disaster and had no desire to thank anyone for the scenery.

"Well," he said at last. "If any of you plans to stun another representative of authority today, I require prior notice in writing."

Moirá went paler still.

"Did they believe it?"

"Enough."

"What does enough mean?" I asked.

Keane looked at me from under his brow.

"It means they are not searching the ship, not taking Briggs, not turning us back, no one is shooting yet and I still have a ship under my feet. In my profession that is a very good definition of enough."

Red moved away from the door.

"And the report?"

"There will be one. Of course there will. A young officer falls into drink, an older inspector feels insulted, and officials adore reports almost as much as they hate responsibility. But the report goes to Liverpool, Liverpool sends questions, questions travel slower than a ship, and if sea, wind and your collective talent for catastrophe allow it, you will be ashore in Dublin before anyone has the wit to ask after you twice."

Moirá sat down heavily.

"And Briggs?"

Keane grimaced.

"For the moment, Briggs is a drunken fool with a lump. I had him moved to a little berth by the stores, where he will lie under the care of one of my men, who has very little imagination but strong hands and understands simple orders such as 'if he shouts, hold him'. When he wakes, we shall be far from the checkpoint."

"And then?" Red asked.

Keane paced a few steps through the storeroom, as if he had to move or explode.

"Then I shall have to talk to him."

"Meaning threaten him?"

"Talk."

"Threaten more politely?"

"At sea, the difference is academic."

He sat on one of the crates, which surprised me, because for the first time since I had met him he looked not like a captain, not like a smuggler, not like a man with a debt, but like someone profoundly tired of having to hold the world upright by means of lies, ropes and very bad rum.

"Listen," he said more quietly. "The officer is not the greatest problem."

"Of course he is not," I muttered. "It would be far too courteous of fate if our greatest problem were locked in a cabin with a lump."

Keane pointed a finger at me, but he no longer had the strength for full outrage.

"That is exactly why people keep trying to lock you up."

"Because I tell the truth?"

"Because you tell everything."

Red gave a short snort.

The captain went on:

"The biggest problem is that after the inspection, word of drunken Briggs will go ashore. If someone in Liverpool already has a description of the girl from Manchester and knows to look for a woman with two companions, they may begin asking questions about my ship. We reach Dublin before dawn if the weather remains on our side. Then you go ashore fast, without looking about, without chatter, without drama. Red's man will be waiting on the quay."

Red lifted her head.

"Who?"

Keane looked at her with something strange, almost caution.

"If he has come. Liam Harkin."

Red went still. Not violently. Not in a way a stranger would understand. But I saw it. Her face hardened. Her eyes went dark for a moment, as if a shadow had passed across them.

"No," she said.

Keane sighed.

"We have few options."

"Not Liam."

"He knows the Dublin docks, he knows people on that side, he can get you through the warehouses before the port guards receive word. You can hate him later."

"You do not know what you are talking about."

"I know enough. I know he is alive. I know he still owes Doyle. I know that if one pays him or reminds him of the proper things, he can be useful."

Red stood slowly.

"He is not useful. He is poison that learned to walk in boots."

Moirá looked at me, questioning, but I knew nothing. I only knew that the name Liam Harkin had entered that little storeroom like a cold draught from Red's past, and that suddenly Ireland, which a moment before had been the promise of escape, had shown its teeth.

Keane did not yield.

"If you have a better plan, speak."

Red was silent.

That was precisely the worst of it.

Red, who always had a word like a knife, an insult like a stone, an answer like flame, said nothing, and her hands were clenched so hard her knuckles had gone white.

"Who is Liam?" I asked quietly.

Red did not look at me.

Keane said nothing either, which I considered disturbing, because the captain clearly knew enough not to want to say it in front of her.

At last Red answered, but her voice was flat, stripped of its usual edge, as if the blade had suddenly been put away too deep.

"Someone who once sold the people he was meant to protect."

Silence. The sea struck the hull harder. Keane bowed his head.

"And someone who may now get you ashore alive."

Red turned to him slowly.

"If he is waiting in Dublin, it means he already knows I am coming back."

"Possibly."

"And if he knows..."

She did not finish. She did not have to. Red's Ireland had ghosts. And it seemed one of them was waiting on the quay.

Keane did not wait for any of us to demand further explanation, because captains, smugglers and people with pasts share the useful habit of knowing when to close a door before other people's questions begin to cost more than they are willing to pay.

He left, saying only over his shoulder that someone would bring us more water in an hour, that Briggs was under control, at least as far as a man with a lump, rum on his breath and tied hands could be under control, and that none of us was to put her nose out of that storeroom without his word, unless we longed for a beautiful wet death or an even more beautiful dry arrest upon landing.

Then the door closed behind him with a soft click, the bolt fell, and in our cramped hiding-place remained only the roll of the ship, the smell of rope, old sailcloth and cheese, and the name of a man hanging between us like a knife driven into the table.

Liam Harkin.

I did not know him, and already I hated him, which may have seemed unjust, but in my life justice had long since ceased to be a necessary condition for instinct. It was enough to see Red's face when Keane spoke the name, enough to hear that familiar edge vanish from her voice, all that sarcasm, all that anger she usually carried at her belt like a second knife, to know that Liam was not some ordinary old acquaintance, old debtor, port smuggler or one of those men who like to consider themselves legends because they once escaped through a window from someone's wife and the police at the same time.

No.

The name had the weight of a corpse.

Red stood by the wall, half-turned away, shoulders taut, head bowed as if she were listening to the ship, but I knew she was not listening to wood, waves or steps overhead. She was listening to something from a much farther place. Something that had crossed the sea after her faster than we had. Her hands, usually alive, quick, ready for a gesture, a blow or a cigarette, were now motionless, clenched so tightly that the thin skin over her knuckles had gone almost white.

Moirá sat on a sack opposite, pale from everything that had happened with Briggs, but a different alertness had appeared in her eyes, less to do with pursuit and more with the person beside her. She knew the face of guilt already. She had seen it every day in a metal prison bowl, in the dirty windows of corridors, and probably in the eyes of women to whom she had given water too late. That was why she looked at Red now not as a riddle, but as someone standing too close to her own abyss.

I tried to stay silent for a while.

Truly.

It was a noble attempt, brief and doomed, like most noble things in my keeping.

"Who is Liam?" I asked at last, softly, more carefully than I usually asked anything, because even I understood that some questions must not be thrown into a person's face like stones, unless you want to see everything in them begin to bleed.

Red did not answer at once.

The ship rolled harder, somewhere above us someone shouted something about lines, the wind struck the planking, water hissed against the hull, and for a moment I had the impression Saint Brigid herself was trying to drown out the silence that followed my question.

"No one important," Red said.

Moirra looked at me.

I looked at Red.

"That is one of the worst lies I have heard this week," I said. "And I heard Officer Briggs pretending to have a brain."

Red turned her head slowly.

Something sharp flashed in her eyes, though this time it was not aimed at me, but at the world which had forced her into a conversation like this at all.

"Not now, Nell."

"When? When we step down in Dublin and that man is waiting on the quay? When he offers you his hand and you look as if you have swallowed your own heart? When we are expected to trust him without knowing whether he is leading us straight to the place where someone will pay for our heads?"

"I said not now."

Her voice was quiet, but tight as a line just before it snaps.

Moirra shifted slightly.

"Red," she said more gently. "If he is to meet us at the port, we must know. Not everything, if you do not wish it. But enough not to walk blind into his hands."

Red gave a short laugh, without humour.

"Blind. Beautiful word. Maeve thought she saw enough too."

And then the name of that girl, spoken again, entered between us like a ghost which had stood patiently by the door for a while, waiting for someone to have the courage to invite it in.

Maeve.

The girl who had laughed as if the world might be acquitted. The girl after whom Red left the network. The girl whose death was a wound beneath every story Red told.

Red sank onto the crate by the wall, not violently, but as if her legs had finally refused to help her pretend that the past weighed nothing. For a while she sat bent forward, elbows on knees, fingers laced so tightly that she seemed to be holding inside herself something that wanted to come out and smash everything on its way.

"Liam was one of us," she began at last. "In Dublin, before I settled in Liverpool, before I began pretending a factory could be shelter for a person if she hated the street enough. He was a few years older than me. Not many. At the time he seemed grown,

because he had a gun, a scar under one eye, and that awful certainty men have when they have survived too little to understand that luck and courage are not the same."

She looked at her hands as if searching for traces of that time upon them.

"He worked on the runs. Guns, letters, people, money. Ordinary things too, sometimes, because revolution, despite what boys with fire in their eyes believe, does not live on powder and grand words alone. It lives on bread, boots, a place to sleep, lies told at the right moment, a woman at the window who sees a patrol and knocks a flowerpot down to warn the rest. Liam knew the docks. He knew the warehouses. He knew men on ships, men in taverns, men who wore cassocks and men who wore knives in their sleeves. He was useful. And useful men very quickly begin to confuse their worth with the right to decide other people's lives."

Moira said nothing, but I saw her face alter at those words. Perhaps because she understood them too well.

"Maeve did not trust him," Red said, and her voice softened around that name so plainly it hurt. "Not from the start. She said Liam had the eyes of a man who always keeps a second way out, even when he promises to stand with you to the end. I argued with her. Of course I argued. I was seventeen and believed that if someone fought on our side, he was ours. As if by then I should not have known the world does not divide so cleanly. Maeve was wiser. Quieter. She saw more because she did not need to keep proving that nothing hurt her."

Red clenched her jaw.

"That night we were meant to move arms through the old warehouses at North Wall. Nothing big, they said. A few crates. Two carts. Three of our people among the porters. One post was to be empty for a quarter of an hour. Liam arranged that. Liam knew the watch change. Liam gave the signal that the way was clear."

She fell silent.

The ship rolled beneath us, but the storeroom suddenly seemed fixed in place, held exactly where a story ends and confession begins.

"It was a trap?" Moira asked very softly.

Red smiled without joy.

"Not at once. You see, the worst thing about betrayal is that it rarely looks like betrayal at the beginning. If soldiers had stood there with muskets and smiles, we might have sensed something. But everything was almost as it should have been. Almost. One man did not appear at the gate. One cart stood too far away. One light went out too soon. Little things, the sort you notice only afterwards, when you can build a gallows joke from them."

She swallowed.

"We went into the warehouse. Maeve walked beside me. She had a scarf over her hair and was laughing under her breath because I had said something stupid about one of the boys trying to look fierce with his trousers wet to the knee. I remember that. That most of all. Not the shots. Not the shouting. Her laugh. The last normal thing in the world."

I did not move.

I was afraid that if I touched her she would fall apart, or close again.

"Then the doors shut," Red said. "Not the main doors. The side ones. The ones we were to use to leave. Someone shouted that it was the guard. Then the first shot. Then the second. Suddenly there was light everywhere, men, smoke, wood splitting under bullets, horses jerking in the carts. Someone fell in front of me. Someone tried to drag a crate as if the guns inside mattered more than his own lungs. I caught Maeve's hand. I swear to you, Nell, I caught her. I held her. She was right beside me. I felt her fingers."

Her voice began to break, but she went on, as if now the door was open, she could not allow it to close before the worst was through.

"Liam stood at the rear exit. I saw him. He stood there with the key. The key he was meant to use to let us out. And for one second he looked straight at me. Straight at us. At me and Maeve. I was shouting for him to open. He..."

Red closed her eyes.

"He stepped back."

Moirá drew in a breath.

"He ran?"

"Not only ran," Red said. "He locked the door from the outside."

Silence struck me harder than any noise.

"Because he already knew the guard was coming," Red went on. "Maybe he sold the route. Maybe he sold only part of the plan, thinking he would come out of it with money and clean hands. Maybe someone pressed him. Maybe they promised that if he gave up the warehouse, they would spare his brother. I heard every version afterwards. Each one very convenient for a man who was still breathing. But the fact was simple. He had the key. We were inside. Maeve was inside. And the doors were locked."

Her hands were visibly trembling now.

For the first time since I had known her, Red did not try to hide it.

"We tried to break the side window. It was high. The bars were old, but strong. One of the boys lifted Maeve, and I held him from below, and the shots were going through the warehouse like hail. Someone had set the straw by the carts alight. Smoke got everywhere. I could barely see. I could only feel her leg by my shoulder, her fingers on the bar, hear her coughing. I shouted at her to hurry. She shouted that I was to come after her. As if it were that simple. As if the world ever let us do things in the right order."

She breathed shallowly.

I could no longer pretend to keep distance. I moved closer, but still did not touch her. Not yet.

"She loosened one bar," Red said. "Truly. A few more seconds and perhaps... perhaps she would have got out. Perhaps we both would. I do not know. A person can spend years measuring a few seconds and never reach the end of them. Then a shot came. I do not know from where. Above? The doors? The smoke? It hit her in the back. At first I did not understand. She just slid down onto me, suddenly heavy, too heavy, and looked so... so surprised, as if death were rude for interrupting her halfway through a movement."

Red opened her eyes, but she looked through us, not at us.

"I held her. I knelt on the floor with her, and everything around us was burning, people screaming, someone trying to break the doors, someone praying in Irish, someone else cursing in English, because in death languages mix faster than in docks. Maeve tried to say something. I did not hear. I put my ear to her mouth, but there was blood, smoke, noise, and I... I kept saying we would get out. That Liam would open. That someone would come. That all would be well. The greatest lies are told to the people we love most."

Moira covered her mouth with her hand.

My throat tightened so hard that for a moment I could not swallow.

"How did you get out?" I asked at last, scarcely with a voice.

Red smiled bitterly.

"I do not remember properly. Truly. There are things the body does for you because the mind is already lying beside it and pretending to be dead. Someone forced open part of a wall by the old chute. Callum? Perhaps. Finn? I do not know. They carried me out almost by force. I would not let go of Maeve. I remember someone shouting into my ear that she was dead. As if that made anything easier. As if death were an argument."

She clenched her fingers in the fabric of her skirt.

"For three days after, I did not speak. I did not eat. I did not sleep. I sat in some cellar listening to people explain to themselves why Liam had done it. That he had to. That he had been pressed. That if he had not locked the door, the guard would have entered sooner and more would have died. That some of the weapons had been saved anyway. That the cause required sacrifices. The cause. How I hate that word when it is spoken by people who are not holding a girl with bullets through her back."

At last she looked at me.

And now I saw the whole wound. Not the tale. Not the history. The wound.

"Liam survived," she said. "Of course he survived. Men like him float up first, whether in water or in shit. He vanished for a while, then came back. He had explanations. Reasons. The face of a man who had suffered, but not so much that he had stopped breathing. Callum wanted to kill him. So did I. But then the elders decided we could not, because he knew the docks, knew people, knew routes, because war needs dirty hands. And do you know? Perhaps they were right. Perhaps fights like that always need such men. But I understood then that if victory required me to stand beside the man who had locked Maeve behind a door, I was not sure I wanted to live to see victory."

"That is why you left," I said softly.

She nodded.

"That is why I left. For Liverpool. For the factory. For the boilers. For work that was meant to kill me slowly, but at least did not ask me to call betrayal strategy. I thought that if I were tired enough, the past would stop catching up with me. Very stupid idea. Tiredness does not kill ghosts. It only makes them sit closer, because they know you have no strength to drive them away."

Moira lowered her hands.

"And now he may be waiting on the quay."

"Yes," Red said. "Now Liam Harkin may be waiting on the quay in Dublin, with that face of his, always keeping a second exit, and we are supposed to let him lead us through the city because Keane says he is useful."

I did not immediately say what I thought, because it was too simple and too foolish, and despite my entire reputation I sometimes do try not to add fire to a barrel of powder. But Red saw it on my face.

"No," she said.

"I have not said anything yet."

"That is why I am saying no early."

"Perhaps we should have another plan."

"We do not have another plan."

"Then perhaps we should make him into one."

Moira looked at me.

"What does that mean?"

I shrugged, though there was no lightness in it.

"If Liam sold people once, he may sell them twice. If he is the only person who can get us out of the port, that does not mean we trust him. It means we watch where he keeps his hands, whom he speaks to, whether he walks ahead of us or behind us, and whether the road he chooses has too many blind alleys."

Red was silent.

Moira nodded slowly.

"We can assume he is a threat, even if for the moment he helps us."

"At last, someone speaks the language of reason," I muttered. "It sounds disgusting, but useful."

Red looked at us both, and there was still pain in her eyes, but something harder and more familiar had appeared beside it. She was coming back. Not whole. Perhaps no one ever comes back whole from such places. But she came back enough to hold the knife by the proper end again.

"If Liam tries to sell us," she said slowly, "I will kill him."

Moira opened her mouth, but did not protest at once. Perhaps because this time we were not speaking of an unconscious officer, but of a man who once locked a door before a dying girl. Morality, like everything else, looks different when one stands nearer the blood.

"If he tries," Moira said at last. "Not before."

Red looked at her for a long time.

"Good. Not before."

And I, though I had no right to touch that wound too hard, moved closer and placed my hand on Red's.

I did not squeeze. I did not force. I simply laid it there.

Her fingers were cold, tense, motionless. For a second I thought she would pull away. But she did not. After a moment her fingers shifted and closed lightly around mine, not tightly, not publicly, not like a confession, only like someone catching the edge of something that may not hold forever, but for that one moment will not let her fall.

"I will not let him lock you behind any doors a second time," I said softly.

Red looked at me.

In her eyes were pain, anger, fear, the past, and that stubborn, unwanted tenderness we both feared more than the sea.

"Nell," she said. "This is not your war."

I smiled weakly.

"Too late. I have a terrible habit of walking into other people's wars when they are beating someone I care about."

She did not answer.

She did not need to.

The ship went on through the night, farther and farther from England, nearer and nearer Ireland, and in a storeroom smelling of rope, salt and cheap cheese sat three women who had fled one prison only to sail towards an old betrayal waiting on the other shore.

And I thought then that perhaps this is what true freedom looks like. Not an open field and a clean sky. Only the possibility of choosing which danger you will meet face to face.

For the rest of the night Liam Harkin sat with us in the storeroom, though not in body, and that was the worst of him, because a living man can at least be judged by the way he stands, speaks, breathes, by where his eyes run when an uncomfortable question is asked, by whether his hand seeks a knife, a pocket, a rosary or a route of escape. Ghosts give no such convenience. Ghosts settle between people without asking, put their elbows on memories and begin picking at wounds with their nails, as if testing whether they are still fresh.

Red said no more about him.

That meant something too.

When Red was simply silent, she was tired, angry or busy arranging in her head some plan that most likely offended law, common sense and at least one saint. But when she was silent as she was then, with her back against the beam, her head slightly bowed, her hand still in mine though we both pretended it was an accident caused by the lack of space, then I knew that every word would have had to pass through the place where Maeve lay, and she was not ready for that.

Perhaps no one ever is. Perhaps speaking of the dead is like carrying something fragile through a burning house. You know you must, and yet you fear that by the end only shards will be left in your hands.

Moirá slept for a while, if one can call it sleep when a person shuts her eyes but her body keeps watch. She sat curled by the sacks, her bag under her head and one hand still slipped under her coat, where she had hidden the false papers. In the half-light her face looked younger, more defenceless, as if even shallow, awkward sleep had stripped away that prison layer of control behind which she hid guilt, fear and uncertainty.

I watched her for a while and thought that not long ago I could have hated her without effort. A wardress. A woman on the other side of bars. Someone who had keys when I had only a wall. And now she sat with us on a ship that could save or ruin her, because at last she had done something no regulation allowed. She opened a door. Then she broke a jug over an officer's head. Moral development can be truly peculiar.

The ship laboured beneath us with a deep, heavy rhythm, and the sea made itself increasingly known. It was not raging yet, not throwing us about like a drunken husband throwing furniture around a room, but it rolled patiently, persistently, as if testing how much human fear could be squeezed from one hull. Now and then from above came steps, calls, the shifting of ropes, then silence, then steps again, and in all of it, in that dark, shut-up space, I began to feel a weariness so enormous that it was no longer part of the body, but a creature of its own, sitting on my shoulders and purring that I should stop fighting for just one minute.

I did not want to sleep. I did not trust the ship. I did not trust Keane.

I did not trust unconscious Briggs, even had he been bound, drunk, toothless and chained to the anchor.

I did not trust Ireland, waiting ahead of us with Liam Harkin on the shore.

But most of all I did not trust my own head, because I knew that as soon as I closed my eyes, all the images I had been postponing like bills that could never be paid would return: my mother in the courtroom, her face after the sentence, my father by the fire, Greta vanishing into an alley, Patrick on the table, the cell, the bars, Cedric falling after the shovel struck him, Red on the boiler-room floor, blood on her mouth.

Red's fingers shifted slightly in my hand.

"You are not asleep," she said softly.

"Is that an accusation or an observation?"

"A warning. If you do not sleep for a little while, you will go ashore in Dublin looking like a woman the sea spat out from pity."

"Still plausible as a fugitive, then."

"As a corpse. Corpses run badly."

"Not all of them. Some return as ghosts and complicate plans."

She looked at me, and despite her exhaustion, a shadow of the old spark came into her eyes.

"If you become a ghost, you will be the worst possible kind."

"Thank you."

"You will haunt courts and correct verdicts."

"And frighten overseers with grammar."

"Poor men."

"Let us not get carried away with pity."

For a while we were silent, and then Red unexpectedly brushed her thumb over my fingers, so lightly I might almost have called it an accident. Almost. But after that night I was too old for faith in accidents.

"Are you afraid?" she asked.

I could have lied. We had been doing a great many things with lies lately: writing them on papers, carrying them under coats, handing them to officers, pouring rum down unconscious men's throats so that the lie would smell better. But with her a lie suddenly seemed too much work.

"Yes," I said. "But not as before."

"How?"

I thought for a moment, listening to the wave strike the hull.

"In prison I feared the end. In court I feared they would make an example of me. In the canals I feared they would catch us, kill us, or that we would leave someone behind. And now... now I fear that we may truly arrive. That Ireland will not be only a word, but a place where I shall have to decide who I am if I am no longer the girl from Manchester, my mother's daughter, Tommy's sister, the boiler-room worker, the condemned rebel. Because if a person has spent her whole life fighting with someone else's boot on her throat, then when that boot is gone for a moment, a very strange question remains: what next for the throat?"

Red looked at me for a long time.

"You do not have to know at once."

"Do you?"

She smiled bitterly.

"No. I only pretend better."

"You do not."

"What?"

"You do not pretend better. You pretend louder."

For a second she looked as if she wanted to be offended, but she was too tired, so she merely snorted softly.

"That sounds like something Maeve might have said."

The name fell more calmly than before, without that sudden break, though it still hurt. Perhaps that is how one begins to tame a ghost: not by banishing it, but by speaking its name without immediately falling to pieces.

"Would I have liked her?" I asked.

Red turned her eyes towards the door, but did not flee.

"Yes. And you would have hated her a little."

"So I really would have liked her."

"She had a patience that drove me mad. She looked at people and always saw one layer more than they deserved. I saw a fool; she saw a hungry fool. I saw a coward; she saw a man who had once been left alone. I saw a traitor..." She stopped for a moment. "And even in Liam she would probably have tried to see something that could be saved."

"And you?"

"I see the man because of whom she died."

There was no hesitation in it.

Moirra shifted in her sleep, as if Liam's name passed even through her shallow rest, but she did not wake fully.

"If you see him in Dublin," I said, "what will you do?"

Red closed her eyes.

"I do not know."

That was more alarming than if she had said, I will kill him. I understood Red's anger. Her uncertainty was something far more dangerous.

"Do you want me to stop you?"

She opened her eyes.

"Would you?"

"I would try."

"Even if he deserves it?"

"Especially then. Because if you kill him because he deserves it, perhaps you will be right. But if you do it with Maeve in your throat, he will take even more from you than he already has."

Red fell silent.

Her fingers tightened around mine.

"When did you become so wise?"

"I did not. I am only pretending for the moment. Weariness can look like depth."

This time she smiled almost gently.

"Maeve would have said something like that."

"Then I am beginning to like her very much."

For a long time we sat so, silent, while the ship carried on through the night. I do not know when Moira truly woke, but at some point I saw her watching us through half-closed lids, not with curiosity, not with judgement, rather with the quiet sadness of someone who sees closeness between others and does not yet know whether she has the right to miss her own. When she noticed I had seen, she sat straighter and cleared her throat, as if she wished to return to the role of practical person.

"If Liam knows the docks," she said quietly, "we must prepare a few signs between us. In case anything is wrong."

Red returned at once to alertness, though she did not release my hand.

"What signs?"

Moira shifted closer and spoke under her breath, as if even the boards might inform.

"If I think someone is watching us, I will adjust my cap with my left hand. If the route looks like a trap, I touch my throat. If we need to split up, I will say something about water. Anything. 'We need to find water', 'there is no water', 'where is the water'. That will mean we do not follow him further."

"And if we need to run immediately?" I asked.

Moira looked at me.

"Then Red will probably strike someone, you will say something unnecessary, and I shall have to mend the consequences."

Red raised an eyebrow.

I looked at Moira with admiration.

"That is the most accurate plan I have heard today."

Moira, to my amazement, smiled faintly.

"I learn from the finest catastrophes."

"From us?"

"Unfortunately."

Red shook her head, but something warmer sat in her face. That small exchange, foolish, quiet, almost ordinary, did more for us than grand speeches. After Liam, after Maeve, after Briggs, after the weight sitting on our chests, suddenly we were three women making a plan, perhaps poor, perhaps imperfect, but our own. And perhaps possession of a plan, even a bad one, is the first step towards freedom.

Towards morning, though in the storeroom we still saw no light, we felt the air change. The ship still rolled, but differently, as if the sea had begun to yield to port. The

sounds on deck grew more nervous, more frequent. Someone shouted about mooring lines. Someone else about landing. Keane passed along the corridor once, then again, without stopping for us. Tom, the boy with the name that still pricked my heart, slipped a piece of bread through the door and said only:

"Lights are showing."

Lights. Dublin. Red went still. Moira stopped chewing.

I felt everything inside me tighten and open at once, which was very discourteous of my organs, but entirely understandable in the circumstances.

After a few minutes the door opened and Keane came in.

He looked like a man who had not slept for a week, hated everyone equally, and would, if he could, sell half the world for a cup of coffee and an hour's silence.

"Up," he said. "We are coming into Dublin. You go ashore quickly, quietly, and with no performance, though I know I am asking for a miracle. Briggs is locked up, half-conscious, and for the present persuaded that rum still hates him. My man is making sure his memory does not recover too sharp a tongue before you leave. If all goes well, in half an hour you stop being my problem."

"You will miss us," I said.

Keane looked at me.

"I shall drink to forget."

"Almost the same."

"It is not. Drinking works."

Red stood first and adjusted the scarf over her hair. Her face was closed again, ready, but I now knew the cracks beneath that surface, and I knew that somewhere behind the mask waited Liam, Maeve, Dublin, and the whole past that was about to stop being a story.

Moira tucked the papers away, checked her bag, touched her cap as if already rehearsing the warning signal. I pulled the scarf up over my face and let Anne Doyle stand before me one more time. Poor, sick, quiet Anne. I did not know her well, but I had to admit she was useful.

Keane opened the door wider.

"And one more thing," he said, looking mainly at Red. "If Liam is waiting, do nothing on the gangway."

Red did not answer.

"I mean it."

"I heard."

"I did not say you heard. I said do not."

At last she met his eyes.

"If he has sold us, I promise nothing."

Keane held her stare for a moment, then nodded, as if he had just accepted that this was the best answer he could get from a woman who had left part of her soul in a burning warehouse.

"Then at least try not to begin with blood. Blood on harbour boards makes too many questions."

We followed him out into the corridor. Then up the stairs. Towards the deck. Towards morning. Towards Ireland.

The first gust of air struck me in the face the moment we came up. It was cold, salty, wet and sharp, entirely unlike the air of England, though perhaps the difference was more in my head than in the wind. But I wanted to believe it. I wanted to believe that this air truly belonged to another shore, another possibility, another life.

Ahead of us, in the grey of morning, Dublin loomed.

Not green. Not fairytale. Not like the songs.

It was dark, wet, port-stained, dirty, with a line of warehouses, masts, chimneys, boats, men shouting, and lights going out slowly in the pale dawn.

And still Red looked at it as if she had just seen the ghost of her own home. Not softly. Not with joy. Rather with the pain of someone returning to the place where she had left something unforgivable.

The ship was coming alongside the quay.

Keane stood before us, shielding us partly with his own body from the people on shore. Lines flew. Sailors shouted. Boards knocked. Chains ground. And I, between Red and Moira, watched the men standing by the warehouses, trying to guess which of them was Liam Harkin.

I did not have to guess for long. Red went rigid. At the end of the quay, beneath a lamp, stood a man in a dark coat. Tall. Slender. Hat in his hand. He did not wave. He did not smile. He simply waited. Red whispered one word, so quietly the wind almost carried it off.

"Liam."

And then I knew we had truly reached Ireland.

CHAPTER IX

A Shore with a Foreign Accent

The gangway fell on to the quay with a dull thud, the sort of sound that in an ordinary port would have drowned among sailors shouting, ropes creaking, crates cracking and men cursing because since dawn they had been carrying other people's cargo for money that was not worth a healthy back. To me it sounded like a gunshot at the beginning of something none of us was ready to call a new life. A new life ought to begin with something cleaner than wet planks, port stink, an unconscious officer locked somewhere below deck, and a man from Red's past standing under a lamp like badly buried guilt.

Keane went first, wearing the face of a man who had just decided that if fate wished to humiliate him further, it would have to put in some effort. Red followed him down very slowly, head lowered, scarf over her hair, shoulders tight, wrapped in that terrible calm which had nothing to do with calm at all. It was merely the last thin sheet of ice over water where the current had already begun to work.

I went just behind her, my face partly hidden, remembering that on paper I was poor, dull, feverish Anne Doyle, not Nell Whitmore, the girl with a talent for insulting judges, upsetting order and bringing people troubles larger than their patience. Moira walked at my side, pale, her bag pressed against her ribs, and I saw at once how her eyes worked: counting men, exits, distance to the warehouses, the patrol at the end of the quay, two sailors by a stack of barrels, a woman with a basket who watched us a moment too long, and Liam Harkin beneath the lamp, motionless as a thorn left in an old wound.

Dublin did not strike me with green, or song, or any fine return to a mythical land. It struck me with the smell of a wet port: fish, coal, horse dung, smoke, salt and poverty, which here had another accent but the same face. The water beside the quay was dark and greasy. The sky hung low, heavy and ashen, as if someone had wrung the night out of it and forgotten to wash it. The people on the shore did not look like deliverance. They looked like port people everywhere: tired, suspicious, ready to judge your coat, your boots, your hands, and whether it was worth helping you, selling you, or simply stepping aside before you brought trouble.

Liam Harkin did not move at once.

He stood under the lamp with his hat in his hand, tall and narrow, perhaps in his forties, though his face carried those years that are counted differently from a register. Some years are given by time. Others by night escapes, other people's graves and decisions that cannot later be prayed away. His hair was dark, dusted with grey at the temples, his face long, his eyes too calm, his mouth belonging to a man who knew how to apologise in a way that sounded like another form of defence. He did not look like a monster. That was the worst of it. Monsters ought to have horns, blood on their hands and a voice fit for a sermon about hell. Most often they have good boots, tired eyes and explanations reasonable enough to choke on.

Red stopped on the last step of the gangway.

For one second I truly thought she would manage it. That she would pass him with her face stone still, that sharp tongue clenched behind her teeth, anger worn like a coat. I thought she would say something cold, cruel, perfectly aimed, something that would cut him without needing the knife.

But Liam raised his eyes.

And said, "Red."

Only that. One word. One name he had no right to say so softly. Red moved like a broken spring.

She gave no warning. She did not hiss or spit an insult. She simply tore herself forward so violently that her coat snapped behind her like a black shadow, and before any of Keane's men understood what was happening, she was upon Liam, her fist already on its way to his face. She struck him once, hard, with all the hatred that had sat in her for years like a red hot nail. The sound was dry, ugly, perfect. Liam staggered back almost into the lamp, but he did not strike back. Perhaps that should have counted in his favour. In me it only stirred more fury, because guilty men often do not strike back not out of gentleness, but because they have long ago learnt to look like men accepting punishment with dignity.

"You son of a bitch," Red snarled, going for him again, this time not with a fist but with her hand dropping for the knife. "You living, breathing, bastard son of a bitch."

Moira caught her arm first, I seized the back of her coat, and Red pulled so hard she nearly dragged both of us off our feet. She was stronger than she looked, or perhaps it was not strength that moved her then, but something much older and less human. Liam did not even lift his hands. He stood with his head turned from the blow, blood rising at the corner of his mouth, looking at her as if he had been expecting this for years.

"Red, not here," I hissed into her ear, gripping the cloth of her coat so tightly my fingers hurt. "Not on the quay, damn you. Not in front of people."

"Let go of me."

"No."

She turned her head towards me, and for one second I was not in her eyes. There was a warehouse, smoke, a locked door and Maeve sinking into her arms. I felt it like cold passing through bone. She was not looking at Nell. She was looking at everything she had failed to save.

Moira, though she was trembling, stepped in front of her with astonishing courage and put both hands on Red's shoulders.

"If you kill him here, we all die," she said low and fast, with none of the softness she sometimes tried to lay over other people's pain. "Do you hear me? All of us. Not only him. Nell. Me. You. Keane. The people who got us out. If you want to kill him, do it more cleverly than he did it to you."

That stopped her. It did not calm her. It stopped her.

Red was breathing hard, as if she had run, the knife already half drawn beneath her coat. Moira still held her. I still had the back of her coat in both hands. A few people on the quay had begun to look our way with that dangerous interest which, in a port, can be worse than shouting. Shouting at least tells you the matter has already exploded. Looks are still deciding whether to inform, help, or wait for profit.

Keane came down from the gangway behind us and stood beside us with a face that could have frightened a storm.

"Beautiful," he said quietly, with such calm that it made everything worse. "Truly beautiful. Not three minutes on Irish soil and you are staging a performance on the quay. All we lack are drums, fire and a man selling tickets."

"He..." Red began, but rage broke the word in her throat.

"I know who he is," Keane cut in. "And I know what he did. I also know that if he does not take you from this place at once, we shall have the port guard, English questions, Irish curiosity and perhaps Briggs himself, if he wakes sooner than he should. So either you postpone your private murders, or I start throwing people into the water in order of irritation."

Liam wiped the blood from his mouth with his thumb. He did not smile. Good. If he had smiled, I think even I would have hit him.

"I deserved it," he said quietly.

Red gave a short, ugly laugh without the slightest trace of amusement.

"No. You deserve far more. That was only a deposit."

"I know."

"Do not say you know."

"Red."

"No." Her voice hardened again, the blade back in place, though her hand still shook. "You have no right to speak to me as if you know the road through my pain."

Liam nodded slowly.

"Right."

Keane cursed under his breath.

"Touching. Now, if this parish service of guilt and hatred is over, move. Liam, lead. And if the road proves even a little too theatrical, Red will not need to kill you, because I shall do it first for wasting my morning."

Liam looked at him without resentment.

"Follow me. Not through the main way. Too many people by the warehouses."

"Of course there are," I muttered. "It would be rude if there weren't."

For the first time Liam looked at me properly.

His eyes paused on my face, my scarf, my posture, then moved to Moira, who still stood close to Red and ready to catch her again if necessary. I saw the assessment in that glance. Not desire, not contempt, not even curiosity. More a quick arrangement of facts: Englishwoman, another Englishwoman, one hunted, the other probably dangerous in a less obvious way. I did not like how efficiently he looked.

"These are them?" he asked quietly.

Red stepped forward before I could answer.

"Do not speak of them as if they were parcels."

Liam accepted it without blinking.

"Very well. Come."

We moved along the quay, not where the other passengers and labourers went, but aside, between stacked barrels, then behind a line of empty crates, through a narrow passage between warehouses where the walls were wet, mossed, streaked with old stains

and covered with writing I could not read in the half light. Dublin woke around us, but differently from Manchester and differently from Liverpool. There was something more torn in it, more nervous, as if poverty and anger did not stand here beside machines but moved through streets, hid in gateways, came out of churches, taverns, tenements and alleys, watching every stranger with the question: do you bring money, trouble, or one dressed as the other?

Very quickly I understood that Moira and I were foreign here in a way no scarf could hide.

It was not only the clothes. Not the face. Not the papers. It was the voice, the way the body held itself, the small reflexes, how you looked at a sign, how you reacted to an Irish curse, how you failed to understand half words flung by men standing at walls. In England I had been poor, working class, dangerous, but made of the same dirt, the same smoke, the same machine. Here I was English. Even if I had nothing to do with lords, soldiers, rents, hunger, evictions or the history these people carried in their throats like a stone, my tongue belonged to those who for generations had given orders.

The first man to notice stood by the door of a tavern with a pipe in his mouth and a face wrinkled like old leather.

"Englishwomen?" he threw at Liam in Irish, but I understood the last word at once from the tone.

Liam did not stop.

"Doyle's goods," he answered shortly.

The man spat on the ground.

"Doyle grows soft."

Red turned her head so sharply that Moira stiffened beside me.

"Say that again," she said in English, but with Irish steel in every sound.

Only then did the man recognise her. Or at least he understood that she was not a woman worth throwing a stone before. He raised his hands in false innocence and backed into the shadow.

"Red," I whispered. "We cannot beat the whole of Dublin at once. Let us make a list."

"He called you goods."

"Liam called us goods."

"Liam is breathing conditionally."

Liam, walking ahead, certainly heard that, but did not turn. I did not like that either. A man who ignores threats is either stupid or too accustomed to having earned them.

We went on through side streets, deeper from the main quay, while the city showed us its morning face: women with pails, boys dragging handcarts, men in caps standing beneath walls and speaking too low, children barefoot despite the chill, a priest crossing the street like a man trying to look innocent in a place full of guilt, dogs nosing rubbish, windows patched with boards, laundry strung over alleys, wet stones and the smell of coal mixed with sea. There were not many people on the roads Liam chose, but every person we passed looked. At Red with recognition or caution. At Liam with something colder. At me and Moira with mistrust, sometimes plain, sometimes hidden behind indifference.

"They know," Moira whispered, walking beside me.

"That we're English?"

"Yes."

"Splendid. Perhaps they will at least appreciate that we are poor. That ought always to bring nations together."

"Do not joke too loudly."

"I know."

And I did know. This time my tongue had to sit on a shorter leash, because here my Englishness was not merely a sound, but a weight. In Manchester I could shout against the Empire as one of its own mistakes, a girl born in the filth it had made. Here I came from the country which for many meant not abstraction, but rent, hunger, soldiers, landlord, office, sentence, a ship leaving with another son who never came back. I might have nothing, and still carry the name of the oppressor on my tongue. It was unfair. Of course it was. But lately injustice had stopped impressing me as an argument. It was more like weather.

Liam stopped at last before a low door in a blind alley behind a warehouse whose windows had been boarded so long the boards had begun to look like part of the wall. He knocked twice, then once, then three times. From inside came a single answer. The door opened and an older woman appeared, her face so sharp it might have cut bread without a knife.

She looked at Liam. Then at Red. Something moved in her eyes.

"Holy Mother," she said softly. "So you did come back."

Red said nothing. The woman looked at me and Moira. Her face closed at once.

"Englishwomen?"

"They need hiding," Liam said.

"The English always need something."

"They are running from the same people."

"That does not make them ours."

Red stepped half a pace forward.

"Brigid."

The woman looked at her sharply.

"Do not Brigid me, girl. Not after all these years. Not with him at your side and two Englishwomen behind your back."

Red took it like a slap, but did not step back.

"They are with me."

Brigid, for that was evidently her name, watched her for a long while, then moved her gaze to me. I felt as if she were peeling me in layers without using her hands. She must have seen the scarf, the bruises, the fatigue, the anger, the uncertainty and everything I wished to hide. I do not know whether she liked it. I suspect she was not a woman who liked things easily.

"If they come in, they do not speak by the windows," she said at last. "They do not go out without one of ours. They do not ask for names. They do not weep, unless quietly. And they do not expect anyone to like them."

"Accustomed," I said before I could stop myself.

Brigid narrowed her eyes.

Red closed hers with the face of a woman praying for patience and, as usual, getting nothing.

Moira jabbed me with her elbow.

To my surprise, Brigid snorted.

"This one at least has a tongue."

"Unfortunately," Red said.

"Tongues are easier cut than hands. Come in."

Inside it was warmer, but no more welcoming. The room looked like a back chamber joined to a warehouse, a hideout and a council room for people who distrust chairs if they stand too neatly. Sacks, crates, coats and bundles wrapped in cloth lay against the walls. On the table stood a jug, bread, cold potatoes, a knife and a candle. Somewhere deeper in the house, someone coughed. Above us a floorboard creaked. There were fewer people here than in Doyle's hideout, but one felt the net, invisible and taut, stretched through docks and alleys.

Liam closed the door. Then Red turned to him. She did not throw herself at him with a knife. She did not need to. Her voice was enough.

"Speak."

Liam slowly removed his hat.

"About what?"

Red took a step towards him.

"About how many people know I came back. About whom you told. About whether I have come here for help or walked into another of your traps."

Brigid pulled out a chair and sat at the table as if a performance had just begun and she did not wish to miss it, although she knew part of the ending.

Liam looked at Red.

"Brigid knows. Keane knows. Doyle knows. Two lads at the docks know, because they had to watch whether the ship had a tail. No one else."

"Are you lying?"

"Probably a little," Brigid put in, pouring herself something into a cup. "Men breathe, so they lie. The question is whether it is in a matter that will kill us."

Liam did not look at her.

"I did not sell you."

Red laughed under her breath.

"Yet?"

"Never again."

It was a stupid sentence. Brave or stupid. Perhaps both. A heavy silence settled in the room, because all of us, even I, knew that a man like Liam should not use the word never without permission from the dead.

Red went closer, close enough to strike him without taking another step.

"Maeve is dead."

Liam shut his eyes.

"I know."

"No. You know that she died. That is not the same. You do not know how heavy she was when she sank into my arms. You do not know how her hair smelt while the warehouse burned. You do not know what she tried to say, because I do not know either, and I will hate you for that until the end of my life. You know nothing, Liam. You have facts. Facts are not punishment."

His face went pale. He did not defend himself. Not yet.

"You are right," he said.

Red flinched as if agreement were another blow.

"I do not want your humility."

"I have nothing else you would take."

"You have a road through the docks," she said coldly. "And that is the only reason you are still standing."

Liam nodded.

"The road is prepared. But you must know you have no money for long hiding. Keane brought you as Doyle's debt, but debts here work short. One night, perhaps two. Then you must eat, sleep, pay people, quiet people, buy other clothes, other papers, maybe a place outside the city. That costs."

"So what do you propose?" Moira asked.

Liam looked at her with cautious respect. Perhaps because she did not sound like a frightened fugitive, but like a woman who knew that morality without bread grows thin very quickly.

"Work."

Red stiffened.

"No."

"You do not yet know what kind."

"I know who proposes it."

Brigid struck her cup against the table.

"Girl, you have no money. You have no people except those who have already risked their necks. One of you is hunted by the English, another was a prison guard, and if that gets about, half this district will want to throw her out and the other half to sell her for peace. The third has come back after years with a corpse in her heart and anger in her hands. Those are not qualifications for quiet sewing by a window."

Moira lowered her eyes when the word guard was spoken.

I noticed. So did Brigid.

"People here do not love the English," the older woman continued, looking straight at me and Moira now. "And I will not sweeten it, because sugar is dear and a lie dearer. For many, you will have the faces of those who took land, language, bread, sons, peace, and then ordered thanks for the right to hunger. Perhaps you are poor. Perhaps you run from the same Empire. Perhaps you have your own scars. But before anyone here sees your scars, they will hear your accent."

"We are not their enemies," Moira said quietly.

"Then show it. Do not say it."

That sentence was hard, but honest. I disliked it. Which probably meant it was true.

"What work?" I asked.

Red turned at once.

"Nell."

"What? Are we to pretend we did not hear? We have no money. We have no one here except you, and you mostly have people who loved you, betrayed you, or did both in a very impractical order. If we are to survive, we need to know what price they mean to ask."

Liam watched me closely.

"Simple things at first. Carrying messages. Watching people. Translating, sometimes. An English accent can be a curse, but it can also be a tool. In some places you can enter more easily than we can."

Red struck the table with her palm.

"I will not make her bait."

"No one said bait."

"I said it."

Liam looked at her.

"If you want to keep her out of it, you must have money. Have you?"

Red was silent.

That was the cruellest answer.

Moirra lifted her head.

"I can read. Write. Forge forms well enough to delay people if they do not check too closely. I know how guards work, reports, registers, questioning. That may be useful."

Brigid looked at her more sharply.

"You were on their side."

"Yes."

"Did you beat women?"

"No."

"Did you watch them beaten?"

Moirra went paler.

"Yes."

Brigid did not look away.

"That is worse than you think and less than others will accuse you of. Remember the difference if you want to survive here."

Moirra nodded slowly.

"I want to be useful."

"Usefulness does not wash away guilt."

"I know."

"Good. Most people do not."

Red looked at Moira differently then. Not softly. Red was rarely soft. But less alone. As if she saw in her not a guard, not a woman of keys, not a problem, but someone who had also come back to a place where no one waited with forgiveness.

Liam moved from the table.

"Today you stay here. Until dusk you do not go out. Then we move you to the house off Thomas Street. Safer for a few days. Red, you may hate me on the way, but you must go where I say, because someone may already be asking about Keane's ship."

"And if you are asking for us?" I said.

Liam looked at me.

"If I wanted to sell you, I would not walk you through half the docks to Brigid. I would have pointed you out on the quay."

"Perhaps you prefer a better price."

For the first time a shadow of a smile touched his eyes, though he did not let it reach his mouth.

"I understand why Red went back for you."

Red stiffened.

"Do not speak of that."

Liam nodded.

"Very well."

He shut his mouth.

It was probably the wisest thing he had done since I met him.

Brigid led us to the back room, small, low, with two straw mattresses, a bowl of water and a window covered with heavy cloth. She gave us bread, cold potatoes, a little fish and a jug of tea so strong it could have dissolved a less determined spoon. We ate in silence, because after everything even I had no strength to say something foolish at once, though I admit the tea tempted me.

Red sat against the wall with one knee drawn up, the knife beside her leg and her eyes fixed on the door.

Moirá removed her cap, rubbed her face and suddenly looked like a woman who had only now understood that she had fled England merely to enter a country where her English voice might be a second sentence.

I held a piece of bread, looked at them both and thought that Dublin would not be a refuge.

Dublin would be a trial.

And we, with no money, no safe names, no place of our own and Red's past waiting just beyond the door in the shape of Liam Harkin, had been pushed into the old underworld of smugglers, rebels and people who helped only when help could be repaid.

We had no choice.

And lack of choice, I had noticed, very often dresses itself as the beginning of adventure so that a person does not see at once it has them by the throat.

For the next few minutes we ate like people who do not know when anyone will give them anything again without threat, price or hook hidden underneath. Perhaps that was why no one spoke. Bread, cold potato and fish that tasted of salt, smoke and stubbornness occupied the mouth more effectively than prudence. Brigid's tea was black, bitter and so strong that after the first mouthful one felt as if a small angry industry had been poured down the throat. But it was hot, and heat at such times can imitate care better than many people.

The back room was low, dark and damp, with a ceiling so close that tall men would have had to bow, which immediately improved my opinion of its architecture. Two mattresses lay against the wall, thin and worn but covered with blankets smelling of peat smoke, old sweat and somebody else's sleep. In the corner stood a bowl of water. Behind

the cloth covered window we could hear Dublin: steps on wet cobbles, calls, wheels, women's voices, a child laughing and, farther off, the deeper breath of the port. It had no intention of stopping merely because three fugitives were trying to understand whether they had survived or only changed the place where they might be caught.

Red picked at her potato with the spoon and did not eat.

"You are not eating," I said.

She looked at me slowly.

"A magnificent observation. One day they should employ you to count corpses after battle."

"Do not change the subject."

"There was no subject."

"There was a potato. Now there is a subject."

Moira sighed softly, as if she knew she was about to witness a conversation that might end in a confession or in a bowl being thrown.

Red rested the spoon on the rim.

"I am not hungry."

"I noticed that too. My career grows."

"Nell."

"Red."

For a moment we measured one another. Then she turned her face towards the covered window, outside which a cart went over the cobbles with a rattle, reminding us that the world beyond our wounds was still very busy with itself.

"I need to go to Galway," she said suddenly.

She did not ask. She did not announce. She said it as one says something that has lived inside too long and has finally stopped fitting under the tongue.

"To family?" I asked carefully.

Red gave a short laugh without warmth.

"If one can call it that. Family is a roomy word. It holds love, hunger, shame, blows, prayers and people who put you on a ship to England because they cannot bear looking at how you resemble their guilt."

Moira's voice was quiet.

"You want to see them?"

Red looked at her as if she did not know the answer and resented the question for noticing.

"I want to know whether they still breathe under the same sky, after everything. I want to see the house where I stopped being a daughter and became shame to be posted away. I want to stand before my father, if he lives, and see if I can still fear him. I want to see my mother and ask whether that fish was worth my exile. I want..." She stopped and looked into the bowl. "I want foolish things, Nell. The worst things. The kind you cannot obtain with a knife."

It grew quiet in the room.

"That is not foolish," I said.

Red snorted.

"Of course it is. Going back to people who threw you out is like knocking on the door of a fire and asking whether this time it might warm your hands instead of burning your face."

"Maybe. But sometimes a person has to see the fire once more to stop carrying it in her pocket."

She watched me closely.

"Where do you get these sentences?"

"From hunger, violence and lack of education. A fine mixture."

Moira smiled faintly. Red did not. Not at once. She looked at me as if judging whether I had said something wise by accident or merely found another form of impudence disguised as sympathy.

"Galway is far," she said. "We cannot simply walk out of Dublin and cross the country like three tourists of poverty and sentence. Roads, posts, questions, men asking where you are from and why you sound English." She looked at Moira, then at me. "And you both sound English."

"Unfortunately," I said. "I did not have time to change my accent during the crossing. I was busy not dying."

"Here that will not be a joke."

"I know."

And I did. After the quay, after the looks, after Brigid's words, I knew that in Dublin my voice could close doors faster than poverty, and on the road through Ireland it might be worse. In England my rebellion had been a class offence, a woman's offence, a political offence. Here there was something older, more collective, something that could not be disarmed by saying, truthfully, that I hated the Empire too. Truth is not always enough, especially when it stands before a history full of hunger, evictions and soldiers speaking your language.

"We can learn," Moira said. "How to speak. What not to say. How to move."

"It will not be enough."

"I know. But it is a beginning."

"A beginning of what? Pretending you are not from a place people here curse at table?"

Moira did not defend herself.

"I cannot change where I come from. I can change whom I serve."

Red went silent.

That sentence sat among us, heavy but clean. It was not a plea for forgiveness. Moira rarely pleaded directly. It was more the admission that there was no going back, and if a person cannot redeem the past, she can at least stop repeating it.

The door creaked and Brigid came in without knocking, naturally, because women like Brigid do not knock on their own doors or on other people's illusions. She carried another bowl of water, cleaner than the last, and a bundle of clothes. She put everything on the table, looked at us in turn and knew at once that the conversation had gone somewhere where the air grows thick.

"Galway?" she asked, as if she heard through walls or simply knew Red's face well enough to read old roads from it.

Red looked at her sharply.

"Do not listen at doors."

"My house. If you want privacy, build yourself walls."

"I did not ask for advice."

"You never did. Look how splendidly that went."

Red clenched her teeth. Brigid sat at the table as if the conversation had received her permission to continue.

"If you want Galway, you will not go now. Not at once. You are fresh as a knife cut. The port still remembers you, Keane's ship will leave questions behind, and the English, though often stupid, are not so stupid that they will not send messages where messages go. You must disappear in Dublin for several days. Dress better. Teach these two when to keep their tongues behind their teeth. Especially that one."

She pointed at me.

"I am becoming known as a problem here and we have only been here since morning," I said.

"That is not a reason for pride."

"I have not decided yet."

Brigid snorted, this time without anger.

"Red, you can get to Galway by merchants' carts, by pilgrim road, or through people who carry things not written in accounts. Safest will be women going to kin or looking for work in laundry and kitchens. Least safe will be looking as you three look now: one furious, one guilty, one with a tongue begging for a gag."

"It does not beg," I protested. "It merely comments on reality."

"Reality tires of you after five minutes."

Red, despite herself, gave a faint snort.

Brigid looked at her and softened almost imperceptibly.

"Your mother lives," she said.

Red became still.

Everything in her fell quiet.

"How do you know?"

"Because people write. People talk. Ireland is small where it hurts. Your mother lives. Near Galway still, though not in the same house. Your father lives too, unless the last message lied, and messages usually lie less than men but more than death. He is old. Ill, they say. Bitter, certainly."

Red stared at her without blinking.

"You knew?"

"I knew for a year perhaps. Perhaps longer."

"And you did not tell me?"

Brigid lifted her brows.

"Whom was I to tell? A girl who ran to England and for years pretended her name burned with that warehouse? Doyle? Liam? The wall? Do not turn me into a messenger in a drama where every hero has barred the door from inside."

Red looked away.

There were no tears on her face, but something in her broke quietly. I saw it in the way the bowl shifted on her knees, in how her hand did not go to the knife but to the edge of the table, as if she had to hold on to something.

Her mother lived. Her father lived. Galway ceased to be a misty place of story and guilt. It became a point on the map where the people who had made her, hurt her and thrown her into the world still breathed.

Moira spoke first.

"Do you want to go there to forgive them?"

Red looked at her as if the question was too clean for such a dirty room.

"I do not know whether I have anything like forgiveness in me."

"Then why?"

Red was silent for a long time.

"To see whether I am still their daughter. Or to stop trying."

That sentence remained in the air.

I had no joke for it. None. Which was irritating, because jokes are more convenient than truth, but sometimes truth comes too close and puts a hand over your mouth.

"First Dublin," Brigid said. "Then the road. If you survive the first week, we will think about Galway."

"The first week," I repeated. "How kind that the plan has such ambitious horizons."

"In your position a week is luxury, girl."

"I hear that more and more. I am beginning to miss the days when luxury was soup without a worm."

Brigid looked at me dryly.

"A worm is protein."

"Irish hospitality is truly moving."

"English impudence as well. A pity we imported so much of it."

Moira almost smiled. Red did smile, briefly and painfully, as if the muscles of her face had forgotten how without blood in the mouth.

Brigid stood.

"You rest two hours. Then Liam comes and you go to the second place. You do not speak to him more than necessary. Red, if you throw yourself at him again, I shall tie you like a calf and make this English mouth guard you all the way."

"Which one of us is that punishment for?" I asked.

"The world."

She left us with water, clothes, food and Galway hanging above the table like a far wet landscape none of us had yet seen, but which had begun to draw us all towards it.

Red stared into her bowl for a long while.

Then she said almost in a whisper, "My mother lives."

I did not know whether it was joy, fear, anger or grief. Probably all of them. I sat nearer to her, this time without asking whether I might.

"Is that good?" I asked carefully.

Red closed her eyes.

"I don't know."

I laid my hand beside hers, not on it, only beside, giving her a choice.

After a while her fingers moved and touched mine.

"Will you come with me?" she asked softly.

"To Galway?"

She nodded.

"If we live."

I smiled a little.

"Red, I have just escaped prison, crossed the sea on a ship with an unconscious officer hidden by the anchor chains, landed in a country that has every right to dislike my accent, and now I am sitting in a smugglers' hideout where they will probably make me work for criminals. Do you think Galway is going to frighten me?"

"My father may be worse than smugglers."

"Then I shall broaden my experience."

Red gave a soft snort, but her eyes were wet. Only a little. Enough that a careless person might have blamed the light.

I was looking carefully.

"I will go," I said. "If you want me, I will go."

Moirra spoke from the other mattress.

"So will I."

We both looked at her.

She was exhausted and pale, but her voice was steady.

"I have nowhere to go. And if I am to learn this country, I would rather do it where truth is not pretending to be easy."

Red watched her for a long while.

"It is not your business."

Moirra shook her head.

"I stopped having only my own business some time ago. Now I have consequences. It is almost family."

I do not know which of us laughed first, but it was quiet, short and tired, more like a sigh after too long a day than real happiness. Yet it was there. In that room, in Dublin, where nobody promised us safety, where Red had before her mother, father, Liam and ghosts, where I had before me a country that might see an enemy before it saw a human being, and where Moirra had before her guilt without a uniform, for one brief moment we sat together like something not yet named.

Not family. Not an army. Not friendship even, perhaps, because that word was too early and too clean. But something. Something that could go on. And sometimes, in lives like ours, that was already enough.

We did not sleep the two hours Brigid had given us with the air of a woman handing over a very doubtful blessing, but we tried, and sometimes trying is all people can manage after several days of flight, violence, sea and conversations with ghosts.

I lay on the mattress by the wall, wrapped in a blanket that smelt of peat smoke, old sweat and something sour I preferred not to identify. If a person begins too closely analysing the odours of borrowed blankets in smugglers' rooms, it means she has either too much time or too little instinct for survival. Beside me, Red sat for a long while instead of lying down, her back against the wall, her knees drawn up and her eyes fixed

on the covered window. Dublin lived beyond it, offensively indifferent to the fact that every creak of a floorboard could mean betrayal, every step outside the door the beginning of pursuit, and every strange word the name of the man who once locked the door on Maeve.

Moirá slept first, though for a long time she pretended merely to close her eyes. Moirá seemed to be one of those people who treat rest as an activity requiring permission. She lay on her side, wrapped in a blanket, one hand under her cheek, her face still tense, as if in sleep she continued to arrange documents, count keys or listen for someone approaching a cell. Watching her, I thought that guilt does not show on a person as easily as preachers and judges would like. It does not grow on the forehead, does not stain the hands one colour, does not make the face instantly uglier. Sometimes it looks like a woman who has finally done something good, but too late to believe in it.

Red shifted at last, as if fighting herself over whether to lie beside me or continue playing guard at her own heart.

"If you keep staring, I shall not sleep," she muttered.

"I am not staring. I am observing the situation."

"The situation is sitting under the wall trying not to lose her mind."

"That is precisely why it requires observation."

She looked at me sideways, and despite her fatigue there was a trace of her old malice there, sharper, healthier, less soaked in pain.

"You are unbearable even in a whisper."

"A talent."

"A disease."

"Then it fits my papers. I am poor, sick Anne Doyle."

Red snorted softly, but the smile died quickly when a man's voice came through the wall, muffled and low, followed by Brigid's answer, short and hard. Red became still. I did not need to ask whether she was thinking of Liam. Her whole body said it.

"You do not have to think of him now," I said quietly.

"A fine piece of advice. Pity thoughts do not obey orders."

"Mine sometimes do. Only bad ones."

"That explains much."

After a while Red slid lower and lay on the far edge of the mattress, not quite against me, but nearer than she needed to be, close enough that our sleeves touched with the smallest movement. It was not a grand gesture, not the sort that would fit into a ballad or be told by candlelight with a theatrical sigh. It was small. Quiet. Careful. And therefore truer than anything one might name without shame.

"If we go to Galway," she said after a long pause, "I do not know what I shall find."

"People. Houses. Mud. Probably someone who tells me I sound English and look like trouble."

"The last one will be right."

"I know. I am trying to accept it."

Red turned her head and looked at me from close by.

"I am serious."

"So am I. Serious things are easier when they have dirty boots."

She sighed, but did not move away.

"My mother may not let me in. My father may spit at my feet. They may pretend not to know me. Or they may do something worse. They may cry."

"That is worse?"

"Sometimes. With tears you have to do something. With hatred at least you know how to stand."

I did not answer at once, because it was so very her that it hurt. Red could fight a blow, an insult, a knife, a door closed in her face. Tenderness she treated as an ambush. Perhaps rightly. Tenderness leaves no bruise on the skin, so it is harder to prove it wounded you.

"If they do not know how to receive you," I said at last, "that does not mean you have nowhere to go."

She watched me for a long time.

"And where do I have?"

The question was too naked for a filthy room in Dublin. It wore no armour, no irony, no curse.

I might have said, "To me," but that would have sounded too sweet, too simple, too like a sentence from a book where women have time to faint on verandas instead of fleeing prisons and striking officers with jugs. So I did what I did better. I told the truth crookedly.

"For now, to wherever we have potatoes, a dry corner and nobody with a truncheon by the door. Later we shall see."

Red looked at me a moment longer, then shut her eyes.

"That is probably the most romantic thing you have ever said."

"I try not to overdo it."

"You are doing well."

I do not know whether I slept for a minute, half an hour, or only dipped briefly into that dark, sticky state between sleep and wakefulness where one hears everything but cannot persuade the body to flee. I dreamed of the boiler room, except the pipes were ship's ropes, the furnace had the judge's face, and Briggs sat on a sack of dye, drunk, singing Red's song in a priest's voice. I woke with my heart too fast and my hand clenched in the blanket.

Moirá was already sitting. Red too. Someone stood outside the door. He did not knock.

He simply stood there, which was far worse, because a man standing beyond a door without knocking always knows that his mere presence is enough to spoil the air.

"It is him," Red said quietly.

She did not need to explain.

Liam.

Brigid opened from outside before any of us could speak and came in first, as if marking with her own body that if there was to be blood in this room, not on her floor without permission. Behind her came Liam, bareheaded, his lip split from Red's blow, washed but still swollen, which gave me a certain unattractive satisfaction. He wore a dark coat, plain waistcoat and shirt buttoned to the throat. He looked like a man able to

pass through three worlds, port, church and crime, and in each pretend he was merely passing by.

I did not trust him.

That was not instinct. It was a healthy form of hygiene.

"Time," he said.

"Where?" Red asked.

"Thomas Street. You stay there until tomorrow or the next day. Brigid is right, no one should move you farther now. We must wait until Keane settles the matter with the officer, until the rumours from the port blur, and until people stop looking at every strange face as if it were a purse."

"And after that?" Moira asked, fastening the borrowed coat.

Liam looked at her. Still assessing. Not crudely, but constantly.

"Then we see what you are worth."

Red stepped towards him.

"Careful."

"I do not mean money. I mean work. If you want Galway, you need a route, people, a reason to travel and money to persuade several others that they do not see what they see. None of that makes itself."

"Speak plainly," I said.

Liam turned to me.

"You speak less."

"Many have tried. Few have succeeded."

Brigid sighed from the depths of her soul.

"Christ, Red, is she truly like this all the time?"

"Unfortunately."

"How has she survived?"

"Stubbornness. And poor organisation by the authorities."

"Also true," I murmured.

Brigid threw me new clothes: a darker scarf, a plain coat, an apron and a basket with such a false bottom that I smiled despite the situation.

"You will carry the basket. You look less suspicious when you have something to do."

"That is deeply insulting to my natural charm."

"Your natural charm begs for arrest. The basket has better manners."

Moira received an old prayer book and a parcel of folded cloth.

"You look like a widow, or a schoolmistress life has treated rudely," Brigid told her.

"Useful. Keep your head low. Do not look people in the eye unless you must."

Moira accepted without comment.

Red received only a black scarf and a long look from Brigid, heavy with things unsaid.

"And you," said the older woman, "try for two streets not to look as though you are going to murder your own past."

Red tied the scarf over her hair.

"I promise nothing."

"You never promised anything sensible."

Liam opened the back door, which led not to the street but to a narrow passage between buildings. Before we left, Brigid stopped me with a hand.

"You."

"Me?"

"Yes, mouth."

"I am gathering names here."

She came closer and adjusted my scarf with a surprisingly skilled, almost maternal gesture, though her face still suggested that maternity was suspicious and poorly organised.

"In Dublin you are not a heroine. Not a symbol. Not the girl who shouted in an English court. Here you are an Englishwoman with trouble. If you want people to see more than that, you must first live long enough for them to become bored with the first thought. Understand?"

I looked into her eyes.

"I understand."

"I do not believe you, but let it stand."

Then to Moira: "And you, if anyone asks where you are from, say little. If you say too much, they will hear prison in your voice even if they do not recognise the words."

Moira nodded.

"Thank you."

"Thank me if you survive the evening."

We went out by the back, one by one, into a passage so narrow the walls almost scraped our shoulders. The bricks were wet, cold, slick with greenish slime, and beneath our boots water slopped with mud and things I preferred not to think about. The more a person knows about the contents of city gutters, the less faith remains in civilisation. Liam went first, then Red, then me, then Moira. Brigid stayed in the doorway and watched until the bend swallowed her.

The house on Thomas Street was not better, merely different. It stood above a shop that pretended to sell cloth and thread and perhaps sometimes did. A thin girl opened the door and led us upstairs, where a room under the roof waited, low and crooked, with two mattresses, one chair, a little table and a window over a yard. It was cold, but dry. After the last few days that seemed such luxury it was nearly offensive.

"The room above is ready," the girl said. "Mrs Byrne says if any of you are sick after the sea, use the bucket, not the washing bowl."

"Hospitality in this country moves me more each hour," I said.

The girl looked at me, then at Liam.

"English?"

"Unfortunately audible," Liam muttered.

"I am here," I said.

"We can hear," the girl replied without smiling.

Red sighed heavily.

"This will be a long day."

"A week," Moira corrected quietly. "Brigid spoke of a week."

"Do not help."

Liam stood in the doorway. He did not come in. Wise.

"You stay here until dusk. Then I return with a man who can give you your first work."

"No," Red said at once.

"You must eat. You must have papers. You must have a road to Galway. That costs."

"You will not decide whom I work for."

"I do not decide. I am telling you which doors exist. You may walk through one, or sit here until someone else breaks down the less convenient ones."

Red took a step towards him, but I caught her sleeve. Firmly. She did not like it. Neither did I. But I did it.

"Who?" I asked Liam. "This man. Who is he?"

"Oisín Kelleher. He runs part of the routes between Dublin and the west. Weapons, letters, sometimes people. He is not kind, but he can be honest when a debt holds him by the throat."

"Splendid. Another candidate for trust."

"You need not trust him. You need to be useful to him."

Moirá came closer.

"What work?"

Liam seemed to weigh how much to say.

"A letter must be delivered to a man who works near customs. Englishwomen can pass there more easily than Red. Especially if one looks ill and another looks like a widow or servant."

Red cursed under her breath.

"I told you. Bait."

"No," Liam said. "A test."

"Worse."

"That is how Dublin works."

Red smiled coldly.

"Did Dublin work that way when you locked the door?"

Liam stiffened. The girl on the stairs lowered her eyes at once and vanished. For a few seconds no one spoke.

Liam took the blow in silence, but this time I saw something more than humility on his face. I saw pain. Whether true, sufficient or useful, I did not know.

"I shall come at dusk," he said. "If by then you decide you prefer hunger to work, I will tell Brigid to give you more prayer, because food will be a waste."

He left.

Red looked after him with such hatred the air near the door should have singed.

Then she turned to us.

"You will not go alone."

"Red," I began.

"No."

"We need money."

"I will not send you to customs as damned English bait."

"I have been damned English bait since birth. At least now it may be useful."

"This is not a joke."

"I know."

I stepped nearer, ignoring the ache in my legs, the fatigue, and the smell of damp wool and old starch under the roof.

"Listen. We have no money. No safe road to Galway. No friends here, only people who tolerate us because someone owes someone else. If we are not to be a weight around their necks, we must do something that proves we are not only a problem."

"You are a problem."

"But I can be a useful problem. That is promotion."

Moirá stood beside me.

"She is right. If we are to survive here longer than two days, we need to gain some trust. Or at least value."

Red looked at her in frustration.

"You too?"

"I know offices. I know men at desks. I know the way they look at women they consider unimportant. That may help."

"And if they recognise how you speak?"

"Then I shall speak less."

Red gave a bitter snort.

"Everyone suddenly learns silence except Nell, who still treats it as a personal insult."

"Not true," I said. "I was silent almost the whole street."

"A miracle."

"And should be appreciated."

Red closed her eyes as if counting to ten or to murder. Then she sat on the mattress, put her elbows on her knees and hid her face in her hands. That was worse than her anger.

I knew Red's anger. Anger was her language, her shield, her way of moving through the world. This gesture, this weariness, this lowered head as if she truly did not know how to keep us all alive, broke something in me quietly.

I sat beside her.

I did not touch her at once.

"You do not have to carry everything alone," I said.

She laughed through her hands, short and without joy.

"A beautiful sentence. Very stupid."

"My finest are."

"I brought you here."

"I walked on to the ship myself."

"Because you trusted me."

"I still do."

She lowered her hands and looked at me.

"That is what frightens me."

Moira turned her face to the window, pretending not to hear, though the room was much too small for such courtesies.

Red spoke more softly.

"If anything happens to you here, in my country, because of my people, because of my old sins..."

"I shall be very displeased and probably say something sharp."

"Nell."

"You cannot protect me from everything. And I do not wish to be carried like a crate of porcelain, though I admit it would be an interesting change after being treated like a sack of coal."

She watched me for a long time.

"You are not porcelain."

"I know. I am a brick with opinions."

Moira could not help herself and laughed quietly.

Red looked at her, then at me, and finally snorted too, brief, exhausted, defeated for a moment by the absurdity of the whole situation.

"I hate you both," she said.

"I think that means you agree."

"It means I have no strength to argue with two idiots at once."

"So you agree."

"Conditionally. I go with you. You do not leave my sight. If Liam or this Oisín do anything suspicious, we leave. If anyone touches you..."

"I know."

"You do not."

"I suspect."

"No, Nell. If anyone touches you, I will not be reasonable."

The way she said it silenced me more effectively than threats from Keane, Brigid and half the Empire combined.

Moira looked at her carefully.

"Then we must see that no one has reason."

Red nodded, though her eyes were still uneasy.

Outside, Dublin grew louder. The day had properly risen, grey, wet and industrious, and we sat in the room under the roof, three women without money, safe names or room for mistakes, planning our first work for people we did not know and did not trust.

On the table lay the basket with the false bottom. Beside it Moira's prayer book. By the door Red's knife.

And somewhere far beyond the city, roads, posts, carts, mud and people who would not want to hear our English accent, Galway waited.

Red's mother. Red's father. The house that once spat her out like a curse.

I thought then that if Manchester had been a furnace, Liverpool a passage, and the sea a throat between one life and another, Ireland would be something else.

Not refuge. Not paradise. A test.

And we, as usual, would go to it dirty, sleepless, poorly prepared and too stubborn to admit that turning back would be wiser.

For some time after that conversation nothing happened, and because lately nothing had been rarer than an honest overseer, all three of us greeted it with the suspicion of people for whom silence means not rest, but the brief moment before a door is kicked open.

The room under the roof was small, ugly and crooked, but it had one virtue beyond price: at that moment no one was beating us, questioning us, dragging us through canals, making us pretend to be sick labourers, or demanding that we immediately make decisions that might end at a gallows, in the sea, in prison, or, sometimes worse, in having to trust people again. Behind the partly covered window Dublin was already a full wet grey day: wheels over cobbles, sellers calling, metal ringing in a workshop nearby, a dog barking, and women in the yard arguing with such passion that the fate of the whole country might have depended on it, though it was probably a bucket, laundry or a child again somewhere it ought not to be.

Red, of course, first tried to sit.

Red Gallagher, I was beginning to understand, considered rest a personal insult and sleep a tactical betrayal permitted only after all exits had been checked, knives counted, probability of fire measured, steps in the next room heard through, and the world sufficiently informed that she needed nothing so pathetically human as closed eyes. She sat on the mattress by the wall, back against the boards, one hand near the knife, the other on her knee, her face taut and pale with exhaustion. When Moira and I looked at her together, she merely narrowed her eyes.

"Do not look like that," she muttered. "I am still alive."

"That is why we are looking," I said. "We want to see how long this stubborn experiment lasts."

"This is not management," I added when she glared. "It is humanitarian intervention. Deeply unprofessional, but sincere."

"Humanitarian? You?"

"Let us not exaggerate. I too am surprised."

Red wanted to answer, I saw it in her mouth, in that small tightening when a sharp reply is already climbing the tongue. Instead she suddenly shut her eyes, as if her body had used that fragment of hesitation to switch off part of command. Her head dipped slightly to the side. She opened her eyes again, furious that her own lids had dared take an independent decision.

"I am not sleeping," she said at once.

"Of course. It was merely a very deep form of contempt for daylight."

Moira came to the mattress and, to my surprise, laid a rolled blanket beside Red without touching her, ordering her, or asking. She simply left it there as a proposal one might accept without losing face.

"Two hours," she said. "We will keep watch."

Red looked at her with distrust.

"You can barely stand."

"In prison I learnt to keep watch when I could barely stand."

That sentence silenced the room for a moment. It was spoken calmly, without pride, and therefore landed heavily. Red had no answer, or chose not to seek one. At last she

placed the knife nearer her hand, because even surrender had to have an edge with her, lay on her side and pulled the blanket halfway over her shoulders.

"If Liam comes in before I wake, kick me."

"Gently or effectively?" I asked.

"You? Gently? Let us not risk fiction."

"Effectively. Understood."

For several minutes she pretended not to sleep. I could feel it. Red even had a manner of breathing which was a form of opposition. But exhaustion is more patient than pride, more industrious than anger, and far less open to negotiation. First her breathing grew steadier, then her fingers stopped gripping the edge of the blanket, then her face, still tired and marked by tension, softened a little, as if sleep had removed several years of fighting without asking. Not entirely. Even asleep Red looked as if she might bite anyone who came too close. But something in her had lowered deeper than before.

I watched her for a while. Perhaps too long.

Not in admiration, though of course I might have pretended it was only concern, and that lie would have had short legs and very dirty boots. I watched because one rarely sees people like Red without a mask, even when the mask has fallen only partly and only because the body betrayed it. Her face in sleep was not peaceful, but younger. The lines of anger at her mouth softened. Her brows were still drawn slightly, as if she was quarrelling with someone in her dream, perhaps Liam, perhaps her father, perhaps God, who certainly had a very poor reputation with her. Damp red hair slipped from under the scarf and lay against her cheek. I wanted to move it aside. I did not. I had not yet learnt to touch her sleep without feeling that I was entering a holy and armed place.

"She really fell asleep," Moira said softly, more to herself than to me.

I turned my head.

Moira stood by the table with a cup of cold tea in her hand. She looked surprised by Red's sleep, as if she had just seen a storm sit down against a wall and close its eyes.

"I think it is a miracle," I whispered. "Or a grave failure of character."

"Do not tell her when she wakes."

"I am not suicidal."

"You are very close."

"True. But I try to keep certain limits."

Moira sat opposite me at the little table, carefully, as if her body had only just remembered that it might sit because it wished to, not because anyone ordered it. Between us lay the false bottomed basket, the prayer book, a piece of bread, a cold potato and Red's scarf, which she had taken off before sleeping. It was not a setting made for delicate conversation. Perhaps delicate conversations are best held in ugly places anyway, because pretty ones are always trying to prettify them.

"You should sleep too," Moira said.

"Probably. But someone must keep watch in case Red murders her own past in her sleep."

"Do you think she dreams of Liam?"

I looked at sleeping Red.

"I think she dreams of the things Liam left behind locked doors."

Moira looked down. Her hand tightened on the cup.

"Sometimes a person stays on the wrong side of a door even if she did not lock it herself."

I did not answer at once. That sentence was too personal to pretend to be a general remark.

"You mean yourself?"

Moira turned the cup in her hands as if searching for the answer in the chipped rim.

"I think so."

Outside, someone began humming under his breath, a low male voice crossing the yard and fading with the steps. Red shifted on the mattress but did not wake.

"You do not have to speak," I said, though curiosity immediately kicked me in the ribs for this show of decency.

Moira smiled faintly.

"That must have hurt you."

"Very much. I am proud."

"I think I want to say it. I simply do not know where to begin. When one has spent years explaining one's life to oneself in the worst possible way, it is hard to arrange it suddenly into words for another person."

"Begin with place. Places lie less than people."

She nodded slowly.

"I was born near Leeds. Not Leeds itself, but one of those little settlements the city was swallowing slowly, piece by piece, until people no longer knew whether they lived in the country or already in the throat of the factory. Low brick houses, damp, a field behind them that seemed smaller each year, and a canal where children played until a mother remembered that water takes faster than hunger. Father worked hauling wool, then in a warehouse, then wherever they took him, because his back broke too early. A man with a broken back in a working world is like a horse with a cracked leg, except a horse is sometimes shot out of mercy. Mother sewed. Too much. For too little money. Through too many nights."

She spoke calmly, but not empty. It was the calm of someone telling a thing long burned, though the ash still dirties the fingers.

"They died early?"

"Father first. Cough, then fever, then only lying there apologising because he could not get up. That was worst. Not that he was dying. That he apologised. As if death were another day absent from work. Mother after him, not at once. She worked more. Ate less. Said women were made of stronger cloth, but I could see the cloth wearing through. She went two years later. Quietly. No scene. She left me a box of needles, two aprons and a sentence I hated for years: 'Do not let them drive you somewhere you cannot get out.'"

She looked at her hands.

"And of course I did precisely the opposite."

"The factory?"

She nodded.

"The factory. First the spinning room. I was fourteen and thought if I were quick, quiet and exact, life would notice and treat me a little more gently. That was my first truly stupid faith. I was good. Truly good. I could count, read, write down deliveries, notice mistakes quickly, and because I did not faint at an overseer's first shout, they decided I was useful. After a few years I was no longer at the machines all day. I helped with registers, issuing materials, lists of girls, fines, deductions, dismissals. I was promoted, as they so beautifully called it."

She smiled bitterly.

"Promotion. A marvellous word. You think you are climbing a ladder, then discover you merely stand a little higher over the same mud and can see more faces drowning in it."

"Did you regret it?"

"At first, no. At first I was proud. Cleaner apron. Sometimes I could sit. Overseers spoke to me in a tone less animal than they used for others. The girls looked at me differently. Some with envy, some with blame. I thought that if I stood nearer the office, nearer the papers, perhaps I could help. Hide a lateness. Change a note. Warn when inspection came. Sometimes I did."

"But not always."

"No. And in time they gave me things to sign which I could not mend. Deductions for ruined cloth when the cloth was bad from the start. Dismissals for sickness. Notes of insubordination. Reports in which a girl with knocked out teeth became aggressive. Do you know what is worst about papers, Nell? They can look clean while describing filth. On a page there is no blood, sweat, scream. There is a line. A signature. A stamp. People think violence begins with a truncheon. Sometimes it begins with ink."

Something in me answered sharply to that. I knew the machine too well. The court had papers too. My crimes on them probably looked tidy.

"How did you end in prison? As a guard, I mean."

Moira smiled sadly.

"Through a woman I knew from the factory. Alice. She lost two fingers, then work, then a room. They caught her stealing cloth. A small piece. I saw her later in the gaol when I brought documents for a supervisor. She sat in a cell, thin, dirty, her hand in a rag. She said, 'You can write. Write where it matters that I am not a thief, only hungry.' I did not write. I was afraid. I did not know to whom. I told myself it would change nothing. Perhaps it would not. A few weeks later I heard she died of fever in prison."

She fell silent.

So did I.

"Then I thought," Moira continued, "that if I stood on the other side of the bars, but not as a prisoner, perhaps I could do what I had not done for Alice. Foolish, isn't it? I became a guard to help women. It sounds like the plan of someone who sees a fire and thinks if she walks in with a cup of water she will be a hero."

"Why did they take you?"

"I could read, write, count. I had no family to cause trouble. I was obedient enough for them to think they could shape me. And I was a woman, and women near female prisoners are convenient, because then the system can pretend decency."

Her mouth twisted.

"At first I really tried. Brought water when I could. Left more bread. Warned when one was to be questioned. Once hid a letter to a woman's child. Another time I lied in a report that a prisoner was too ill to be moved because I knew what they did to those moved to the dark cell. Small things. Pathetic things. The kind that let me go to bed and say I was not like them."

"But you were there."

"Yes," she said. "I was there. I carried keys. Opened and closed doors. Heard screams and did not always go to see. Saw bruises and did not always ask. Watched guards throw food on the ground and sometimes only clenched my teeth, because I told myself if I protested too loudly, they would throw me out and then I would help no one. That was my excuse. Very convenient. Very ugly. Each day I said: a little longer, one more woman given water, one more message smuggled, one more name remembered. Then one day I understood that you can help a little and still be part of something monstrous. One does not cancel the other."

She sat very straight, but her eyes were wet. She did not cry. Moira seemed one of those women who cry only when no one sees, or never, which is usually worse.

"That is why you helped me?" I asked.

She looked at me.

"I helped you because when you came back from questioning with blood on your mouth and still told a guard his mother must have suffered greatly giving birth to so little man, I thought you were the stupidest person I had ever seen."

"Moving."

"I had not finished."

"Forgive me. Continue my moral portrait."

She truly smiled, briefly.

"I also thought that if they broke you, they would make a display of it. Not only for you. For all the women in the cells. For those who had heard of you. For those who saw the writing on the wall. I knew you were not a saint. I did not want a saint. Saints are for churches and dead pictures. You were alive. Angry. Inconvenient. You reminded them that prison does not always work. And I could not stand by the door again telling myself small things were enough."

I did not know what to say.

This was becoming irritatingly common. A person builds a life on a tongue sharp as a nail, then someone lays before her their guilt, hope and fear, and suddenly the nail is a very awkward instrument.

"Were you afraid?" I asked at last.

Moira gave me a look that was almost amused.

"I was terrified. The first time I passed a message through Greta, my hands shook so badly I nearly dropped the laundry basket. When I carried out the keys, I thought I would faint at every step. When I opened your cell, I was sure someone stood behind me with a pistol. And when I hit Briggs with the jug..."

She stopped and looked at her hands.

"Then I was not thinking. Perhaps that was best."

"It was very effective."

"Red said that too."

"Red considers effectiveness a form of poetry."

Moira smiled faintly, then grew serious.

"I do not know if I am good, Nell."

The sentence came from her quieter than the rest. Not a dramatic confession, but something she had carried too long and finally lacked the strength to keep holding.

"I do not know if helping now means anything. If I can say I do right when for years I did wrong things or stood beside others doing them. I do not know whether those women I did not help would be glad I fled with you. Perhaps they would say it is too late. Perhaps they would be right."

I looked at her for a long time.

"Perhaps they would be right," I said.

Moira flinched.

She had not expected that. Perhaps she wanted comfort. Perhaps I wanted to give it. But comfort that lies is sugar on a wound.

"But that does not mean you should sit down and let your own conscience hang you," I added. "If it is too late for some, then it is too late. That is awful. That is true. But perhaps it is not too late for others. For those they will lock up tomorrow. For those someone will yet throw food at. For those who do not yet know a door can be opened. I do not know whether you are good. I do not even know whether I am. Probably not. But I know you did something that saved us. Now you can do the next thing. Then the next. Perhaps no one becomes good in one act. Perhaps one simply stops choosing the worst version of oneself every day."

Moira watched me very long.

"You speak sometimes as if you have read more than you pretend."

"Do not insult me. This is lack of sleep."

A tear appeared at the corner of her eye, but did not fall. She wiped it quickly, almost angrily.

"Thank you."

"Do not thank me. It may grow sentimental and Red will wake by defensive instinct."

As if to confirm it, Red muttered something in her sleep, probably in Irish, and turned slightly. We both froze. Red slept on, more deeply than I had ever seen, one hand still near the knife but her face a little calmer.

Moira looked at her, then at me.

"She is very afraid for you."

"I know."

"More than she says."

"I know that too."

"And you?"

I sighed softly and looked at Red, at her red hair loose near the scarf, the shadow under her eyes, her mouth which in sleep had lost some of its hardness.

"I am afraid for her so much that it offends me," I said. "A person should have the right to her own panic, not carry someone else's under the ribs like a second stomach."

Moira smiled.

"That sounds like love."

I looked at her sharply.

"That sounds like illness. We have established that I am ill on paper."

"Of course."

"And let us not use large words in a room with such thin walls. They may be frightened."

Moira said nothing, but the smile stayed longer than the others. Then she lifted the cup, drank the cold tea and grimaced so hard I nearly laughed.

"This tea is terrible."

"At last you speak like a free woman."

"Freedom begins with the right to criticise tea?"

"In England one can probably be sentenced for that too."

"In Ireland it may be taken as a declaration of war."

"Then we are well prepared. Wars keep finding us."

Moira shook her head, but her face was lighter. Not happy. Not calm. Only less alone. Perhaps that was enough for that hour, in that room, in a city still deciding whether to hide us, use us or spit us out.

A board creaked beyond the door.

Both of us fell silent at once.

Steps passed along the corridor, paused by our room, then moved on. Not Liam. Too light. Perhaps the girl from downstairs. Perhaps someone of Brigid's. Perhaps Dublin reminding us that rest was borrowed and would soon collect interest.

Red slept on.

Moira looked at the door, then at me.

"Are you afraid of this work?"

"Yes."

"And you will go?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

I adjusted the scarf lying on the table and looked at the false bottomed basket.

"Because I have no money, no country, no safe name, and the woman asleep by the wall wants to see her mother in Galway. And because if the world has decided I am a problem, I may as well see whether it can be made into a profession."

Moira watched me, then said, "That also sounds like love."

"Moira."

"Very well. Illness."

"Thank you."

She smiled quietly, but then we both turned to Red, because she moved suddenly and opened her eyes, fogged with sleep for one brief second before all her wariness rushed back. She pushed herself up on one elbow at once.

"What happened?"

"Nothing. You slept."

She blinked as if I had accused her of something immoral.

"How long?"

"Too short."

"Was Liam here?"

"No."

"Someone by the door?"

"Only steps."

She sat slowly, dragging a hand over her face. She looked a little more alive and a little more defenceless, which she immediately tried to repair by reaching for the knife and adjusting her scarf.

"What were you talking about?" she asked suspiciously.

Moira and I looked at one another.

"Tea," I said.

Red narrowed her eyes.

"You are lying."

"Obviously. In a good cause."

Moira added calmly, "We spoke of how I became a guard."

Red looked at her more closely. Suddenly there was no joke.

"And?"

Moira lifted her chin slightly.

"And I still do not know whether you can trust me. But I would like one day to earn it."

Red was silent for a moment.

Then she nodded, short and rough, as only she could.

"Good."

That was all.

But from Red, that good was sometimes worth more than another person's sermon on forgiveness. Moira seemed to understand, because she did not ask for more.

Downstairs came a knock at the front door. Three times. Then two. Then Liam's voice, muffled by boards. Red stood. I took up the basket. Moira tucked the prayer book beneath her coat. Rest was over. Dublin had come to collect.

The knock downstairs did not sound like a request to enter, but like a reminder that in this house even silence was borrowed, and every borrowed peace has an owner who sooner or later arrives with the bill.

Three knocks. Two shorter. Liam's voice, low and controlled, too calm for a man who had led under one roof three fugitives, one of whom wanted to kill him, another who could once have described him in a report so accurately he might have feared his own reflection, and a third whose tongue would be hanged before the rest of her body. A bolt scraped below. Floorboards complained under more than one set of steps, heavier, surer, belonging to men who do not enter other people's houses carefully because long ago they decided most thresholds lead where they are allowed.

Red stood first. Of course. Sleep vanished from her so quickly it might never have happened. She adjusted her scarf, slid the knife deeper beneath the folds of her skirt and

looked at Moira and me with a gaze that did not ask whether we were ready, because the answer was irrelevant. Moira hid the prayer book, tightened her fingers on her bag and for a brief moment looked again like a guard, not the one of truncheon and bars, but the one of corridors, observation and silence waiting for someone else to say too much. I took the false bottomed basket, because apparently my latest social advancement consisted of becoming a vessel for other people's lies.

"Remember," Red said softly before we went down. "They are not friends."

"I began to suspect that when I discovered we were staying with smugglers and nobody offered us a bill for breakfast."

"Nell."

"I know. Less talking, more looking useful."

Moira glanced at me.

"The second may be harder."

"Betrayal. And after our conversation about tea."

Red did not smile, but the corner of her mouth moved. That was enough. In times like ours one took crumbs, even when they fell from a table in a house where trust was less stable than one's boots.

We went down carefully through a narrow passage smelling of dust, starch and boiled cabbage, to the back room, where Liam stood with two men I did not know. One was young and broad, expressionless, his hands resting near his belt in a way that let everyone know they were free only because they did not yet need to break anything. The other occupied the room though he sat.

It was him.

I did not need to ask.

He was perhaps in his forties, though of that type of man who do not age evenly, because money, violence and good food smooth one part of the face and leave the rest to the eyes. He was too well dressed for the room: dark frock coat of good cloth, patterned waistcoat, clean shirt, boots polished so carefully it was almost offensive, as if he wanted everyone to see that even Dublin mud had to ask permission before touching him. He had a heavy signet ring, short whiskers and a mouth always ready to smile, but only the sort of smile after which a person checks whether she still has her purse, dignity and all her fingers.

On the table before him lay parcels.

One held clothes, better than ours. Not elegant, not aristocratic, but decent, clean, well sewn, clothes in which a woman might cross a street and not look immediately like a sentence in progress. The other parcel smelt of food, and not just any food: fresh bread, cheese, smoked fish, apples, perhaps even a piece of meat wrapped in cloth. The smell struck me harder than I wanted to admit. Hunger is very ill mannered. It does not ask whether you have pride before it starts pulling at your insides.

The man looked us over slowly. Too slowly.

His gaze stopped first on Red, then on me, my basket, scarf, hands, the marks of fetters that could not be entirely hidden. Last it went to Moira, where it remained a moment longer, as if he had found something amusing.

"Well," he said. "Doyle told me it would be an interesting morning, but Doyle often exaggerates. This time he may have been modest."

His voice was pleasant, smooth, almost velvet. That immediately put me on guard. People with truly ugly intentions often speak more prettily than those with a conscience. Conscience interferes with diction.

Liam stood by the wall, face closed, but not comfortable. That mattered too. If Liam Harkin, the man Red said had locked the door on Maeve, looked wary beside this man, we were in front of something worse than a traitor. A traitor at least must once decide. This one looked like a man who bought decisions from others and then charged them for delivery.

"Oisín Kelleher," he said, in a tone that gave the name not as courtesy but as weather information no sensible person ignores. "I will not pretend to be delighted. Delight is for meeting ladies at supper, not taking under one's roof three troubles, each with a separate chapter in police nightmares."

"Then do not pretend," Red said. "Save us all time."

His smile widened a little.

"Red Gallagher. Still teeth first, sense afterwards."

Red took half a step, but Liam moved almost imperceptibly and Moira touched Red's sleeve at the same time. She did not hold her by force. She reminded her only that we were in a room from which we had no exit without another person's permission.

Oisín noticed the gesture. Of course he did. He had the eyes of a man who notices everything and stores it on a shelf labelled for later use.

"So you are the one from Manchester," he said, moving his gaze to me. "Nell Whitmore. The girl who struck an overseer, insulted a judge, was sentenced to the colonies, then managed to make the north of England look like a hen with its head cut off. I must admit, for someone of your height you make a lot of noise."

"I try to compensate for lack of property."

Red hissed almost soundlessly. Moira closed her eyes for the blink of a second. Oisín gave a low laugh.

"Good. The tongue is real. Doyle did not lie."

"How nice that among smugglers qualifications are still appreciated."

"Everything that can be sold, used or turned into advantage is appreciated. Tongues too. Though in women they are most profitable when they know when to stop."

His gaze slid to my mouth lazily, deliberately, and I felt Red tighten beside me.

I smiled before she could do anything.

"I know when to stop. For example, when a man says something for which he might later lose teeth if unlucky enough to meet a woman less tired than I am."

Moira made a small sound that could have been a cough or an attempt not to laugh.

Oisín tilted his head.

"Sharp."

"Blunt would have killed me."

"We shall see."

That we shall see was not a threat spoken plainly, but I felt it between my ribs. He did not need to raise his voice. He was of the kind who keep others for shouting, others for beating, and others again for making problems disappear.

He looked at Moira.

"And you are the guard."

Moira did not move.

"Former."

"You correct so quickly. Good. Accuracy helps in documents. In bed rather less, but one cannot have everything."

Red moved for real, but I caught her wrist, and to my surprise Moira answered first, with a calm cold voice.

"Men often mistake their own remarks for wit. I understand you do as well."

Silence fell. Liam turned towards the window as if suddenly fascinated by the curtain. Oisín watched Moira for a long while. The smile stayed on his face, but his eyes hardened.

"A former guard with a spine. Interesting."

"With remorse," Moira corrected. "I am only trying to regain the spine."

"More interesting."

"Not for you."

"Everything can be for me if it lies on my table long enough."

"She is not lying on your table," Red said quietly.

Oisín looked at her.

"One more face like that, Gallagher, and I shall think you brought back from England not only trouble, but sentiments. That would be disappointing. Sentiments smuggle badly. They take too much space and leak."

Red did not answer. Her face said enough for a wise man to end the subject. Oisín did not end it, probably because he considered wisdom useful chiefly in subordinates.

"Sit," he said. "Eat if you wish. I did not bring food to have it stare at me. Thin women are cheaper to maintain but worse at escaping."

"How caring," I muttered.

"Do not mistake investment for care."

That at least was honest.

We sat, though Red did it as if the chair might be a betrayal. Oisín opened the parcel of food and pushed it towards us. The bread was fresh. Truly fresh. The crust broke under my fingers, the crumb was pale and still faintly warm, and for a second I felt such plain, humiliating gratitude that I wanted to throw it at the wall. Instead I tore off a piece and ate. Pride is noble, but contains no calories.

Moira ate carefully. Red barely at all, her eyes fixed on Oisín.

The man noticed.

"Still think you can live on anger alone?"

"If necessary," Red said.

"It is poor food. Makes people stupid."

"Then you must have eaten something else."

His smile returned.

"Doyle said this one would be trouble," he said to Liam. "He omitted that she would be entertaining."

"Entertainment costs extra," I said.

"And you are expensive?"

"Constantly. Ask anyone forced to put up with me."

Red gave me a look that suggested the list was long and morally exhausted.

Oisín folded his hands.

"Enough. Let us speak plainly. England is awake. Manchester is howling. Liverpool is embarrassed. The port is angry because Keane made them look foolish, which is always more dangerous than making them look cruel. Cruelty they can dress. Foolishness shows at the cuffs."

Moirá went still.

"What have they said?"

"That an industrial agitator named Eleanor Whitmore was unlawfully removed from custody by Irish conspirators. That a former female guard aided from within. That several officers were wounded, some perhaps dead. That the matter may be linked to anti-imperial sedition."

"How elegant," I said. "They make escape sound like bad housekeeping."

"They will make it sound like whatever earns money, fear and authority," Oisín said. "And fear travels fast. Your faces are not on every wall yet, but descriptions are moving. A Manchester girl. A red-haired Irishwoman. A former guard. Two Englishwomen in the company of an old network name. A pretty little bundle. If I were a poet, I would be moved. Being practical, I see problems and opportunities."

"Opportunities," I repeated.

"Yes. Do not look like that. You are a symbol whether you like it or not. In England they want you caught to prove order still has teeth. Here some will hide you because you are a slap to England. Others will sell you, because a slap is a slap but money feeds children faster than ideals. Others will want to use you."

"Which group are you in?" I asked.

He smiled.

"The honest one. I intend to use you, and I say so at once."

Red struck the table.

"She is not yours."

"No one here is anyone's, Gallagher. That is a pretty lie lovers, parents and landlords tell themselves. But if you want to take her to Galway, if you want to take all of you farther than two streets, you need me. Not because I am good. I am not. Not because I am the only one. I am not. Because I am fastest, and time has just become dearer."

Moirá leaned forward slightly.

"What changed about the job?"

Oisín looked at her with the satisfaction of a teacher seeing the quietest pupil understands the most.

"The letter still goes out. But not to customs. The man there has frightened himself and will not come out before evening. Instead you go to the laundry by the rear entrance of St Brigid's convent. A woman there washes for several official houses and for customs

men. Clothes, notes, sometimes keys pass through her hands. You give her a parcel. She passes it on. While there, you collect something for me."

"What?" Red asked.

"A register of names from recent port arrivals. A copy. Or something close enough to a copy."

Moira's gaze sharpened.

"That is not merely delivering a letter."

"Bravo."

"It is theft of information from official documents."

"Better. You see why I like you?"

"I do not care."

"All the more."

Red leaned over the table.

"Why us?"

Oisín pointed to the clothing parcel.

"Because the three of you can look like women seeking work in laundry, sewing or service. Red knows the accent, the city, and can frighten people, sometimes with too much enthusiasm. Nell sounds English, which behind a convent may work if she plays a woman from an official household, or a servant to an English family. Moira knows registers and will tell whether what you receive is worth anything or whether someone has put rubbish into your hands."

"And if it is a trap?" I asked.

"Everything is a trap until you get out of it."

"That is not an answer."

"It is an excellent answer. Not my fault you dislike it."

Moira looked at the clothes.

"They suit the role."

"Of course. I did not bring them to admire your figures, though that would have been a pleasanter morning."

Red stood so fast the chair scraped.

"One more remark."

Oisín did not move.

"And what? You will hit me? That will surely improve your situation. Officer in the morning, me at noon, perhaps a bishop before evening to balance the orders of society."

"Red," I said quietly.

Not because I did not want her to strike him. I did. Very much.

But I already understood that this man lived off other people's reactions. He slid a razor under the nerves and waited for someone to cut herself.

I looked at Oisín.

"If you need our courage, stop testing it in the dullest possible way."

His eyes came back to me.

"Does it bore you?"

"A man with money makes crude remarks to women to see whether they blush or explode. It is not sin, it is lack of imagination."

For a moment no one breathed.

Liam closed his eyes as if praying for divine intervention or a quick heart attack.

Oisín watched me, then laughed softly. This time there was something real in it, though it did not make him less repulsive.

"I see why the English want you locked up so badly."

"So do I. Their reasons are less interesting than they think."

"Good. Enough jokes."

"Those were jokes?" Moira murmured.

I looked at her with approval. So did Red.

Oisín clapped once, shortly.

"To summarise. I brought food, because fainting women are useless. Clothes, because in those you look like a prison escape described by a drunken poet. I give you first work, because I do not maintain legends for free. In return you receive protection for several days, better documents than Keane had, and if you survive and do not prove yourselves complete idiots, a route to Galway."

Red's eyes were full of hatred.

"And if we refuse?"

Oisín spread his hands.

"Then you may return to the street. Dublin is a beautiful place for women without money, papers or friends. Especially Englishwomen. Especially now."

Silence. Violence without touch. The worst sort. The kind that leaves no bruise but moves the walls closer.

Moira looked at me. I looked at Red. Red looked at the table, the food, the clothes, the basket, all of it smelling of help and leash at once.

We had no choice.

Or rather, we had several choices, each rotten, and this one at least led somewhere beyond the first patrol.

"We will do it," I said.

Red turned to me.

"Nell."

"We will," I repeated. "But not alone and not blind. You will tell us everything you know about the laundry, the woman, the entrances, the people on the street, the patrol hours and exactly what we are meant to collect. If you leave something out, we shall consider it deliberate. If it is a trap, Red will probably try to kill you, Moira will find a way to make it look like an accident, and I shall write a very impolite epigram on your grave."

Oisín watched me for a long moment.

Then his eyes moved to Red.

"Does she always negotiate like a woman already sentenced to death?"

"More often like someone with nothing left to lose," Red said.

"Dangerous."

"I know."

Moira calmly lifted the clothing parcel.

"When do we leave?"

Oisín smiled with the satisfaction of a man who had got what he wanted, and perhaps enjoyed the blows on the way.

"In an hour. You change. You eat properly. Liam takes you near, but does not go in. Red will know the way back. Moira checks the papers. Nell does what she does best."

"Insult authority?" I asked.

"Not attract notice."

Red gave a short, bleak laugh.

"Then we are lost."

Oisín stood and buttoned his coat.

"Perhaps. But not today, if you obey."

"I am not good at obedience."

"I know. That is why I do not ask obedience to me. I ask obedience to your instinct for survival. It is often wiser than pride, though with you three I cannot be wholly certain."

He went to the door and Liam followed. At the threshold Oisín stopped and looked back.

"One more thing. From now you are not refugees. Not guests. Not poor girls to whom someone is doing a kindness. You are an asset. Ugly word, I know. But ugly words often keep a person alive longer than beautiful ones."

He went out. The door closed behind him. For a moment none of us spoke.

Then Red said quietly, with such fury that it sounded almost calm:

"I hate him."

Moira laid the clothes on the table exactly, methodically, as if every fold of cloth might help her regain control.

"So do I."

They looked at me.

I took a piece of fresh bread, bit into it and chewed slowly, because hunger, despite everything, had its own views on morality.

"So do I," I said. "But the cheese is good."

Red looked at me as if unsure whether to hit me or laugh. Moira snorted first. Then Red, reluctantly, briefly.

And I thought that if we were going to enter the world of Oisín Kelleher, of smugglers, thieves, flesh-traders and men who spoke of women as investments, we would need more than knives and false papers.

We would need fury.

And a very full stomach.

CHAPTER X

On the Strategic Use of Vegetables in Subversive Activity

For several minutes after Oisín left, none of us moved from the table, as if some part of the air had gone out of the room with that elegant son of a bitch, and what remained was thicker, heavier and more suspect, like smoke after a candle has been snuffed, giving no light but still reminding you that something had been burning there a moment before.

Red stood by the door, her shoulder against the frame, half turned away from us, staring at the place where Liam had vanished, though both of us knew perfectly well that it was not Liam she was truly seeing. She was looking at the whole Irish net that had suddenly tightened around us, softly, almost politely, bringing better clothes, fresh bread, cheese, smoked fish, a little fruit and the offer of work, which is precisely the sort of help a person accepts with one hand while checking with the other whether a rope has already been slipped round her wrist.

Her jaw was clenched, her cheek tight, her eyes dry, but there was something in the whole line of her body like a person standing before a door again, hearing someone turn the key on the other side.

Moirá was laying the clothes out on the table with excessive care, smoothing folds, checking seams, lifting each piece of cloth towards the light, as if that labour might let her avoid thinking, for a moment, that we had just agreed to enter an arrangement with a man who could sound, in a single sentence, like a merchant, a pimp, a politician and an executioner, which in Dublin probably meant he had enjoyed a career as versatile as it was repulsive.

She set aside a dark dress for me, simpler than my own but properly made, of thicker stuff that did not announce poverty at once, then a grey coat, a kerchief, fingerless gloves and an apron so clean it made me distrust it. For herself she chose a dark skirt, a modest blouse and a cap that might indeed turn her into a widow, a governess, or a woman so worn out by life that no sensible person would think of bothering her.

There was least for Red, because Red, in any version of herself, apparently looked like a threat to public order: a darker kerchief, a short coat, a plain dress and a belt perfectly suited to hiding a knife, which I suspected was not accidental.

"I do not like this," Red said at last.

"Good," I replied, taking another piece of bread. "If you liked it, we should have to check whether someone had swapped you in your sleep."

"I am serious."

"So am I. Oisín looks like a man who could sell his own shadow if it stood idle too long."

Moirá set the cap down on the table.

"He does not only want the letter and the register. This is a test."

"Of course it is a test," Red said, turning from the door. "And not only ours. He wants to see whether we can be sent, whether we can keep quiet, whether we panic,

whether we can come back with something more than our own skins. If it works, he gives us another job. If it does not, he says he knew nothing about us and finds someone to sell our names faster than he can finish his coffee."

"Probably not coffee," I muttered. "Men like that drink something dearer and more morally decayed."

Red glanced at me, but did not rebuke me. Perhaps she needed that thin layer of mockery herself, if only to keep from throwing a chair at the wall.

Moirá sat at the table and reached for the small parcel Oisín had left beside the clothes, though she did not open it yet. For a moment she weighed it in her hands, as if its weight might tell her whether it contained a letter, death, or one dressed as the other.

"We must establish what we know," she said. "Before Liam comes back."

Red came closer.

"We know we are going to the laundry by the rear entrance of Saint Brigid's convent. A woman there washes for several clerks' houses and customs men. We are to deliver the parcel and collect a copy of the port arrivals register."

"A register that may be worth more to Oisín than we are," Moirá added. "If it holds names, ships, cargoes, perhaps people being moved, or information about inspections, then it is not just paper."

"So if they catch us with it, they will not pretend it is about laundry," I said.

"Precisely."

Red leaned both hands on the table.

"And yet he sends us because we look less obvious than his boys."

"And because we are new," said Moirá. "Not yet tied to his people here. If anything goes wrong, he can say we were strangers, that we used his name, that Liam acted alone, or that Red came back and brought trouble with her."

Red looked at her with a shadow of recognition.

"You think like someone who knows reports."

Moirá lowered her eyes to the parcel.

"Unfortunately."

"I did not mean it as an accusation."

"It sounds rather similar."

Red fell silent, as if she wanted to answer and the words would not fit. Instead she reached for the knife, laid it on the table and began using the blade to tease apart the knot.

"Let us see what this rich worm has left us to carry."

There was nothing spectacular inside. A small fold of cloth, and within it a thin envelope sealed with plain wax, several coins wrapped separately, a little metal cross, a length of thread tied in a peculiar manner and a slip of paper with three words written in a small hand: "white basin, rear".

"Password?" I asked.

Moirá lifted the note and examined it carefully.

"More likely a sign. Perhaps we are to look for a white basin at the back of the laundry. Or the woman is meant to have it, so that we know whom to approach."

Red turned the cross over in her fingers.

"That convent washes for officials, but I would wager it does its own business with half the city. Nuns always look as though they have never heard of money until it has to be counted."

"Do not insult nuns before a mission near a convent," I said. "It may bring bad luck."

"Bad luck comes from stupidity, not nuns."

"In my experience, they often walk together."

Moirra spread the coins across the table.

"Payment for her, or a bribe on the way."

"Or bait, if someone checks the basket," Red said. "Small money, so it looks as if we are carrying something ordinary."

I picked up the envelope, but Moirra touched my wrist at once.

"Do not open it."

"Not even a little?"

"Especially not a little."

"You are very severe for a woman who recently knocked an officer senseless with a jug."

Moirra looked at me with chilly politeness.

"That is exactly why I know innocent little things have consequences."

I handed the envelope back with a sigh.

"Very well. Let mystery kill us, not curiosity."

Red began to divide the items: the envelope into the false bottom of the basket, the cross into Moirra's pocket, the coins partly into mine and partly into her own, the thread hidden in the prayer book because Moirra decided that if it was a recognition sign it was better to have it with her, but not where it could fall out at the first search. I watched and could not help noticing how quickly we had become something like a small cell.

Only yesterday we had been three women on a ship, hunted, bruised, holding together more from necessity than design. Now we sat at a table in Dublin, arranging a smuggler's parcel with the solemnity of people who had been preparing all their lives to carry other people's secrets in a basket with a double bottom.

The world sometimes develops a person very quickly. Pity it usually does it by kicking.

"We need to change," Moirra said.

Red pushed back her chair.

"You first."

Moirra looked at her.

"You need not stand by the door like a guard."

"I most certainly do."

"Red."

"Change."

Moirra rolled her eyes, took the clothes and went behind the curtain in the corner, which offered as much privacy as a piece of cloth hanging in a room full of worries can offer. Red stood with her back to her, pointedly watching the door. I sat on the pallet and tried not to think that in an hour I would be walking through a foreign city,

pretending to be a woman no one ought to remember, with a smuggler's letter and a register to collect, while all England slowly turned my name into a hunt.

"All England is talking," I said quietly.

Red turned her head.

"What?"

"That is what he said. Oisín. That all England is talking. About Manchester. About the prison. About the dead guards."

Behind the curtain, Moira stopped moving.

Red came nearer.

"We do not know how much truth there is in that."

"Enough for the search to travel beyond Manchester. Enough for Dublin to start speaking soon. Enough that any man who hears my voice might, after a few days, remember some rumour about an English girl."

Red sat beside me.

"You are not alone."

"I know."

"That was meant to sound comforting."

"It did. Only the problem has not disappeared out of politeness."

For a while she said nothing.

"If I had not taken you out..."

"Do not finish."

"Nell."

"No. We are not doing this. You are not going to sit and count what would have happened if you had left me in a cell. If you had left me, they would have sent me in chains to the colonies, and you would have carried it all your life like a second stone beside Maeve. You pulled me out. Now we must live through the consequences. It is a far dirtier version of happiness, but I still prefer it to gallows morality."

Red looked at me for a long time, then turned away.

"You have a dreadful way of saying things I cannot reject."

"It is my chief weapon. Right after the basket."

Moira came out from behind the curtain and we both fell silent.

The change was greater than I had expected. In the new dress, dark cap and prayer book in hand, she looked less like a fugitive and more like a woman who might work with the children of a richer family, keep a widow's accounts, or bring someone tea with such a calm face that no one would notice the knife hidden beneath the cloth. The pallor remained, but now it looked like illness or mourning, not pursuit. A good disguise does not hide a person entirely. A good disguise gives people an easier explanation, and people adore easy explanations, because they spare them the trouble of thinking.

"Well?" Moira asked.

"You look like someone who could lecture me on morals and hide a body in the same afternoon," I said.

"So, good?"

"Very good."

Red nodded.

"It will work."

Then it was my turn. Changing behind the curtain was oddly humiliating, though not because someone might see me. After the last few days, modesty seemed a luxury from a catalogue for people who had not fled through sewers. It was rather that as I slid out of the borrowed port clothes and put on new ones, cleaner, better fitting, I felt as if they were removing one version of my life and putting another on me again. Nell from the boiler house. Nell from the cell. Anne Doyle from the ship. Now what was I meant to be? A servant? A cousin? An English laundry girl? A problem in a better coat?

The dress was dark, high waisted and plain cut, neither too poor nor too good. The kerchief hid my hair, and the apron, if tied properly, made me look like someone carrying a basket not because she hid another person's secret inside it, but because life consists of dirty things someone must wash. When I came out from behind the curtain, Red looked at me and for a second something strange happened to her face.

"What?" I asked. "Do I look human?"

"Almost."

"I think that is a compliment."

Moirá examined me closely.

"You must lift your chin less."

"My chin is politically independent."

"Not today."

She came closer and adjusted the kerchief beneath my chin, then smoothed the apron until it lay straight and pushed the basket into my hands.

"Hold it as if it is heavy, but ordinary. Not as if you are carrying a secret."

"And if the secret is heavy?"

"Then ordinary all the more."

Red stood.

"Now me."

She did not go behind the curtain at once. For a moment she held her clothes in her hands and looked at them as if that dark coat and kerchief were not merely a disguise, but a return to the old Red, the one from Dublin, from the network, from the days before the boiler house, before England, before us. When at last she disappeared behind the cloth, Moirá looked at me knowingly, but said nothing.

Red came out a moment later.

And that was the worst of it, because she looked as though she truly belonged to the city.

Not entirely to the street, not entirely to the house, not entirely to the smugglers, but to that hard, wet space between a door and a knife, between port and church, between a woman people pass because she looks ordinary and a woman it is better not to stop if she looks you straight in the eye. The kerchief hid most of her hair, the coat changed her shape, but nothing could hide the tension in her movements, the alertness, the readiness for a fight that lived in her as naturally as breathing.

"Well?" she asked.

"You look like a very dangerous widow," I said.

"Good."

"After several husbands," I added.

Moira coughed, trying to hide a laugh.

Red gave me a murderous look.

"You truly want to die before noon."

"No. I am merely checking whether fear still likes me."

Before she could answer, footsteps sounded downstairs again. Only one set this time. Lighter than Oisín's. Liam. He paused on the stairs for a moment, as though he knew that if he entered without warning Red might consider it a gift.

He knocked.

"May I?"

"No," Red said.

The door opened slowly anyway, but Liam did not come in at once. He stood on the threshold, sensibly beyond reach of her hand.

"It is time."

"We still have an hour," Moira said.

"You had. Oisín has changed his mind."

"Of course he has," I muttered. "Men like that probably change their minds to see whether other people can still run."

Liam gave me a brief glance.

"There are more people in the streets than he wanted. Better to move now before it grows crowded."

"Or before the rumour travels farther," said Moira.

Liam nodded.

"That too."

Red went to him.

"Anything else you have hidden from us?"

He looked at her for a while, and I saw that there was weariness in him too. Not the clean kind that stirs sympathy. More the wear of a man who has lived with himself for years and not always come well out of the acquaintance.

"Yes," he said.

That stopped us.

Red narrowed her eyes.

"What?"

"The person at the laundry is not only a contact. She is the sister of a woman who died during a transport two months ago. She believes Oisín sold her."

Moira went pale at once.

"And he sends us to her?"

"To the sister. The one left behind. She works at the laundry. The brother is around nearby. If he recognises that you come from Oisín, there may be trouble."

Red took a step nearer.

"Why are you telling us this only now?"

"Because only now did Oisín say the brother may be there."

"And you did not know before?"

Liam did not answer immediately.

"I suspected."

Red laughed without mirth.

"Of course. You suspected. As always, Liam, enough to survive, not enough for someone else to choose."

It struck him. I saw it.

Liam took the blow, but this time he did not lower his eyes.

"That is why I am telling you now."

"Hero."

"No. A late man with information."

Moirra stepped between them with her voice before Red could use her hands.

"Does this woman know we are coming?"

"Yes."

"Does she know we come from Oisín?"

"She knows a parcel is to come. I do not know if she knows through whom."

"What is her name?"

"Siobhán Tierney."

Red looked at Moira, then at me.

"Do you still think this is a good idea?"

"No," I said. "But it is still the only one with food on the table and a road to Galway in its promise."

"Oisín's promises are worth exactly as much as his pleasure in breaking them."

"I know. Which is why I do not intend to believe him. I intend to use him while he tries to use us."

Liam looked at me with something that almost resembled approval.

"A dangerous approach."

"So is every other one. At least this one sounds industrious."

Moirra lifted the prayer book and tucked the thread between the pages.

"We must decide whether, if that woman's brother is there, we leave at once or try to speak to her alone."

Liam answered.

"If you see a man with a scar across his nose, do not approach. That will be Tierney. He has a quick knife and a short grief, and that combination seldom gives time for explanations."

"Wonderful," I said. "Is there anyone in this city who does not want to use us, sell us, test us or stab us?"

Liam thought for a moment.

"Children. Some of them."

"That is nice."

"Unless they have older brothers."

Red moved towards the door.

"We should go before this conversation grows any more encouraging."

Liam stepped back to let us pass.

As we went down the stairs, I felt the basket's weight in my hand. It was not large. It did not look suspicious. That was what made it suspicious. The world is full of little

things from which great catastrophes begin: the key in Liam's hand, the jug in Moira's, the shovel in mine, the letter in the false bottom of the basket.

Downstairs the girl with the needle looked up from her work and took in our new clothes.

"Better," she said.

"Thank you for the enthusiasm," I replied.

"I did not say good. I said better."

"This week, that is practically praise."

Liam opened the rear door. Dublin's wet air came in, cold, sour with smoke and salt. Red went first. Moira after her. I went last, basket on my hip, kerchief pulled lower and tongue instructed for the day to pretend it knew how to behave like a sensible organ.

The street was waiting. Dublin did not look like a city that intended to make our first job easy. It would have been strange if it had.

We went out by the back, of course, because in our new life main entrances had become something like a luxury for people with clean papers, a certain name and no need to check whether round the next corner stood a man with a knife or a clerk with questions, which in practice could be just as dangerous, only one had better boots.

Liam walked first, keeping a few steps ahead, neither too close nor too far, like a man who understands that his presence is necessary but unwanted, which may have been the most honest position he could occupy in our little procession. Red followed him, her face calm enough not to draw attention, but her shoulders tight as a ship's line before a storm.

I walked behind Red, basket at my hip, trying to look like a woman who had an ordinary, dull, unmemorable errand to perform, though every muscle in my body behaved as if instead of a letter the beating heart of the Empire itself lay in the basket. Moira brought up the rear, prayer book in hand, head slightly lowered, playing the widow or modest woman of service so well that I began to wonder how many times in her life she had been forced to pretend to be smaller than she was, simply to pass through a door without trouble.

Dublin by day was louder, more insolent and less inclined to hide its own filth. Night at least gave the city a little mercy, blurring cracks in the walls, hiding faces in shadow, letting poverty look for a while like mystery. Day was crueller. It showed everything without courtesy: children with dirt on their cheeks and eyes too old, women carrying buckets of water with the same faces with which others carry sentences, men standing by walls, apparently idle and yet watching every movement of the street, as though the whole city were a gaming table at which you must not reveal your cards.

Brown water ran in the gutters, mixed with food scraps, ash, mud and something that looked like a dead rat, though it might just as well have been a rag after a hard life. The smell was peat, fish, sweat, boiled potatoes, horse dung, damp wool and the sea, which would not let itself be forgotten even several streets from the port.

"Do not look at people too long," Liam said quietly without turning. "And do not answer if someone throws a remark. Especially you."

He did not need to point for me to know whom he meant.

"I feel honoured," I muttered.

"That will pass if you survive."

Red turned her head slightly.

"Liam."

"What?"

"Do not speak to her in that tone."

"What tone?"

"As if you had the right to warn her."

For a second Liam walked in silence, then answered calmly.

"I do not have the right. I have experience."

"Your experience in warning people is rather selective."

The sentence was quiet, but it struck harder than a shout. Liam did not answer. Good. Had he answered, Red would probably have forgotten all about our modest mission and begun writing a new chapter of Dublin history on his face.

We crossed a street where stalls were already packed tight, and the sellers shouted over one another with such determination that trade in onions, fish and bits of cloth seemed to have become a form of national warfare. A woman by a barrel of herrings looked at me, then at the basket, then at my face partly hidden by the kerchief.

"New?" she called to Red in English, but with the weight of Ireland in her voice.

Red did not stop.

"Passing through."

"English?"

Moira stiffened behind me.

Red did stop then, turned her head and looked at the woman with such calm that even I felt sense hide behind the nearest barrel.

"Hungry," she said. "Like most."

The woman snorted, but said no more. Perhaps because the answer was good. Perhaps because Red looked like someone to whom it was unwise to prove that you had the last word. We moved on.

"That will not work every time," Moira said softly.

"It does not need to," Red replied. "Only to the end of the street."

That was our strategy. Survive to the end of the street. Then to the next. Then to the laundry door. Then to evening. A man of grand ideas might have called it pitiful, but men of grand ideas rarely have prison, false papers and a smuggler's breath on their necks. Grand ideas look well on posters. In practice, freedom often means not tripping in the gutter and not saying "fuck" with too English an accent.

Liam turned into a narrower lane, then another, and the houses seemed to draw closer together, as if the city wanted to squeeze us and see what fell from our pockets. It was quieter there, but not calmer. Silence in such places does not mean the absence of people, only people behind walls, curtains and half closed doors, watching and remembering. Somewhere above, a window opened, then shut quickly. A thin dog shot out of a gateway, sniffed my boots, apparently judged my prospects poor and vanished under a cart.

"The laundry is round the corner," Liam said, stopping beside a wall whose bricks were so wet they seemed ill. "From here you go without me."

Red turned to him.

"Of course."

"If I go with you, Tierney may see me. If he sees me, you will not even reach the door."

"So he truly may be there."

"Yes."

Moira adjusted her cap, then very slowly touched its edge with her left hand. Our sign. Someone was watching us.

I felt my heart make one hard movement.

Red noticed at once, but did not turn her head too sharply. Neither did I. I had already learned that when a person knows she is being watched, the hardest thing is not to behave like a person who has just learned it.

Liam went on, more quietly.

"Rear entrance. A white basin should stand on the sill. The woman you seek has dark hair, a scar by her chin, and limps slightly on her left leg. Her name is Siobhán, but do not use it first. You say, 'We bring things from the house on Thomas Street.' If she answers, 'There are too many other people's things here,' then you may give her the parcel."

"And if she answers differently?" I asked.

"You leave."

"And if the brother with the scar across his nose is inside?"

"You leave."

"And if someone will not let us leave?"

Liam looked at Red.

"Then Red does what Red does."

"A very precise plan," I said. "Almost poetry, only with a better chance of haemorrhage."

Moira touched her cap again, pretending to adjust it, but her eyes moved lightly towards the opposite corner of the lane. This time I managed to see him from the side of my eye: a boy, perhaps fifteen, in a cap too large for him, leaning on a barrel outside a closed shop. He did not look directly at us. That was exactly what made him suspicious. Children in poor districts stare insolently unless someone pays them to pretend they are not looking.

"Someone behind us?" Liam asked, barely moving his mouth.

"The boy by the barrel," Moira answered.

Liam did not look.

"Oisín's, or Tierney's."

"Or someone else's," I said.

"In Dublin there is always someone else."

Red clenched her jaw.

"Splendid."

Liam drew a small piece of cloth from his pocket and handed it to Red. It was an ordinary grey handkerchief with a little rust coloured thread embroidered in one corner.

"If something goes wrong and you must come out another way, show this at the bakery on the corner of Bride Street. An old man with one eye. He will take you to the second passage."

Red looked at the handkerchief and did not take it at once.

"Why are you helping me?"

Liam looked at her. For the first time that morning his face truly changed. The careful, patient mask of a man prepared for blows vanished. Something more tired remained.

"Because once I did not."

Red snatched the handkerchief from his hand.

"Do not imagine that is enough."

"I do not."

"And do not make yourself a penitent. Penitents are almost as unbearable as traitors."

"I know."

"Stop saying you know."

He fell silent.

We stepped round the corner without him.

At once I felt more naked, which was absurd, because Liam was not a shield I wanted to trust, but his knowledge of the streets gave at least the illusion that someone else understood the rules of the game. Now there were three of us. Red on the left, Moira on the right, me in the middle with the basket, like a highly suspicious allegory of domestic labour.

The laundry stood at the back of a long, low building with a grey front, pressed so closely against the convent wall that it seemed to be pretending it belonged to a holier world than the one in which it actually worked. White smoke rose from the chimney, heavy with steam, soap and damp linen. The air smelled of lye, hot water, dirty clothes and ash, and that scent struck me with strange force, because it recalled the factory in miniature: the same compulsion of labour, only instead of machines there were tubs, irons, lines and women's hands reddened by water.

Through the partly open door came splashing, shuffling, short commands, coughing and one woman's song, low and broken, as if the melody had to push its way through the steam.

A white basin stood on the sill. Moira looked at it, then at me. Red moved first.

Inside it was hot and wet. Steam hung above the great tubs like mist above a bog, settling on faces, hair and walls, making everything soft, wet and slippery. Several women worked at the washing, one at the mangle, another by the stove, a third carrying a pile of linen so high I could see only her legs and part of her nose. No one stopped working at once, but all of them noticed us. That is an art working women master better than spies: one can keep one's head down and still know who has come in, what they carry, whether they are a danger and whether they have money.

At the rear tub stood a woman with dark hair tied low, sleeves rolled to the elbows and a scar by her chin. She limped slightly when she moved away from the table.

Siobhán.

We did not say the name.

I went forward with the basket, because that was the role. Red followed half a step behind, Moira beside me, calm, modest, the prayer book in her hand. If anyone had glanced quickly, they would have seen three women on some matter of washing. If anyone had looked longer, they might have seen catastrophe under three different kerchiefs.

"We bring things from the house on Thomas Street," I said, keeping my voice lower, less combative, more tired than usual.

Siobhán looked at me.

Her eyes were pale, cold and very watchful.

"There are too many other people's things here," she replied.

Moira let out a breath almost invisibly. Red did not move. I set the basket on the table.

Siobhán removed the cloth from it and began pretending to look through the clothes. Her hands were red and split from lye, but they moved surely. She slipped her fingers under the false bottom so deftly that even I, knowing where it was, almost missed it. The envelope vanished into wet linen.

"We waited earlier," she said quietly.

"The road was wet," Moira replied.

Siobhán gave her a brief look, perhaps in recognition of the neutral answer, perhaps in suspicion of her voice.

"All roads are wet."

"Not all lead where they should."

The corner of Siobhán's mouth twitched, but it was not a smile.

"Cleverer than she looks."

"I hear that often," I said reflexively.

Red almost stepped on my foot.

Siobhán looked at me again.

"English."

It was not a question. In the laundry, several movements slowed. My stomach tightened at once.

"From the north," I said.

"That is still England."

"Unfortunately, even geography can be stubborn."

Moira closed her eyes for half a second. Red had the face of a woman giving serious thought to gagging me with a stocking.

Siobhán looked at me for a long while, then gave a small snort, though it was not amusement. Something harder.

"An Englishwoman with a tongue. God has a sense of humour, though seldom a good one."

"I am beginning to suspect it."

"Why did Oisín send you?"

"I am not sure Oisín tells people true reasons more than once a year," I answered.

That amused her a little more. Minimally. Red shifted, partly covering me, because someone had appeared in the doorway. A man.

Tall, cap pulled low, bearded face, and a scar running across his nose from the bridge down to his right cheek.

Tierney.

He came into the laundry without knocking, which was apparently the favourite habit of every man that week, and the atmosphere changed at once, so clearly that even the steam seemed to stop rising. The women at the tubs did not stop working, but their shoulders stiffened. Siobhán did not turn to him at once. That meant she knew who had entered and would not give him the satisfaction.

"Who are these?" he asked.

His voice was low, rough, full of the sort of anger that does not need a reason, only an occasion.

Red answered before I could commit another diplomatic suicide.

"Women with washing."

Tierney looked at her. First as a stranger. Then more closely. Then he understood.

"Gallagher," he said slowly. "Well now. Dublin throws up nothing but rubbish from old years today."

Red smiled coldly.

"And yet you are still floating."

Tierney took a step forward. Moira touched her throat. Our sign. Trap. Do not go farther.

Only we were already inside. Basket on the table. Envelope delivered. Door behind us, man before it, women around us and the register not yet in our hands.

Siobhán finally turned to her brother.

"Get out."

"No."

"This is my place of work."

"And Oisín sends you his letter whores?"

Red moved half a step.

I caught her sleeve.

Moira spoke calmly, very calmly.

"We do not work for him."

Tierney looked at her.

"And who are you?"

"Someone who does not want trouble here."

"Then you came to the wrong place."

"I see that."

Siobhán lifted a wet sheet from the tub and threw it onto the table with such a crack that water splattered the boards.

"Padraig, I said get out."

"Did you give them it?"

Siobhán said nothing.

Tierney looked at the table, the basket, us, then the pile of linen by the stove.

"He sold her," he said, no longer looking at us, only at his sister. "Oisín. Sold Bríd. And now you take letters from him?"

The laundry fell so silent I heard a drop fall from a wet shirt into the tub.

Siobhán went pale, but her face was stone.

"Not in front of them."

"Precisely in front of them. Let them know whose baskets they carry."

Red stopped straining against my hand.

That struck her differently.

Because Oisín was not only a smuggler, a thief, a rich son of a bitch in an elegant coat. He was also a man suspected of selling his own. Perhaps women. Perhaps refugees. Perhaps those who could not pay more than the buyer on the other side.

Moirá looked at me.

And suddenly our "work" became dirtier still.

"We do not know what he did," I said slowly.

Tierney laughed once.

"An Englishwoman will tell me what she knows?"

"No. An Englishwoman is saying she does not know. That is rare among the English, so it may be worth hearing."

Red closed her eyes as if praying I would survive my own sentence.

Tierney came closer, but Siobhán stepped between us.

"Do not touch her."

"You defend them?"

"I defend my laundry. And myself. And what remains of sense in this family."

"He took Bríd."

"You have not proved it."

"Because everyone fears him."

"And you think that if you cut the throats of three women carrying his parcel, the truth will crawl out of the canal and kiss you?"

The sentence was so sharp, so heavy with fatigue and grief, that even Tierney fell silent.

Siobhán turned to me, reached beneath a heap of wet linen and handed me folded cloth, thicker than an ordinary rag. Something was inside. Flat. Paper.

"Take it," she said. "And go."

Tierney seized her wrist.

Red had the knife in her hand before I could blink.

"Let her go," she said.

She did not shout. That was worse. Tierney looked at the knife, then at Red.

"Still quick."

"You may still find out."

Moirá shifted towards the door, not fleeing, only placing herself so that she could clear the way if needed. I slipped the wrapped cloth into the basket, feeling paper under my fingers, paper that suddenly weighed as much as someone else's death.

Tierney released Siobhán slowly.

"Tell Oisín," he said to us, "that if Bríd is alive, I will find her. If she is dead, I will find him."

"Tell him yourself," Red replied. "I am not your messenger."

"You are his now."

That hit.

Red went white with anger.

For a second I feared she would throw herself at him despite everything. But Moira, quiet as a shadow, said:

"No. Not yet."

Red heard her.

I do not know whether she obeyed Moira, me, her own sense, or Maeve sitting somewhere in her memory with blood on her back, but she put the knife away.

Siobhán jerked her head towards the rear door.

"That way. Do not go back by the main street. And if you truly do not know what Oisín trades in, start asking more quietly before you ask too late."

Moira looked at her.

"Bríd. She is your sister?"

"Younger," said Siobhán. "And stupider, because she believed people with money."

"I am sorry."

Siobhán looked at her hard.

"Be sorry somewhere else. Here, there is work to do."

We left by the back door into a narrow yard where wet laundry hung on lines and steam from the washhouse leaked behind us like an animal's breath. Only when the door shut softly did I allow myself to breathe out.

Red stood motionless, fists clenched.

Moira checked the lane behind us.

"We must go."

"You heard it?" Red said.

"Yes," I answered.

"A trafficker. Not a drunkard's rumour. They truly think he sold that girl."

Moira looked at the basket.

"And we are working for him."

There was no good answer. There was not even a bad one that sounded honest enough.

"For now," I said at last. "We are working for him for now."

Red turned on me sharply.

"Is that enough for you?"

"No. But we have the register, information that Oisín may be trading in people, a girl called Bríd to remember, and a road back if no one cuts our throats now. That is more than we had an hour ago."

Moira adjusted her cap with her left hand. Someone was watching us. Again.

I looked from the corner of my eye. At the end of the yard, by the passage to the street, stood the same boy in the oversized cap.

This time he was looking straight at us.

Red saw him too.

"Oisín's?" I asked softly.

"Or Tierney's," Moira said.

The boy stepped back and vanished round the corner. Red moved after him by instinct. Moira caught her sleeve.

"No. It may be to pull us off the route."

Red swore under her breath.

"I hate this city."

"It seems to be trying to return the sentiment," I said.

Instead of following the boy, we turned the other way, across the wet yard, under the lines of washing that brushed our shoulders like cold, dead hands. The basket weighed more heavily than before. Not because of the paper. Because of Bríd. Because of Siobhán. Because of the word "sold", which would not leave my head.

Dublin was not only testing us.

Dublin had begun to show us the price of protection.

And I began to suspect that if we wanted to reach Galway, we would have to decide whether to survive by means of a monster, or try to bite off his hand on the way.

We crossed the yard as fast as the dignity of women who were meant to look busy, not as if they were fleeing with another parcel that might explode their lives from within, would allow. That was the difficulty: the body wanted to run, scream, seize Red by the sleeve and Moira by the hand and fling itself into the first alley regardless of where it led, while reason, that irritating, belated steward of disasters, repeated that haste is suspicious, fear has its own smell, and people in the street notice not those who walk slowly, but those who try to vanish too fast.

Wet washing hanging above us brushed our faces and shoulders, cold, heavy, soaked with lye, sweat and other people's lives, as if the whole city had hung out its filth precisely across our path, which would have been an almost courteous metaphor had one still the strength to appreciate metaphors instead of watching for a knife between the ribs. From the laundry the slap of water and muffled voices still came, but after a moment the noise of the street swallowed them: cart wheels, a barking dog, a woman's shout from a window, men's distant laughter, the tap of a hammer from a workshop and something else, lighter, quick footsteps somewhere ahead, breaking off round the corner exactly where the boy in the large cap had gone.

Red went first, her hand too near the knife, and I could see every muscle in her back begging for the chance of pursuit, because Red was made for direct confrontation, for looking someone in the eye and seeing who blinked or bled first, not for that filthy kind of prudence that says leave the suspicious boy alone, because perhaps the boy is only a hook and you are the fish foolish enough to admire the glint of metal.

Moira touched my elbow.

She did not stop me. Only slowed my step slightly.

"Not that street," she said quietly.

Red looked back at once.

"Why?"

Moira did not look at her, only at the opening from the yard where a narrow slit between walls led to the street and noise beyond it.

"Too straight. If the boy watched us and disappeared that way, someone may be waiting at the end."

"And if we go another way, we lose the route."

"Better to lose the route than walk into someone else's."

For one brief second I thought Red would protest. She had that stubbornness in her face that usually preceded either an argument or a stupid, brave act, often one leading to the other. But she looked at Moira, saw her expression, that dry, prison-made, practical watchfulness, and nodded.

"Lead."

Moira did not hesitate, which at once raised my opinion of her instinct and lowered my hope of a peaceful return. We did not turn towards the main exit, but beneath a low wooden lean-to, past a stack of empty barrels and a broken barrow, through a side gate so narrow I had to press the basket to my chest and go sideways. Beyond it lay another slit between houses, wet, dark, stinking of urine, rotten leaves and old smoke, with slick stones underfoot. Somewhere behind a wall a child cried, and a woman soothed it in a whisper so tired it sounded more like a plea to God than to an infant.

"How did you know?" I asked Moira almost soundlessly as we squeezed through.

"I did not."

"Comforting."

"In prison you learn that if someone wants you to take the easiest way, the easiest way usually ends at a locked door."

"That sounds like the motto for our entire expedition."

Red hissed:

"Quiet."

I fell silent, which I record with chronicle honesty, because such moments deserve preservation for posterity, provided of course that posterity has nothing more important to do than admire my brief victory over my own tongue.

We emerged from the passage into a narrower street, less crowded but not empty. Two boys were carrying a coal basket so heavy one of them was almost dragging his feet, yet they laughed between themselves, softly, nervously, like children who already know laughter must be stolen before adulthood taxes it. An old woman swept her step with a broom missing half its twigs. A man with a pipe stood in a doorway, barely looking at us. Perhaps he truly did not care. Perhaps he pretended. In Dublin I was beginning to suspect even stones could pretend indifference and then report to the proper person.

"Thomas Street is quicker through the market," Red said quietly. "But if someone is following us, the market will show us to everyone."

"Then not the market," Moira replied.

"Sideways by the one-eyed bakery?" I asked.

Red looked at me.

"The man at the bakery has one eye. Not the bakery."

"In my defence, I expect anything from this city."

Moira stopped for a second.

"Liam's handkerchief. Perhaps we should use it."

Red shook her head at once.

"No. That is for an emergency."

"We are being watched and do not know by whom. That sounds like an emergency."

"If we show the sign now, Liam or Oisín will learn we changed the route. I want to get back before any of them decides we require more help."

That made sense. I hated it when Red's caution made sense, because it robbed me of the pleasure of arguing.

We crossed another two streets, once stopping at a vegetable stall to look ordinary, once against a wall while a cart of barrels passed, followed by two men whose faces were so closed that even their own mothers would have had to knock before attempting conversation. Moira bought a single onion, which surprised me so much I nearly asked whether we were smuggling something in that as well, but her look silenced me more effectively than the gag in Briggs's mouth.

"Why the onion?" I whispered only later.

"A woman carrying a basket of laundry and one onion looks less like a courier."

"An onion as an operational screen. I am beginning to respect your methods."

"I am pleased the onion has won your approval."

Red, a few steps ahead, muttered:

"If we survive, you two will write a treatise."

"On the Strategic Use of Vegetables in Subversive Activity," I said.

"Quiet."

"Working title."

And then I saw the boy.

Not the same one. I think not. This one was shorter, with hair pale as straw and a shirt three sizes too large, but he stood at the corner on the opposite side of the street and looked at us the way children look when someone has told them to remember a face. Too long. Too quietly. Without childish curiosity. The moment my gaze moved towards him, he turned his head, but too late.

Moira saw him too. Her hand went to her throat, then stopped halfway, because a warning sign repeated too often becomes its own alarm.

Red did not turn, but said:

"I know."

"How many of them are there?" I asked.

"Too many for chance, too few for an attack."

"Perhaps Oisín is checking that we return with the parcel."

"Or Tierney is checking that we leave with it alive," Moira said.

"Or both," I added. "Very courteous of the city to offer us such a wide choice of threats at once."

Red quickened slightly.

We did not run. We must not. But our steps took on a more determined rhythm, as if each of us sensed that this part of the return was no longer merely a walk through an unfriendly city, but a tug of rope with people we had not yet fully seen. The basket dragged at my shoulder, and in it lay the cloth with the register, the onion, the envelope

already delivered, money that might be a bribe or evidence, and paper that perhaps told Oisín who had arrived in Dublin, who had sailed, whom one could buy and whom one could sell.

At the end of the street a man was waiting.

He did not stand in the middle. He was not that stupid. He leaned against the wall by a narrow gateway, cap pulled over his eyes, hands in his pockets. If we went straight, we would have to pass close by him. If we turned back, it would look like fear. If we turned too soon, we might enter something worse.

Red slowed.

"Do not look at him," she said.

Naturally, I immediately wished to look. Such is human nature, and mine has additional structural defects.

The man lifted his head only when we were a few steps away.

"Lost your road?" he asked.

He had a strong Irish accent, but he spoke English deliberately, for us.

Red did not stop.

"No."

"You look like women carrying other people's things."

"Then we look like half the city," she replied.

He smiled.

He was missing one front tooth.

"Cormac says Red Gallagher has come back with English little birds."

"Cormac should talk less if he still wants to count his teeth with his tongue."

"Tierney wants a word."

Red stopped.

There we were. One sentence was all it took for our beautiful strategy of walking on to die like a rat in a gutter.

Moirá stood beside me, calm, hand on the prayer book.

I adjusted the basket and tried to look like someone who did not have a highly important document and an onion of strategic significance to hand.

"Tierney had the chance to speak," Red said. "He chose growling."

"Now he wants more."

"People often want more. It is one of their uglier traits."

The man's eyes moved to me.

"And you? English girl from the laundry. Are you as brave away from steam and skirts?"

"Depends whether the speaker has anything more interesting than someone else's orders," I replied before sense could catch up and strike me across the neck.

Red did not even look at me. That meant either she was used to it, or planned to kill me later.

The man gave a short laugh.

"Mouthy."

"Everyone is discovering this today with remarkable delay."

A second man slipped from the gateway behind him.

Then a third.

They did not have weapons visible, but they did not need to. Their bodies said enough: we are here, we are ready, let us see what you will do.

Moira lowered her head and spoke so quietly only Red and I could hear.

"Do not fight here. Too narrow. We lose the basket."

Red did not answer, but her hand did not go to the knife. Yet.

"What does Tierney want?" she asked.

The first man stopped smiling.

"What you carry."

"We do not know what you mean."

"That is bad. We do."

So there it was.

Tierney did not intend to wait. Either he wanted the register for himself, or evidence against Oisín, or simply to use us as a stick with which to strike a bigger dog. In Dublin everyone had his own hierarchy of hatred, and we had just found ourselves somewhere between its rungs.

"It is washing," I said.

The man looked at the basket.

"Show it."

"I do not show strange men underclothes. Mother raised me badly, but not that badly."

The third man snorted with laughter, earning a look from the first.

Red moved half a step in front of me.

"You will not touch the basket."

"Then you will hand it over."

"No."

"You are far from your old boys, Gallagher."

"And you are very close to my knife, so perhaps we are both in the wrong place."

Everything narrowed to that one street, those three men, the basket in my hand and the wet stones beneath my feet. I knew that if a fight began now, we would lose not because we were weak, but because we had nowhere to go. Perhaps Red would wound one. Perhaps Moira would strike another with the prayer book, or something more practical. Perhaps I would use the basket, the onion and my unbearable personality as weapons, but it would not alter the fact that someone would shout, someone would come running, someone would recognise an accent, someone would remember a face.

And then Moira did something unexpected.

She stepped forward, before me and partly before Red, as if she were not a guard, not a fugitive, not a woman with guilt clenched under her ribs, but someone who knows that sometimes the most effective violence wears a calm voice.

"If you take the basket," she said, "Tierney will not get what he wants."

The man looked at her.

"And why is that?"

"Because if we do not return with it to where we must return, Oisín will know who broke the route. If we return without the basket, he will know as well. If we do not

return at all, Liam will know where we disappeared. And if Liam knows, Red knows. And if Red knows, someone will bleed. Probably you."

Red looked at Moira with something almost like pride. I wanted to applaud, but judged the situation might not bear it. The man narrowed his eyes.

"Is the English widow threatening me?"

"No. Calculating."

That was good.

Very good.

A man may dismiss fear, dismiss anger, dismiss a woman, especially if he has two companions and very little imagination. But a calculation? A calculation has weight. It says: if you do this now, someone else will do something later, and later can be very long.

The first man spat on the stones.

"Tierney wants to talk."

"Then let him come to Oisín," Red said.

"He will not go to Oisín."

"Then he may remain with his desire. I hear it builds character."

The second man shifted a little, blocking the gateway, but did not come farther. I could see they were uncertain. Moira had planted the proper kind of caution in their heads. Not pity. Not moral sense. Only the question of whether it was worth entering trouble with Oisín Kelleher today for a basket whose contents they might not even understand.

Then a whistle came from the end of the street. Short. Familiar? No. Agreed upon, rather. The men turned their heads.

At the corner stood the boy in the oversized cap. The first one. The one from the laundry yard. He made a sign with his hand, quick and nervous.

The first man swore.

"Go," he growled at us. "But Tierney will speak yet."

"Let him practise before a mirror," I said.

Red caught my arm and pulled me away before my face could receive the consequences of my tongue.

We passed them. Slowly. Without running. Without turning our heads. I felt their stares on my back like cold fingers. The basket weighed so heavily my hand began to go numb, though it did not weigh much. Only round the next corner did Red turn sharply into a side passage and press my back against the wall.

"Will you ever shut your mouth before someone shuts it with a fist?" she hissed.

"I am trying. It is a process."

"This is Dublin, Nell. Not a courtroom, not a factory, not a pub full of girls who like you. Here one joke can cost teeth."

"I know."

"No, you do not!"

Her voice broke a little, not from anger but from fear, and that silenced me at once.

Moira stood beside us, watching the end of the passage.

"Not now," she said. "You may quarrel when we are not being followed by two different gangs and probably a boy who works for a third person."

Red released me.

She was breathing hard.

"We move."

"Where?" I asked softly.

"Not home. Not yet. If we go back directly, we take them to the door."

Moira nodded.

"We must make a loop. Perhaps through the church or the market."

"The market is too loud, but one can lose a tail there."

"The church has side exits."

"And people who like looking at women in need so they can feel better," I added.

Red shot me a sharp look, but did not rebuke me this time.

We went on, choosing a way through several narrow passages, then across a small square by a church where a group of women stood with baskets and spoke Irish so quickly the words sounded like stones poured into a pot. We stepped among them for a moment, pretending to adjust our kerchiefs and rearrange things in the basket. One woman looked at me, surely heard my breathing, judged me a stranger, but said nothing. Perhaps because Red stood beside me. Perhaps because women with baskets sometimes understand more than they care to say aloud.

Moira leaned towards me.

"The boy crossed the far side of the square. He is no longer watching us. Rather watching whether Tierney has withdrawn."

"So perhaps Oisín's," I said.

Red tightened her mouth.

"Or Liam's."

"Do you trust him?" Moira asked.

Red answered after a long moment.

"No."

"But?"

"But if he had wanted to sell us this morning, we would already be sold."

"That is not the same as trust."

"I know."

"Good," I said. "So we have a list. Oisín is using us. Tierney wants what we carry. Liam helps, perhaps from guilt, and guilt can be a worse adviser than greed. Siobhán gave us the register, but warned us we are working for a trafficker. Boys are following us. England is hunting us. Dublin dislikes us. Have I missed anything important?"

Moira considered.

"We have an onion."

"Right. The foundation of the operation."

Red closed her eyes.

"I swear, if both of you live to Galway, I shall take it as proof of God's existence, or of his complete resignation from duty."

"Perhaps both," I said.

This time even Red smiled, briefly and against herself.

When at last we reached the neighbourhood of the house on Thomas Street, we did not go in at once. We watched the door from across the street, standing by a stall of used pots whose owner, an old man with an ash-coloured beard, glared at us as if he suspected even our glances of theft. For several minutes nothing happened. Then the door opened for a moment and the girl with the needle came out carrying a bucket, poured water into the gutter, glanced round slightly and went back inside.

"Clean?" I asked.

"Nothing is clean," Red replied. "But we can go in."

We crossed the street calmly, again like women returning from laundry, not messengers of chaos with a register in a basket and fresh suspicions in their hearts. Liam opened before we knocked.

His gaze stopped at once on our faces.

"What happened?"

Red went in first.

"Tierney."

Liam went pale.

"Where?"

"On the way."

"Who?"

"Three of his men. They wanted the basket."

Liam swore in Irish, quick, ugly and with a passion I considered perfectly sincere even without translation.

"Did you take the route I gave you?"

"No," Moira said. "We were being watched. We changed road."

He looked at her, then at me, then at the basket.

"Do you have it?"

I lifted the basket.

"We do. Also an onion."

Liam looked at me with the blankness of a man who had no strength to ask.

"An onion?"

"A long strategic story."

Red closed the door.

"Where is Oisín?"

"Below. Waiting."

"Of course he is waiting," I said. "Spiders seldom run after flies."

Liam looked at me sharply.

"Less of that near him."

"I know. He prefers his own comparisons."

We went down to the back room, where Oisín sat at the table exactly as before, with a cup in front of him and the expression of a man who had not been waiting, merely permitting time to pass in his presence. When we entered, his eyes moved at once from our faces to the basket, then to Red, then to Moira.

"Late," he said.

Red threw Liam's emergency handkerchief onto the table.

"We were watched. Tierney sent men."

Oisín did not look surprised.

That told me more than his first sentence.

"And?"

I set the basket on the table.

"And we have your papers, your answer from the laundry, and the information that if Bríd is alive, Tierney will find her, and if she is not, he will find you."

Oisín looked at me slowly.

"He said that?"

"Less elegantly. I preserved the sense."

"And you, I understand, decided to bring me a threat together with the register?"

"No. I decided to make sure you know your dirty business has begun dirtying our boots sooner than promised."

Liam tensed by the door. Red stood beside me, ready. Moira laid the prayer book on the table and drew out the thread and the wrapped document. Oisín did not reach for it at once. He was watching me.

There was no amusement in his eyes now. Not entirely. There was calculation, and something worse: interest.

"Good," he said at last. "Very good."

"That did not sound like praise," Moira said.

"Because praise makes people idle. But you returned. With the document. Without leading a tail to my door, I hope. Without blood. Without shouting. With additional information. More than I expected."

"You sent us into a conflict with Tierney," Red said.

"No. I sent you to the laundry. Tierney came after his own anger."

"You knew he might."

"I suspected."

Red laughed once.

"That word is a disease in this city."

Oisín leaned forward and finally unfolded the document. Moira stood by him, though not too close, watching the paper like someone who trusts letters more than people.

"It is a partial copy," she said. "Names of ships, arrival times, several names at the office and cargo marks. One page is missing."

Oisín looked at her sharply.

"How do you know?"

"Numbering. And the mark where it was stitched. Someone removed the middle part."

For a moment his face hardened.

"Siobhán."

"Or Tierney," Moira said. "Or someone before either of them."

Oisín rested his fingers on the table.

"Interesting."

"For you, perhaps," I said. "For us it was an outing among people who want to murder one another while using us as a basket."

Oisín lifted his eyes.

"And yet the basket came back."

"The basket has character."

"The basket is beginning to have value."

Red stepped up to the table.

"Do not speak of her as if she were a thing."

Oisín looked at Red and then, very slowly, smiled.

"Then let us say it differently. The three of you have just become more useful than I thought."

Moirá went still.

I felt something bad approaching. Oisín did not look like a man who said such a thing in order to offer someone a day off.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

Oisín folded the document very carefully.

"It means Bríd Tierney and the missing page may be the same matter."

Liam moved away from the wall.

"Oisín."

"Not now."

"Do not drag them into this."

Oisín looked at him coldly.

"Too late. They are already dragged in."

Red clenched her fists.

"Speak plainly."

Oisín sat back more comfortably, and I immediately hated the movement, because people most often sit comfortably when they are about to tell another person's misery as business.

"Bríd Tierney disappeared two months ago from a transport of women meant for work in houses in Liverpool and Glasgow. Officially, work. Unofficially, it depends which house, through whose hands, and how much debt was written against them along the way. Tierney thinks I sold her. I think someone stole my transport, my money and my name to cover their own trade. The missing register page may hold the ship or the man who took her."

Silence.

I felt myself grow cold inside.

"Your transport of women," Moirá repeated.

Oisín sighed.

"Do not make that face. Half the poverty in this country packs daughters onto ships in the hope that work across the water will be less hungry than home. I arrange passages, papers, contacts."

"And debts," Red said.

"Debts maintain order."

"Debts are leashes."

"A leash is sometimes better than a gutter."

Red was about to answer, but Moira spoke first, and her voice was as quiet as a closing cell.

"If the women cannot leave, it is not work. It is trade."

Oisín looked at her with irritation that, for the first time, broke through his smoothness.

"The former guard will teach me morality?"

Moira went pale, but she did not step back.

"Yes. If necessary."

The room became very quiet.

Liam stared at the floor.

Red looked at Oisín as if he had just moved in her head from the category of "repulsive but useful" to "perhaps should be killed sooner".

I felt the weight of Siobhán's words. Start asking more quietly, before you ask too late. Perhaps we had just asked. And it was already too late. Oisín folded his hands on the table.

"You want the road to Galway? You want papers? You want to live a week in Dublin when England begins sending letters and money after you? Then stop pretending you can walk only on the clean side of the street. The clean side does not exist."

"No," I said. "But there are different kinds of dirt."

He looked at me.

"That is precisely why I need you."

"For what?"

He smiled, but this time without warmth, without play, without filth. Only pure business.

"To find the missing page. And perhaps the girl."

Red straightened slowly.

"Brid?"

"If she lives."

"And if she does not?"

"Then to find the man selling women under my name."

Moira said:

"Or under your protection."

Oisín looked at her so sharply that even I felt it on my skin.

"Take care."

"I am no longer behind bars," she answered. "I need not take care in the same way."

Red took half a step closer to Moira. So did I. Oisín noticed. He smiled again, less confidently this time.

"Beautiful. Three women after two days' acquaintance, and already standing like a pack of she-wolves. Doyle truly sent me a gift."

"No," Red said. "Doyle sent you a problem."

"Even better. Problems, if placed properly, do more than obedient people."

Outside the window someone shouted. A cart wheel struck a stone. The house trembled a little, or perhaps I only felt it that way.

On the table lay the register without one page. On the chair beside it, the basket. In the air hung Bríd's name.

And I understood that the road to Galway had just moved several more miles away from us, because before Red could see her mother, before she could stand before her father, before any of us could pretend we were choosing our own future, Dublin had caught us by the skirts and shown us the dark cellar beneath its own heart.

Oisín Kelleher wanted us to work for him. Tierney wanted the truth. Siobhán wanted her sister. And us? We wanted to live.

Unfortunately, it was becoming increasingly clear that living would require something far harder than escape.

It would require deciding which of the monsters to put a knife between first.

CHAPTER XI

The Blue Thread

Oisín left late in the afternoon, not because the conversation had been concluded, but because men like him know very well when to leave other people alone with the filth they have just scattered over the table, so that they may touch it with their fingers, smell it, understand that disgust alone will not make it vanish, and at last begin to think how to use it before it uses them.

He offered us nothing beautiful. No noble purpose, no clean rescue, no promise of justice that might sit well in a priest's mouth or on a leaflet written by an idealist with a full stomach. He said only that the missing page of the register might point to the ship, the man, or the office through which Brid Tierney had passed, and that if we wanted to understand whether the girl had been sold, moved, hidden, or killed, we had to find that page faster than Tierney, faster than the people who had taken her, and faster than the news from England could catch up with our names in Dublin. Then he took the copy of the register, left us a few coins, setting them on the table with the air of a man feeding dogs before a hunt, and told us to rest, because the next night might be "demanding".

Demanding.

That is what one calls things when one does not wish to say: probably very dangerous, possibly stupid, and, if the arrangement worsens, fatal.

Liam stayed a little while after him, but he did not say much. Red did not say much either, which by itself was enough to make the room grow smaller and smaller. Moira gathered the coins, counted them carefully, and divided them into three small portions, as if the act of counting could introduce a little order into a world in which a smuggler accused of trading women was paying us for a first successful step in the matter of a vanished girl.

I sat at the table, looking at bread I no longer had the strength to eat, and thinking of Brid, although I did not know her face, her voice, or her laugh. Still, I could feel her name begin to cling to us, rather as Maeve's had done before, as if Ireland had a habit of handing over its ghosts not in stories, but in errands.

Liam left before dusk, promising to return in the morning with new information. Red snorted at the word "promising", but made no comment, which from her was almost diplomacy. Once the door closed behind him, we were left alone with the money, the new clothes, the basket, the onion which had been promoted from vegetable to witness of history, and a silence so thick that, had one stood it near the stove, it might have been cut like cheap cheese.

Evening came slowly through wet panes, through the yard, through the voices in the street which deepened with time, grew drunker and more quarrelsome. From below came the tap of a needle, the scrape of chairs, sometimes the voice of the girl from the workshop talking to someone in Irish and laughing shortly, sharply.

In the room under the roof, the candlelight trembled on the walls, lengthening our shadows until we looked like three different versions of the same exhaustion: Red by the

window, motionless and taut; Moira at the table, bent over little objects which she arranged and rearranged with the determination of someone refusing panic the right to make a mess; and me on the pallet, my back against the wall, trying not to say anything that might start another conversation about things none of us was ready to carry.

Naturally, I did not last long.

"Have we just become part of a case about trafficking women before we have even properly learned the way to the privy?" I asked at last.

Moira looked up.

Red did not turn from the window.

"Yes," she said.

"Splendid. The pace of professional advancement in Ireland is impressive."

"Do not joke about it."

"I am not joking about Brid. I am joking about the fact that life decided that after prison, a ship, Briggs, Liam, and Oisín, we were still short of entertainment."

Moira sighed softly.

"Perhaps we can refuse in the morning."

Red finally turned from the window.

"We cannot."

She did not say it sharply. That made it worse.

"Because Galway," I said.

"Because Galway. Because money. Because papers. Because if Oisín truly did not sell that girl, then someone else is using his routes and his name, and that means the same road we may one day take west is more rotten than we think. Because if Brid is alive, someone is holding her somewhere for debt, work, a lie, or another man's profit. Because if she is dead, Tierney will look for blood, and sooner or later he will find us, because he saw us carry the packet. And because England is looking for Nell."

The last sentence fell heavily. Moira looked at me. I shrugged, though there was not a grain of lightness in it.

"England is always looking for something. Usually cheap labour, new taxes, or a way to call someone else's death order."

"This time it is looking for you," Red said.

"I know."

And I did know. More than I wished to show. In my mind I could still see Oisín saying that the whole north of England was talking about Manchester, about the prison break, the dead guards, the Irishmen, the former wardress. I saw a newspaper I had not yet held in my hand, but could imagine perfectly: my name, twisted or not, my face described by someone who had never known me, "dangerous agitator", "woman of subversive tendencies", "escaped convict", "murderous band". The less authority knows, the more it writes in, and then believes its own additions with a piety it does not reserve for any saint.

That night, however, we planned nothing more.

We had no strength.

We ate the rest of the food slowly, in silence, not for pleasure but for sense. Red at last ate more than a few mouthfuls, which Moira recorded with a glance, though she had

enough instinct for survival not to comment aloud. Then we washed our faces and hands in a bowl of water, cold already, but still better than prison rust or canal damp, and when I scrubbed the last of the dirt from my fingers I thought that a person might run half across a country, cross a sea, change clothes and name, and still keep under her nails something of the place that had tried to swallow her.

We lay down early.

That is to say, we laid down our bodies, because our heads refused cooperation for a long time.

Red took the place nearest the door. Moira the one nearest the window. I lay between them, which was becoming my speciality, as if for some reason I always landed in the middle of other people's lines of fire. For a while I listened to their breathing, uneven, alert, not quite surrendered to sleep. Downstairs the voices faded. The street softened into night. Somewhere far off a man sang drunkenly, then someone told him to shut his mouth, then came laughter, then a door slammed. Dublin did not sleep. It merely changed the nature of its noise.

"Nell," Red said after a long while.

"Hm?"

"Tomorrow, do not throw yourself in first."

"That sounds like a very broad request."

"I am serious."

"So am I. There are many situations in my life to which that might apply."

She turned her head towards me in the dark.

"If we have to go in somewhere by night, if we are separated, if something goes wrong, you leave. You do not wait for fine speeches. You do not prove to anyone that you are not afraid. You leave."

"And you?"

"I will manage."

"Oh, how delightful. The old, loyal hypocrisy has returned."

"Nell."

"No. If you want me to be sensible, you must pretend that you yourself have considered it. Otherwise my sense of justice takes offence."

Moira spoke from the other side, sleepy but clear.

"Both of you leave. If the plan requires one of you to remain dramatically behind, it is a bad plan."

"Thank you," I said. "The voice of reason has spoken from the vicinity of the window."

Red sighed.

"Both of you are unbearable."

"And yet here you are in a room with us."

"I had no choice."

"We rarely do either, and look how beautifully we are building a community from it."

She did not answer, but I heard something in her breathing. Amusement, perhaps. Resignation, perhaps. The difference is sometimes small.

In the end, sleep came for us unevenly. It took Moira first, though for a while she muttered something unintelligible, as if she were counting keys in a dream. Red slept later, one hand near the knife, but more deeply than before, because fatigue had finally beaten even her offended pride. I lay awake longest, staring at the dark ceiling and thinking of Brid, of Maeve, of Galway, of my mother who might even now be somewhere in England hearing rumours of a daughter who had become something larger and worse than family shame.

I fell asleep only towards morning.

And, as usual, when the body finally received something like rest, the world decided to demand it back.

A knock woke me.

Not loud. Not violent. Three short taps on the room door, then a pause, then one. Red sat up instantly, knife already in hand. Moira rose so fast she struck her elbow on the sill, and I opened my eyes with the firm conviction that one day I would die not of a bullet, a truncheon, or the sea, but because someone knocked before I had managed to become a human being.

"It is me," Liam said from beyond the door.

"That is not a password," Red replied.

"I brought money and weapons."

For a moment there was silence.

"That is nearer a password," I muttered.

Red shot me a look, then told Liam to come in.

He entered carefully, which was wise. He looked more tired than he had the previous day, with stubble along his jaw, red eyes, and a coat wet from morning mist. In his hands he carried a bundle wrapped in cloth and a small leather purse. He did not have the expression of a man bringing good news. Rather the expression of a man bringing necessary news, and necessary news is rarely pleasant.

He set the purse on the table.

"Payment for yesterday. Oisín told me to pass it on."

Red snorted.

"How generous."

Moira reached for the purse, tipped out the coins, counted them quickly, and raised her brows.

"There is more than he said."

"Because you came back with the document, with information about Tierney, and with confirmation that the missing page may matter. Oisín pays for usefulness. Not goodness."

"No one suspected him of that," I said.

Liam unfolded the second bundle.

Inside lay weapons.

Old. Very old. Two flintlock pistols, not handsome, not elegant, with dark wood rubbed smooth by hands and metal dulled, though cleaned enough not to look as if they had been found in a gutter. Beside them lay a small sheathed knife, shorter than Red's but handy, and several charges wrapped separately.

Red came to the table and took one pistol. She checked it quickly, expertly, without admiration.

"Is this a museum or a weapon?"

"Both," Liam said. "But it works. Tested."

"By whom?"

"By a man who still has all his fingers."

"Is that meant to reassure me?"

"In Dublin, it is a fair reference."

Moira looked at the pistols uneasily.

"I do not know how to shoot."

"Good," Red said. "Most people who think they do are the worst."

Liam pointed to the knife.

"That one is for you."

Moira looked at him sharply.

"Why?"

"Because Nell with a pistol is, I suspect, a danger to all sides of the conflict, and Red has her own knife. You need something small if someone gets too close."

"I do not want to kill."

"A knife is not only for killing. Sometimes it is for persuading a man to pull back his hand."

Moira took the knife, but held it as if it were colder than metal permitted.

I looked at the second pistol.

"And that is for me?"

Liam hesitated.

Red answered for him.

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"No."

"Is this a collective decision, or your private tyranny?"

"Common sense."

"I do not know the gentleman."

Moira handed me another knife Liam had left under the cloth, smaller still, more tool than weapon.

"Take this. Easier to hide."

"Wonderful. I always dreamed of promotion to woman with a small knife."

Liam did not smile.

"Listen. Yesterday Oisín received only part of the register. The missing page is not at the laundry. Siobhán does not have it, but she probably knows who took it or where it went. Tierney may know some of it, but he is too hot to speak sensibly. Oisín suspects the documents were moved to the old office by the customs warehouses, not the main office, the side one used by loading men and unofficial entries. They may keep copies there. Or lists of cargoes that never reached the register. If Brid was taken by ship, the trace should be there."

Red narrowed her eyes.

"The customs warehouses are guarded."

"In the day. Less at night."

"Less does not mean none."

"Which is why it will not be simple."

"Nothing is."

Liam drew a folded sketch from beneath his coat, spread it on the table, and weighed the corners with coins. It was a map, drawn quickly but carefully: a street, a row of warehouses, a rear entrance, a narrow yard, a window on the upper floor, inner stairs, a room marked with a cross, and a second escape through a barrel store and a little gate by the wall.

"Here," he said, pointing with a nail. "The old loading office. Two men stay at night. One at the main gate, the other walks the back every quarter hour or so. Sometimes they sleep. Sometimes they drink. Do not rely on either. The upper window is damaged. You can get in from the roof of the shed, if someone is not afraid of heights."

"So not me," I said. "Today I am afraid of heights, depths, and offices."

Red ignored me.

"Who goes in?"

Liam looked at me and Moira.

"They do."

Red straightened at once.

"No."

"You go to Siobhan."

"I said no."

"It is not an order. It is the plan."

"A very short-lived plan."

Liam held her stare.

"Siobhan will not say everything in front of Englishwomen. Yesterday she gave you the document because she had to, but if she knows anything about Brid, about her brother, about who removed the page, she will tell you. You are Irish. She knows your name. She knows your past, or part of it. And she hates Oisín almost as much as Tierney does. If you come alone, or nearly alone, she may speak."

"Nearly alone?"

"I will be nearby."

Red laughed coldly.

"That will certainly reassure her."

"I will not go in with you. I will stay in the street. You speak to her. If you learn who took the page, perhaps they will not have to enter the office at all."

"And if I do not?"

Liam looked at me and Moira.

"Then they will already be inside."

Silence.

Very unpleasant silence.

"So we separate," Moira said.

"Yes."

"Red to Siobhan. Nell and I to the building with the documents."

"Yes."

Red struck the table with her palm.

"I am not sending them in alone."

"They will not be alone. They will have a route, weapons, a sketch, and I will leave a man at the corner."

"One of Oisin's men?"

"Mine."

Red looked at him in such a way that for a moment I thought the word "mine" might be the last Liam ever spoke upright.

"Yours," she repeated.

"Yes."

"Like then?"

Liam went pale. Moira glanced from Red to him, but said nothing. Liam closed his eyes for a second, then opened them.

"Not like then."

"How am I to know?"

"You cannot."

It was an answer so honest it was cruel.

Red fell silent.

Liam went on, more quietly.

"You cannot know. You can only decide whether the plan makes sense despite the fact that I am the one bringing it."

I did not like him. I did not trust him. But the sentence was good. Bad, painful, and good.

I bent over the sketch.

"Moira can recognise documents. I can... make confusion if required."

"You will not make confusion," Red said at once.

"Of course. I shall exist in an entirely orderly manner."

Moira pointed to the cross on the map.

"The document room is locked?"

"Probably," Liam said. "Simple lock. Older. Can you manage?"

Moira hesitated, but only for a moment.

"If I have wire or a thin blade."

Liam drew a small packet from his pocket and unfolded it. Inside were two thin pieces of metal, curved, flat, worn.

"These should do."

Moira looked at them in silence.

"Where did you get them?"

Liam did not answer at once.

"From someone who no longer needs them."

"Dead?"

"Gone."

"In your language that may mean the same thing," I said.

Liam looked at me.

"Sometimes."

Red bent over the map, though her face still said she would rather burn the whole plan and warm her hands over it.

"When?"

"Tonight. Before midnight. The laundry will be shut, but Siobhan sometimes stays after hours. If not, Red leaves the sign and waits. The office is quietest between eleven and one, before the men come for the morning loading."

"And if there are extra guards because of the rumours from England?" Moira asked.

Liam nodded.

"Possible. That is why you do not go in if you see more than two men or a light in the side window. Then you return. No heroics."

Red looked at me very meaningfully.

"Why does everyone look at me when the word heroics appears?" I asked.

"Because stupidity would be less polite," Moira said.

"That was unnecessarily accurate."

Liam slid his finger along the map.

"You enter here. Shed roof. Then window. Corridor. Document room. Look for pages from the ship register over the last two months, the name Brid Tierney, transports of women, marks for domestic work, Liverpool, Glasgow, Galway if it appears. Anything with Kelleher, Tierney, or the firm Marlowe & Sons. If you find the missing page, take it. If you find more, take only what can be hidden. Do not try to carry out the whole bible of sins. The weight will kill you faster than a guard."

Moira listened carefully.

"And if the documents are in a cabinet?"

"Picks."

"And if someone comes in?"

Liam looked at Red, then at me.

"Hide or run."

"We do not fight," Red said.

"You do not fight," Liam confirmed. "If it comes to a fight, the plan is already dead."

Red looked as if she wished to ask whether Liam had experience with dead plans, but she restrained herself. It visibly cost her.

Moira took the small knife and the picks, placed them beside the prayer book, then looked at me.

"We need to practise. How to enter, how to search, what to do if we are separated."

"Good," I said. "Only let the record show that if you order me to keep silent all night, I may suffer internal damage."

"We shall risk it."

Liam handed Red one of the pistols.

"For you."

Red took it, checked it again, then slid it beneath her coat at her belt.

He laid the other on the table.

"This stays with Nell and Moira."

"I said no," Red said.

"If they meet someone larger than their plans, a knife may not be enough."

"She cannot shoot."

"Moira can hold it."

Moira looked at the pistol as if it were a dead animal.

"I cannot either."

Liam said calmly, "You do not need to be good, for someone in front of you to decide he would rather stand farther away."

That was true. Ugly, but true. Moira picked up the pistol very carefully. Red watched as if someone had just given a child a red-hot poker.

"I will show you how to hold it," she said at last. "And how not to shoot off Nell's foot."

"I appreciate the concern for my feet," I said. "They have been through a great deal lately."

Liam reached for the empty purse and slid it towards me.

"Keep the money divided. If one of you is caught, the others have something on them. Oisín gave enough for food, a bribe, or silence. Do not spend it on anything else."

"And if we find someone selling patience?" I asked.

"You cannot afford it."

"Fair."

Liam began to fold the map, but Moira placed a hand on it.

"It stays with us. I must copy it and memorise it."

"You cannot carry the map."

"I know. That is why I shall copy the layout differently. Like an account or a prayer."

Liam looked at her with admiration he did not manage to hide.

"Good."

Red noticed and said at once, "Do not admire too long."

Liam withdrew his eyes.

"I had no intention."

"Excellent."

For a moment we all stood over the table: map, weapons, coins, knives, picks, basket, prayer book, and three women who two days earlier had no idea they would be planning a night burglary in Dublin, in order to find a missing page that might lead to a vanished girl and perhaps to an entire channel of trafficking hidden under names of work, transport, and debt.

It was absurd. Of course. But absurdity had long since ceased to be an obstacle to our lives.

Liam was about to leave when he stopped at the door.

"One more thing."

Red sighed.

"I am beginning to hate those words more than your name."

"If Red learns something from Siobhán while Nell and Moira are already in the building, warning them will not be easy."

"So?"

"Set a sign. If the whole thing must stop, Red lights a lamp in the laundry window. One light means withdraw. Two short covers and uncovers means guards. No light means continue."

Moira nodded.

"And if we find something that changes the plan?"

"You return through the barrel store. Not here, but to the little shrine by Saint Audoen's wall. A boy with a cap will be there. Ours, this time."

"How do we know he is ours?" I asked.

"He will have an onion."

I looked at him. Red looked at me. Moira slowly lowered her head.

"Is that a joke?" I asked.

Liam did not smile, but something moved in his eyes.

"I thought, since you already have a system."

Red sat down and hid her face in her hands.

"God help us, he is beginning to learn from you."

"A beautiful day for Irish conspiracy," I said.

Moira, to my amazement, gave a sudden snort of laughter and had to cover her mouth. Even Liam smiled, barely and briefly, like a man who had forgotten long ago that he could.

Red lifted her head and looked at all of us with absolute fatigue.

"If we die with an onion as our password, I shall haunt every one of you."

"Accepted," I said. "But please do not criticise my organisation afterwards. I shall be under pressure."

Liam shook his head and this time truly left. The door closed. We were left with the plan.

Red rose first, went to the window, and looked out at the grey morning light becoming day. Then she turned to us, and her face was different. Not calm. Red was rarely calm. But focused. Sharp. Ready.

"Right," she said. "We have a few hours. Moira, I will show you the pistol. Nell, you will learn to climb through a window without loudly commenting on the frame, the sill, God, and the architect."

"That severely limits my working methods."

"That is the point."

"And you?" Moira asked. "What will you do?"

Red looked at the map, then at the door, then somewhere farther away, as if through the walls she already saw the laundry, Siobhan, and the conversation waiting for her.

"I shall try to convince a woman who is quite right to trust nobody to tell me the truth about her sister. Without a knife, if possible."

"And if not possible?" I asked.

Red smiled crookedly.

"Then I shall have to be very nice."

Moira looked at me. I looked at Moira. We both understood that this was probably the most dangerous thing Red had said all morning.

Moira raised the pistol from the table as carefully as though it were not a weapon but someone's bone taken from a grave, and for a moment she stared at it in silence, her brows slightly drawn, wearing that face of a woman who dislikes admitting that something moves her and therefore immediately tries to turn the movement into analysis.

Red stood opposite her, arms crossed, still pale from too little sleep, but entirely present again, gathered into herself like a blade in a sheath, ready to spring at the smallest mistake. I sat on the edge of the pallet with the basket by my feet and the onion on the table, which, to my growing annoyance, was beginning to look more competent than most people in this affair.

"Hold it more firmly," Red said. "It is not an infant. You need not pity it."

Moira looked at her coolly.

"I know what a pistol is."

"Good. Because it does not know what you are, and may take offence very easily."

"I saw weapons every day in prison," Moira said, turning the pistol so that it aimed neither at me, nor Red, nor the wall behind which there might be people with very little patience for accidental shots. "The guards carried pistols for convoys, transports, interrogations, sometimes only to look more important than a man with keys. I saw them cleaned, loaded, and pretended over, while the men acted as if they were not afraid the thing would blow up in their hands. I am not entirely stupid."

"I did not say you were."

"But I was never given one of my own," she added, and something harder entered her voice, not anger perhaps, rather an old bitterness covered too long by correct silence. "I was good enough to stand by the cells, take women to questioning, write names, bring water, hear screams, and lock doors, but not trusted enough to carry a weapon. A woman with keys was useful. A woman with a pistol was unsettling. I could open bars. I could not carry the thing that would remind men I had hands too."

For a moment none of us spoke.

It was one of those moments in which anger needs no shouting, because the fact itself is sharp enough. Red looked at Moira differently then, with less impatience and more understanding, though if anyone had asked her directly, she would have denied it so fast the windowpanes might have trembled.

"Then show me what you know," Red said at last, more quietly.

Moira took the pistol more surely this time, settling it in her hand rather than lifting it like an object to be feared. She checked the cock, the pan, the barrel, awkwardly but not ignorantly, then opened the little packet of charges and looked at Red.

"Powder, ball, wadding," she said. "I have seen it often. I have never had to do it myself."

"Tonight you do not fire unless you must," Red said. "And if you must, do not try to be a heroine in some cheap tale. Do not aim at a heart from ten paces with shaking hands. Aim low. The leg. The belly if he is close. Better still, aim at the fact you have a gun. Most people do not want to learn whether a woman will pull the trigger, provided she looks as if she might."

Moira nodded, and I raised my hand like a particularly ill-bred pupil.

"Is there also training planned for those not trusted with pistols?"

Red did not even look at me.

"Yes. You will run."

"That is offensive. I can also scream."

"That is why you will run."

Moira handed me the small knife.

"You have this. Hold it blade down, close to the forearm. Do not wave it. If someone catches you from behind, do not try anything pretty. Put it into hand, thigh, side. Whatever makes him let go."

I took the knife and weighed it in my hand. It was short, plain, dark-handled, more tool than weapon. Perhaps that was why it seemed worse. The shovel in the boiler house had been large, heavy, obvious, almost honest in its brutality. This knife was small. Intimate. It required nearness, and nearness with violence is much fouler than a blow given from a distance.

"Do not make that face," Red said.

"What face?"

"As if you just discovered a knife is not a metaphor."

"I dislike it when things stop being metaphors."

"I regret to inform you that life has appalling literary taste."

For the next hours we practised, not fighting, because for true fighting we had neither space, time, nor any sensible spare limbs, but the little things that in a bad moment can make the difference between escape and lying face-down on cobbles. Red showed Moira how to carry the pistol low beneath the coat, how not to put her finger on the trigger until she truly wished to fire, how to step back so no one could snatch the weapon from her hand, and how to look not at the barrel but at the man before it, because a gun by itself is not dangerous until the hand knows why it holds it.

Moira learned quickly. Not gracefully, not confidently, but stubbornly. Her prison experience turned out to be an ugly but useful teacher. She knew how people behaved when afraid of weapons. She knew how a guard reached for a truncheon before a pistol, how an official man first raised his voice, then his hand, and only at the end his courage. She knew what corridors looked like when people should not be in them, and how to move along them without betraying herself immediately by breath alone. None of this made her a warrior. It made her something much more useful: a woman who understood the system from the side of its hinges.

I was taught silence.

It was the cruellest lesson.

Red made me cross from the door to the window without comment. Then from the window to the table. Then from the table to the pallet, with the basket, without catching the chair, without scraping my shoes, without sighing, without muttering insults under my breath at the floor, the architect, Oisín, Liam, men as a species, or God, who in this matter was behaving with suspicious passivity. Each time I opened my mouth, Red raised a finger. By the third time Moira began counting. By the fifth I felt persecuted.

"This is not natural," I whispered at last.

"What?" Red asked.

"So much silence. I feel as though my soul is in a corset."

"Good. Let it become accustomed."

"It may die."

"I will weep briefly."

Moira bent over Liam's sketch, which she had already translated into her own system. It no longer looked like a burglary map, but like a laundry account or a prayer, a few short lines, signs, and numbers hidden among ordinary words. If someone found the paper, he might see a list of candles, thread, and soap. If one knew how to read it, one saw the shed roof, the window, the corridor, two turns, the document room, and the route through the barrel store to the shrine by the wall.

"Again," she said.

Red came to the table at once.

Moira placed a finger on the first sign.

"We go out after dark, but not together. Red goes with Liam towards the laundry, stops at the side entrance, and tries to speak to Siobhan. If Siobhan knows who took the paper or where Brid is, Red is to draw it out without threatening her, if possible."

"That part sounds insulting," Red muttered.

"It is practical," Moira said. "If you light the lamp in the laundry window and leave it uncovered, we withdraw from the office. If you cover and uncover it twice, that means guards or immediate danger. If there is no light, we continue."

"And if Siobhan does not open?" I asked.

"Red leaves the sign by the white bowl and returns to the point by the bakery, not to us," Moira said. "She must not go near the customs office, because if anyone follows her, she will bring them to us."

Red tightened her mouth.

"I do not like that part."

"I know."

"That is my favourite thing about this plan," I said. "Each of us dislikes a different part. That means it is fairly horrible."

Moira ignored me with a professionalism worthy of a better cause.

"Nell and I go through the back street by the coal store. We reach the shed beside the warehouse. We climb to the roof by the ladder, if it is still there. If it is not, we return. We do not improvise."

"She looked at me when she said that," I observed.

"Yes."

"Was that deliberate?"

"Yes."

Red nodded in full support.

Moira went on, "From the roof we cross to the upper window. If the window is closed, I try to open it. If it is barred from inside, we return. If there is light in the corridor or voices, we wait no more than five minutes. Then we return. If the corridor is empty, we go to the document room. I open the lock. You stand at the door and listen."

"May I listen in an offended manner?"

"You may listen in a quiet manner."

"A very narrow category."

"In the room we look for documents from the last two months, ships to Liverpool, Glasgow, perhaps Bristol, the names Brid Tierney, Oisin Kelleher, Padraig Tierney, Marlowe & Sons, women recorded as servants, domestics, washerwomen, kitchen girls, orphans, or private transport. If we find the missing page, we take it. If we find more, we take only what can be hidden under clothing or inside the prayer book. Not in the basket, because in a flight the basket may be lost."

"And if someone comes in?" Red asked.

Moirra turned to her.

"We put out the lamp, if there is one. Hide behind the cabinet or under the desk, if possible. If not, we pretend to be laundry women who have mistaken the entrance."

Red looked at her as if the sentence were a personal insult.

"In the middle of the night?"

"People believe in women's foolishness more readily than their courage. That works in our favour."

It was so true that no one laughed.

Moirra placed her finger on the final sign.

"The way out is through the barrel store. If all goes well, we meet at the shrine of Saint Audoen. A boy with an onion is the sign that the road home is safe. If there is no boy, we go to the one-eyed bakery."

"The man with one eye," Red corrected wearily.

"In my head it will forever be the one-eyed bakery," I said.

Moirra, to my surprise, drew a small circle with a dot on the paper.

"Good. One-eyed bakery."

Red looked at her in outrage.

"Do not help her."

"Too late," I said. "The conspiracy has been infected by my genius."

Red sat down heavily.

"This night will end badly."

"Probably," Moirra said. "That is why we must reduce the number of things that can end badly at the same time."

We practised further.

Moirra showed me how to listen at a door without pressing my entire face to it like an idiot, because wood can creak and the shadow beneath the threshold betrays movement. She also taught me to remember the shape of a room in the first three seconds: window, door, desk, cabinet, something heavy to prop, something soft to muffle sound, somewhere to slip a paper if it must be abandoned for a moment. Red showed us how to descend a ladder backwards without looking down, though we had no ladder, so we used the bed, the table, and an imagination which with every exercise became more offended.

In the afternoon we ate the last of the better food, but this time none of us joked about the cheese. Perhaps because the weight of the night was coming slowly, like mist from the harbour, and even I began to feel that words had to conserve strength. Red cleaned both pistols again, though Liam had said they were checked. Moirra copied the

map onto a second paper, then burned the first sketch over the candle and crushed the ash into the water bowl. I checked the basket, the kerchief, the knife, the coins, then sat against the wall and looked at my hands for several minutes.

They were different than before.

Not in shape. Not in skin. In memory.

These hands had written slogans on walls, held a shovel, gripped bars, held Red's hand, carried Oisin's basket, and now were to search by night for papers about a missing girl. Strange, I thought, how many times a person changes her life before noticing that her body has long been working for the next version of herself.

When dusk began to fall properly, filling the room under the roof with grey shadow, Red tied her kerchief tighter and slid the pistol beneath her coat.

She did not look at me.

I knew why.

If she looked too long, she would begin to say things neither of us should hear before parting.

I came to her first.

"Red."

"No."

"I have not said anything yet."

"That is precisely why."

"I only wanted to say I shall be sensible."

She looked at me at last.

"You are lying."

"A little. With good intentions."

Her face softened for a moment. Very briefly.

"Nell, if you see something is wrong, you withdraw."

"You too."

"Do not start."

"It is not a start. It is a condition."

Moira stood beside me.

"Both of you return. Both. Otherwise the whole plan is wasted time."

Red looked at her, then at me, and for a moment she seemed about to throw something sharp into our faces, perhaps an order, perhaps a curse, perhaps her own fear. Instead she only nodded.

"Good."

The one word was heavy. Enough.

Liam was waiting downstairs.

He did not come up. He waited by the back door, hat low over his forehead, coat fastened at the throat, wearing the face of a man who knew the night might settle old and new debts with him at once. When he saw Red, something crossed his face for a moment, but she turned away before it could become a conversation.

"Ready?" he asked.

"No," I said. "But we are going."

Liam accepted this as the most reasonable answer.

We went out into the night.

Dublin after dark was a different creature from Dublin by day. Less noisy, but hungrier. The streets shone after rain, the lamps gave a dirty yellow light in which faces looked older and shadows more confident. From the port came the far clank of chains and the voices of sailors, from taverns laughter, song, and the sound of glasses, from alleys whispers, coughing, and sometimes the quick beat of feet. Night did not hide Dublin. It revealed it differently, showing the places where the city stopped pretending to be industrious and began to be honest.

At the first corner we had to separate. Liam and Red were to turn towards the laundry. Moira and I towards the warehouses.

For a moment we stood under the wall in the shadow, and everything between me and Red suddenly became too large for the street, too large for words, too large for our dirty, tired lives.

Red came closer. She did not embrace me. Not here. Not now.

She only adjusted the kerchief under my chin, the same kind of motion with which Moira had arranged my disguise earlier, but in her hand there was something different. Brief, rough tenderness. The kind that asks no name.

"Do not play heroine," she said.

"I am not. I am a very convincing servant with a basket."

"Nell."

"I will come back."

Her fingers paused for a second at my cheek.

"You had better."

Then she stepped away, as if the gesture had cost her more than a run through the canals.

Moira touched my shoulder.

"Time."

Red looked at Liam.

"Lead. And if you betray me..."

"I know," he said.

"No. You do not. But you can learn."

Liam did not answer. They went left. We went right. I did not turn back at once. I forced myself not to.

Only after several steps did I glance from the corner of my eye and see Red vanish into the shadow beside Liam, walking towards Siobhan, towards the laundry, towards a woman who might have the key to Brid or another trap.

Moira walked quietly beside me. Towards the warehouses. Towards the upper window. Towards the missing page. And for the first time in a long time I thought that silence might not be merely the absence of words. It might be a blade not yet fallen.

At first Moira and I walked as sense required, not too fast, not too slowly, without looking back, without whispering every three steps, without that particular tension of the shoulders which tells more than a scream when a person is fleeing. But sense, as I had already noticed, is most often a well-dressed coward that offers advice from a safe distance and then leaves the body alone with wet cobbles, dark windows, and the

knowledge that somewhere to the left Red was now going with Liam to the laundry, while I was meant to enter a building full of papers, guards, and possible answers to whether a missing girl still breathed.

Dublin at night did not so much fall silent as speak another language. By day it was dirty, loud, crowded, hurried, like a man who has stood too long in a bread queue and now snarls at everyone by habit. By night it stretched into gaps, full of passages one did not see in daylight, gates open only to the width of one body, windows shining through greasy glass, drunken songs cut suddenly in the middle of a word, as if someone had reminded the singer that walls have ears and ears in this city often hire themselves to whoever pays sooner.

The lamps burned unevenly, their light pouring over the cobbles in patches the colour of dirty honey, and where the light failed, the shadows were not empty. They were patient. Patient shadows always seem more suspicious to me than shouting men.

Moira walked half a step ahead, in cap and coat, prayer book held to her chest, looking exactly like a woman on her way to a sick aunt, or to commit a carefully considered crime in the service of documentation. I could not see the knife in her hand, but I knew where she had hidden it. The pistol lay beneath her coat, awkward, old, heavier than the confidence neither of us possessed in abundance.

I carried the basket, lighter now, because it no longer held Oisín's packet, but full of the humiliating inheritance of our previous task: whenever I felt its handle in my palm, I remembered Siobhán, Tierney, the missing page, and Oisín speaking of women as freight that might be lost, damaged, or profitably moved.

"You are breathing too loudly," Moira said without turning her head.

"It is not me. It is my desire to live demanding attention."

"Tell it to speak more quietly."

"It has character."

"I can see that."

We passed a small shrine set into the corner of a building, with a statue of a saint so chipped that it looked as if she herself was trying to survive in Dublin without papers. Someone had set two candles beneath her, one gone out, the other burning crookedly, fighting damp and draught. Moira stopped before it only for a fraction of a second, not to pray, rather to check the street reflected in the cracked glass. Clever. Prisons teach people to look without looking.

"Anyone behind us?" I whispered.

"I do not know. Perhaps. Twice I saw the same man with a sack over his shoulder."

"He may be a labourer."

"Labourers usually go somewhere. He walks as if waiting for us to decide."

I did not turn round.

I was proud of myself for all of three seconds.

Then I heard a cough behind us, low and wet, and every muscle in my neck wished to turn my head. I did not. Perhaps Red's training had some use after all, though if I ever tell her that, she will become even more unbearable than usual, and the world does not need such escalation.

Moira suddenly turned into a passage between two tenements. It was not on Liam's plan. At least I did not remember it being there, which meant either that Moira was improvising, or that my memory of maps resembled a sieve after a quarrel with a cat.

"This is not the way," I said softly.

"I know."

"Is this a good time to remind you that we were not to improvise?"

"I am not improvising. I am checking."

The passage was so narrow that the bricks almost scraped our shoulders, and from above hung rags, ropes, and something that looked like a broken birdcage, though birds had probably long since decided that prison in Dublin was excessive even by their standards. Moira went a few steps in, then stopped in the darkest place and drew me beneath a jutting balcony.

We waited. At first, nothing. Then steps. The same cough.

The man with the sack passed the entrance to the passage, slowed, stopped. I saw only part of him in the lamplight: a broad hat, a shoulder under the sack, beard or the shadow of beard. He stood for a while and looked down the street where we had walked before. He did not come after us. This did not reassure me. A man who does not follow when he should may simply know where you will come out.

Moira put a finger to her lips. The man moved on. Only after a longer while did I let out my breath.

"Oisin?" I whispered.

"Perhaps."

"Tierney?"

"Perhaps."

"Liam?"

"I do not know."

"Wonderful. Our network of acquaintances is growing faster than my capacity to hate people."

Moira looked at me in the gloom.

"You do not hate everyone."

"Give me time."

We did not return to the previous street. Moira led me through a rear passage, across a small yard where rainwater gathered in a barrel and someone had chalked a simple sign on the wall: an eye above a wave. I did not know it. Moira apparently did not either, because she stopped and looked more closely.

"Oisin's mark?" I asked.

"I have not seen it before."

"Tierney's?"

"I do not know."

"Does everyone in this city have private signs, secret passages, and at least one missing girl?"

"Probably."

We moved on, but the mark stayed in my head. An eye above a wave. Simple, ugly, quick. Someone had drawn it recently, the chalk not yet wholly damp. It was not a child's

random scrawl, not after the missing page had begun to grow from beneath every board. I thought of ships, registers, women entered as servants, washerwomen, kitchen girls, orphans. Eye over wave. Who watched? Who sailed? Who disappeared?

The customs warehouses appeared after more twisting than Liam's plan had promised, dark, squat, ranged along a side canal like a row of men paid to keep quiet. The building he had indicated was easy to recognise by the low shed against its side, the crooked roof, and the upper window in which one pane looked darker than the rest, like a patched eye. The yard between the buildings was empty, but emptiness on warehouse ground is not soothing. In such places it means someone has made sure people do not wander without purpose.

The guard at the main gate stood beneath an awning, a lantern hung beside him and a truncheon at his belt. From this distance I could see only his profile, his cap, his hand against the wall, and the smoke of a pipe rising near his face. The second man was supposed to walk the back every quarter hour. He was not visible.

That did not mean he was not there.

Moirra drew me to the wall on the other side of the street.

"We wait one round," she whispered.

"How long?"

"We shall see."

Waiting in the shadow with a basket at my foot, a knife under my coat, and Moirra's ancient pistol nearby seemed to me the most indecent form of idleness ever invented, because the entire body demanded motion and the only thing we could do was stand and count breaths. The street was almost empty. Somewhere farther off water slapped. A rat ran along the wall, stopped, looked at us with the face of an experienced inhabitant who had seen better burglars, then vanished beneath the boards. I maintain it judged us. Probably fairly.

After several minutes we heard steps from the rear yard.

The second guard came from round the building. He was shorter, heavier, with his coat thrown on crookedly and a lantern in his hand. He walked slowly along the wall, stopped by the shed door, spat, scratched his neck, and then did something that was not in the plan.

Instead of walking on, he took out a key and entered the shed.

Moirra stiffened.

"Is that bad?" I mouthed, though the answer seemed fairly obvious.

"Very."

The shed door shut behind him.

A weak light appeared inside.

"That is our way to the roof," Moirra said.

"Perhaps he is only checking it."

We waited. The light did not go out. One minute. Two. Three.

From inside came the sound of shifting wood, then a metallic tap, then something that sounded like a short prayer uttered by a man who had hit his finger.

"Perhaps he is drinking in there," I whispered.

"Perhaps he is guarding something."

"Or someone."

Moira looked at me.

Both of us thought of Brid.

It was stupid. Brid did not have to be in a shed by a loading office. That would be too simple, too theatrical, too convenient for a story. But since our lives had lately adopted the taste of a cheap dramatist with a fondness for violence, I could not reject the possibility merely because it sounded unlikely.

Moira unfolded her copied plan and looked at it in the dark.

"There is another way," she said. "Through the barrel store. But that was meant as an exit, not an entrance."

"Can we enter?"

"Perhaps. If the gate is not locked."

"And if it is?"

"Then we shall pretend the basket has special powers."

"The onion may help."

"Nell."

"I know. Silence."

We moved along the street, using the darkness between lamps, until we came to the narrow passage behind the store. On the way, I saw the main gate from another angle. The guard with the pipe still stood there, but now he was speaking to someone on the other side of the fence. I could not see the man's face, only a hand in a light glove and the sleeve of a good coat.

Someone higher up. Moira noticed too. We did not stop.

The barrel store was enclosed by a low wall and a wooden gate. The gate was locked, of course, because the world rarely has the courtesy to leave things open in important moments. Moira knelt by the lock, drew out Liam's thin metal, and began to work. I stood beside her, shielding her with the basket, as if that could mean anything if we were caught. For a while all I could hear was her breathing and the delicate scrape of metal.

"You know how to do this," I whispered.

"A little."

"A little is a very wide word."

"In prison, locks were better. Or worse. It depends which side you stood on."

Click. The gate gave. Moira looked at me.

"A little was enough."

We slipped inside.

The barrel store smelled of wood, beer, salt, and something sour. Barrels stood in several rows, some full, some empty, some marked with chalk, others branded with merchants' signs. The path between them was tight, but gave cover. Above us, to the right, was the office wall and a small window on the ground floor, barred, but open at the top for air. Not an entrance. More an offer of claustrophobia.

Moira pointed to the rear wall.

"There should be a service door there."

We found it behind a stack of empty barrels. Low, dark, metal-bound. Locked. Of course. Moira knelt again.

This time the lock was harder. I heard the metal tremble in her hand. I also heard something else: steps on the other side, distant and dull, as if someone were walking a corridor beyond the door. Moira stopped. We froze.

The steps moved on.

Then silence.

"Someone is inside," I whispered.

"I know."

"There were meant to be two guards."

"Perhaps one has gone in."

"Or a third."

She did not answer. The lock clicked on the second attempt. Moira slowly opened the door. It was dark inside.

Not entirely. Far away, perhaps round a turn in the corridor, a lamp burned. Its light did not fall on us directly, but struck the wall and made a yellow smear on the floor. It smelled of paper, dust, ink, wet wood, and tobacco. Not warehouse smell. Office smell, the smell of a place that pretends to order the world while in fact helping it steal.

We went in.

Moira closed the door behind us without a sound.

The corridor was narrow and low, with floorboards so old I felt a personal grievance against them. Any one of them might creak. Any one might betray us. On the walls hung old hooks, a few coats, an empty sack, a board with ship names written in chalk. One name struck me at once: Saint Brigid. Crossed out. Beside it, a date. Today.

I touched Moira's arm and pointed. She nodded, but did not stop. We had to go upstairs.

According to the plan, the document room was above, second door on the left. But the plan had assumed an entrance through the window, not a service door, so now we stood in a corridor Liam had not described properly. Moira moved slowly, counting steps, watching the traces of light beneath doors. First door on the right, locked. Second ajar. Dark inside. Third farther along, light and voices.

Men's voices. One speaking low, nervous. The other answering more calmly, distinctly more educated, with an English accent. English. Moira stopped at once.

Through the half-open door we saw little, only the edge of a desk, a lamp, and someone's hand in a light glove. The same? Perhaps. Papers bound with ribbon lay on the table. I heard part of a sentence:

"...Manchester changes everything. If the girl is here, Dublin becomes inconvenient."

My heart struck so hard I was certain they would hear it through the door. Moira caught my wrist.

The second voice, low and Irish, said, "No one knows she is here."

The Englishman replied, "Someone always knows. Kelleher has a nose for problems, but this time he may decide the problem is too useful. Tierney is sniffing about. And Harkin..."

He stopped.

Then he said more softly, "Harkin has a conscience. That makes him unpredictable."

Moira pressed a finger to her lips.

I did not even try to speak.

The Englishman went on, "The missing page must disappear before dawn. Not in the cabinet. Not in the office. Burn it or take it to the chapel by the old bridge. If Oisín finds it, he will begin to ask questions he does not need."

The Irishman snorted.

"Oisín likes money more than girls."

"That is precisely why he is dangerous. A greedy man can discover the truth by accident while looking for profit."

Moira looked at me. We already knew the missing page might not be in the room upstairs. It might be here. On the desk. Behind that half-open door.

With two men, one of whom had an English accent and knew more about Manchester, Oisín, Tierney, and Liam than he should.

Then, at the back of the corridor, the service door creaked.

Someone had come in the way we had.

Moira smothered my breath with her hand over my mouth, pushed me aside, and dragged me into the nearest dark room. The door opened behind us without a sound, but the floor inside creaked lightly under my boot.

I froze. Steps in the corridor stopped. Someone waited.

Through the crack of the door I saw only a strip of light and the shadow of a man standing just outside, perhaps two paces away.

I clutched the small knife.

Moira had the pistol beneath her coat.

And in the next room, the man with the English accent had just ordered the destruction of the page we sought.

I thought, with entirely inappropriate clarity, that if Red were here she would probably already be threatening someone with death.

And I had to do something much harder.

Stay silent.

The shadow stood outside the door so close that I saw his boots through the narrow slit at the floor: dark, heavy, mud on the soles, not dock boots, not the sort worn by men who spend all day carrying crates, but better, stronger, more accustomed to ordering cobbles than working on them. It was an absurdly small detail, but in such moments the mind clings to fragments because the whole is too large, too loud, too close to the throat. Boots. A scrap of coat. The shadow of a hand. The smell of damp wool, tobacco, and cold air brought in from outside.

Moira kept her hand over my mouth, not hard, but firm enough to remind me that even breath can betray a person if it escapes at the wrong moment. We stood in a dark room that proved to be something between a storeroom and a little archive, full of old crates, broken chairs, rolls of paper, and dust so ancient it might have been issued a birth certificate. My boot still rested on the board that had creaked, and I feared to shift my weight by so much as a hair, because boards, like men in authority, most often speak when they ought to keep quiet.

The steps in the corridor did not move on. The shadow did not either. The man outside was listening.

In the next room the two men still talked, but more softly, as though the arrival of a third had changed not only the corridor but their caution. The Englishman said something I did not catch, then the Irishman replied with a short curse. In my head there was only one thing: the missing page. Burn it or take it to the chapel by the old bridge. Not upstairs. Not in the cabinet. Not where we had meant to search. Liam's plan had fallen apart with the elegance common to all plans prepared by people who do not tell you the whole truth, either because they do not know it or because they consider your life too small to contain it.

The shadow at the door moved.

Moira slowly, so slowly it looked almost like a thought and not a movement, slid her other hand beneath her coat towards the pistol. I felt the fingers on my mouth tighten slightly. She did not want to shoot. I did not want her to shoot. A shot in such a place would be a bell for our own funeral, only less dignified and with more running.

The man outside took half a step closer. The board under his boot groaned. Then he spoke.

"Reilly?" he called towards the lit room. "That you crawling about?"

Not to us. To them. I let the air out through my nose so carefully it hurt.

From the next room came the low Irish voice.

"What?"

"Someone's been near the back door."

Silence.

This time everything in the next room truly stopped. Not papers. Not a chair. Even the lamp seemed to burn more quietly, though I know that is nonsense, but fear has its own physics and very little respect for reason.

After a moment the Englishman spoke, clearly nearer the door.

"Did you check?"

"That is why I am here."

"And?"

"Nothing. But the door was badly shut."

Moira closed her eyes.

Oh, lovely. The service door. Our entrance. Our subtle, marvelously professional presence in the building had already begun to leave traces. If Red had been here, she would have looked at me as the guilty party even if I had not closed the door, because Red had a talent for blaming me in advance, often correctly.

The Englishman said, "Shut it. And make another round below. No one comes in."

"And the papers?"

"I will handle the papers."

The man by our door did not move at once. For a while he stood so close that his leg shadow cut across the line of light beneath the threshold. Then he turned and walked down the corridor, towards the way we had come.

The steps receded slowly. One. Another. A third. Farther.

Moira did not take her hand from my mouth until we heard the scrape of the service door and the muffled sound of a bolt. He had locked it. Our simplest way out had just ceased to exist, which, I must admit, was very consistent of the night. Nothing should be

too easy when one is breaking in for evidence of women's trafficking, pursued by England, in a city still undecided whether it is a refuge or another kind of trap.

Moirá slowly drew her hand back. We did not speak. We could not. Instead she bent to my ear so close I felt the chill of her breath.

"We must stay," she whispered almost soundlessly. "Door locked. If we go back now, we meet him."

I nodded.

In the next room a chair scraped over boards.

The Englishman was speaking more quickly now.

"There is no time. You take the page to the chapel if I am not back before two. No one else touches it."

Reilly grunted.

"I don't like the chapel. Too many people around after dark."

"Precisely. No one suspects a place where everyone pretends to be holy."

"And the girl?"

Moirá froze. So did I. The girl.

Not "document". Not "transport". The girl.

The Englishman did not answer immediately.

When he did, his voice was lower.

"If she is alive, she is no longer our problem."

"Tierney thinks otherwise."

"Tierney thinks with his fists. That makes him easy to predict."

"And Kelleher?"

The Englishman laughed softly.

"Kelleher thinks with money. That makes him easier still."

"And Harkin?"

Silence.

Longer this time.

"Harkin thinks with guilt," the Englishman said at last. "That makes him dangerous."

Moirá looked at me in the dark.

She did not need to say anything.

Guilt. Liam. Maeve. Red. Chapel. Missing page. Brid. Everything was beginning to join not like a neat pattern, but like a filthy spider's web in which every thread led to something sticky.

Papers rustled again in the next room.

"The page is in the blue folder," the Englishman said. "You cannot mistake it."

The blue folder.

At last something concrete. Real. Something that could be stolen, burned, hidden, sold, or rescued from the hands of men who spoke of a missing girl as one speaks of a misplaced crate.

Moirá raised two fingers and pointed first to herself, then to the door.

No.

I caught her sleeve and shook my head as hard as I could without making noise. I had no intention of letting her go out alone, but of course my intention, like most of my better intentions, was ignored by the more practical woman.

Moira leaned closer.

"I have to see where he hides it," she whispered.

"No," I replied soundlessly, with my mouth alone.

Her gaze hardened.

"Yes."

And here is the problem with women who escape prisons, save your life, knock officers senseless with jugs, and learn to carry weapons in a single afternoon: they begin to believe they have the right to make decisions. Which would be beautiful if it did not involve leaving a hiding place straight into a corridor full of people.

Moira slowly drew a small mirror from her pocket. I had no idea where she had obtained it. From the clothing bundle, perhaps. Or from some old wardress-soul of hers, where every tool waited only for the moment it might prove useful. She slid to her knees by the crack near the hinges and set the mirror at such an angle that she could see part of the corridor.

She looked.

Then passed it to me.

In the mirror I saw the half-open door of the room, the smear of light, a table leg, and part of the Englishman's hand, a white glove being slowly removed, a finger with a thin gold ring, papers shifted over the desk. I could not see his face. Too little. But I saw folders. Several. One dark. One brown. One blue.

Blue. It lay on the table, partly covered by other documents. The Englishman reached for it. Slid something inside. Then closed it.

He did not put it in the cabinet. He did not put it in his pocket. He laid it on the edge of the table as if it were about to go with someone farther.

Moira took the mirror, looked again, and went still. Something had changed. I did not know what until I saw it myself when she angled the mirror towards me. In the doorway of the room stood someone else. Not a guard. Not the man with the sack. A boy. The one in the too-large cap. He stood on the threshold, breathless, wet with mist or rain, and held something in his hand.

An onion.

For a second my heart, which until then had been beating like a hammer in panic, did something entirely ridiculous. It almost laughed. The boy with the onion. Our sign. Our man. Our little culinary angel of conspiracy.

Except the boy was in the wrong place. Not by the shrine of Saint Audoen. Not on the road out. In the loading office, before the Englishman, Reilly, and the documents. Moira looked at me. I looked at her.

In the mirror the boy said something quickly, too low for us to hear. The Englishman turned to him, and for the first time his face moved nearer the light. I saw only the profile. Narrow nose. Smooth cheek. Fair hair at the temple. I did not know him. But I felt the chill that says a man need not be known to be dangerous.

The Englishman answered the boy.

"Here? Now?"

The boy nodded.

Reilly cursed.

"Harkin?"

The boy nodded again. Liam. Something had happened on Red's side. The Englishman took the blue folder from the table.

"Put out the lamp. We move this now."

Moira hid the mirror.

Everything suddenly quickened.

If they took the folder, we lost the page. If we followed them, we met the guard at the door. If we stayed, Red might be in danger. If we ran, we did not know the way. If we came out of the dark storeroom, they might see us.

And then I understood something even more unpleasant. The boy with the onion might be a sign. But not necessarily ours.

Perhaps someone had stolen the sign. Perhaps overheard it. Perhaps Liam had been forced. Perhaps Red had lit the lamp in the laundry and we could not see it from here. Perhaps everything was slipping out of the last scraps of control we had worked so hard to pretend existed.

Moira moved her mouth to my ear.

"The folder must stay."

"How?"

She did not answer at once. Then pointed into the darkness behind us. I turned my head.

Only then did I see that the storeroom had a second exit. Very small. A narrow door or rather a panel in the rear wall, half-hidden behind old rolls. It did not lead to the corridor. Perhaps into the next room. Perhaps nowhere. Perhaps to the hell of bureaucracy, where the condemned fill in forms for all eternity. At that moment any option was better than waiting.

Moira went to the panel and shifted the rolls. The little door was fastened with a simple bolt on our side. She opened it.

Behind it lay a low space between walls, something like a service shaft or an old document chute, wide enough for a person with little respect for her own ribs. Dust, cold, and old paper breathed out of it.

Moira looked at me.

"We can get behind their room."

"Or get stuck and die like rats with ambitions."

"Choose quickly."

Footsteps sounded from the corridor. Someone put out the lamp in the next room. It grew darker.

"Rats with ambitions," I whispered. "Sounds like us."

We squeezed into the shaft.

Moira first, I behind, and I had to leave the basket because it would not fit. My heart hurt at the sight of the abandoned onion, but every revolution demands sacrifices. The passage was narrow, filthy, and so low that we had to move on knees and elbows, feeling

splinters in the boards, dust in the mouth, and the cold of the wall against the cheek. Ahead of me Moira moved with surprising precision, almost without sound, as if her entire life had prepared her for crawling through the forgotten intestines of buildings. I moved worse. With the dignity of an offended sack of potatoes. But quietly. More or less. I hope.

After a few paces, or perhaps an entire lifetime, the shaft bent slightly right. Through a narrow slit between boards I saw the room where the men had been. It was almost dark now, but the door to the corridor stood wider and the light beyond was enough to show movement. The Englishman had the folder under his arm. Reilly held a lantern, shielded with his hand. The boy with the onion stood by the door, shifting from one foot to the other.

"If Harkin truly came to the laundry with Gallagher, then Kelleher has moved faster than we thought," the Englishman said.

"What do we do about the girl?" Reilly asked.

"Which one?"

"The one from Manchester."

For a second my stomach vanished.

The Englishman replied, "If she is here, we catch her later. Now the page matters. Without it, no one proves the route."

Moira stopped so suddenly that I almost drove my nose into her. The route. So the page was not merely a list. It was proof.

"And Brid?" the boy asked suddenly.

His voice was younger than I had thought. Trembling. He did not sound like Oisín's man. He did not sound like anyone's man. He sounded like a child who had walked into too adult a world and begun to understand that adults use words like locks without keys.

Reilly turned on him sharply.

"Shut your mouth."

But the Englishman raised a hand.

"No. Let him ask. Curiosity is valuable, while it knows when to die."

The boy drew back a little.

The Englishman came nearer.

"Brid is where all such girls go when the people who love them are too poor to buy them back and too naïve to understand that no one returns by the same road."

My stomach clenched so hard I nearly made a sound. Moira turned her head slowly, and in the dark I saw her eyes. Not fear. Not only. Fury. Quiet, bright, almost white. The Englishman placed a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Go to Harkin. Tell him Siobhan is talking. Tell him Red is to return to the house on Thomas Street. Tell him..."

He stopped.

He smiled.

"No. Tell him Nell Whitmore is in danger. That will move Gallagher faster."

The boy nodded, but did not move.

"And if he asks from whom?"

"Tell him from the man who knows where Maeve is."

The world froze.

Not because I froze. I was only a small, filthy body in a wall, knees pressed into boards and dust in my throat. Something larger froze. Air. Time. Red's memory, though she was far off by the laundry, seemed suddenly to enter the room and stand between us.

Maeve. He used her name as a key. As a hook. Moira closed her eyes.

We knew then we could not let the boy carry that lie. If Red heard that someone knew where Maeve was, she would go. No matter where. No matter with whom. No matter whether it was a trap. In some places a person has no choice, because the wound decides faster than reason.

The Englishman went to the door with the folder. Reilly after him. The boy remained for half a second longer, holding the onion like the stupidest talisman in the world. Moira turned to me and silently pointed at the boy. Not at the folder. At the boy. The plan had changed again.

We had to catch the child with the onion before he carried Red a message from a man who dug in her deepest wound as if it were a pocket. And at the same time the blue folder was leaving the room, taking the missing page, the proof of the route, and perhaps the only trail to Brid.

Two things to save. Two women. Too few hands.

Moira looked at the folder, then at the boy, then at me. And I understood what she meant to do. I shook my head. No. She pointed to herself, then towards the corridor after the Englishman. Then to me and the boy. No. No. Absolutely not. Moira laid a hand on my shoulder and squeezed once, short and hard.

Then she whispered, almost without sound:

"Red must not hear that lie."

Then she turned and began crawling farther along the wall, towards wherever the service shaft must open nearer the corridor.

I was alone.

Me, the knife, dust, no basket, no onion, and a boy who was about to bring Red the name Maeve like a lit torch to a barrel of powder.

Excellent, I thought. Truly excellent. If I survive this night, I shall learn to shoot, climb, and close my mouth. In that order, or the reverse.

The boy with the onion stood in the room for several more seconds, as if his body had not received the same message as his legs, and in those seconds I saw that he was no professional spy, no little demon of Dublin streets, no clever rat raised on other people's secrets, but a child to whom someone had given a role in a matter too large, too dirty, and too full of blood. Poor foolish creature, he was only now beginning to understand that adults do not always lie to hide something. Sometimes they lie to push someone straight beneath a knife.

He held the onion so tightly that his fingers had gone white. For a moment I almost pitied him. Almost. Then I remembered Red.

I remembered how she said Maeve's name, as though every syllable had to pass through burned wood, smoke, and blood. I remembered her face when Liam returned to her life like a door locked from the outside. I remembered that brief, nearly unwilling touch by the wall when she adjusted my kerchief before we parted, and I thought that if

this boy reached her with such a lie, Red would follow him even into hell itself, and hell, given our recent luck, would probably have a signboard, a doorman, and several of Oisin's men by the side entrance.

I could not let him leave. The problem was that I was inside a wall. He was not.

Moirra, cursed, brave, practical Moirra, was already crawling somewhere farther in the dark behind the boards, after the Englishman with the folder, after the missing page, after the proof, after Brid, and I could not call her, could not follow, could not even swear properly, which in my case was almost physical suffering. I was left with a task requiring silence, speed, and common sense, three virtues which in my family had apparently missed the front door.

The boy moved towards the corridor.

No time.

I shifted through the shaft to where I could see a larger crack between boards. There was a panel I could leave by, two steps from the room door, behind an old document cabinet standing slightly away from the wall. Thank you, dirt, damp, and every careless carpenter in this city. From my side the little door had no bolt, only a hook, which gave under my fingers after one almost soundless tug. Almost, because of course the world would not be itself if wood did not sigh precisely when a person is trying to behave like a shadow.

The boy stopped.

I froze, crouched in the dark slit, one knee still in the shaft, the other leg almost in the room, in a position so dignified that if anyone painted it, the canvas should be burned at once for the good of art.

The boy turned his head. He saw only darkness behind the cabinet. Or wanted only to see darkness.

"Who's there?" he whispered.

I did not answer. It was my greatest act of self-control that night. He took one step closer.

And I, because opportunities in my life rarely come prettily wrapped and prefer to fall into mud shouting, sprang from that wretched gap like a very tired, very angry cat spat out by a wall.

There was no grace.

There was no plan.

There was an elbow, a knee, a piece of skirt caught on a board, and my hand clamping over his mouth before he could yell. We hit the floor together, but sideways more than full weight, so the thud was less than it might have been, though to me it sounded like a cathedral collapsing. The boy bucked hard beneath me, startled, terrified, and not nearly as weak as a child in such circumstances ought to be. His onion rolled away, betrayed by gravity, which I had always suspected of moral weakness.

"Quiet," I hissed in his ear. "Quiet, or I will make this more educational than either of us wants."

He stilled only a little. I pressed the knife, not to his throat, because I am not entirely a monster and because trembling children rarely improve under steel at the neck, but close enough to his sleeve that he could feel the idea of it.

"I am going to move my hand. You will not shout. If you shout, Red Gallagher will find out you tried to feed her a lie about Maeve, and honestly, I will be the gentler of your problems. Do you understand?"

He nodded rapidly.

I drew my hand away.

He gulped air but did not cry out.

From the corridor came a door opening and then closing. The men had gone. At least for the moment.

Then steps came back from the other end.

The boy's eyes widened. I dragged him behind the cabinet and squeezed into the gap with him, which was like trying to hide two guilty thoughts in the same nun's sleeve. A guard entered the room carrying a lantern. He had a round face reddened by cold or drink, though in Dublin the two could cooperate beautifully. He held the lantern high and the light slid over desk, chair, floor, wall, papers, cabinet.

It stopped on the onion.

The guard looked at it. I looked at the boy. The boy looked as if he might die not from the knife, but from shame before a vegetable. The guard approached the onion, bent, and lifted it between two fingers.

"What the devil..." he muttered.

For a long, wonderfully absurd moment he stood in the middle of the dark office holding an onion in the lantern light and looking like a man who had found the symbol of a religion he did not wish to learn.

Then he shrugged. And put the onion in his pocket.

I almost choked on my own breath.

The boy trembled beside me, perhaps from fear, perhaps from despair at the loss of an official sign. The world was vile. Even onions defected to authority.

The guard circled the room, looked under the table, but not behind the cabinet. He stopped at the desk, ran his fingers over the place where the blue folder had lain, cursed under his breath, and left, closing the door badly.

I waited. One breath. Two. Three. His steps moved away down the corridor.

Only then did I exhale and move back from the boy as far as the gap allowed.

"What is your name?" I whispered.

He said nothing.

I pressed the knife against my own hand, not his, so he could see I was not asking for amusement.

"I have no time for pleasant methods, and I am told I am poor at them anyway. Name."

"Eamon," he forced out.

"Good, Eamon. Now listen very carefully. Who told you to speak to Red about Maeve?"

"The... the man from England."

"I noticed that. Who is he?"

"I don't know."

I fixed my eyes on his face.

"Eamon."

"I don't know! I swear. They call him Mr Ashford. Or Ash. I don't know if it is real. He comes to the warehouses. Talks to Reilly. Sometimes to the shipping men. Gives money."

Ashford. Englishman. Gloves. Blue folder. Maeve as hook. I stored the name and felt my head grow cold.

"Who do you work for?"

The boy looked at me as if that question were the hardest.

"For... different people."

"Bad answer."

"For Liam sometimes. For Mrs Brigid. For Oisín if he pays. For Reilly if I cannot say no."

"And today?"

"Today I was meant to wait by the shrine. With the onion. Liam said. But Reilly caught me by the bridge. Said he knew who I was waiting for. Took me to the warehouse. Then Mr Ashford told me to go to Harkin with the message."

"So the sign was taken."

He did not understand.

He did not need to.

"Where is Moira?" I asked, more to myself than to him.

"Who?"

"The woman who looks like a widow but has more sense than this entire building."

"I don't know."

Of course he did not.

Moira had gone after Ashford and Reilly. After the folder. After the missing page. With a pistol she had held for the first time in her life, but a mind that could see locks where other people saw doors.

I had to leave.

I also had to keep Eamon from running to Red.

Which meant I had to take him with me or tie him in the wall. The second option had some practical charm, but the boy was a child, and besides he clearly knew too much to leave him where Mr Ashford and his people could find him.

"You are coming with me," I said.

"No."

"Yes."

"I can't."

"Splendid. I also cannot do most of the things I have been doing for the last week, and yet here I am, inside a wall, talking to a boy without an onion and considering kidnapping him for the safety of the woman I love..."

I stopped. Eamon blinked. I blinked. Silence.

"Do not repeat that," I hissed.

"What?"

"Good. Clever boy."

This was not the time to examine my own stupid, uninvited honesty, which had just fallen out of me in the worst possible place, like a coin through a hole in a pocket. Love. I had said it. To a child. In a wall. In a customs warehouse. During a burglary. If the world had possessed any decency, it would have collapsed at once to spare me further shame.

It did not collapse.

We had to continue.

I pulled Eamon out of the hiding place and made him stand by the door, then went to the crack myself and looked into the corridor. Empty. Light farther along, to the left. Steps somewhere below. The service door bolted. Ashford with the folder had probably gone towards the main part of the building or the gate. Moira might be behind him. She might have been caught already. No. I must not think that. Thinking the worst is like putting a hand into a machine only to see whether it will truly take the fingers.

"Do you know this building?" I asked Eamon.

"A little."

"Is there another way out besides the back door and the main gate?"

"Through the cellar. To the canal behind the store."

"Of course there is a cellar. There is always a cellar. Where?"

"Where they keep old ropes and seized things. But the door is heavy."

"Can you open it?"

"No."

"Then we shall improvise."

"What?"

"Never mind. Lead."

We went out into the corridor.

Eamon went first, hunched, silent, suddenly less a messenger than a child caught between other people's wars. I followed with the knife in my sleeve, my heart in my throat, and the thought of Moira somewhere ahead, perhaps already following Ashford. We passed the half-open door of the office. I wanted to look in, but Eamon tugged my sleeve and shook his head. Correctly. Curiosity, even mine, should sometimes be slapped and told to wait.

The stairs to the cellar were around the turn, behind a low door without a handle, opened by a bolt. Eamon slid it back quietly. Cold, damp, and the smell of mould, old rope, rotting wood, and river struck upward, as if water always found a way into places where it had not been invited. We went down the stone steps into darkness, with only a little light from the corridor behind us.

"I have no lamp," he whispered.

"Wonderful. I was beginning to worry it would be too easy."

Below it was almost completely dark. Almost, because through a small barred window near the ceiling came a sliver of night light, enough to see the shapes of crates, barrels, coils of rope, and something covered in a sheet. I moved slowly, one hand to the wall, the other holding the knife. Eamon led between the crates towards a door opposite.

Then I heard a voice. From above. A cry. Not mine. Not Red's. Moira.

"Stop!"

Then a crash.

I do not know whether it was a shot or a door striking a wall, but my body reacted before my head. I lunged for the stairs. Eamon caught my skirt.

"No! They are there!"

"Let go!"

"They will kill you!"

"Moirra is there!"

"Then go through the cellar! Cellar is faster to the yard!"

That stopped me. One second. Enough.

"Lead."

We ran through the cellar, no longer trying to pretend at silence. Someone shouted above. Someone else ran. A second crash. This time definitely a shot. The stone walls of the cellar returned it dully, as if the whole building had coughed lead. Eamon reached the heavy door at the end, grabbed the iron handle, and pulled. It did not move.

"Locked!"

"You said there was a way out!"

"There is, but..."

"I hate the word but more with every minute!"

The lock was on our side, old, iron, rusted. I had no picks. Moirra had them. Of course. The universe, being a meticulous and malicious creature, had arranged the distribution of tools in the worst possible manner.

I looked around in panic.

Crates. Ropes. A hook. An iron bar against the wall. I seized it, wedged it between door and frame, and pulled with all my strength. Nothing. Eamon helped, bracing his feet. The door groaned but did not yield.

Steps came from above. Someone was descending to the cellar. We had no time.

"Again," I hissed.

We pulled together. The bar grated. Wood split. The door opened the width of a hand. Too little. Steps nearer. Lantern light spilled at the top of the stairs.

"Who's there?!" a man's voice shouted.

I set my whole body against the bar and drove it once more, with such fury that it seemed all the bars, sentences, locks, male orders, and stupid heavy obstacles of my life had gathered in that door.

The wood cracked with a snap.

The door burst open.

We tumbled outside into the cold and the stench of the canal behind the store. Eamon first, I after him, almost falling to my knees. Behind us someone ran down into the cellar and shouted. I did not look back. This time truly not. I ran after the boy along the wall, through mud, puddles, between barrels and stacks of old planks, until we reached a low passage leading back towards the warehouse yard.

And then I saw Moirra.

She stood on the other side of the yard, against the wall, a pistol in both hands. She no longer aimed at the air. She aimed at Ashford. Ashford stood a few paces from her, calm, the blue folder held to his chest. Reilly lay on the ground, clutching his arm, blood

darkening between his fingers. So Moira had fired. Moira, who said she did not want to kill. Moira, who had never been given a weapon because she was a woman.

Moira stood now in the wet yard, smoke rising from the barrel, and looked like someone who had crossed a border she had not even known existed.

Ashford turned his head. He saw me. And smiled.

"Miss Whitmore," he said quietly, yet clearly enough for me to hear through the rain and the shouting behind me. "England truly misses you."

Then from beyond the gate came a whistle. Not one. Three.

A signal.

Someone else was coming.

CHAPTER XII

The Eye Above the Wave

For a moment the courtyard ceased to be a place and became an arrangement of forces, a filthy, rain-slick chessboard on which no sensible person would have wished to be a pawn, a piece, or even the table, because everything stood too close, too taut, too ready to split apart.

On one side stood Moira, pale as a candle in a draught, the pistol held in both hands, its barrel aimed at Ashford's chest, and on her face there was no triumph, only something far worse: the knowledge that the weapon had truly fired, that a man truly lay on the ground, that blood was no longer a word in a report or a stain on a prison floor, but something her own hand had caused.

On the ground Reilly groaned through clenched teeth, clutching his arm, while his lantern lay overturned beside him, throwing crooked light across the wet stones. In that light the blood looked almost black. It had always irritated me that blood in stories is red, beautiful, dramatic, like a banner or a rose for people suffering from an excess of poetry, when in truth it is often dark, sticky, filthy, and looks more like something that must be scrubbed away before it soaks into the boards.

Ashford stood upright with the blue folder pressed to his chest, like a man who, even in the middle of catastrophe, still minds the proper fall of his coat.

He was taller than he had seemed through the crack in the wall, lean, fair-haired, elegant in that particular English fashion which says to the world: I need not hurry, because other people hurry for me. His face was calm, smooth, almost courteous, which immediately made me want to hit him with something heavy. Truly dangerous people rarely look as though they have just walked out of hell. More often they look as though they have a table reserved at a respectable restaurant and, passing through hell on the way, merely stopped to inspect the accounts.

And in the middle of all this there was me, tumbling out of the cellar like an unfinished disaster, Eamon behind me, no basket, no onion, a knife in my hand and my heart beating loudly enough to deserve its own charge for disturbing the peace.

A whistle sounded beyond the gate. Three short signals. Not ours.

I did not know whose they were, and that was the worst of it, because in this affair everyone had signals, boys, secret passages, and morality tucked into their pockets like coins best kept out of the light.

Ashford smiled at me as though we had met for invited tea rather than in a courtyard smelling of blood, mould, and rotting administration.

"Miss Whitmore," he repeated. "I confess I expected someone taller."

"And I expected someone less tediously evil," I replied, before I could remind myself of all my recent lessons in silence. "We are both disappointed."

Moira did not even look at me, but her fingers twitched on the pistol.

"Nell," she said quietly. "Do not provoke him."

"I appreciate your belief that this is something I control."

Ashford shifted his gaze to Moira.

"A former wardress, as I understand it. An interesting variation. Women on this side of the bars are usually more grateful for order."

"Order that requires girls to be sold is not order," Moira said. "It is only filth written up more neatly."

"Oh, very pretty. Is that yours, or did you hear it from our little revolutionary?"

"From life."

Ashford sighed, almost disappointed.

"Life is the worst teacher. Too many examples and far too little class."

Reilly groaned more loudly. Ashford did not look at him once, which told me everything I needed to know about the value of his men.

Eamon stood behind me with his back pressed to the wall, trembling so hard I could hear his sleeve rustle. I wanted to shove him farther back, hide him, tell him to run, but any movement might shatter that fragile, revolting balance. Moira was aiming at Ashford, Ashford held the folder, someone was approaching beyond the gate, Reilly lay bleeding, and I had a knife which had suddenly become so small it felt insulting.

"Give me the folder," Moira said.

Ashford regarded her with mild interest.

"And then? You will shoot me? I doubt it. You have already fired once, and I can see that you are still trying to decide whether your soul has fallen or merely slipped."

Moira went paler, but the barrel did not drop.

"Give me the folder."

"That document is not for you."

"All the more reason."

"You do not understand what you have in your sights."

"A man."

Ashford smiled.

"No. A system. A system that existed long before your conscience and will exist long after it, because poverty needs passages, ships need cargo, families need promises, and promises are easiest to sell to those who have nothing left but hope. Do you think that if you find one page, one girl, one name, the world will suddenly grow ashamed and stop working?"

"No," Moira said. "But you may stop working this evening."

That was good. So good that Ashford stopped smiling. Footsteps sounded beyond the gate. Several pairs. Fast. There was no time. There was no Red either.

And that fact alone made me feel something strange: not only fear for her, but the absence of her presence like the absence of a wall at my back. In a moment such as this Red would have done something reckless, beautiful, and probably bloody. I had to invent something stupid quickly enough to pass for a plan.

I looked at Eamon. At his empty hand. At the guard's pocket where the onion had vanished. At Reilly. At the lantern. At the barrels against the wall. At the narrow drain beside the stones, where water ran like a black thread towards the gate.

"Eamon," I whispered.

The boy looked at me, terrified.

"Can you whistle like them?"

He blinked.

"What?"

"Those three signals. Can you do them?"

"Yes, but..."

"Good. In a moment you whistle twice and shout that there is a fire by the shed."

"But there is no fire."

"Not yet."

Moira heard. Her eyes moved towards the lantern. Then to me. And she understood. Ashford understood too, but one second too late.

I lunged for the fallen lantern and kicked it towards the barrels against the wall. I had no idea what was in them. Water, perhaps. Beer. Something vastly more useful, or spectacularly useless. The lantern rolled across the wet stones, the glass shattered, the flame danced wildly and licked at scattered straw and old rags lying beside the wooden stack. For one second nothing happened, and I felt fate had chosen the worst possible moment to humiliate me.

Then the straw caught. A little. Not beautifully. But enough.

"Now!" I hissed.

Eamon whistled twice. Short and sharp.

Then, to my astonishment, he shouted in a voice as though he had suddenly remembered that life owed him something:

"Fire! By the shed! Fire!"

The footsteps beyond the gate quickened, but not with certainty. Men running to a fight run differently from men suddenly trying to decide whether their warehouse is about to burn along with the papers, goods, and bribes hidden beneath the boards. Eamon's cry echoed back, and someone above answered with a curse. A door slammed somewhere. The guard at the main gate shouted something unintelligible.

Ashford stepped back with the folder.

Moira moved.

She did not fire. She did not throw herself at him like Red. She did something more her own, more prison-born: she used the instant when a man looks at the fire rather than the hand. She sprang forward and struck him across the wrist with the pistol, the wrist holding the folder. Not hard, like a man beating for pleasure. Precisely, dryly, into the bone.

Ashford hissed.

The folder fell.

I threw myself after it just as Reilly, despite the wound in his arm, tried to seize my ankle. His fingers clenched in the cloth of my skirt. He yanked. I fell onto one knee so hard the pain shot into my hip.

"Let go, you office rat!" I snarled, and kicked him in the face with my other foot.

It was not an elegant blow. It was not a blow worthy of a lady. It worked. Reilly howled, released the cloth, and I snatched up the blue folder and clutched it to my chest as though it were an infant made of guilt.

Ashford tried to reach for it again, but Moira stepped between us and this time truly aimed the pistol at his face.

"One more step," she said, "and we shall find out whether I can do it twice."

Her voice did not shake. Her hands did. A little. But not her voice.

Ashford watched her for a long moment. The fire by the barrels had grown, still small but large enough for smoke to begin creeping beneath the windows. Someone ran into the courtyard from the gate, then stopped at the sight of us, Ashford, Reilly on the ground, and Moira with the pistol.

"What the...?"

"Water!" Eamon roared, astonishingly convincing. "Get water, you idiots, the shed will go up!"

And then something wonderfully stupid happened. The men who a moment earlier might have become our pursuers flung themselves towards the barrels and buckets, because fire in a warehouse full of papers, timber, rags, and God knew what else was a danger they understood faster than Ashford's secret arrangements. One knocked into Reilly, another nearly bowled Eamon over, a third began stamping on the burning straw, a method so desperate it was almost dear to my heart.

"Now!" Moira shouted.

We ran.

Not beautifully. Not quietly. Not according to any plan Moira had so diligently copied out. We ran across the courtyard towards the passage by the barrel store, me with the folder under my coat, Moira with the pistol in her hand, Eamon behind us, because apparently abducting a boy had become a permanent item on the evening's programme. Behind us Ashford shouted:

"Whitmore!"

I do not know why I turned. I should not have. But I did.

He stood in the smoke, his wrist bleeding, his face no longer courteous or smooth but cold and stripped bare, as though all that English elegance had fallen from him with the folder. And he said something that reached me despite the shouting, the crackle, and the smoke:

"Ask Red who truly betrayed Maeve!"

I would have stopped. Truly. If Moira had not seized my arm and yanked so hard she nearly tore my shoulder from its socket.

"Not now!"

Not now. Not now. Those two words ought to have been the coat of arms of our lives.

We burst through the passage behind the barrels onto a narrow towpath, where the stench of water and mud struck me in the face like a wet rag. Eamon ran first because he knew the way, and we followed, stumbling, slipping on the stones, hearing chaos rise behind us. Someone shouted to close the gate. Someone shouted about fire. Someone about Ashford. Someone about the girls. Splendid, I thought, now we were girls again. In the mouth of a pursuit, a person always becomes simpler.

At the end of the path we were meant to turn towards St Audoen's shrine, but Eamon stopped so suddenly that I almost crashed into him bodily.

"What is it?"

Ahead of us, at the end of the alley, stood a man with a sack over his shoulder. The same man who had followed us earlier. He did not move. He did not need to. Moira raised the pistol, but Eamon caught her sleeve.

"No! That's Colm. Liam's man."

The man with the sack slowly raised his hands.

"If you still want to see dawn today, not that way," he said. "Ashford has men by the shrine."

"How do you know?" Moira asked.

"Because I kicked one of them in the knee when he tried to shut me up. Quickly, follow me."

"And the onion?" burst out of me.

Colm looked at me as though unsure whether I had been struck in the head.

Eamon raised a hand.

"The guard took it."

Colm sighed heavily.

"Jesus, Mary, and all the holy fish."

"It's a long story," I said.

"In your company, I do not doubt it."

There was no time to inspect his history, his intentions, or his views on vegetables.

Behind us the pursuit was beginning to take shape, and ahead the shrine had been burned as an escape route. We followed Colm sideways through a gate into a tannery yard where the stench was so powerful that for a moment I considered returning to custody voluntarily, because even prison had certain limits to its olfactory ambition. Colm led us quickly and confidently through dark passages, beneath hanging hides that looked like dead angels in the gloom, then through a low door into an ash store and on through a hole in the wall known to no one except a man who lived by other people's shortcuts.

Only after several minutes, when the noise of pursuit had fallen behind us, did we stop in an empty, ruined yard behind an old brewery.

I was breathing so hard my lungs burned as they had after the boiler room.

Moira leaned against the wall, still holding the pistol, though the barrel had dropped. Her face was grey.

Eamon vomited against the wall. Briefly, miserably, with all the grace of a child who had just discovered that adult affairs have a very sour taste.

Colm looked at me.

"Have you got it?"

I did not answer at once. I opened my coat. The blue folder was there, pressed to my body, damp from rain and my own sweat, but intact. Moira came over and opened it with trembling fingers. Inside were several sheets. A register. Names. Dates. Ships.

And one page torn from a larger document, with a number in the corner matching the missing section. Moira's eyes ran over it faster and faster until suddenly they stopped at one place.

"Brid Tierney," she whispered.

Red was not with us, but her absence suddenly became larger.

"What?" I asked.

Moirra kept reading, and her face grew paler still.

"Entered as a kitchen maid. Private transport. Transferred by..."

She stopped.

"By whom?" I asked.

Moirra looked at me.

"Not Oisín."

"Is that good or bad?"

She swallowed.

"By St Martha's charitable foundation. With the signature of a Crown official. Ashford."

Colm swore. Eamon stopped being sick and turned his head. I felt cold despite the run having heated every part of me.

"Where to?" I asked.

Moirra looked at the page again.

"Not Liverpool. Not Glasgow."

She raised her eyes.

"Galway."

For a moment no one spoke. Galway. Red's mother. Red's father. The family she wanted to return to.

And Brid, the missing girl, sold or moved under the cover of charity, leading us west as well.

As though all of Ireland, all that wet, filthy, suffering land, instead of allowing us to go to Galway for Red's past, had decided to place another girl in need of saving on the very same road.

Colm looked behind him.

"We have to move. Now. We are not going home by the same route."

Moirra tucked the page beneath her blouse and put the rest of the papers back into the folder.

"We have to warn Red," she said.

And then I saw the light. Far away above the roofs, in the direction of the laundry. One light in a window. Steady. Our signal. Withdraw. Red was warning us. Only we had already finished. Or perhaps something worse was only beginning.

The light in the laundry window burned far away, above the rooftops and beyond a dense web of alleys, small, yellowish, stubborn, perfectly innocent to anyone who did not know that it meant: run, leave everything, withdraw, something has gone wrong.

A steady light.

Not two brief coverings. Not the signal for guards. Not the absence of any sign, meaning we should continue. One still, wrong light in the window of the place where Red had gone with Liam to speak to Siobhan, not to walk into another trap with Maeve's name driven through its centre like a nail into a coffin.

For a moment no one moved.

Even Colm, who until then had looked like a man made entirely of haste, stood motionless beneath the old brewery wall, the sack slipping from his shoulder, his face turned towards the light.

Eamon wiped his mouth on his sleeve after that miserable bout of sickness and stared in the same direction with the expression of someone only now truly understanding that signals adults play with may mean someone's death, not merely a change of street. Moira held the blue folder to her chest, while her free hand went instinctively to the hidden page bearing Brid Tierney's name and the word Galway, as though she needed to be sure the document still existed, that we had not invented it in the running, the smoke, the panic, and the stench of the tannery.

I looked at the light. And I felt something inside me go very quiet. Not calm. Quiet.

It was the silence that comes when fear is too large to run about one's head, so it sits down motionless and begins to watch.

"We have to go to her," I said.

Moira turned her head at once.

"No."

"Do not start."

"Nell, the signal means withdraw. She is telling us not to go that way."

"Perhaps she means she has to withdraw. Perhaps she is being followed. Perhaps Siobhan warned her. Perhaps..."

"Perhaps that is precisely why we cannot go there."

"Moira."

"No." Her voice was quiet but hard, harder than before, harder even than when she had aimed the pistol at Ashford. "If we run to the laundry now with Ashford, Reilly, the warehouse men, and perhaps Tierney behind us, we will kill Red before we manage to warn her. We have the documents. We have proof. We have Ashford's name. We have Galway. If she gave the signal, then she ordered us to survive with what we found."

It was sensible. I hated her for it for a full three seconds. Perhaps four.

"And if it was him?" I asked. "If Ashford sent a message about Maeve? If Red heard it?"

Colm finally moved.

"What message about Maeve?"

I looked at him sharply.

"You tell me. You work for Liam, do you not?"

"Sometimes."

"That is an answer they apparently ought to embroider on cradles in this city."

Colm narrowed his eyes but did not bite back. He was perhaps thirty, with a hard, long face, a scar beneath one ear, and the look of a man who preferred counting roads to counting people. He did not look stupid. That helped. A little. Nor did he look like someone I would trust with my own coat, but my standards of trust had lately fallen so low they probably had to be dredged from a canal.

"Liam told me to watch the shrine," he said. "The boy was meant to be the sign. With an onion."

At this he gave Eamon a very pointed look.

Eamon hunched in on himself.

"They took me."

"I can see that."

"The guard took the onion."

Colm closed his eyes for a second, as though praying for patience with a world in which a vegetable could have operational consequences.

"Not now. What message?"

Moira answered before I could say something profoundly unhelpful.

"Ashford ordered Eamon to tell Liam that Nell is in danger. And that the message came from a man who knows where Maeve is."

Colm froze.

That was not the reaction of a man hearing a stranger's name.

"What?" he whispered.

"You know her," I said.

I did not ask.

Colm looked at me, then at Moira, then back towards the light.

"Maeve is dead."

"Red thinks so too."

"No." His voice hardened. "She does not think it. Maeve died. I was there afterwards. I saw the body."

The words struck me harder than they should have, because after all I knew the story only from Red's telling, but Red's stories were not ordinary stories. They had blood in the seams.

"Ashford is lying," Moira said.

"Of course he is lying," Colm replied. "But if Liam hears that, he will understand that someone is digging into that night. If Red hears..."

He did not finish. He did not need to. We all looked at the light. One. Steady.

"We have to warn Liam," Colm said. "Not Red. Liam. If he is with her, he may be able to pull her away."

The thought of Red allowing Liam to pull her away from anything connected with Maeve was so naive it was almost beautiful.

"Best of luck," I said.

Colm looked at me.

"You have known her a short time."

"Long enough."

"I knew her before you did."

That ought to have stung. It did. I hated that it did.

I was tired, bruised, filthy, with Moira holding a folder full of evidence, an Englishman called Ashford at our backs, Eamon without an onion, and Red somewhere in the dark, yet some stupid little part of me still found time to be jealous of Red's former life, of people who had known her name before she became fire in a boiler room for me. Human beings are truly revoltingly good at doing several of the worst things at once.

"Splendid," I said. "Then you know her well enough to know I will not leave her in a trap."

"If you go now, you will walk into the next one."

"At least I shall be consistent."

Moira seized my arm more firmly than before.

"Nell. Listen to me. The documents have to reach somewhere safe. If Red returns and we lose that page, all of this will have been for nothing. If Red does not return..."

Her voice faltered on the words.

I did not let her finish.

"She will."

"Exactly. Which is why we must keep what we found, so that she has something to come back and continue for."

I hated that logic. I hated it because it was good. Colm made the decision faster than we did.

"We go to the second hideout. Not Thomas Street. Someone may already be waiting there if Ashford knew the routes. I have a place by the stables behind the brewery. Briefly. An hour. Perhaps two. From there I will send a boy to Liam."

"No!" Eamon almost squeaked. "I am not going again!"

Colm looked at him.

"Not you. You have lost too much today already."

"It was an onion!"

"It was a signal."

"The guard took it!"

"And now some representative of authority is probably standing somewhere with an onion in his pocket, and we must live with the consequences."

"Stop arguing about the onion," Moira hissed. "For God's sake."

Under normal circumstances the exchange would have been ridiculous. Under ours it was too, which proved only that circumstances had long since abandoned any sense of propriety.

Colm led us through another passage, this time down towards the river, then sideways across a yard full of empty crates and stinking sacks, and on through a gate so low we had to duck.

Dublin seemed to multiply at every corner, expanding not in streets but in cracks, secret shortcuts, back doors, holes in walls, as though the true city existed not on maps but in the memory of those who had been running long enough. At one point we passed two drunken men singing beneath a wall, then a woman with a basket who, on seeing Colm, lifted her chin slightly and turned, shielding us with her own body until we had passed. She did not ask. She did not need to. In this country, solidarity often seemed to look like pretending not to see what had to be saved.

The second hideout proved not to be a house but a room above a stable, low-ceilinged, warm from the animals below, smelling of hay, leather, wet wood, and horses' breath. After days of cells, sewers, ports, and cellars it was almost luxurious, though one horse beneath us snorted so loudly that it plainly had its own opinion on clandestine activity and considered us amateurs.

Colm shut the door, barred it with a beam, then turned to us.

"Give me the documents."

Moira stepped back at once.

"No."

"I need to see what you have."

"You? No."

Colm looked at her in irritation.

"Woman, we have no time."

"Exactly why I will not hand them to a man who appeared five minutes ago with a sack and claims to know Liam."

Colm turned to me.

"Is she always like this?"

"Usually more sensible than the rest of us. It is exhausting, but useful."

Moira took out the folder but did not hand it to Colm. She set it on an overturned crate, opened it, and began laying out the sheets in the light of a small lamp which Colm lit after a long hesitation. The flame was low, muffled, shielded by metal, giving enough light to read but not enough to betray the window.

"Here," she said, pointing to the missing page. "Brid Tierney. Entered as a kitchen maid, private transport, destination Galway. Ashford's signature. But there is something else."

We all bent over the paper.

Eamon too, though Colm pulled him back by the collar.

"Do not touch."

"I am not touching!"

Moira moved her finger lower.

"There are other names here. Four women. Two without full details. One marked 'M. Kavanagh', one 'E. Ward'. Beside them, the same day, the same transport. And here..."

Her finger stopped on a small mark in the margin. An eye above a wave. The same symbol we had seen on the courtyard wall.

"I saw that," I said. "On the wall. The eye above the wave."

Colm swore under his breath.

"What is it?" Moira asked.

"I do not know for certain."

"Again?"

"I said I do not know for certain. But I have heard of the mark. People from the west spoke of it in whispers. Some call it 'The Watching Tide'. Or the Floating Eye. Something like that. Not a gang. Not an ordinary network. More like brokers. People who make people disappear."

"Traffickers," Moira said.

Colm grimaced.

"Yes."

"And they operate in Galway?"

"Not only there. But if the mark appears beside a transport to Galway, it means someone receives them there."

Galway once again dropped into the middle of our road like a stone one is bound to trip over despite seeing it from a distance.

"Red has to know," I said.

"Yes," Moira replied. "But she cannot hear it together with the lie about Maeve."

Colm went to the small window and looked out cautiously.

"I will send someone for Liam. If Red lit the signal, they may already have withdrawn from the laundry. Or they are on their way."

"Or they are not," I said.

No one answered.

Because we all knew it.

Eamon was sitting against the wall now, his arms around his knees. He looked younger than before, perhaps because he had lost his cap, perhaps because his role as messenger had collapsed along with the onion, leaving only a boy who no longer wanted to be anyone's instrument.

I went over and crouched beside him.

"Eamon."

He looked at me suspiciously.

"I am not carrying any message."

"I am not asking you to."

"Good."

"I want to know whether you have seen that sign. The eye above the wave."

He went pale.

So he had.

"Where?" I asked.

He was silent.

"Eamon, if this concerns Brid..."

"I do not know Brid."

"But you know the sign."

He lowered his head.

"On crates."

Colm turned at once.

"What crates?"

Eamon pressed his lips together.

"Eamon," Colm said more sharply.

The boy hunched down, but answered:

"At the old quay. Not the main one. The one no one goes to after dark. Sometimes they make me carry small parcels. I did not know what was in the crates."

"Who makes you?" Moira asked.

"Reilly sometimes. Sometimes one of Ashford's men. Sometimes..."

He looked at Colm and stopped.

"Say it," I said.

"Sometimes Oisín's men were there too."

Silence.

Colm clenched his fists.

"You are lying."

"I am not!"

"Oisín does not work with Ashford."

"I do not know who he works with! I saw his men. That is all."

Móira looked at the papers, then at Colm.

"That may be the point of overlap. Perhaps that is why Oisín wants the page. Not to discover the truth, but to find out who is using his routes. Or to hide that his own men are already tangled in it."

Colm shook his head.

"Say that to Oisín without proof and you will end up in the river."

"I have no intention of telling him anything without proof," Móira replied.

"And with proof?"

"Not immediately then either."

I looked at her with approval.

"Móira, you are beginning to sound like a criminal."

"That is your fault."

"I am proud."

She did not smile. Her eyes remained fixed on the page.

"You do not understand. If the sign leads to the old quay and Brid was sent to Galway, the transport may not have left yet. Or the documents may suggest Galway while the person is still here, waiting for the next stage."

My heart leapt into my throat.

"You think Brid could be in Dublin?"

"I think documents often lie before people do. If Galway was entered, it might mean the final destination, an intermediate point, or a false trail. We need to know when the transport was meant to leave."

She shifted the page.

"The date is two months old."

Hope shrank at once.

"Two months," I said.

Móira did not lift her eyes from the paper.

"But there is an annotation here. A second one. Smaller. 'Held. Reason: inspection.' And a new date. Three days ago."

Colm moved closer.

"Three days ago?"

"Yes. Transport resumed after passage was confirmed. That means..."

She stopped.

"What?" I asked.

"It means Brid may have been held somewhere for weeks. And she may only have been moved now. Or she is about to be moved at any moment."

At that instant a horse below the stable neighed sharply. Colm extinguished the lamp at once. In the darkness we all froze. Voices sounded below. Not ours. Not calm. Someone had entered the stable.

Footsteps on wood. A man's voice, muffled but clear:

"Check upstairs. The girls may have gone with Colm."

Eamon covered his mouth with his hand.

Moira folded the documents in one swift movement, slipped the page beneath her stays, and pushed the folder under the hay in the corner. Colm drew a knife. I tightened my grip on my own little blade, which in the darkness seemed more pathetic than ever.

Footsteps on the stairs. Slow. Heavy. Red was not there. Liam had not returned.

And we, with a document leading to Galway, an old traffickers' mark, and a boy who knew too much, were shut upstairs again, waiting for someone to open the door.

The footsteps on the stairs were of the kind that leave little room for philosophy, because philosophy, however much one respects it, is rarely useful when a stranger is coming up wooden steps towards your hiding place and you are standing in darkness with a knife better suited to cutting cheese than stopping history.

Colm had put out the lamp so quickly the flame did not even have time to whimper, and the room above the stable was left with nothing but night, heavy and close, smelling of hay, horse sweat, and fear which, for once, did not belong to me alone.

Moira stood motionless by the crate, the papers hidden beneath her clothes and the pistol in her hand, but the barrel was lowered, because after the warehouse courtyard she knew very well that a shot does not end a matter, it merely opens the next door, usually onto a worse view. Eamon crouched against the wall, hugging his knees as though he might shrink to the size of guilt and vanish between the boards. I stood by the door, not because it was a sensible place, but because fate apparently enjoyed arranging me beside entrances through which troublesome people came.

The footsteps were close now. One man. Perhaps two below.

A voice beneath the stairs said something indistinct, then a horse neighed and struck a hoof against the boards, and for a moment I thought that if I survived the night I would learn to appreciate animals, because at least when they panic they do it honestly.

Colm raised his knife and stood beside the frame with his body pressed to the wall so that whoever entered would not see him at once. Moira moved sideways behind the overturned crate. I wanted to do something equally sensible, but at that moment Eamon made a small strangled sound, something between a breath and a sob, and I instinctively put a hand on his shoulder before I had time to decide whether comforting a child during an ambush was a strategic act or merely another sign of my professional decline.

The handle moved. The door opened slowly. In the dark gap I first saw a hat. Then the shadow of a face.

Then I heard a whisper:

"Colm, if you stab me, I swear I shall come back from the grave and move your boots every day."

Liam. Colm swore so softly it must have cost him enormous discipline, and lowered the knife. Red came in behind Liam.

Or perhaps fell in, because although she was trying to look as though everything were under control, her coat was torn at the sleeve, her scarf had slipped from her hair, one cheek was muddy, and her breathing heavier than she wished to admit. She was alive. Standing in front of me. In one piece, at least as much as Red ever looked like one piece. For one second all my words, that unbearable rabble of sentences, comparisons,

and insults, deserted me like a cowardly army, and only a stupid, simple, almost painful feeling of relief remained.

Red saw me. Saw Moira. Saw Eamon.

She saw the documents, the pistol, Colm's knife, and the darkness in which we all stood like thieves inside our own misfortune.

"You are alive," she said.

"I was about to say the same," I replied, finding my voice again, though it sounded less steady than I would have liked.

For a moment we looked at one another and I think we both wanted to do something more than speak, but there were still people beyond the door, and in lives such as ours even relief had to queue behind safety.

Liam closed the door and dropped the bar into place.

"Our people are downstairs," he said quickly. "Two of Colm's men. Not pursuit. Yet."

Colm looked at him sharply.

"How did you know about the stable?"

"Because it is my stable."

Silence.

Even Red turned her head.

"Yours?" she asked.

Liam adjusted his coat as though the wet cloth at his sleeve had suddenly become fascinating.

"Not in the legal sense. In the practical one. I used to keep horses here for transports west. Then the place passed through three sets of hands, two honest only by port standards, and came back to people I know. Colm was to bring you here only if the route by the shrine was burned."

"You could have told us earlier," Red said.

"There are many things I could have told you earlier."

The sentence fell between them like an old knife.

Red stiffened.

Liam regretted it at once, but it was too late. Sometimes truth comes out of a person not because he is brave, but because he is tired of holding it between his teeth.

"Not now," Moira said.

And this time no one argued with her.

Red came towards me but stopped one step too far away, as though the last hour had taught her that every approach might be interrupted by a shot, a pursuit, or someone else's corpse hitting the floor.

"What happened?" she asked.

"That depends which catastrophe you want first."

"Nell."

Moira went to the makeshift table of an overturned crate and laid the papers on it. Her hands were still trembling, but her movements were exact, almost clerical, which in the circumstances was strangely comforting. When someone can put papers in order after a pursuit, a gunshot, and an escape through a cellar, one begins to believe

civilisation is not entirely dead, merely hiding for the moment beneath the stays of a former wardress.

"We have the missing page," she said. "And part of Ashford's folder. Not all of it, but enough to understand that Brid's transport was no ordinary transport, and that Ashford's signature is on the document."

Liam stepped closer.

"Ashford was there?"

"He was," I answered. "Elegant, English, revolting, knows my name, knows yours, knows Oisin, Tierney, Red, and apparently knows how to put his fingers into old wounds belonging to people he has never even met."

Red looked at me sharply.

"What does that mean?"

And there the problem stood in all its ugly splendour.

I did not want to tell her. Not here. Not like this. Not after she had only just returned alive from the laundry. But silence would have been worse, because Ashford's lie had already left his mouth, and things spoken in places like that have a habit of finding the proper ear, particularly when that ear belongs to someone who can be broken by them.

Liam understood before I spoke.

His face changed.

"Maeve," he said quietly.

Red turned towards him slowly.

The whole room froze.

"What about Maeve?" she asked.

Liam did not answer at once, so I did, because for some reason my life lately consisted of saying the worst things at the worst moments.

"Ashford told Eamon to carry a message. That he knows where Maeve is. It was bait. A lie."

Red did not move. She did not suddenly go pale. She did not shout. That was far worse. Her face became so still that for a second it looked like a mask cast from ash.

"A lie," she repeated.

Colm spoke first, carefully but firmly:

"A lie. I was there after the fire. Liam knows too. Ashford wants to move you from where you stand. He knows your history because every dirty man in this city has heard some version of it. He took the worst one and made a hook from it."

Red closed her eyes.

Only for a moment.

When she opened them, there was something so icy in them that Eamon shrank farther against the wall.

"Good," she said.

That word was not good.

That word meant Red had just put something inside herself aside for later, and later might involve a knife, fire, and very little mercy.

Liam spoke softly:

"Red..."

"No."

"He just..."

"I said no."

Liam fell silent.

And rightly so. Even I knew it. Sometimes the only thing one can do for a person who has been touched at the deepest part of a wound is not immediately put one's own fingers into it in the name of care.

Moira slid the document towards Red.

"We have to look at this practically."

Red laughed without sound.

"Practically."

"Yes. Because if we let Ashford use Maeve, Brid, your family, Galway, and Nell against us all at once, we shall lose before we begin choosing our own move."

It worked. Not because it was gentle. Because it was true. Red came to the table.

"Speak."

Moira pointed to the page.

"Brid Tierney is entered as a kitchen maid on a private transport to Galway. The document is signed by Ashford, under cover of St Martha's charitable foundation. Beside the names is the eye-above-the-wave mark. Eamon saw the same mark on crates by the old quay. It is possible the transport has not left yet, or that it was delayed and rescheduled. The date of the second annotation is three days ago."

Liam bent over the paper.

"That does not have to mean Brid is in Dublin."

"No," Moira said. "But it means the route passes through Ashford's people, not only Oisín's. And that Galway appears in the papers as either a destination or a screen."

Red said nothing, but I saw the word pass through her like a cold knife. Galway. No longer only her mother. Not her father. Not the home to which she might or might not return. Now Brid as well. Ashford. The mark. The transport. Liam took a deep breath.

"Oisín will be pleased that you have the page."

"Pleased?" I snorted. "He did not get the entire folder."

"He got more than he expected," Liam said. "The missing page, Ashford's signature, the mark, information about the old quay. He will be satisfied. Not delighted, because men like that reserve delight for profit without risk, but satisfied enough not to consider you a loss."

"How comforting that we remain a sound investment," I said.

Red looked at Liam.

"And Ashford?"

Liam rubbed a hand over his face.

"Ashford is not an ordinary official. If this is Henry Ashford, and everything suggests it is, he works at the junction between Customs, charitable foundations, and labour transports. He has contacts in Dublin, Liverpool, and probably Manchester. He pulls too many strings, far too many for Oisín simply to cut his throat in an alley and call the matter closed."

"So Oisín is afraid of him?" Moira asked.

"Oisín fears only losing money, influence, and control. Ashford can threaten all three. So Oisín will be careful. But now that he has a signature on the page, he can strike differently."

"How?"

Liam looked at the documents.

"Blackmail. Bribing someone higher up. Cutting a route. Releasing a rumour to the right people. Or the opposite, burying the affair and using it as a knife at Ashford's throat."

"So the truth about Brid could still be buried," I said.

"Yes."

Moira set her jaw.

"We cannot give Oisín everything."

Silence. The sentence mattered, and we all understood it. Colm turned towards her.

"If you keep a copy without Oisín knowing, you risk a great deal."

"Which is why we shall not keep the original," Moira said.

I looked at her.

And suddenly understood.

"You will copy it."

"Yes."

Red nodded slowly.

"A copy for us. The original for Oisín."

Liam looked at her.

"If he finds out..."

"He will not," Red said.

Moira was already taking paper, ink, and a pen from her bag, as though the entire situation were merely an unusually nervous clerical exercise. In the low light of the lamp Colm had lit again, she began copying the most important lines: Brid's name, the dates, the mark, the foundation's name, Ashford's signature, the annotations about the halted transport and its resumption. Her hand was quick, even, beautiful in its precision. Watching her, I thought the world was truly stupid if it had spent years making hands like those close prison bars instead of opening cases.

Red stood by the window and watched the street.

"Everyone knows already," she said after a moment.

No one asked who.

We knew.

Ashford knew I was in Dublin. Reilly knew. His men knew. Tierney had seen us with the packet. Siobhan knew. Oisín had known from the beginning. Brigid. Doyle. Keane. Liam. Colm. Eamon. Too many mouths. Too many eyes. Too many people with interests of their own.

"By morning half the underworld will know Nell Whitmore is in the city," Liam said. "By tomorrow evening the people at the port will know. A day later someone will sell it for money or a favour. If the English do not know yet, they soon will."

"Then we have to leave," I said.

"Yes," Red replied.

"For Galway," Eamon said softly, as though supplying an answer in a lesson.

We all looked at him.

The poor boy shrank at once.

"What? But that is where..."

"And precisely why everyone will assume that is where we are going," Moira said without lifting her pen from the paper.

Liam nodded.

"If Ashford has heard of Red's family, if Oisín knows about Galway, if the document points to Galway, if Tierney begins to think Brid was sent west, everyone will be watching the roads to Galway."

Red turned from the window.

"We cannot abandon Galway."

"No one is saying we do," Moira said. "We simply must not go there in the way everyone expects."

"Meaning?"

Liam went to the map Colm had pulled from beneath a loose board. It was older and stained, showing Dublin, the western roads, canals, several smaller towns, and routes which officially were probably not routes at all but mud with ambition.

"The simplest road west is by the main highways and merchants' carts. They will be watched. The canal too, if Ashford has men in transport. Smaller ports may be safer, but if anyone checks ships after what happened with Keane, they are out for several days."

"What remains?" I asked.

Colm pointed north-west of Dublin.

"Do not go straight to Galway. Go north first, as though you meant to reach Ulster or the farms beyond Drogheda. Then turn by the back roads with false papers, as women looking for harvest work or laundry work in houses. Slower, but less obvious."

Red studied the map.

"That lengthens the journey."

"Yes."

"And gives Ashford more time."

"It also gives him more wrong directions."

Moira added:

"We can also leave a trail suggesting we truly set off for Galway by the main road. A false one. Someone must see it, and someone must repeat it."

Liam looked at her with approval.

Red noticed immediately.

"Do not look at her like that."

"She is right."

"I know she is right. You need not look surprised."

Moira continued, ignoring both of them:

"If Oisín is to receive the original, we can let him believe we need his route to Galway. Let him prepare it. Let his men begin moving. Let Ashford and Tierney hear of it. Meanwhile, we go another way."

"Lie to Oisin," Colm said slowly. "Bold."

"No," Moira said. "Allow him to believe the thing he will decide is obvious. Safer than a lie."

I looked at her in delight.

"Moira, are you quite certain you were a wardress and not a minister of war?"

"Paper is easier than people."

"I disagree. Paper at least does not make obscene remarks."

Red came closer to the table.

"If we go north, when?"

"As soon as possible," Liam said. "Tomorrow before dawn at the latest. But not from here. This stable will not remain safe for long either. Do we move you to Brigid by morning, or to Doyle's place?"

"Not Brigid," Red said. "If someone knows about Thomas Street, Brigid will be next."

"Doyle?"

"Too close to the port," Moira said. "After the warehouse affair, the port will be hot."

Colm thought.

"There is a place outside the city. Not a house exactly, an old peat-drying shed by the road to Swords. No one lives there. You can wait a few hours, change clothes, and move on. If you go north, it is the right direction."

Liam nodded.

"That may work."

Red looked at him.

"Will you come with us?"

Liam did not answer at once.

That was an answer in itself.

"No," he said at last. "Not from the beginning. If I go, I bring too many eyes upon you. Too many people know my face in Dublin and on the western routes. I can prepare the first stage, then join later or leave you a man."

Red watched him with an unreadable face.

"You always leave people for later."

Liam took it without defence.

"This time I shall give you a choice."

"It is not a choice if every road stinks."

"No. But one may stink a little less."

Moira finished copying. She dusted the ink with sand, waited a moment, then folded the copy very small and slipped it into a slit beneath the cover of the prayer book. The original went back into the folder.

"The assignment is half completed," she said. "But with something Oisin will value. We only have to give it to him in a way that does not keep us in Dublin."

"Colm can deliver it," Liam said.

Colm looked at him as though he had just been handed the bill for someone else's sins.

"I can."

"Tell Oisín the girls have to vanish at once because Ashford already knows about Nell. Tell him they are waiting for his route to Galway, but not in the city. Do not say where."

"Oisín will ask."

"Of course he will."

"And?"

Liam looked at Red.

"Say Red refused to give the place because she trusts no one after the Ashford business. That will be believable."

"Because it is true," Red said.

Colm tucked the folder beneath his coat.

"And if Oisín orders me to find you?"

"You will find us too late," Moira said.

Colm looked at her with something between irritation and respect.

"I like you less with every sensible answer."

"That is common."

Below, one of the horses snorted, then someone knocked twice on the wall. Colm extinguished the lamp at once.

"My man. The street is clear, but not for long."

Red looked at me.

Only then did I realise I had been holding the knife so tightly all this time that my fingers had gone numb. I put it away slowly.

"Are you hurt?" she asked.

"Only my dignity. And my knee. And perhaps my relationship with onions."

She did not smile. She came closer, took my chin, and turned my face towards the light slipping through a crack in the boards. She was checking for cuts, bruises, traces of blood. The gesture was quick, practical, almost rough, but it affected me worse than the entire run, because Red's concern was never soft. It was like a hand stretched out of flame: burned, but real.

"Ashford saw you," she said.

"Yes."

"And he knows your name."

"Everyone knows my name lately. I am becoming sociable against my will."

"It is not funny."

"I know."

Her fingers released my chin, but she did not step away at once.

"Did he say anything else?" she asked quietly.

I did not want to say it.

But I could not leave it unsaid.

"He told me to ask you who truly betrayed Maeve."

In the darkness I saw Liam close his eyes. Red did not look at him. She did not look at anyone.

She stood perfectly still for a moment, then said:

"That is a lie too."

Too fast. Too sharp. Too much like a wound covered by a hand.

Liam spoke from the darkness:

"Red..."

"Not now."

"He will use it."

"I know."

"Not against me. Against you."

"I said I know."

There was no shouting in her voice now. There was exhaustion so old that for a moment I saw not Red from the boiler room, not Red with a knife, not Red with a song about Ireland, but a girl from years before standing in front of fire with someone dying in her arms and a question no one had ever allowed her to ask to the end.

We could not solve it now.

We must not.

Too many things were trying to tear us apart at once, and I, as the owner of this cursed head, would ordinarily have been the first to observe that if we added the full truth about Maeve, we would fall into pieces before reaching even the first village beyond Dublin.

Moira picked up her coat.

"We have to leave."

Practical. Cruelly practical. Thank God.

Colm opened the rear stable door, which led not onto the street but to a narrow strip behind the building.

"We go in pairs. First me and the boy. Then Moira and Nell. Red and Liam last, with a gap. If anyone stops the first pair, the rest do not come out."

"No," Red said. "I go with Nell."

Liam looked at her.

"That is the worst possible arrangement."

"I did not ask."

"Precisely why I am speaking."

Red stepped towards him.

"Enough people have tried to use her against me today already."

"And if you walk beside her, you confirm to everyone that it works."

That struck cleanly. Red stopped. She hated him for it. I could see that. But she knew he was right. Moira put a hand on my shoulder.

"I shall go with her. I shall get her there."

"You make me sound like an old trunk," I muttered.

"You are louder."

Red looked at Moira for a long time.

"If anything happens to her..."

"I know," Moira said.

"No. You do not."

Moira did not look away.

"I know enough not to allow it."

It was a strange exchange. Not tender, not sentimental, without a trace of sisterly softness. Yet something passed between them, some kind of recognition forged not from trust but from the fact that both had already done something for me, and both knew they had no right to fail.

Red nodded.

We went out.

The night was colder than before, as though Dublin, after all that running, had decided we required further sobering. Colm and Eamon disappeared first into the dark passage behind the stable. We waited, counting breaths. Then Moira moved and I followed, head lowered, hands hidden in the folds of my coat, conscious that somewhere behind me Red was walking separately, though everything in me wanted to turn and make certain she was truly there.

I did not turn.

Another miracle. Soon they will use me to frighten people in church.

We walked through a city that already knew too much, though it had not yet begun saying all of it aloud. We passed dark windows, closed gates, low walls, sleeping drunks, and women returning from night work with faces so empty that even shadows did not want to stay on them. Somewhere beyond a corner I heard a distant shout, then a whistle, then quick footsteps running the opposite way. Moira did not slow. Neither did I. If one stops at every scream in a city like this, one never reaches one's destination, and besides, one very quickly ends up without money, boots, or life.

We reached the little yard by the peat-drying shed before dawn.

The building stood beyond the city like a promise no one had kept. Low, dark, partly collapsed, with a roof crooked but intact, its stone walls steeped in the smell of peat, smoke, and damp. Around it lay emptiness. Not quite countryside yet, but no longer city. Dublin glowed behind us like a dirty stain of light, while ahead a dark road opened north.

Colm waited by the entrance. Eamon sat on a stone, pale and exhausted. A few minutes later Red arrived with Liam.

When I saw her in the doorway, something gave way in my chest so violently that I had to look aside and pretend to inspect my own coat. Very dignified. Entirely convincing. Almost.

Inside the drying shed Colm spread a piece of canvas on the ground. Moira sat down at once, took out the copied document, and checked that the damp had not ruined it. Red stood by the door, Liam against the opposite wall, and I thought that if anyone entered now, he would see not great rebels, not heroes, not the Manchester legend, not Red's old network, but a handful of people so exhausted that even sitting had become a negotiation with their own bones.

"At dawn," Liam said, "Colm will return to Oisín with the folder. He will say you are heading west, but not today. That you need Oisín's route. He will not say where you are. Oisín will be furious, but the page will occupy him."

"And Ashford?" Moira asked.

"Ashford will try to close the port and warehouses from his side. But he cannot do it too loudly, because then he reveals that he has lost something. That is our advantage."

"A small one," I said.

"Small advantages are still advantages."

Red looked at the map.

"We go north."

"Yes," Liam said. "Not to Galway. Not at once. First Swords, then the back roads. You will look like women seeking seasonal work, perhaps relations travelling to a sick aunt. We shall need a story."

"Just not another illness," I said. "Anne Doyle was sickly enough already."

Moirá looked at me.

"Illness is useful."

"Of course. Everything unpleasant has lately proved useful."

Red finally sat down against the wall.

"And Galway?"

Liam answered carefully:

"Galway later. Differently. While everyone is watching the western road, you disappear north. Then turn through the smaller villages, perhaps with help from Colm's people. If Brid truly is in Galway or on the road to Galway, you will reach it all the same. But not as the women everyone expects."

Red said nothing.

I could see what it cost her. Delay. Another detour. More waiting before she could see her mother, her father, the house, the past. But this time she did not protest. Perhaps because Brid also led to Galway. Perhaps because Ashford had touched Maeve and by doing so made this affair personal in a way even Red could no longer separate from her own road.

Eamon raised his head.

"And me?"

We all looked at him. Poor boy. Again. Colm sighed.

"You are not going back to the city for several days."

"What?"

"Reilly knows you were in the warehouse. Ashford knows you were the messenger. Liam knows you lost the onion."

"Stop with the onion!"

"Eamon," Liam said more gently, "you will go with Colm to people beyond Swords. You will wait there."

The boy looked as though he wanted to object, but had no strength left.

"So everyone is running," he said.

No one answered him. Because yes. That was precisely what we were doing.

Only this time escape was not simple. It was not running straight ahead, anything to get farther from bars, guards, a courtroom, or a port. This time escape had a direction both false and true. We were to leave behind a trail towards Galway while going north ourselves. We were to give Oisín enough truth to satisfy him and keep enough not to become his property. We were to evade Ashford before he closed Dublin like a trap. We were not to let the lie about Maeve break us. We were to remember Brid. We were to live.

A great many demands for people who had not yet eaten breakfast.

Red raised her eyes and looked at me through the dimness of the drying shed.

"North," she said.

I nodded.

"North."

"And then Galway."

"And then Galway."

Moirá closed the prayer book with the hidden copy of the document.

"If we live that long."

"Moirá," I said, "we truly must work on your talent for ending conversations."

"I am a realist."

"The worst kind of pessimist."

For the first time in many hours Red truly smiled. Briefly, faintly, but genuinely. Beyond the cracked roof of the drying shed the sky was beginning to pale. Not beautifully. Not poetically. Not like a promise. More like a dirty rag being wrung out over the world. But it was morning. And we were still alive.

CHAPTER XIII

The Ghosts of Manchester

Morning brought no relief. That must be said plainly, because people have the stupid habit of believing that once they have survived the night, the world ought to hand them some sort of reward at dawn, if only warmer light, a piece of bread without mould, or news that all their enemies have accidentally fallen into the river and left behind nothing but wet hats. Nothing of the kind happened. Dawn came ugly, pale and indifferent, seeping through the gaps in the roof of the old peat-drying shed like water through a badly stitched boot, and instead of warming our faces it merely showed more clearly how much we looked like people who had spent several days fleeing the law, lawlessness, their own decisions, and all the consequences at once.

I sat against the wall with my knees drawn to my chest, wrapped in a coat that smelled of smoke, damp and someone else's sweat, staring at my hands because I was already too tired of other people's faces. Moira dozed now and then over the prayer book, though not truly; she would sink into sleep for a handful of breaths and come back from it like someone dragged out of water by the hair. Red stood at the entrance even though Liam had told her three times that Colm was keeping watch and there was no movement on the road. Red could not leave a door to be merely a door. She had to guard it, as though every threshold in her life had already found time to betray her.

Liam had disappeared before dawn to give Colm his final instructions and make certain that Oisín received the folder at the right moment, in the right manner, and without the information he was not meant to receive. Eamon slept in a corner, curled beside a sack of peat, his face still childish despite all the filth people had tried to press into his hands along with an onion, messages and someone else's war. Looking at him, I thought the world had a particularly revolting talent for using children as little tools and then pretending to be surprised when they grew into people with a knife in their pocket and no one left to love.

I should have been asleep.

I was not.

Not because I was especially brave. Girls like me are not brave in the way people sing about beside fires. I was simply so tired that sleep had become suspicious, another ambush in which you could lose your vigilance and, with it, everything else. So I sat there, looked at my hands, and thought of Manchester.

Of Mother.

Of whether someone had already knocked at her door with questions, threats, or sympathy, which always smells worse than ordinary contempt because at least a contemptuous person does not pretend to have arrived with his heart in his hand. I saw her in my mind standing in the kitchen, her hands wet from washing up, her face going pale at the first name spoken by a strange man. Nell Whitmore. Your daughter. Escaped convict. Agitator. Murderess. Dangerous. Did she know I was alive? Did she think it

would be better if I were not? Was she proud? Terrified? Furious? Would she say again that my brother had spoken too, and what had it brought him?

My brother.

Tommy.

Dead, and yet more present by the day, as though death did not end a person at all but merely made him more convenient to summon whenever the living needed to explain something to themselves. How many times had I used him as a banner without asking whether he would have wanted to be one? How many times had I told myself I was proud of him when in truth I was furious that he had left me with an empty place at the table and a mother who measured every sharper word I spoke by the distance to his grave? Tommy was no saint. He was a boy with blood under his fingernails, a head full of pamphlets and a heart larger than his good sense. Perhaps that was why they killed him. The world cannot bear people who have hearts too large for bodies too poor.

Father.

Sitting motionless by the fire, imprisoned in a body that had betrayed him, with eyes that must once have been strong and now held only scraps of light. Had anyone told him? Had Mother sat beside him and thrown the news out of herself like a stone? Had he blinked? Had he understood? Somewhere beneath that silence, beneath the paralysis, beneath everything the factory had taken from him, or God, or one disguised as the other, was there pride in me? Or only pain, because his daughter had followed his son down the same road, only farther, deeper, all the way across the sea?

Greta. Milly. The girls from the pub.

The women from the boiler room, who might now be hearing that I had escaped, that someone had died, that the guards were hunting people, that interrogations would become harsher, that names would begin falling from mouths like teeth after a blow. What of them? What of those who had stayed behind? What of Greta, who had laughed with a revolver on the driver's box and then probably had to vanish again into a city where every informer knew somebody's poverty? Had she taken a truncheon because of my tongue? Had Milly escaped? Did Callum and his boys still have anywhere to return to? How many people would pay because I had never learned to keep quiet?

That question, though I admit it very unwillingly, was the worst.

Not because I had suddenly begun to regret. Regret would have been too simple, too comfortable, almost elegant. I did not regret standing up for Red. I did not regret striking Cedric. I did not regret telling the judge what I thought of his wig, his title and that entire theatre of justice smelling of old sweat and class rot. But a person can feel no regret and still see the ruins. A person can know she did something necessary and still count the faces of those she dragged along behind her, though she never gave them a choice.

My damned loose tongue.

How many times had Mother told me it would kill me one day?

It turned out she had been close to the truth; only the scale had escaped her. My tongue had not killed me. Yet. It had stirred up an entire city, then a factory, then a court, then a prison, then a port, and now, according to Oisín, perhaps half of England.

Such a small wet piece of meat in the mouth, and look how much it can set alight if a person does not keep it behind her teeth.

"You are thinking too loudly," Red said from the doorway.

I looked up.

She stood half turned away from me, but she was no longer watching the road. She was watching me. Her face was tired, shadows lay beneath her eyes, and yet she was there, whole, alive, still possessed of that stubbornness capable of driving a person mad and keeping her alive in the same moment.

"Is that a new complaint?" I asked.

"An old one. Only now you are not using your mouth."

"I am trying to grow."

She came closer and sat beside me against the wall, not touching me, but near enough that I could feel the warmth of her arm through my coat. For a moment we both watched the grey light in the gaps of the roof.

"You are thinking about Manchester," she said.

It was not a question.

"Yes."

"Your family?"

"Them too."

"The ones who stayed behind?"

I nodded.

Red rested her hands on her knees.

"You did not do this to them."

I gave a short, humourless laugh.

"That sounds beautiful. False, but beautiful."

"Nell."

"I am not saying the authorities are innocent. I am not saying Cedric is not a brute, Briggs a piece of filth, the court a farce, and the Empire a great fat parasite in a top hat. All of that remains true. But I was the one who shouted. I painted the walls. I struck him. I stood in court and said things that are probably being repeated through the factories now in whispers or shouts. And other people may pay for that."

Red was silent for a while.

"Yes," she said at last.

I looked at her, surprised.

She did not comfort me. She did not deny it. She did not smear some cheap balm over the wound.

"Yes," she repeated. "They may pay. They are paying already. That is what happens with any word that truly moves something. If you want to say only things without consequences, you must talk about the weather, boots and the price of sausage. And even then someone may get punched if the sausage was too expensive."

"Very heartening."

"I am not here to hearten you."

"I noticed."

"But if you start thinking now that it would have been better to stay silent, you will do half their work for them. That is exactly what they want. They want you to see every bruise on another person's face and tell yourself: this is my fault, I should have kept quiet. No. Your guilt is yours. Their violence is theirs. Do not mix the two too thoroughly or it will strangle you."

I looked at her for a long time.

That was Red in her purest form: never console with a lie, only hand over the truth even when it had thorns, and expect a person to possess enough decency not to choke on it.

"And if I truly have destroyed someone?" I asked.

Red looked towards the door.

"Then you have to make it mean something."

There was no mercy in that. But there was a road. Uncomfortable, filthy, uphill, like all our roads.

Moira woke a little later, or rather stopped pretending to be asleep. She sat up, adjusted her cap and immediately reached for the prayer book containing the hidden copy of the page. She had the face of a person who, on waking, does not ask where she is but what must be saved first. Colm returned not long afterwards with pieces of dry bread, some cheese, two canteens of water and news that one of his men had taken the folder to Oisín through an intermediary rather than directly, and that Oisín had accepted it without comment, which in the language of men like him could mean anything from "I am pleased" to "I have not yet decided whom to have drowned."

"But he has not ordered anyone searched for immediately," Colm added, sitting on an overturned beam. "That is something."

"It means the document has occupied him," Moira said.

"Or that he is counting the money he can make from it," I muttered.

"Both," Liam replied as he came in just after Colm, as though he had been waiting for a sufficiently cynical sentence before making his entrance. "Oisín is satisfied. Not delighted, because the rest of the folder is missing and Ashford knows he has lost the page, but he has the signature, the mark and Bríd's name. That is enough for him to begin putting pressure on Ashford's people while pretending he is doing it out of concern for the girl."

"And in truth?" Red asked.

Liam shrugged.

"In truth he is doing it because someone has moved in on his routes, his influence and his profits. Bríd matters to him because she may prove that someone is stealing people from under his nose or using his name for trade that does not pass through his pocket. Not because he has a heart."

"So the transport matters because money is involved," I said.

Moira shook her head.

"Not only that. If Ashford, the Saint Martha charitable foundation, the customs offices and that eye-above-the-wave mark are connected, then this is not about one girl. Bríd may be one of many. These transports may operate as charitable work schemes, help for poor women, domestic service, kitchens, laundries, care work. On paper

everything looks legal, or at least respectable. In practice women can disappear into houses, ports, farms, ships, debts. Without names. Without the right to return."

"And if someone has the register..." Red began.

"They can prove the route," Moira finished. "Or control it. Or sell the evidence to whoever pays the most. That is why Ashford wanted to burn the page. That is why Oisín wants to possess it. That is why Tierney is looking for Bríd. Each has a different reason, but the page is one of the few traces saying she did not simply vanish on her own."

Silence fell in the drying shed.

This time it was not empty.

It was full of women we did not know. Full of girls entered as kitchen maids, servants, laundresses, orphans. Full of mothers who may have signed papers believing they were sending their daughters to work, not into a cage with a prettier word painted on it. Full of people who looked at poverty and saw not tragedy but logistics.

Red stood.

"So this is not only about Galway."

"No," Moira said.

"But Galway is part of it."

"Yes."

Red looked at Liam.

"We go north?"

"Yes. The plan stands. Colm will spread word that you are preparing to travel west by one of Oisín's routes. Oisín himself will help the rumour grow because he will want Ashford looking where he chooses to point him. You will go the opposite way. At least at first."

"And if Oisín realises we are deceiving him?" I asked.

Liam looked at me.

"Then we shall have another problem."

"How lovely. I was beginning to fear the list was running out."

The plan, though already sketched out before, now began to acquire flesh, sweat and dirt. We could not simply step onto the road and trust that headscarves and exhausted faces would serve as a disguise. Colm was to secure a cart travelling with empty peat sacks towards Swords, where an acquaintance of his kept a small farm and sometimes closed his eyes to people who needed to disappear more than they needed to pay. Liam was to return to Dublin and leave Oisín a false trail suggesting that three women were waiting for a western route but were too cautious to reveal their location. Eamon was to travel with Colm because, after the business with Ashford, he could no longer remain in the city, though he himself claimed he would rather sell herrings by now, and I decided that the herrings probably worked for one network or another as well and had their own passwords.

Moira made another copy of the most important information, shorter and encoded in the form of a prayer. "Bríd" became "the Blessed One", Galway "the green shore", Ashford "the fair lord", and the eye above the wave "the watching water". As I watched her pen move across the paper, I thought that if she ever wrote a gospel, half the saints would turn out to be smugglers and every miracle would have footnotes.

Red checked the weapons, the knife and the money. I was given the task of repacking the food and not losing anything, which sounded insultingly simple until I remembered that the previous evening I had lost a basket, an onion and almost a boy, so perhaps outrage was not my strongest position.

Everything was going far too smoothly.

And that was precisely when the news arrived.

It was brought by a boy perhaps two years older than Eamon, thin and freckled, cap in hand and breathing so raggedly that he looked as though he had run all the way from Dublin, or perhaps from a world that had suddenly begun burning again. Colm let him in after a brief knock, and Liam immediately moved away from the wall because the boy's face said more than his mouth.

"From Manchester," the boy gasped. "News from Manchester."

My heart rose into my throat. Not mine alone. Red looked at me but said nothing.

"Speak," Liam said.

The boy swallowed.

"It has started again. In the factories. Around the boiler rooms. At Preston and Lowell and two other works. People did not come in for their shift. Or they came and stood still. Women first, then the foundry boys. They painted walls. Handed out sheets. Someone set fire to the store where wage fines were recorded. The guards went in. There was a fight. People are hurt. Maybe dead. The newspapers are already writing about it."

I was not breathing.

The boy looked at me as though only then recognising a face from a story.

"They are calling them the Manchester Martyrs."

The words struck the drying shed and stayed there with us. Manchester Martyrs. The martyrs of Manchester. I did not know whether I wanted to laugh, be sick, or hit someone in the face.

"Who?" I asked, but my voice sounded foreign. "Who was involved?"

The boy looked at Liam as though seeking permission, then back at me.

"Callum. The Irishman. The one from the escape. They say he was seen near a printing shop and then by the factory. Spreading slogans. People say it is because of the girl from the boiler room. Because of you. That if they sentenced you and did not break you, then they will not stand quietly either. That what happened in court, in prison, during the escape... it carried on. They swore by your words."

My words.

Again.

Red took a step towards me but stopped, as though she knew she must not touch me then because I might crumble or turn to stone, and neither was convenient for travel.

"What exactly are the newspapers saying?" Moira asked, practical even while I felt my insides turning to ash.

The boy drew a crumpled scrap from his pocket. Not an entire newspaper, only a torn piece, damp from rain and hands.

Liam took it, read quickly, then looked at me with something I could not bear.

Pity.

"Read it," I said.

"Nell..."

"Read it."

He did.

Not all of it. Only fragments. About disturbances inspired by "the subversive legend of Nell Whitmore". About workers refusing labour in protest against the sentence and deportation. About Irish agitators inflaming resentment. About women painting on walls: "She Who Did Not Keep Silent." About arrests. Injured guards. About the authorities using the name "Manchester Martyrs" with contempt while people were taking it up with pride.

My cell came back to me at once. The words on the wall. SHE WHO DID NOT KEEP SILENT.

I had thought then that I was leaving a mark for myself, for Lizzie, Margaret, for the women behind bars. Not for a city. Not for factories. Not for people I would never see.

And yet the words had left the wall. And gone. Like rats from a burning building. Like sparks from the boiler room. Like disease. Like hope. I did not know which was worse. I sat down slowly on a sack of peat. My legs had suddenly decided not to hold me.

"How many?" I asked. "How many arrested?"

The boy shook his head.

"I do not know. They say many. That they are looking for Callum. That Greta..."

He froze.

Red turned to him.

"What about Greta?"

"I do not know for certain."

"Speak."

"They say she was by one of the walls. That she escaped. Or that they caught her. Different reports."

Different reports.

The cruellest kind of news, because it gives neither grief nor relief, only forces a person to imagine every version at once.

Greta running through a street. Greta with a truncheon across her back. Greta in a cell. Greta laughing in a guard's face. Greta dead. No. I could not. Red crouched in front of me. This time she touched my knee.

"Nell."

I looked at her.

"You said that if I destroyed someone, I had to make it mean something."

Her face hardened because she heard in my voice what she herself had handed me.

"Yes."

"And what if it already means too much?"

She did not answer at once.

No one did.

Beyond the wall a horse snorted softly. Dawn was greying. The road north waited. Galway drew farther away and closer at the same time. Ashford had our faces. Oisín had the original. We had a copy, a plan, a trace of Bríd, a false route and news that

Manchester was burning again from words that had once left my mouth before I had learned to fear their weight.

At last Moira said quietly:

"It means we cannot let ourselves be caught."

I looked at her.

"Because if they catch you now," she continued, "they will make an example of you. If you disappear and survive, you remain a problem for them. And for those people... perhaps proof that not everything ends at the gallows."

Liam folded the newspaper scrap and handed it to me. I did not want to take it. I took it. The paper was damp, rough, dirty from other people's hands. My name stood there in black and looked foreign. Nell Whitmore. Not a daughter. Not a sister. Not a worker. Not the girl from the boiler room. A legend, a crime, a contagion, a spark. All at once. I clenched my fingers around the paper until it crumpled.

"We move," I said.

Red watched me carefully.

"Now?"

"Now."

"Are you sure?"

I gave a short laugh.

"No. But certainty is apparently a luxury for people who do not have their own martyrs in the newspapers."

I stood.

My knees were still weak, but I stood.

Moira hid the prayer book. Red fastened her coat. Liam looked at Colm, and Colm nodded like a man who knew that from this moment every minute spent in one place was an invitation to pursuit.

Manchester was burning again. Not with fire I could touch. Not with smoke that bit my lungs. But it was burning. And for the first time since the escape I understood truly that I was no longer running only from them. I was also running from what I had become.

We left the peat-drying shed before the day had fully decided whether it wished to be day at all or merely a lighter variety of night, and I thought then that in this part of the world even dawn arrived uncertainly, like a worker late for his shift, aware that he would be struck for it anyway and merely unsure by whom.

There was no grand departure, no solemn dramatic moment in which a person turns towards the city, bids farewell to her old life and promises herself she will never be the same again. Real escapes look less dignified. A person adjusts a coat that is too heavy, shifts frozen fingers on the strap of a bag, checks whether the bread is wrapped properly, whether the coins do not clink, whether the knife is slipping from its hiding place, whether the one piece of paper on which too many lives have suddenly come to depend has not soaked through with damp. Then she steps into the mud. Without music. Without a blessing. Sometimes only a horse snorts behind her as though it has an opinion on the whole matter and has decided human beings are not worth wasting it on.

Colm led, with Eamon several paces behind him because after the events of the night the boy clung to him as a person clings to the nearest wall while a building collapses, even if he does not trust the bricks. Moira walked beside me, quiet and closed in upon herself, the prayer book beneath her coat and the document hidden so deep it was as though she wanted to stitch the truth into her own ribs. Red walked a little behind, not from weakness but because from the rear she could watch us all at once and see whether the world had decided to reach a hand out of a ditch. Liam did not come with us at the start. That had been agreed before we left. He was to return to Dublin, muddle our tracks, tell Oisín as much as was necessary and withhold what was forbidden.

It sounded sensible.

I hated sensible plans almost as much as stupid ones, because lately both kinds had developed the identical habit of collapsing at the worst possible moment.

The road north was not a road in the romantic sense, not some broad sweep through green fields like a promise of freedom. It was rather a succession of wet tracks, side paths, wheel-rutted lanes and muddy shortcuts between stone walls that looked as though they had been built not to divide land but to remind people that even the landscape had boundaries. Low, dirty-white mist hung over the fields, moving slowly across the ground like a sick breath. The grass was wet, boots sank, coats took on damp, and the wind from the sea pushed beneath our clothes with all the intimacy of a drunk man at a bar.

For the first hour almost no one spoke.

That is to say, I had enough sentences in my head to supply a small newspaper, but none seemed worth uttering. Manchester walked with me. Not behind me. Not in memory. With me. In the mud, beneath my coat, in the weight of the newspaper I still carried folded against my chest though I should never have taken it, because the paper was like a wound a person carries herself merely to check whether it still hurts.

Manchester Martyrs.

The farther I moved from the city, the larger it became. Absurd. The factory, the boiler room, the court, the cell, the words on the wall, Greta at her tankard, Milly with that laugh of hers cracked like an old pane of glass, Callum and his Irish boys who had only been meant to help us escape and now were apparently carrying forward something I could not even name. Martyrs. A huge, fat, churchly word, unpleasantly scented with sanctity and blood. I hated it at once. Martyrs are convenient for those who survive, because you can put them on a banner instead of asking whether they wanted to die. And yet somewhere back in Manchester people had taken the word and begun to carry it as though it belonged to them, as though it did not sound like a nail driven into a coffin lid.

I thought of Mother.

Had she heard the name already? Had some neighbour brought the gossip under the pretence of concern, wearing that particular expression of women who say "I do not wish to interfere" and then wade elbow-deep into somebody else's life? Had Mother stood in the doorway listening about martyrs, about Nell, about Manchester, about Callum, and felt pride, or only that old heavy despair of women from whom the world first takes a son, then a husband, then peace, and finally tries to turn a daughter into a symbol as well?

I thought of Father.

His motionless hand. Cold skin. Eyes fixed on the fire. Perhaps someone had read him the newspaper. Perhaps not. Perhaps he sat in silence while Mother wept soundlessly by the stove because she no longer had the strength to cry loudly enough for the neighbours to hear. Perhaps my father, imprisoned in a body that had betrayed him, understood better than anyone what rebellion without the possibility of movement meant. Perhaps somewhere in his mind there still lived the man who had once carried sacks, laughed at Tommy's jokes and lifted me as a child so high that I believed the world ended at the ceiling. Or perhaps none of that remained. Perhaps my beautiful thoughts were only another pamphlet pasted to the wall of death.

I thought of Tommy because there was no way not to.

Tommy died before he had time to become cautious. That is the ugliest privilege of young rebels: to die while their faith still looks clean, leaving everyone else the dirty task of surviving the consequences. Sometimes I was angry with him. I told no one. Mother would have made blasphemy of it, Father could not answer, and I did not want to watch my own words stain the only place in the house still pretending to be sacred. But it was true. I was angry that he died. Angry that he left me with his legend, his papers, his shadow, that eternal comparison: Tommy spoke, Nell speaks too; Tommy died, Nell will go the same way. In the end I did. Only farther, more foolishly, across the sea.

And Greta? I did not know whether she was alive. That sentence walked beside me most quietly and hurt the most.

After a while Red slowed and came level with me. She did not speak at once. That was unlike her, or perhaps exactly like her and I simply did not yet know all her silences. Red did not comfort easily. She did not scatter words as I did, did not pelt the world with metaphors, did not turn pain into a performance. When she finally spoke, it was usually brief and landed in the bone.

"Do not carry all of Manchester," she said.

I snorted softly.

"Where am I supposed to put it? In a ditch?"

"For a while. Yes."

"Easy for you to say."

"No."

I looked at her.

Red kept her eyes ahead, on the track churned by wheels, on the mist, on Colm leading us between the walls.

"It is not easy," she said. "But if you carry everyone at once, you will fall before anyone catches you."

There was no retort in it. No ornament. Only truth, plain and unwilling, like a slice of dry bread handed to someone who would have preferred a feast.

"And if others have already fallen because of me?"

"Then walk all the more."

That was Red entire. Brief. Brutal. Enough.

After the second hour of walking Colm called a halt beside an old wall behind a clump of black bushes that looked as though even birds avoided them on moral grounds.

We were to eat a little bread, drink, and wait for a peat cart to pass along the road and take us a short distance, provided the driver still believed Colm's money worth the risk. Naturally, "provided" had by now become a word larger than God in this affair.

Moira sat on a stone and took out the prayer book without opening it at once. She looked at the cover as though the very thought of the copied document beneath it weighed more than paper. Red stood a few paces away talking quietly with Colm. Eamon chewed bread without appetite, which I took as further proof that children who come into contact with history very quickly lose their natural respect for food.

"We need to put Bríd's case in order once more," Moira said.

Her voice was calm, dry, matter-of-fact. Exactly as it ought to be. Moira did not throw words in order to wound the world. She arranged them like evidence.

"Now?" I asked.

"Now. Before we go farther into the road and lose the chance to think."

I sat beside her.

"Go on."

She opened the prayer book, though not at the page containing the hidden copy. She simply held it on her lap as though at any moment she might pretend piety before someone who did not know her well enough to understand that she prayed chiefly to facts.

"The missing page matters for three reasons," she said. "First: names. Without a name a woman disappears as a person and becomes a category. Servant. Kitchen maid. Orphan. Laundress. The page restores Bríd as a particular person, with a date, a route, a signature and a notation."

I nodded.

Moira continued:

"Second: the chain. There is the Saint Martha foundation, which gives the appearance of charity. There is an official or agent, Ashford, who signs and passes the papers. There are the people handling transport, the port, warehouses, false places of employment. There are intermediaries like Oisín, or people exploiting his routes. There is the eye-above-the-wave mark, which may indicate a group receiving the women farther along. That page shows this is not a single abduction. It is passage through a system."

"And the third?"

Moira looked at me.

"Third: accountability. Ashford cannot simply kill everyone because the documents were legal. Or were meant to look legal. If he begins removing people too openly, he confirms that he has something to hide. He needs the matter to look like work, debt, assistance, transfer, mere poverty. That is why he lies, redirects, destroys pages and uses other people's wounds instead of immediately setting half the city on fire."

It was clear. Too clear. Legible as a whip mark.

"So Bríd matters because she may be a witness," I said.

"If she lives, yes. If she is dead, she may still be evidence that she was part of the route. But a living Bríd..."

Moira stopped, choosing her words carefully.

"A living Bríd could destroy the whole story of charity. She could say where she was taken, who received her, what was promised, what was signed on her behalf or forced from her. That is why Ashford does not want only the page. He does not want anyone reaching the girls on that list."

I looked at the mist.

It was easier to look into mist than truth.

"And Oisín?"

Moirá closed the prayer book.

"Oisín wants control of the evidence. He may use it against Ashford. He may help us if it profits him. He may sell silence for more than truth."

"So we have no one clean on our side."

"No."

She said it without drama.

Clean things, I thought, are for people with water, time and less history beneath their fingernails.

Red returned a moment later, and her face told me at once that the peat cart would not be our reward for sober analysis.

"Problem," she said.

"How wonderfully familiar," I muttered.

She did not smile.

"The driver is not coming."

Moirá stood.

"Why?"

Colm came up behind Red with the expression of a man obliged to deliver unpleasant news who would prefer the recipient not to possess a knife.

"Someone warned him. Or bought him. I do not know. His son brought word. Said the road north is already being watched by men asking about three women and a boy."

Eamon went pale.

"Me too?"

Colm looked at him.

"Yes."

That was the first blow.

The plan to go north ceased to be secret before we had even properly stepped into the mud.

Red turned towards Liam, but Liam was not with us, which suddenly became a problem in itself. When a person is absent, it is very easy to turn his absence into evidence.

"Who knew?" Red asked.

Colm clenched his jaw.

"Liam. Me. Two of my men. The driver. The messenger boy. Perhaps Brigid, if Liam told her anything. Perhaps Oisín, if he guessed from the folder."

"So half of damned Dublin," Red said.

She did not shout. That was worse. Moirá immediately looked at the bag.

"We need to check the money and papers."

Red understood before the rest of us.

She pulled the bundle from her shoulder, threw it on the ground and began going through it. Moira opened her bag. I checked my pockets, purse, the packet of food. Eamon watched us in terror.

Some of the money was missing.

Not all of it. This was no dramatic robbery leaving a person with an empty hand and a clear enemy. It was worse. One small purse had vanished, the one Colm had given us that morning for bribes along the road. One set of papers was gone as well, not our most important false documents, but those meant to confirm seasonal work near Swords.

Moira knelt over the bag, holding the cloth in her hands.

"Someone must have taken them in the drying shed or as we left."

Colm swore.

"My men would not..."

Red turned on him so quickly that he stopped.

"Do not finish that sentence. If you tell me your men would never do such a thing, I will lose my patience. Every man's people in this story do something they were supposedly never meant to do."

Colm accepted that through clenched teeth.

"I will check."

"No," Moira said.

We all looked at her.

"If you go back now to check, we lose time. The money is gone. The papers are gone. Information about the northern route has leaked. That means someone wants to force us to change direction or make us go where the next point has already been prepared."

"Or someone simply stole the money," Colm said.

Moira looked at him coldly.

"A thief would have taken more. Whoever did this took exactly what makes passage harder and reveals the direction."

That was the second blow.

We had not lost everything. We had lost enough to understand that someone did not want to rob us. Someone wanted to steer us.

Red clenched her fists.

"Liam."

Colm shook his head at once.

"No."

"Do not defend him."

"I am not defending him. I am saying that if Liam wanted to sell you, he would do it more simply."

"Is that his speciality? Simplicity?"

Colm did not answer. Just as well, because something appeared on Red's face that could have set fire to a bush without matches. Moira closed the bag.

"We do not know whether it was Liam. And we cannot become stuck on that now."

Red turned to her.

"Easy for you to say."

"No. But I have to say it."

That mattered too. Moira did not raise her voice, did not lunge, did not try to defeat emotion with more emotion. She stood in the mud, skirt wet, the hidden document against her body, and spoke like someone holding the last straight piece of timber in a house full of fire.

"What do you suggest?" I asked.

Moira looked at Colm's map, then the road, then me.

"Not north. Not now. If word of the northern route has leaked, we go in the direction that looks even worse."

"Which means?"

Colm understood first.

"Back towards the city."

"Not into Dublin," Moira said. "The outskirts. Somewhere no one will look for people who were just supposed to be fleeing north. We need a new point. Someone outside Liam's people and Oisín's."

Red gave a short laugh.

"Excellent. So we trust a third person because we can no longer trust the first two."

"Yes."

"I hate this plan."

"So do I," Moira said. "But it is better than walking into a watched road without papers."

Colm was silent for a long while.

Then he said:

"There is a woman."

Red looked at him immediately.

"No."

"You do not even know who."

"If you begin with 'there is a woman', it usually ends with the woman knowing too much, wanting too much, or having a brother with a knife."

"This time not a brother. A sister."

"Even worse."

Colm ignored that, though I could see it cost him effort.

"Máire Devlin. Former courier. Not Oisín's. Not Liam's. Not Ashford's. She once worked with a network that moved people after the famine, then stopped when she saw half the rescue turning into trade in debt. She lives by the old road, but closer to the city, at a place where carts and fodder are kept. She will do nothing for free."

"Naturally," I said. "Kindness has to eat too."

Moira looked at Colm.

"What will she demand?"

"Information."

"What kind?"

Colm pointed to the prayer book.

"What you have."

Red immediately moved closer to Moira.

"No."

Colm spread his hands.

"Without her, you will not get through. If the north is burned, she knows routes through small farms and old workhouses. I do not trust her entirely. She does not trust me either. That is good. People who trust too quickly usually sell too cheaply."

Moira watched him closely.

"I will not give her the copy."

"Then you will not pass."

At that moment I felt something inside me sink, not sharply but with the heavy wet movement of a thing that has soaked through and can no longer pretend to be light. This was what I had been thinking about earlier. History does not allow people to live beside it. You cannot possess evidence and pay nothing for protecting it. You cannot know the truth and keep it clean in your pocket. Truth begins demanding witnesses, and witnesses demand a price.

Red said quietly:

"If we hand over the copy, we lose the only thing not in Oisín's hands."

After a moment Moira replied:

"Not all of it."

We looked at her.

"I can make an extract. Not the full document. Bríd's name, Ashford's signature, the mark, the dates. No complete route, no full list of names. Enough for Máire to understand the matter is real. Not enough for her to sell the whole thing."

"And if she memorises it?" Colm asked.

Moira closed her eyes for a brief moment.

"Then she is clever enough to help us, or dangerous enough that we have no choice anyway."

Red turned her head aside, fighting herself. I could see it. She wanted to refuse. She wanted to keep the evidence with us, with me, with Moira, inside that small fragile space our own hands could still control. But hands are not enough when the road begins closing.

"Fine," she said at last. "An extract. Nothing more."

Moira nodded. And I thought that here was the first piece of truth leaving us for someone we did not trust. Something had been taken from us. Not only money and papers. The illusion that caution was enough had been taken. The belief that we still had even one road no one else knew about had been taken. The luxury of holding evidence against the heart and believing that meant control had been taken.

Colm decided we could not wait. We had to leave the open road, skirt the fields and curve back towards a place that had not existed in any of our earlier plans. Eamon was silent throughout, which in a child after such a night was less peace than a wound in the process of healing. Red walked beside Moira as though her mere presence could protect the prayer book from other people's hands. I felt a little behind again.

Manchester was still with me. But now another thought walked beside Manchester. Someone had sold us. Perhaps one of Colm's men. Perhaps someone of Liam's. Perhaps Oisín. Perhaps some ordinary boy connected to the driver.

Perhaps not one person at all, but the whole network in which information flowed faster than water through a canal because everyone had hunger, debt, fear, or a brother in prison.

And then I understood something very simple, and therefore very cruel. Ashford did not need to be everywhere. Oisín did not need to be all-powerful. Liam did not need to betray us. It was enough that the world was built from people who could be pressed in the right place. Some with money. Others with guilt. Others with fear. Still others with hope.

And we, walking through wet fields with a copy of the evidence hidden in a prayer book, were merely more people with places someone could find and press.

Red had Maeve. Moira had guilt. I had Manchester. And all our enemies, sooner or later, would learn how to use them.

We walked for a long time, though "a long time" is a polite phrase suited to a letter or conversation over tea, not to a march through wet Irish fields where the mud has family ambitions and tries to keep a person close like a jealous aunt. In truth we were not walking. We were shifting. Pushing. Wading through ground so soaked with water that every step sounded as though the country were trying to swallow us while muttering that it was doing so for our own good.

Colm led us in a wide arc, not along a road, not along a path, but through something he called "the safer way" and I thought looked like a place people visited only when they wished to die without witnesses. Low stone walls stretched to our left, crooked and moss-grown; to our right lay fields where the mist sat so low it looked as though someone had spilled milk and lacked the strength to wipe it up. Far behind us Dublin had almost vanished, but I did not feel it had truly been left behind. The city was like smoke. It got into your clothes and travelled on with you.

Red walked beside me, which I considered significant progress after all those plans in which someone was forever trying to place her far from me in the name of common sense, as though common sense had ever done anything for us beyond standing at the side and shaking its head. Her scarf was tied more tightly than before, her coat pulled high at the throat, and her face said to any sensible person: come closer and receive a practical lesson in anatomy. She was not calm. A calm Red would probably have looked suspicious even in sleep. But she was focused, and inside that focus something sharp and brilliant smouldered, ready to spring from her at the world's first stupid sentence.

"If Colm says 'short cut' one more time, I will force the short cut down his throat," she said after a long silence.

I looked at her with such relief that I almost smiled.

"I was afraid you left all your sarcasm in Dublin after yesterday."

"No. Only some by the river. The rest clings like mould in an English house."

"A beautiful image. Very domestic."

"I have talent. Pity the world uses it chiefly for running from men with documents."

"Men with documents are the worst kind of men. With a knife, at least you know where the conversation is going."

"With a document you know as well. It merely takes longer and smells more of ink."

Moira glanced over her shoulder. Her look was calm but carried that quiet form of rebuke she managed without raising her voice.

"Speak more softly."

Red answered at once:

"We are speaking softly. It is only our irritation that has a carrying accent."

Moira did not answer. That was very like her. Had I heard such a retort, I would probably have added three of my own and then another for balance. Moira left words where they fell if she decided they did not need picking up. There was a certain elegance in it. Irritating, naturally.

Colm stopped by a low wall, raised one hand and motioned us to crouch. We obeyed at once because, after the last few days, even my tongue had begun to understand that there were moments when objection could be postponed until later, provided later existed at all. Eamon dropped to his knees almost gratefully because the boy was so exhausted that even fear could no longer keep him upright. Red crouched beside me but kept one hand beneath her coat near the knife.

Ahead of us, beyond a line of bushes and wet stones, a road was visible. Not a main road, but a real one, beaten hard by wheels, with ruts full of water and dark marks from horses' hooves. A cart stood on it.

Not ours.

Two horses, one man on the box, another beside it, a third near the rear. They looked like ordinary people, which I immediately found suspicious because in my present experience ordinary people were either unwitting witnesses or trouble in very good disguise. The cart was covered with a tarpaulin. Sacks lay on top of it, and on one of them sat a woman in a dark shawl.

Colm crouched lower.

"Not ours."

Red looked at him as though he had just announced that rain was wet.

"Better and better. Perhaps the next short cut will take us straight into a courtroom and save everyone the walk."

"Be quiet for a moment."

"Try asking more nicely. It may work after I die."

"Red," he said quietly, but more sharply.

She did not like that. I could see it. Red disliked people using her name like a hand on the back of her neck.

"What are they doing?" Moira asked.

Colm watched through the bushes.

"Waiting."

"For us?" I asked.

"I do not know."

"Which means yes, only without proof yet."

Red glanced at me.

"See? You are learning."

"Terrifying. Soon I shall start speaking Irish and threatening people more economically."

"Do not flatter yourself. That requires a soul."

"Mine is temporarily under repair."

Moira looked at us again, longer this time.

"Quieter."

Red leaned towards me and whispered with perfect seriousness:

"One day she will kill us for making noise, but she will do it very neatly."

"And file a report."

"In beautiful handwriting."

Moira closed her eyes.

She did not need to say anything. Even Eamon, despite his exhaustion, snorted under his breath and immediately looked as though he regretted allowing himself a sign of life.

On the road the woman in the dark shawl jumped down from the cart. She was not young, but neither was she old. Rather she belonged to that age poverty gives people too early, smoothing some things and sharpening others. She had broad shoulders, heavy boots and the walk of a woman who did not ask the earth's permission to stand on it. She approached one of the men, said something quietly, and then, to my astonishment, looked directly towards us.

She could not see us. And yet she looked as though she could. Colm swore under his breath.

"Máire."

Red turned her head towards him.

"The woman with the route?"

"Yes."

"And of course she just happens to be standing in our way before we have even reached her."

Colm said nothing.

Red smiled without amusement.

"Ah, Ireland. Land of green hills, holy mothers and women who know where you are before you yourself realise you are lost."

"She has people," Colm said.

"Everyone here has people. I want people too. Preferably ones who carry the mud for me."

Máire Devlin raised a hand. She did not wave. It was a gesture: come out.

Colm slowly stood.

"If we run, she will take it as an insult."

Red rose with him.

"If we approach, she may take us for merchandise."

"She does not trade in people."

"Everyone in this country says that about a friend until the friend opens a cellar."

Máire must have seen movement because she called:

"Colm! Stop hiding in the bushes like a priest from his own child and come over here!"

Red looked at me.

"I like her less than I expected and more than I should."

We came out of hiding.

Not all at once. Colm first, then Red, then Moira and me, Eamon last, hunched as though he dreamed of becoming a stone. The men by the cart watched us calmly, but their hands were never far from their belts, which in this country was apparently the equivalent of a polite good morning. Máire stood in the middle of the road with her hands on her hips and measured us with her eyes.

She looked longest at Red.

"Gallagher," she said. "I thought they had either hanged you or you had married some blind idiot in England."

Red answered at once:

"Lovely to see you too. I see you still keep your charm under your sole."

Máire snorted.

"And your tongue still runs faster than your sense."

"Sense is for people permitted to be bored without consequences."

"Good. So the rumours were gentle."

Máire looked at me.

"This her?"

Colm nodded.

"Nell."

"English."

"Unfortunately," I said. "But I try to compensate with personality."

Máire looked me over without the shadow of a smile.

"That usually makes matters worse."

The corner of Red's mouth lifted.

"Give her a moment. She can worsen even things already lying in a ditch."

"Thank you for the reference."

"Any time."

Máire shifted her gaze to Moira.

Here her face changed subtly. The blunt curiosity disappeared and something more cautious took its place.

"And you?"

Moira answered calmly:

"Moira."

"Former prison officer."

Moira did not flinch.

"Yes."

"I do not like guards."

"Neither do I, increasingly."

Máire watched her for a long time.

"That is not an answer that buys trust."

"I did not come to buy it."

"Pity. Everything has a price."

"I know. That is why I am asking yours."

That was Moira. No ornament. No retort. Straight into bone.

At last Máire nodded, as though deciding that at least one of us could conduct a conversation without setting the curtains on fire. Then she pointed at the cart.

"First you get off the road. Then we talk. Two patrols have been asking about women heading north. One had a description of a red-haired woman, another of a sharp-mouthed Englishwoman, a third of a boy. Which means someone sold you faster than fish before a heatwave."

Eamon went pale.

Red looked at Colm.

"Well, there we are. And we came here thinking only the weather hated us."

Máire started towards the cart.

"Get under the sheet. If anyone looks in, you are sacks of flour."

"I hope at least of decent quality," I muttered.

"You are English flour," Máire called without turning. "Spoils easily."

Red almost laughed.

"Fine. She may live."

The cart began moving as soon as we had hidden beneath the sheet among sacks, empty crates and something that smelled of dried herbs or the medicinal death of plants. It was cramped, airless and dark. I lay on my side with one knee driven into a plank, shoulder to shoulder with Red, while Moira's leg was so close to my face that I thought if this was freedom, captivity had at least offered more personal space.

Eamon squeezed himself into the rear corner and tried to breathe quietly.

Red whispered into my ear:

"If you sneeze now, I will strangle you before the patrol does."

"Beautiful concern."

"Practical."

"I am moved. There is simply no room for it."

"Do it small."

The cart shook so violently that every hole in the road introduced itself separately to my bones. Through a crack between the boards I occasionally saw mud, a wheel, a horse's legs, a piece of sky. After several minutes Máire began speaking to someone on the road. A male voice, unfamiliar, official. We all froze.

"What are you carrying?" the man asked.

"Flour, herbs and two crates of things for my cousin," Máire replied.

"Where to?"

"To my cousin. If I wanted half the road to know where his farm is, I would have married a gossip."

The man did not appreciate the joke.

"There have been reports. We are looking for fugitives."

"Here? In the sacks? If you find me a fugitive who voluntarily hid himself beside my flour, I will hand him over with thanks, because he must be stupider than the goat I had last year."

Red twitched against my arm.

I did not know whether from tension or amusement.

"A red-haired woman, an Englishwoman, a former wardress, a boy," the man said. "They may be going north."

Máire answered calmly:

"Half of Ireland is going north, half west, and the rest to the grave. If you have a better map, show me."

Silence followed. Then footsteps approached the cart. Someone struck the side. Once. Twice. Eamon clamped his hands over his mouth. Moira did not move at all. Red's fingers slid towards the knife.

I prayed to every saint I had offended in the past week, which was probably quite a number, and none of them were likely queuing for the privilege of helping me.

The sheet lifted slightly. Light entered in a thin stripe. I saw part of a man's face. Moustache. Nose. Eye.

Then Máire said very sharply:

"If you put your filthy paw into my flour, you will pay for the whole sack. And the second one too, because the first will be offended."

The sheet dropped.

The man swore.

"Go on."

The cart moved.

No one breathed for several seconds, as though breathing also required permission. Only when the voices had fallen behind us did Red whisper:

"I withdraw my objection. She may live a long time."

"And she has better lines than half of Parliament," I added.

Moira said quietly:

"That was a real patrol."

"Yes," Red replied.

"So the information really did get out."

"Yes."

Nothing more needed to be said.

After a while the cart left the road and turned into a yard beside a low building hidden behind a belt of trees. It was not a house in the ordinary sense. More an old shed converted into a place where people could disappear for a few hours, provided they did not mind the smell of dust, onions, old tools and a deeply hostile cat sitting on the windowsill. Máire ordered us out quickly and told us not to stick our heads up like ladies on an excursion. We obeyed with all the grace of sacks being thrown from a mill.

Inside it was dark but dry. That alone was enough to make me almost call it cosy, which showed how low my standards of accommodation had fallen. Máire shut the door, told one man to watch the yard and another to take the horses behind the building. Then she turned to us.

"Colm says you have something for which people will start dying faster than usual."

Moirá did not reach for the prayer book.

"We have information."

"I do not play with holy words. Paper or memory?"

"Both."

Máire looked at Red.

"Gallagher, if you want passage, I want to know whether I am risking my people for a cause, for your romantic suicide, or for Oisín's business."

Red answered at once:

"If it were romantic suicide, we would look better."

"True."

"The matter is filthy. It concerns transports of women under the cover of work and charity. Bríd Tierney is one of them. The document leads to Galway, or pretends to. Ashford has his hands in it. Oisín wants the paper for himself. We want the girl and the truth, though that sounds so beautiful I nearly want to spit."

Máire was silent.

Her face scarcely changed, but something in her eyes hardened.

"The eye above the wave?" she asked.

At last Moira lifted her head.

"You know the mark."

"I know rumours."

"That is not enough."

"In our world a rumour is often truth that has not yet been killed."

Red leaned against the wall.

"Sounds like a sentence Nell would steal if she had a pen."

"I am writing it down in my head," I said.

"Do not encourage yourself."

Máire approached the table.

"Show me the extract."

Moirá did not move.

"Price first."

"Price?" Máire looked at her carefully.

"Passage, a safe place for one night, new papers or someone who will confirm our story if a patrol stops us. And no information to Oisín without our consent."

Máire gave a short laugh.

"A former wardress bargaining like an accountant with a pistol."

Moirá answered calmly:

"I have the pistol. An accountant would be better, but I work with what is available."

Red snorted.

"Look at that. Moira is learning to ruin conversations. I am proud."

Moirá gave her a look touched with patience.

"I am not learning from you. That would be dangerous."

"Wise. I would not learn from me either. Too many casualties."

Máire watched them both and, for the first time, truly smiled. Not warmly. Not kindly. More like someone smiling because trouble at least has good teeth.

"Fine," she said. "One night. Then a road neither north nor immediately west. You will pass through country where questions are asked less often because the answers are usually too poor to be worth anything. You will get new papers, but not today. Today you get names you can wear for two days and a man who will swear you are widows travelling to a sick aunt."

"Illness again," I muttered.

Red added without hesitation:

"In this story aunts suffer more than the Empire."

"Aunts are stronger," Máire said. "The Empire only falls when it runs out of people to convince that it is family."

The sentence settled between us. The Nell in me wanted to steal it immediately. I did not.

Moira drew out the document extract. Not the whole thing. Only what she had judged necessary: Bríd's name, the dates, Ashford's signature, the mark, the Saint Martha foundation, the notation that the transport had been halted and later resumed. Máire read for a long time, unhurried, moving her lips only over the names. Then she laid the paper on the table and pressed it down with her fingers.

"You are not taking this with you," she said.

Red pushed away from the wall at once.

"I beg your pardon?"

"If you want passage, the extract stays with me."

"No."

"Yes."

"No," Red repeated, quieter this time, which was considerably more dangerous.

Máire did not move her hand.

"I have people in Galway. If that mark operates there, I must warn them. If Bríd is alive, someone may still have seen her. If Ashford is using the foundation, I need to know which houses to avoid. I will not risk my women on the strength of your pretty eyes and poor reputation."

"My reputation is excellent," I said. "Only the convictions spoil it."

Máire did not even look at me.

"The paper stays."

Moira was very pale.

"It is not the full copy."

"It is enough."

"It may also be enough for someone who sells the information."

"Of course."

Máire's honesty was almost insulting.

"And we are supposed to trust you?" Red asked.

Máire looked at her hard.

"No. You are supposed to decide that my price is lower than the price of the road without my help."

Red took a step forward.

"If that paper reaches Oisín..."

"It will not."

"If it reaches Ashford..."

"It will not."

"Beautiful. Two assurances and not a scrap of proof. Almost like marriage."

"Gallagher, I am not your friend. I am a woman with a road you need. You are a woman with fire under her skirts and an English legend at her side. We both have a problem. We can make it worse for one another or push it a little farther away. Choose."

Red clenched her fists. She looked at Moira. Moira looked at the paper. This was the moment in which we lost another thing. Not the document. Not quite. Control. Slowly, Moira released the page.

"It stays," she said.

Red turned sharply towards her.

"Moira."

"It stays. But I will write a second extract from memory. Without the mark. Without the dates. For us. Now."

Máire raised an eyebrow.

"Clever."

Moira looked at her calmly.

"Careful."

Red stood there a moment longer, caught between the urge to snatch the paper from the table and the need to keep us alive. At last she stepped back.

"If you sell us," she told Máire, "I will not threaten you. I dislike wasting announcements. I will simply come back."

Máire folded the paper and slipped it beneath her bodice.

"If you come back with that look in your eyes, I shall know I did something stupid."

Red smiled briefly.

"At last someone understands instructions."

They gave us water, some food and an hour of rest that was not rest but merely a pause between losses. Moira sat at the table and began writing from memory what she could in her small, even hand. Red paced the room like a flame shut inside a box. Eamon slept with his head on a sack. Colm spoke quietly with one of Máire's men.

I stood by the small window and watched the road that was meant to carry us onward. Not north. Not west. Not yet. Sideways. Always sideways.

I thought that this was how history caught people. It did not stand before them with a great gate and a sign reading: enter, now you will change the world. No. It pushed you step by step from the road you had chosen, took a little money, a little trust, a little sleep, then made you hand a piece of truth to someone you did not know, and before you could object you were already so deep inside another person's suffering that the only way out led straight through the middle.

After a while Red came to stand beside me.

"You are thinking too loudly again."

"It is my new affliction. Perhaps the aunt has the same thing."

"If she does, we will put her out of her misery on the way."

"Red."

"What? It sounds serious."

I looked at her and despite everything, despite the paper handed to Máire, despite the betrayed route, despite Manchester, despite Bríd and Ashford, I wanted to laugh. Briefly. Quietly. Ugly. But truly.

Red smiled too. And then a whistle sounded from the yard. One long note. Máire lifted her head at once. Her face hardened.

"Patrol," she said.

Moirá stopped writing.

Red drew her knife.

And I thought that since God clearly had no intention of sparing us, He might at least vary the repertoire now and then.

CHAPTER XIV

The Boy with the Onion

The whistle cut through the morning so thinly and cleanly that it sounded less like a warning of danger than someone testing whether silence was still alive.

It was not loud. That was the worst of it. There was no panic in it, no cry flung into the air by someone who had suddenly seen death round the corner. It was long, low, deliberate, drawn with such precision that I understood at once it had not come from the throat of anyone frightened, but from someone who had known for some time exactly where we stood, how many ways out we had, and how little time remained for a decision.

The room went still.

Even Máire's cat, until then perched on the sill with the expression of an old judge among people he did not consider worth sentencing, dropped soundlessly to the floor and vanished beneath the bench. Sensible animal. Had people possessed even half a cat's instincts, the Empire would never have found so many volunteers willing to die for other people's titles.

Máire Devlin raised her head first. Her face was hard, broad, tired, but in that one moment something in her closed, as though every door in the woman through which mercy might enter had been bolted from within.

"Patrol," she said.

Red was already standing with a knife in her hand.

I had not seen when she drew it. A second earlier she had been leaning against the wall with that air of apparent carelessness which, in her, was never carelessness at all, merely a way of letting the world underestimate her exactly once. Now the blade flashed low by her thigh, partly hidden in a fold of her coat. Her face was not frightened. Fear changed Red differently. Made her quieter. More dangerous. Like the door of a furnace with the fire already working behind it.

Moirá froze at the table. The sheet on which she had been copying a second abbreviated version of the document still lay before her, the ink fresh, shining, dangerously wet. There was too much truth on the paper to leave behind and too little time to hide it safely. She stared at it for a fraction of a second, long enough for me to see every possible consequence in her eyes: evidence smeared beyond use, the copy lost, Ashford once again master of the story, Bríd reduced once more to a name without a body.

Then Moirá folded the page, though the ink must have stained it, and slipped it beneath the kerchief at her breast.

She did not grimace. She did not swear. She did none of the things I would have done, which is to say she did not call the world a mouldy sack full of officials and rats. She simply hid the truth as close to her heart as she could, as if the heart had become the last archive one might still trust.

The second whistle came from nearer.

Eamon jerked awake from the floor, his face still soft with sleep, hair stuck to his forehead and eyes suddenly much too large.

"What's happening?" he asked.

No one answered him. Not because we were cruel. Because the answer had just struck the door.

First came the thud of wood against wood. Then a voice from the yard, male, hoarse, confident in that cheapest sort of way which usually comes from superior numbers or stupidity, most often both.

"Máire! We haven't come for you! Hand over the girls and the boy, and your roof stays where it is!"

Red smiled without amusement.

"How courteous. He begins with architecture."

Máire shot her a brief look.

"This is no time for your tongue."

"My tongue recognises no such restrictions."

"Then teach it."

"I tried. It bites."

If it had not been for the fear, I might have laughed. That was precisely why Red was Red. Even with a knife in her hand, even when men had come to collect us like an overdue bill, she could speak as though the world were a drunken customer in a pub who was shortly to have the rules explained to him with a stool.

With one gesture Máire placed her people. One moved to the window and raised a pistol, another drew back the bar at the rear passage, while the third, the younger one, thin and scored with exhaustion, took position by the door into the yard. They moved quickly, without theatre, without questions. They were not heroes. They were people who had seen before how visits from armed men ended and knew that courage was useful only when it stood near an exit.

"How many?" Moira asked.

The man at the window peered through a crack.

"Five I can see. Two by the wall. One behind the cart. One doing the talking. One at the back, by the well. Could be more on the way."

"Uniforms?" Máire asked.

"No."

Red straightened slightly.

"Then not a patrol."

"Any man with a weapon and someone else's name in his mouth is a patrol to me," Máire replied. "The only difference is who pays for the powder."

The voice outside came again:

"Don't make a matter of this, Máire! This isn't your war!"

Máire gave a snort so contemptuous it was almost a spit.

"When a man stands outside my house telling me it's not my war, he's usually already got my yard's mud on his boots."

"We don't want you!"

"How kind!" she shouted back. "I didn't want you either, and yet here you are!"

Red glanced at me.

"She and I could dislike one another professionally."

"You're already making very promising progress."

"Quiet, English flour."

"That was once."

"Good things bear repeating."

Moira turned her head and gave us that calm, taut look of a person who knows someone may die in a moment while two idiots are still exchanging remarks.

"To the back," she said quietly to Eamon and me. "By the passage. Not the window."

Eamon was trembling. Not all of him. Only his hands. That was worse, because he was trying to control them. The boy who the day before had run about with an onion as a conspiratorial sign now stood with his fists clenched, as if he might hold the last of his courage inside them before it leaked between his fingers.

Moira knelt beside him.

"Eamon. Look at me."

He did.

"You will do exactly what I tell you. If I say drop, you drop. If I say run, you run. If you hear a shot, you do not look to see who fired it, you get lower. Do you understand?"

"But if..."

"There is no 'if'. There is only what I tell you. Do you understand?"

He nodded, but there was something in his eyes I did not want to see. Trust. In Moira. In adults.

In people who, until now, had chiefly shown him that the world was a vast machine for grinding poor boys into warnings for everyone else.

The first shot tore through the wall before anyone could say another word.

The plank split above the table, splinters bursting into the air, one scoring my cheek, another burying itself in the tabletop beside the place where Moira's page had lain a moment earlier. The blast inside that little room was deafening. Not like a shot in the street, its force dispersed by open space. Here it struck back from walls, beams, chests, teeth. For a moment I had the impression my very skull was ringing from within.

Eamon screamed.

Moira dragged him to the floor at once and shielded him with her own arm.

Máire's man at the window fired back. Powder smoke spread beneath the ceiling, acrid, heavy, familiar in that filthy way in which, lately, every smell of violence had begun arranging itself inside me into an alphabet of its own. Someone outside swore. A horse shrieked. Máire shouted something in Irish, and her people moved together, like a single body well acquainted with its own wounds.

The second shot came lower. The ball struck a crate, tearing open its side and spilling herbs, dust and some tiny dry seeds across the floor, where they rolled beneath our boots like a ridiculous dead rain. A third shot smashed what remained of the glass in the window. The man beside it hissed and staggered back, clutching his face. Blood ran down his cheek, but he did not let go of the pistol.

"Rear passage!" Máire snarled. "Get the boy out!"

Moira hauled Eamon up by the arm. The boy stumbled but moved. I followed them, bent double, hands near my face, though I have no idea what exactly I thought I was shielding myself from. A ball? A splinter? Yet another consequence of my own life?

Red did not move.

I turned.

She stood by the wall at the low passage, not where common sense would have put her, but where someone had to stand if the attackers tried to come round us. She held the knife low. Her face was calm. Too calm.

"Red!" I hissed.

"Go."

"No."

She looked at me in one short movement.

"Nell."

I hated it when she said my name that way. Like an order. Like a plea. Like something I was forbidden to break, however much I wanted to.

"I'm only going to see whether our guests know where hospitality ends," she added. "Don't be jealous. I'll be back to your drama in a moment."

"Very funny."

"I know. It's my cheapest talent."

Moira tugged at my sleeve.

"Now."

We passed through the low opening into a store room and then to the rear door, which led onto a narrow strip of ground between the building and a stone wall. The air outside was cold, wet and full of smoke. For a moment it seemed almost clean after the room, where powder and fear had already begun settling on the tongue like soot.

Moira went first, still holding Eamon by the hand. I followed, clutching my knife so hard that the handle bit painfully into my palm.

And then a man stepped out from behind the corner.

He had a pistol.

He did not look like a soldier, more like someone who had spent his whole life carrying other men's orders in one pocket beside a dirty knife and a piece of bread. His face was uneven and unshaven, his eyes flat as wet stones. He saw Moira, Eamon and me, and raised the weapon almost lazily, without haste, because men with guns often believe time belongs to them.

He never had the chance to pull the trigger.

Red appeared behind him.

I do not know which way she came. I swear I do not. Perhaps through a side door, perhaps through a window, perhaps she simply materialised out of all the fury she had carried beneath her skin since Galway, since Maeve, since Liverpool, since the boiler room, since every man who had mistaken a woman for an object to be moved. One moment he was alone. The next Red was on him, one hand wrenching his hair back, the other laying a knife against his throat.

"Lower the gun," she said.

She did not shout. She did not need to. The man froze.

"Lower it, or I'll make you a second mouth, and I promise it'll be less insolent than the first."

The pistol dropped.

Moirra tore it from his hand at once and pushed Eamon behind her. The boy was so pale he looked as though all the blood had fled him before any bullet could.

Red forced the attacker back against the wall. The blade left a thin red line across his neck.

"Who sent you?"

He said nothing.

Red tilted her head.

"Oh, splendid. One of the brave ones. I always get the brave ones when I'm short of time."

"Red," Moirra said.

"Not now."

The man tried to spit, but fear had dried his mouth.

"I know nothing."

Red smiled almost tenderly.

It was the worst smile I had ever seen on her.

"You see, there are many things I don't know either. I don't know why men with guns keep assuming a woman with a knife has patience. I don't know why God gave cowards such soft necks. I don't know whether you'll die quickly or first try to convince me your mother would be disappointed. But the two of us can learn something."

She pressed the blade harder.

"Who?"

The man clenched his teeth.

Red nicked the skin just below his ear. Not deep. Enough for blood to run in a thin line beneath his collar.

"Who?"

"I don't know!"

"That's a very unhealthy answer."

"Reilly!" he choked at last. "Reilly's men! But the money didn't come from him. Through the port. Through a middleman."

Moirra looked at me. Ashford. The name did not need speaking. It hung between us like smoke. Red did not move the knife away.

"How did you know where we were?"

The man was breathing fast.

"The information came this morning."

"From whom?"

He was silent.

Red sighed.

"Really? After all this lovely conversation?"

She moved the knife lower.

"From whom?"

The man closed his eyes.

"Colm."

For a moment I heard only the shots from the front of the building, Máire's shout, the horse's screaming and my own pulse hammering in my ears.

Colm.

I felt something heavy drop very low inside me. Not because I had trusted Colm. I had not. In fact, I no longer trusted anyone without a footnote, a date and two witnesses. But he had been with us all the same. He had led us. Spoken of passages, roads, Liam's people. And now his name had come from the mouth of a man pinned to a wall beneath Red's knife, and suddenly every path behind us looked different, as if each rut in the mud were not merely a trace of our flight but a signpost left for the pursuit.

Red lost the slightest hint of colour.

With her, anger often began by draining colour from the face.

"Colm sold the position?"

"Not to us. Through the carter's boy. Said you were going to Máire. Said there'd be a paper. Said the girls were to be alive. The boy too, if possible."

Eamon made a small, strangled sound.

The man began speaking faster, because once opened, fear started pouring out of him like dirty water from a cracked barrel.

"There wasn't meant to be shooting. We were to stop you. Take the paper. The Englishwoman alive. The redhead too. The gaoler, if she didn't make trouble. The boy didn't matter."

Moirá went rigid at the last sentence.

The boy didn't matter.

That is where the whole system lives, in words like those. Not in grand declarations, not in coats of arms, seals or speeches by men in white gloves. In sentences tossed away without thought. He didn't matter. Fit for work. Private transport. Kitchen help. Woman without family. Child of no value. Everything written more briefly so that it is easier not to hear the screaming.

Red looked into his eyes.

"And who paid Colm?"

"I don't know."

The knife twitched.

"I don't know, I swear! They said he had a debt. That someone reminded him. The port doesn't forget debts. Nobody here forgets unless they're paid to."

For a second I thought Red would let him go.

I truly did.

I had that stupid hope that, now he had spoken, now he had proved to be only another cog, now he was shaking and bleeding and smelled of fear, she might leave him there beneath the wall, alive, filthy, smaller than he had been a moment before.

But then another shot sounded at the front of the building and someone shouted Máire's name. The man against the wall jerked by instinct. Red did not give him a second chance. She drove the knife beneath his ribs. Quickly. Close. Without theatre.

His body went violently taut. He opened his mouth as though he had suddenly remembered something terribly important to say, but all that came out was a wet, broken

breath. Red held him so he would not fall noisily, then lowered him to the ground with a care that was almost obscene, because gentleness after killing a man looks like a joke told by the devil.

She did not look at him long.

But she looked long enough.

Moira stood motionless, a pistol in one hand and the other resting on Eamon's shoulder. Her face was tense, closed, yet not full of condemnation. Rather, it held the horror of someone who had just watched a necessary thing and could no longer say whether necessity made it less terrible.

"We have to go," she said.

And then Eamon tore himself free.

He did not do it from defiance. Not from stupidity. Not because he had failed to listen. I understood it better later, though later, of course, was already one of those cruel places a person reaches too late. He had seen the dead man sliding down the wall. Seen blood on Red's hand. Seen the pistol in Moira's hand, smoke above the roof, splinters, mud, death too near his own boots. He was a child. For days we had pretended he was a messenger, a guide, a witness, a small component of a plan, but the truth was simpler and more defenceless.

He was a child.

So he ran.

"Eamon!" Moira shouted.

She went after him at once, but in that first panicked burst he was faster. He ran between us and the stack of barrels, where a narrow passage led behind the shed towards a patch of open ground. Perhaps he thought freedom was there. Perhaps he thought nothing at all. Perhaps his body simply chose a direction before reason had time to get up from its knees.

A shot came from the right, from behind the cart. Not at him. I know that. I have to know it.

The ball was not meant for him. The attacker fired at movement, at a shadow, at Red, at Moira, perhaps at me, perhaps at anyone who appeared in the smoke. But the world does not apportion guilt as neatly as people later try to do inside their heads in order not to go mad.

Eamon crossed the line of fire.

His body jerked suddenly, unnaturally, as though an invisible hand had seized the back of his clothes and yanked. He stopped. Took one more step, very small, almost polite, like a boy approaching his mother after a scolding, and then looked down at his own chest.

At first there was not much blood.

That was the worst of it.

For a second one could pretend it was nothing. That the ball had merely grazed him. That he would fall, swear, cry, Moira would dress the wound, Red would growl at everyone, and later I would make some dreadful joke about an onion that amused nobody, but all of us would live.

Then the blood began to come. Dark. Fast. Much too certain of itself.

"No," Moira said.

She did not scream. Not at first. That one word came from her quietly, utterly defenceless, as though she were speaking not to us, not to Eamon, not to God, but to the fact itself, trying to stop it before it became true.

She reached him and caught him before he fell face-first into the mud. She sank to her knees with him, driving her skirt into the wet earth, and pressed one hand to the wound.

"Look at me," she kept saying. "Eamon, look at me. Breathe. Do you hear me? Breathe."

He tried.

I saw it.

His mouth opened and closed like that of a fish thrown onto a board. His eyes were wide, but the boyish panic from a moment earlier had gone. There was astonishment in them. That was what broke me. Not the pain, not the blood, not death, but that astonishment, as though only now had he understood that the adult world really could mistake a child for an obstacle.

Moira pressed her other hand to the wound.

"Help me!" she screamed.

I moved without thinking, but Red seized my coat and pulled so hard I nearly fell. Another ball struck the stone exactly where I would have been half a breath later.

"No!" Red snarled.

"Let me go!"

"I will not lay you down beside him!"

I hated her in that second.

For being right.

Máire and her people were firing from the back of the building, trying to keep the attackers away from the passage, but everything had become jagged and broken, full of smoke, shouts and mud kicked up beneath boots. Someone was yelling to go round by the barn. Someone else was calling for Reilly. One of Máire's men broke from the corner and fired towards the cart. An attacker answered. A horse screamed so horribly that the sound ran down my spine like a cold rope.

And through all of it Moira sat with Eamon in her lap as though there were no world around them, only a wound that could be closed by force of will.

"Don't close your eyes," she kept saying. "Eamon. Do you hear me? Don't close your eyes. Not now."

The boy moved his lips.

Moira bent lower.

"What?"

His voice was so weak that I saw it more than heard it.

"Onion..."

And if the world had possessed even a shred of decency, it would not have allowed that to be his last word. But the world had no decency. It never had.

Eamon let out his breath very softly, almost like a sigh of relief after a long run. His eyes remained open. They looked somewhere beyond Moira's shoulder, beyond the roof,

beyond the smoke, perhaps towards a place where children without debts, signs, messages or men from the port can sleep without a whistle waking them.

Moira froze.

Her hands still pressed against the wound.

For a little while longer she did what one was meant to do, though there was no longer any point. She pressed. Breathed quickly. Watched his face as though waiting for a sign that death was only pretending, that it might still be caught in the lie.

"Eamon," she said.

Quietly.

Almost gently.

Then again:

"Eamon."

Nothing.

Red knelt beside her.

Her own hand was wet with the blood of the man she had killed a moment before. She did not touch the boy. Perhaps she did not dare. Perhaps she knew there are hands which, at certain moments, should not touch a dead child.

"Moira," she said.

Moira did not answer.

"Moira."

"I was holding him," she whispered.

"I know."

"I was meant to hold him."

"I know."

"I told him to do what I said."

Red gripped her by the shoulders. Hard. Not brutally, but hard enough to make Moira feel the living body in front of her, not only the dead one in her lap.

"Listen to me. You can fall apart later."

Moira looked at her. There were no tears in her eyes. Not yet.

There was something worse: the complete emptiness of a woman who had just added another name to the weight she carried.

"He was a child."

"Yes."

"It wasn't meant to be his."

Red clenched her jaw.

For a second her face cracked. Truly. Only a little, only in a place perhaps no one but me would have noticed. But I saw it. Red knew too that it was not meant to be his. Just as Maeve was never meant to be the price. Nor Tommy. Nor all those women entered into columns that had never been meant to become graves.

"No," Red said. "It wasn't. But it is. And if we stay here, ours will be next."

Moira closed her eyes.

When she opened them, she was paler than before, but she had returned. Not all of her. Not truly. Only the part still capable of standing up.

Slowly, with a tenderness so careful it hurt to watch, she laid Eamon on the ground. She took the small kerchief from her neck, the same one she had worn beneath her collar, and covered his face. The cloth was too thin. Too small. It did not cover the whole outline of the boy, but it covered his eyes.

It was all she could give him. A piece of cloth instead of a mother. A moment of silence instead of a grave.

Máire burst from behind the building with a pistol in her hand and blood on her sleeve. Her face was grey, but her eyes were sharp.

"To the cart! Now! We can't hold them long!"

Red stood.

"Colm sold us."

Máire stopped for a fraction of a second. Only a fraction. But it was enough for me to see she was not as surprised as she should have been. Red saw it too.

"You knew."

"I suspected too late."

"Too late is lying over there beneath a kerchief."

Máire took it like a blow, but did not lower her eyes.

"And if we stand here now, we'll give him company. Move."

"Where is Colm?"

"Gone before the attack."

Red smiled a dead smile.

"Of course. Rats always know the holes before the fire."

"You can hunt him later," Máire said. "If you're alive."

"Not 'if'. When."

"Suit yourself. Just get on the bloody cart first."

The next few minutes were not a sequence. They were fragments.

Running through mud. Red's hand between my shoulder blades, driving me towards the cart. Moira moving like someone whose body still obeyed orders while her soul had remained several steps behind, beside the boy beneath the kerchief. Máire screaming at the horses. One of her men firing from the rear, another dragging a wounded companion by the collar. Splinters bursting from the cart's side as a ball struck the wood. The smell of powder, wet earth, blood and the herbs scattered in the room, some of which were still clinging to my skirt as though even the plants wanted to escape with us.

I scrambled onto the cart. Moira sat opposite me. She did not look at me. She looked at her hands.

They were red.

Not completely. Eamon's blood had entered the lines of her skin, beneath her nails, into the creases of her fingers. She tried to wipe them on her skirt once, then again, then a third time, harder each time, until Red caught her wrist.

"Stop."

Moira looked at her as though, for a moment, she no longer understood the language.

"It won't come off."

"I know."

"He..."

"I know."

"You don't know."

Red released her wrist.

"No. Not like that."

And that was perhaps the most honest thing she could have said.

The cart lurched and moved. The horses sprang forward, the wheels dropped into ruts, and we pitched into one another like sacks of bones. The shots fell behind us, close at first, then increasingly broken by distance, until at last they mingled with the pounding wheels and the animals' breath.

No one spoke.

Not even me.

Not because I had no words. I had too many. They crowded inside me, ugly, furious, helpless. They wanted to accuse Colm, Ashford, Reilly, Oisín, Liam, Máire, me, Red, the entire damned mechanism that knew how to turn a boy into a messenger, a messenger into a target, a target into an accident, and an accident into one more body left in the mud because the living had to keep moving.

But no word was good enough for Eamon.

The boy with the onion.

The boy whose last word had been so stupid, so human, so small that this was precisely what made it impossible to bear.

Red sat by the side of the cart, her face turned towards the road behind us. The knife lay across her knees, already wiped clean, though I do not know when she had found the time. When at last she spoke, her voice was quiet, dry and so cold that I felt it more in my bones than in my ears.

"Colm."

One word.

Nothing more.

There was no shout in it. No promise spoken for effect. It was a sentence postponed, carefully wrapped and put away in the place where Red kept the things she did not forget.

Máire, seated on the box, did not turn her head.

"If Ashford bought him, Colm will be far away by now."

Red looked at her.

"No one is far away after leaving a child in the mud."

Máire said nothing. Moira looked at her hands again. This time she did not try to wipe them.

And I looked at her, at Red, at the empty piece of cart where Eamon might have been sitting only a short while before, and understood that the mechanism Moira had spoken of was not merely paper, a foundation, Ashford's signature, a route to Galway and the sign of the eye above the wave.

The mechanism was larger. It entered people. Their debts. Their fear. Their betrayals. Their hunger. Their last words. It did not take everything at once, because then

a person can still scream. It took piece by piece. First the money. Then the road. Then trust. Then the boy.

And as the cart raced along the wet back road, leaving behind us Máire with a roof punched through by bullets, Colm disappearing somewhere with his debt, Eamon beneath a kerchief and another bloody stain on the map of our flight, I thought that history does not need great battles to make martyrs.

Sometimes a child running the wrong way is enough.

Sometimes a bullet not even meant for him is enough.

The cart went on for a long time, though 'raced' was too proud a word for what Máire's horses were doing, because the poor animals were really wrenching us out of one piece of misery and dragging us towards the next, foam on their mouths, flanks slick with sweat and eyes as wide as ours, except that at least no one expected them to pretend they understood politics, debts, false papers and the meaning of the death of the boy with the onion.

Behind us the shots died away, then returned once more, distant and dull, already more like branches breaking than things that punch holes in bodies, until at last they merged with the wheels, the mud and the rain, which began to fall lightly and slyly, as though the sky lacked the courage to weep properly and so merely spat in our faces. We sat wordless on the boards of the cart, pressed between sacks, crates and our own silence. Moira watched her hands. Red watched the road behind us. I watched them both and felt that if I spoke first, something inside me would break in a way no one could later describe prettily.

Máire drove hunched beneath her coat, but her back said more than her face. She did not turn. She did not ask about Moira, did not ask about Red, did not speak of Eamon. To someone outside it might have looked like coldness. To me it looked like the old grief of people who have no time to grieve, because poverty, pursuit and other people's pistols do not recognise pauses for human feeling. Máire held the reins tight, shoulders taut, and only once, when a wheel dropped into a deeper rut, did I hear her curse Colm under her breath so softly that even God might have mistaken it for private correspondence.

After a while we left the road.

First the cart turned between two low stone walls, then crossed a shallow ditch, then entered a wood, if it could be called a wood, for the trees grew crooked, thin and with such reluctance that it seemed the earth beneath them had spent years trying to persuade them to leave. Branches scratched the cover, rain ran down our collars, the mud turned soft and black, and the wheels began sinking so deeply that at one point I thought Irish soil had maternal intentions towards us, only in this version the mother wanted to smother us.

Máire stopped the cart only in a hollow among the trees, screened from the road by thick bushes and a fallen trunk. The horses steamed in the cold air. One of Máire's men, the one wounded by flying glass, climbed down from the back holding a rag to his face. The other scanned the wood with a pistol in hand. Máire finally turned.

Her face was wet with rain.

Perhaps only rain.

"You get out here," she said.

Red raised her head.

"Here?"

"No, Gallagher, I'm asking the trees whether they have a room with a fireplace for you."

Red narrowed her eyes.

"Careful, Máire. I'm beginning to like you and I don't know whether I'll survive the shame."

"You'll survive the shame. Colm may not."

The name dropped between us again like a stone into a well.

Moira did not move, but I saw her fingers tighten on her skirt.

"We can't travel together," Máire continued, more calmly now. "They saw my cart. If they followed us, they'll be looking for the cart, the horses, my people. If I carry you farther, I'll lead them straight to you or you straight to them. Both contain more stupidity than I care for at my age."

"And you?" Moira asked.

"I'll go the other way. Make some noise. Perhaps leave a trail that looks like panic. Men like believing in other people's panic because it makes them feel cleverer."

Red rested her elbows on her knees.

"And we're to stay in the wood and talk to wet leaves?"

Máire nodded towards the trees.

"Half a mile from here there's a house. Large. Stone. English. Belongs to the Hargreaves family, or did, because people like that own land even when they've been away from it long enough for the grass to have a right to change its surname. The lord and his family have gone to Dublin or farther, I don't know. The servants remain. Perhaps two stable hands, perhaps a cook if she hasn't run off to her sister after the last quarrel with the steward. The house stands by itself. The road to it isn't watched now because no sensible person assumes women on the run will walk into the house of a rich Englishman."

"Which is exactly why we should," I said.

Máire looked at me.

"I see England gave you at least one useful thing. Insolence and sense in the same bowl."

"It was a cheap mixture. Often goes off."

Red jumped down from the cart and brushed mud from her skirt, a purely symbolic gesture since the mud merely changed address.

"You want us to break into an English landowner's house."

"I want you to stop looking like three women who've escaped half of Ireland and a quarter of England."

"Ambitious."

"You need clothes, food, money, horses, or at least something that moves faster than your legs. If the Hargreaveses keep silver locked up, so much the better. If not, take coats, boots and anything that hasn't grown into the wall."

Moira looked at her very coldly.

"You say that as though it were ordinary household advice."

Máire replied without a smile:

"For families like that, theft is a tradition. They simply call it rent. If you take two horses and a little cash, it'll be the first time in years the land has given something back the other way."

Red snorted.

"She really does want me to like her. This is becoming dangerous."

Máire reached beneath the cart bench and drew out a pistol. Shorter than Moira's, uglier, with the stock cracked near the base, but clean and loaded. She handed it to Red.

"Second one. Don't waste it."

Red took the weapon, weighed it in her hand and grimaced.

"Looks like something a drunken grandfather would fire at his own shadow."

"It works."

"That's already more than I can say for many men I know."

Máire handed her a small packet of powder and two balls.

"Don't fire unless you must. Noise brings questions. Questions bring people who pretend they have the right to know the answer."

Moira finally raised her eyes from her own hands.

"And if there are women in the house?"

"You don't hurt the servants," Máire said at once. "Tie them, lock them in, leave water if you must. From the rich you may take whatever you can carry. From the poor you take nothing except fear, and give even that back if you can do it quickly."

It was the nearest thing to a moral principle I had heard in a long while, so I instinctively treated it with more respect than I had intended.

Red slipped the pistol beneath her coat.

"What if it's a trap?"

Máire looked straight into her eyes.

"Everything is a trap. The question is whether it has a door on the other side."

For a moment neither woman spoke. Two women who did not trust each other in the slightest stood in a wet wood with mud on their boots, weapons in their hands and a boy left behind beneath a kerchief, and both knew there were no decisions left that did not stink.

"Colm," Red said.

Máire clenched her jaw.

"If I find him first, I'll leave you a piece."

"A large one."

"Depends how much he talks."

Red smiled briefly, without warmth.

"You know, I'm beginning to believe in Irish hospitality."

"Don't get used to it."

Máire climbed back onto the box.

"Go through the trees until you see a stone wall and an orchard. Don't take the road. They usually keep the dogs by the south wing, but if the lords have gone away they've probably taken the better dogs with them, because rich people love dogs more than

workers. The stables are behind the house. If you want horses, stables first, house second. If you enter the house first, someone may run for help."

"And if the stable hands fight?" Moira asked.

Máire looked at Red, then at me.

"Then let them quickly understand they're dealing with women in a bad mood."

"Meaning women," Red said.

"Exactly."

The cart moved suddenly, without farewell, without tenderness, without a last look, because Máire was not a woman who wasted time on scenes when she had armed men behind her. The wheels splashed in the mud, the horses pulled, the cover shuddered, and a moment later the cart was receding between the trees, leaving us in the wood with a second pistol, the remains of our food, Eamon's blood in our memory and a plan so brazen it almost suited our circumstances.

CHAPTER XV

The Road Across Wet Stones

For a long moment we stood without moving. Rain dripped from the branches. Moira stared at her hands. Red looked at her, then at me.

"All right," she said. "We are breaking into an English house. Anyone have any moral objections before we begin?"

Moira answered after a moment:

"We do not hurt the servants."

"That is not a moral objection. That is an instruction."

"It is enough for me."

"Nell?"

"I have only one observation."

Red sighed.

"Of course you do."

"If we steal a lord's clothes, money, food and horses, is it still theft, or merely a belated settling of the historical accounts?"

Red pretended to consider the matter seriously.

"Depends whether we find anything pretty. If it is pretty, it is justice. If it is ugly, it is theft by necessity."

Moira set off first between the trees.

"We are going."

"She truly has no appreciation for the philosophy of robbery," Red muttered.

"She was a gaoler. Perhaps she prefers statutes."

"Statutes are only robbery in a wig."

We moved quietly through the wood, though quiet, in our case, meant rather: less catastrophic than usual. The ground was soft and slick, roots pushed out from beneath the leaves like dead men's fingers trying to catch at our ankles, and wet branches lashed our faces with such regularity that nature seemed to have decided to take over our upbringing. Moira walked in front, more intent than before, but there was something heavy and delayed in her movements. She did not cry. She did not speak about Eamon. That worried me more than tears would have done. Some people scream when they suffer, and at least such people can be read. Others begin to act with even greater precision, as though precision might cover the hole inside them. Moira was dangerously precise now.

After a quarter of an hour or so, we saw the wall.

Stone, high, moss-covered, with an iron gate farther to the right and an orchard to the left. Beyond it we could see the roof of the house, grey and steep, its chimneys so proud that each looked as though it possessed a title of nobility in its own right. The Hargreaves house stood on a slight rise among clipped hedges, wet lawns and paths spread with pale gravel. Even in the rain it looked clean in that disgusting way wealth can look clean because other people perform its dirt for it.

It was not enormous like a palace, but large enough for anyone standing before it to know at once that it had not been built for people with mud beneath their fingernails. The windows were tall, the curtains heavy, the front doors broad and dark, with a brass knocker in the shape of a lion's head. The lion looked bored. It had probably known for years that it guarded people unworthy of animal symbols.

"There," Moira whispered, pointing towards the rear of the house. "The stable."

Behind the building, partly screened by trees, stood a long low stable with a coach house attached. A boy, or perhaps a young man, was moving about in the doorway, while another sat beneath the lean-to roof on an overturned barrel, eating something from a bowl. Stable lads. Two of them. Just as Máire had said.

"They look dangerous," I whispered. "One of them is fighting porridge."

Red bent down beside me.

"The porridge is losing."

"Poor thing."

"Do not pity it. Probably English."

Moira looked at us without a word.

"Right," she said after a moment. "The stable first. Red, you go round the back. Nell comes with me to the door. We do not shoot unless we have to. We frighten them. Tie them. Take the horses. Then the house."

"And if they start shouting?" I asked.

Red checked her knife.

"Then I shall persuade them that silence has a future."

"The bloodless version," Moira said.

"Moira, darling, do not make me sign regulations before a burglary."

"The bloodless version," Moira repeated.

Red rolled her eyes.

"Fine. No blood. Unless they are very rude."

The plan was simple, which immediately made me uneasy, because simple plans had lately developed a habit of tripping over the first thing nobody had foreseen, such as a boy, a betrayal, an onion, or an English official with the face of a cold fish. This time, however, luck, or rather its grubby cousin, stood on our side for a little while.

Red circled the stable through the orchard, bent low between the trees, silent as a fox with very bad intentions. Moira and I approached by the side path, pretending, though I could not say for whose benefit, that we had every right to be two wet, filthy women creeping towards somebody else's stable. The lad with the bowl noticed us first. He lifted his head, frowned and opened his mouth.

He did not have time.

Moira drew the pistol from beneath her coat and aimed at him with both hands.

"No shouting," she said calmly.

That was very much Moira's way: no ornament. No threat about giving him a second mouth, no comparison with porridge. Just a pistol and an instruction.

The stable lad froze with the spoon still in his mouth.

The other turned away from the horse he had been grooming and immediately raised his hands when Red appeared behind him with a knife at his side.

"Good morning," she said. "This is a robbery, but let us try to make it more civil than your tax system."

The boy with the bowl slowly removed the spoon from his mouth.

"What?"

"He asked a question," I said to Moira. "May we classify him as resistant yet?"

"No."

Red pushed the other stable lad towards a beam.

"Names."

"Tom," stammered the one with the bowl.

"Will," said the other, pale as milk.

"Splendid," Red said. "Tom and Will. Sounds like a cheap comedy in which nobody ought to die. Let us remain faithful to the genre."

Moira walked over to Tom.

"How many people are in the house?"

Tom looked at the pistol, then at Moira.

"Only Mrs Kearney in the kitchen... but she has gone to the village. The gentlemen are away. The steward too. We only..."

"Dogs?" Moira asked.

"Two, but they went with the master. There is an old spaniel left, but he does not bite, he only farts."

Red looked at me.

"At last, a worthy opponent."

"Never underestimate a spaniel," I said. "I have seen empires with weaker moral defences."

Moira took from her pocket the rope she had earlier brought from Máire's cart and handed it to me.

"Tie Tom. Loosely, but effectively."

"I adore being given tasks that demand contradictory qualities."

Tom was close to tears.

"Please, miss, I have nothing. I only work with the horses."

I stopped.

And that was precisely why all of this was harder than stories about robbing the rich. The rich are almost never the first people standing in front of you. Tom and Will stand in front of them. Boys with bowls of porridge, hands cracked by the cold, fear in their eyes because someone may beat them over stolen horses, though the horses were never theirs.

"I know," I said more quietly. "That is why we are not going to hurt you. But if you start screaming, Red will become creative, and truly, nobody wants Red creative before noon."

Red nodded gravely.

"Before noon I am an unfinished artist."

Tom looked as though he could not decide whether to be less afraid or more.

We tied them in an empty stall, sat them beside one another and, in accordance with Máire's instructions, left them a bucket of water and a piece of bread from our bag.

Moira checked the knots twice, without cruelty. Red took a small knife from Will, examined it, then, after a moment's thought, gave it back by laying it just beyond reach of his bound hands.

"You can fetch it later," she said. "I am not a monster. Merely an uninvited guest."

"Are you going to steal the horses?" Will asked.

"No," Red replied. "We shall ask them to support the cause and see whether they are more moral than their owners."

"The master will kill us."

Tom said it. And this time nobody made a joke at once. Moira studied him carefully.

"You will say five men came. Not women. Men. Masked. You say it was dark, that they had pistols, that you did not see their faces. If you tell the truth, the steward will look for someone to blame nearby. If you lie intelligently, he may look farther away."

Will swallowed.

"And if they do not believe us?"

Red leaned towards him.

"Then say one of them had a moustache bigger than the parish priest's and a voice like a barrel. People believe in men more easily. Even when you invent them."

We left them there, frightened, alive and probably enriched by the finest story of their lives, provided they survived the consequences of somebody else's property.

The house proved less well defended than the stable.

We entered by the back door through the kitchen because Tom, after a brief conversation with Moira's pistol, had told us where the housekeeper kept the spare key. It was beneath a stone by the threshold, which I took as proof that rich people genuinely did not deserve their possessions. The kitchen was large, still warm from the morning fire, and smelled of bread, fat, soap and order purchased with someone else's spine. Leftovers lay on the table: bread, cheese, cold roast meat, apples. Red stopped beside the roast and looked at me.

"Does stealing meat from an Englishman count as fasting?"

"If the intention is patriotic, everything counts."

Moira was already packing food into a bag.

"Less talking. More work."

"She speaks as if robbery has a rulebook," Red muttered.

"It does. I am writing it now," Moira replied without even looking at us.

It was so dry, so calm and so unexpected that Red looked at me with genuine satisfaction.

"You see? We have corrupted her."

"She claims she is not learning from you."

"She lies better every day. There is hope."

We went through the pantry and took flour, dried meat, some tea, two bottles of spirits and a small bag of salt. Moira also found a medicine box with bandages and laudanum, which she put away immediately. Red went into the servants' room and found several plain garments, coats, scarves, two pairs of boots, one pair too large, though after the past few days one stops taking offence at boots provided they possess soles.

Then we went deeper inside.

And there the house changed its face.

The kitchen was labour. The corridor beyond it was power. Carpets, dark wood, portraits of ancestors staring from their frames as though they still expected rent from every breath taken in the room. On the wall hung a beautifully framed map of the estate, with fields, villages, a stream and place names written so elegantly that one might imagine the land itself had come to these people and begged to be owned. In the drawing room stood a piano, silver candlesticks, porcelain and a clock so enormous it must have measured time not for people, but for property.

Red walked up to the portrait of a man in a red coat.

"Do you think that is Hargreaves?"

"He looks like the sort of man who makes children take off their caps before stealing their fathers' land," I said.

"So yes."

Red lifted a silver cigarette case from a side table and slipped it into her pocket.

"For Eamon," she said quietly.

It was not a joke. Moira heard, but said nothing. In the study we found a strongbox.

Locked, of course, because rich people have a touching faith in small locks. Moira opened it after a little work with a pick, and I felt a pride so inappropriate that one might have thought she had just won a crochet competition rather than committed burglary. Inside were money, several banknotes, silver coins, a watch on a chain, a ring set with a stone and documents Moira had no time to examine properly, though she took one sealed letter because, as she observed, paper bearing a coat of arms might always prove useful.

"Is that sensible?" I asked.

"I do not know yet."

"Our favourite category of decision."

Red found a small lady's pistol in a drawer, more elegant than practical, with a mother-of-pearl grip.

"Oh, look. A weapon for a lady. Presumably for shooting burglars between one embroidered napkin and the next."

Moira looked at the pistol.

"Take it."

Red handed her the weapon.

"Here. It suits your new career."

Moira took it without comment, but a shadow tightened her face for a moment. Eamon was still between us. He would remain between us for a long time.

We left the house through the kitchen, laden like very gloomy market women, with bags of food, clothes, money and small valuables. In the stable Tom and Will sat where we had left them. The old spaniel they had mentioned did indeed appear in the doorway, looked at us with the contempt of a creature that had known better times, farted quietly and lay down again.

Red stopped.

"Defeated by an aristocratic dog."

"We do not have time," Moira said.

"That is not a dog. That is chemical warfare."

Will groaned.

"Take the chestnut mare and the black gelding. They are quiet. And the grey. He bites, but only the master."

"A sensible animal," Red said.

Saddling the horses took us longer than it should have, because none of us was a hunting lady or a born horse thief. Red managed best, observing that "every Irishwoman learns two things: how not to trust the English and how to hold on to something that is trying to throw you off". Moira was practical and calm, though her hands still did not quite obey her. I tried to look as though I understood straps, girths and all that leather theology, but the horse looked at me much as the rat in the warehouse had before: with painful awareness of my deficiencies.

Before we left, Moira went over to Tom and Will.

"Will someone untie you?"

Tom nodded.

"Mrs Kearney will be back before noon."

Moira left the knife nearer their feet, though still far enough away that they would have to work for it.

"Tell her the story about the men."

Will looked at Red.

"And if she asks why one of them had a woman's voice?"

Red grinned broadly.

"Tell her he was an upper-class Englishman. They all sound like aunts when they are offended."

This time even Moira almost smiled.

Almost.

We rode out of the stable by the back way, not through the gate but through an open gap in the wall by the orchard, which Tom had pointed out after a second look at the pistol. The rain had eased. The sky was still low and dirty, but a paler streak had appeared between the clouds, looking less like hope than a hole in a badly stitched sack.

I rode the chestnut mare, who had evidently decided I was a temporary problem and endured me with the dignity peculiar to animals wiser than human beings. Red rode the grey, who did indeed try to bite her, but after a brief exchange of looks apparently decided there was little point starting a war with a woman more stubborn than himself. Moira rode between us, with a bag of documents, bandages and food, her face closed, but her back straight.

Behind us remained the Hargreaves house. Two bound stable lads. A spaniel armed with chemical warfare. A portrait of a man whose cigarette case we had stolen. And the first moment in many hours when nobody was shooting at us.

"Well," Red said after a while, adjusting her coat, "if anyone ever asks me what the road to freedom looks like, I shall say it begins with stealing cheese and a horse from an English stable."

"Very patriotic," I replied.

"And practical. Patriotism without food is only poetry on an empty stomach."

Moira looked ahead.

"We need to disappear before the lads are found."

Red became serious at once.

"I know."

And just like that, the funny moment ended as quickly as it had come. Because now we had horses, clothes, some money, food and weapons. More than we had possessed that morning. And yet we were poorer. By one boy. By trust.

By one more illusion that it was possible to move through this world and take only what one needed without leaving people bound, dead or terrified behind.

We urged the horses between the trees, away from the road, towards a direction we did not yet know. Only farther. Only faster. Only before history caught us again.

For a while we rode in silence, which was very noble, grave and entirely unlike us, but apparently even my mouth, that small factory of calamity, needed a moment to decide whether, after the boy's death, Colm's betrayal, the raid on the Hargreaves house, the theft of horses and the appropriation of aristocratic cheese, it still had the right to manufacture commentary or ought at last to be closed by some sensible authority.

A sensible authority, of course, did not exist, and if it did, it was probably signing papers for Ashford at that very moment.

The chestnut mare carried me along the wet track with the patience of a saint, which was suspicious, because so far every saint in our vicinity had either remained silent or worked for a foundation with very dirty hands. Red rode beside me on the grey horse, who had already bitten her sleeve once and then apparently concluded that he had found an opponent more stubborn than his own temper, so from then on he confined himself to offended snorting. Moira kept between us on the black gelding, straight, rigid, her face closed and her hands wrapped in stolen gloves too elegant for a woman with a boy's blood beneath her fingernails.

I wore somebody else's coat and carried in my bag a piece of cold roast meat, a silver cigarette case, some money, bread, bandages, two bottles of spirits, a letter bearing a coat of arms I did not understand, and the sense of moral advancement that comes only when one transforms from factory girl into escaped convict, burglar, horse thief and unofficial specialist in damaging the reputation of the British Empire.

It had to be admitted that, for a girl who until recently had possessed in life mainly a shovel, a bowl of watery soup and a mother who looked at her like disappointment on legs, my career was developing dynamically.

"You know," I said at last, because the silence had begun to grow too comfortable and I trust nothing comfortable for more than three minutes, "if I survive the next week, I shall have to update my personal description very carefully."

Red looked at me from beneath her wet headscarf.

"I warn you, if you say 'lady', I shall throw you off the horse."

"I would not dream of insulting ladies. They have fewer charges against them."

Moira did not look at me, but asked quietly:

"What does the present description say?"

"Well," I began, adjusting myself in the saddle with the dignity of someone who had no idea how to sit a horse properly but intended to do it criminally and with conviction,

"Eleanor Nell Whitmore, formerly factory worker, daughter of a man broken by labour, sister of a dead agitator, owner of an unruly tongue that ought to have its own police file, currently wanted by England, unwelcome in parts of Ireland, suspected by every sensible person and probably cursed by at least one spaniel from the Hargreaves household."

Red snorted.

"That spaniel looked as though he had cursed everyone from birth. Do not take it personally."

"I take everything personally. It is part of my charm."

"It is an illness."

"Charm in the poor always looks like illness because nobody wants to pay for it."

Moirá sighed very quietly, but this time she did not tell us to be silent, so I took it as permission to continue insulting my own biography.

"As for achievements," I went on, "I began modestly. Graffiti on factory walls, a few leaflets, several sentences apparently so dangerous that grown men in hats developed trembling knees. Then I was promoted to woman transferred to the boiler room, which in itself is a sort of sentence, only without a judge and with more soot between the teeth."

Red raised an eyebrow.

"Do not forget Cedric."

"I do not. Cedric Mowbray, my first serious relationship with a shovel in the background. I admit I struck a supervisor in the head with a tool of labour, which sounds bad only if one omits the fact that the supervisor was moral refuse dressed as a man and was at that moment beating a woman I had very unwisely grown fond of."

Red looked ahead.

"Unwisely?"

"Red, my dear, from the moment I met you my life began to resemble a sermon against making decisions under the influence of emotion."

"And yet you are still riding beside me."

"Because I am loyal to my own mistakes. It is my prettiest quality."

A shadow of a smile appeared on Red's lips, small, tired, but real. Moirá still looked ahead, yet her shoulders loosened by a fraction. It was not relief. Not yet. More a brief opening in the pain through which air could enter.

"Then," I continued, because having begun to make myself the chronicler of moral decline I ought to do the job honestly, "I was arrested, beaten, accused of subversion, agitation, insulting the Crown, sabotage, assault, abusing representatives of authority and probably generally existing in an inconvenient manner. In court, instead of showing remorse, I decided to make a speech which, as it turns out, had better legs than I did, because it managed to travel from Manchester to the factories faster than I reached common sense."

"There was no competition there," Red muttered.

"Thank you for the support."

"Always."

"Then I was sentenced to twenty years' labour in the colonies, which was a very polite way of saying: 'take this woman off the map before she opens her mouth again'. Unfortunately for the judge, my mouth proved harder to deport than anticipated."

Moira finally spoke:

"Escape from custody."

"Yes. Thank you, my dear accountant of crime. Escape from custody with the help of an Irish network, a former gaoler, several armed men, a cart, a fire, keys and very bad decisions. To that we should add complicity in riots, absconding from sentence, illegal sea crossing, false documents, concealment of identity, receiving aid from smugglers, unauthorised presence aboard ship and insulting the captain merely by breathing in his hold."

"The captain deserved it," Red said.

"All captains deserve it by definition. We simply do not always have time to prove it."

Red's horse snorted as if in agreement. I was beginning to like the grey.

"Next," I went on, "already on Irish soil, with the dignity proper to a woman thrown by fate from one hell into another, I became entangled in the case of a missing girl, a charitable foundation which apparently treats charity as an elegant name for trading in other people's lives, and an English official with the face of a man who has never had to apologise for somebody else's hunger. Along the way I met Oisín, which ought to be a separate offence, because mere contact with a man like that leaves a greasy mark on the soul."

Red nodded.

"Oisín is like a lard stain. You wipe and wipe, and it still stares at you from the cloth."

"Beautiful. Disgusting, but beautiful."

Moira said dryly:

"Let us not insult lard."

Red looked at her with approval.

"Moira, if you carry on like this, we shall begin demanding your permanent participation in conversation."

"That would be dangerous."

"At last you understand the spirit of the group."

For a while we rode in something one might almost have called laughter, except that in our situation laughter lacked the courage to come out whole, so it merely brushed the throat and retreated inside, where it was safer.

"Then there was the business with the blue file," I continued, "meaning my brief adventure with breaking into a forwarding office, crawling inside walls, abducting a boy with an onion, losing the onion to an officer of the law and escaping through a cellar, which will doubtless one day enter textbooks as an example of how not to conduct a clandestine operation unless one possesses luck, no shame and Moira with a pistol."

Moira flinched at the word "pistol".

I noticed. So did Red. I did not take the sentence back, but lowered my voice a little.

"Later we handed part of the evidence to Máire, a woman who looks as though she could sell rain a bucket and convince it the bargain was exceptional. We lost some of the money, some of the papers, half the plan, all trust in Colm and a boy who should never have found himself among people like us."

Silence returned then. Not completely. Not as heavy as before. But it returned and lay down between the horses' steps. I swallowed.

"Then we raided the estate of an English landowner, which, I admit, was one of the more morally clear episodes of recent days. We terrorised two stable lads and left them bread and water, which is a higher standard than authority offers most people in custody. We stole clothes, food, money, valuables, bandages, weapons and three horses. We spared one spaniel despite an obvious gas attack, which proves our mercy."

Red placed a hand to her breast.

"I am proud of that decision. Maturity sometimes means not starting a war with an old dog."

"Especially when the dog has the olfactory advantage."

Moira closed her eyes briefly.

"Please."

"What?" Red asked.

"I do not know. Anything less... graphic."

"Moira, dear Moira," I said, "if a person cannot describe the defeat of dignity in battle with a spaniel's stomach, then what is the tongue for?"

"For asking questions, giving warnings and making statements."

Red looked at me.

"You see? She truly was a gaoler. Even her tongue has official duties."

Moira did not answer, but the corner of her mouth moved so delicately that, had I not been watching closely, I might have mistaken it for the shadow of a branch. It was not a smile in the full meaning of the word. More its poor cousin, smuggled across the border of grief.

We rode on, faster now, because the horses from the Hargreaves house, despite their class origins, proved sturdy and less inclined to betrayal than most people we had met lately. The road between the trees narrowed, then emerged again onto wet meadows, where the wind pushed the grass in waves and the sky hung low as though it wanted to eavesdrop.

"To sum up," I said after a moment, because if a person is compiling a catalogue of her own decline she ought to keep it orderly, "in a relatively short period I have gone from honest work for starvation wages to being an agitational plague, convicted criminal, fugitive, smuggled passenger, false servant, burglar, horse thief, robber with elements of social justice, owner of somebody else's cigarette case and a woman whose name causes riots in Manchester. If Mother ever worried I would not make a career, she may stop now."

Red smiled more broadly.

"You are still missing piracy."

"Do not tempt me."

"And setting fire to a church."

"I shall leave that to priests. They have more experience in destroying sanctity from within."

Moira opened her eyes.

"You should not say that by the roadside."

"Why? Does God have men in the bushes?"

Red looked around theatrically.

"If He does, they are paid worse than Ashford's, because I cannot see a single one."

"Good," I said. "We cannot afford another front."

For a moment we really almost laughed. Almost. And that "almost" was all we could afford, but even it had value. Laughter does not erase blood. It does not raise boys from the dead. It does not straighten broken roads. But for a few breaths at least it can build a small crooked barrier against whatever is trying to drown a person.

After a long while Moira spoke:

"You are not only that."

I looked at her.

"A criminal?"

"Yes."

"That is kind. Slightly disappointing for my new brand, but kind."

"I am serious."

There was something so calm in her voice that I stopped joking, at least outwardly.

"You are also the reason people speak. That is not a small thing."

"People die because of it."

Moira did not look away.

"People died when they were silent too."

The sentence did not sound like comfort. Good. I was beginning to tire of comfort. Red looked at me from the other side.

"Besides, you are a dreadful horse thief."

"Excuse me?"

"You sit as though the horse were an innocent chair that decided to move."

"That is unfair. The chestnut and I are building a relationship."

"She is building patience. You are building a threat to your own neck."

"It is always pleasant to have shared goals."

Red shook her head.

"One day I shall teach you to ride."

"Is that a promise, a threat, or a form of revenge?"

"Yes."

And I do not know why, but that "yes" did something inside my chest warmer than the stolen coat.

Naturally, I did not say so. I was not quite that ill with honesty. Instead I adjusted myself in the saddle, most likely incorrectly, because the chestnut sighed from the depths of her equine soul and went on with a resignation that would have suited my mother.

"In any case," I said, "if anyone ever writes a book about me, I hope they at least mention that all my crimes possessed a certain moral elegance."

Red glanced at the stolen bag.

"You stole cold roast meat."

"With dignity."

"And cheese."

"From historical necessity."

"And a cigarette case."

"For Eamon."

Red stopped smiling then.

Not abruptly. Her face simply grew serious, as though the boy's name were a finger touching a fresh wound. Moira too lowered her eyes to the horse's mane.

For a while we heard only the beat of hooves and the distant rush of wind.

"For Eamon," Red repeated quietly.

Moira nodded.

"For Eamon."

There was no toast. No bottle. No grave, prayer or mother who might weep over his hair.

There were three women on stolen horses, riding through wet Ireland with someone else's food, someone else's money and a weight that could not honestly be divided.

So I did the only thing I knew how to do.

I added his name to the account.

To that long, dirty, increasingly unfunny account that one day somebody would have to pay.

And if not somebody, then us. Because apparently, on top of everything else, I had also become the bookkeeper of vengeance. And I must admit that for a girl from the boiler room, the promotion was bloody impressive.

We rode until the horses ceased to sound like spoils and began to sound like responsibility.

It was a very unpleasant stage of every theft, one nobody sings about in taverns, because in songs a man takes a horse, leaps into the saddle, throws a curse at the world over his shoulder and disappears in the glory of freedom, whereas in real life a horse must be led, fed, watered, calmed, watched so it does not break a leg in mud, and all the while one must pretend not to look beside it like a pauper who has accidentally stolen not an animal but a piece of somebody else's estate together with its class origin.

The chestnut was too good.

So were Red's grey and Moira's black.

It was not merely the coats, though even after rain and mud they had that indecent sheen of things usually housed beneath roofs better than entire workers' homes. It was the saddles, the tack, the way the animals placed their feet, accustomed to roads rather than flight through ditches, to people in gloves rather than three women smelling of gunpowder, blood, fear and stolen cheese. One look from any shepherd, trader or child standing by a fence would be enough to understand that the horses suited us no more than we still suited any respectable story.

In the afternoon, when the road began to rise gently between wet hills, Moira made us stop.

She did not say it loudly. She simply raised one hand, dismounted carefully and went over to a stone wall where the wind tore at the grass as though trying to interrogate it. From her bag she took a folded paper stolen from the Hargreaves house. It was not a proper map, rather part of an estate plan and the surrounding farm roads, but to Moira even a scrap of paper looked like something from which meaning could be squeezed if one stared at it long enough without blinking.

Red dismounted from the grey and at once looked west, as though the very word Galway sat somewhere beyond the line of hills and called her through the mist.

"Far?" I asked, though I knew the answer from their faces.

Moira pressed the paper against the stone so the wind would not take it.

"Too far by the direct road. Too far on horses someone will describe before dusk. Too far for three women riding together without reason, without a man, without a cart and without a credible story."

"We have a story," I said. "We are travelling to a sick aunt who apparently lies somewhere between medicine and miracle, since the whole country is obliged to visit her."

Red snorted.

"If that aunt exists, she ought to leave us an inheritance for the effort."

"If she does not exist, she ought to as well. It is the least she can do."

Moira looked at us over the paper.

"The main road is out."

Red became serious at once.

"Why?"

"Because anyone who thinks even a little will assume we shall try to head west. Galway appeared in the document, you have family there, Bríd may be there or on the way, and the pursuit does not need to be clever, only predictable."

"And numerous," I added.

"Numerous helps too."

Red placed her hands on her hips and looked towards the muddy road we had just travelled.

"So we are not going to Galway."

The sentence cost her more than she wished to show.

Moira folded the map very slowly.

"We are. Just not the way they want us to."

"Sounds like the plan of someone who later explains the bodies in a ditch," Red muttered.

"It is not a plan. It is necessity."

"Necessity lately has the face of an old whore and prices like a London moneylender."

"Do you know the area?" Moira asked, ignoring her tone, because Moira possessed that rare gift of treating Red's sarcasm like rain, as something wet, troublesome and impossible to stop.

Red looked at the hills.

"Not this precise part. But I know the kind of people who live here. Shepherds, turf-cutters, widows of men who drank before they managed to die, children born tired, and old people who remember more than they will tell for free. There should be a settlement farther on. Ballynareen or something like it. A few cottages, sheep, turf smoke, much silence and even more eyes."

"Can we buy silence there?" I asked.

Red gave me a sidelong look.

"Silence is not bought. Silence is traded. For food, money, a favour, or a lie that sounds less dangerous than the truth."

"So like everything in life, only with more sheep."

"Sheep are more honest than people. At least they stink without pretending."

Moira put away the paper.

"We need to leave the road. The horses must be hidden or exchanged as well. They are too good."

Red patted the grey's neck, and the horse snorted as though he understood that his class embarrassment was being discussed.

"Do not tell him that. He has the delicate soul of an aristocrat and the teeth of a petty tyrant."

"He will attract attention in a poor settlement," Moira said.

"In a poor settlement everything attracts attention," Red replied. "Even a pretty button is an event, and we shall ride in on three stolen horses from a rich Englishman's house, with faces fit for a funeral and bags full of someone else's cheese. It will be difficult to pretend we are pilgrims."

"Perhaps we shall say we are a travelling theatre," I said. "You play anger, Moira conscience, and I the decline of morals."

Red looked at me.

"And the horse?"

"The horse plays landed property seized by the people."

"At last, a role equal to his station."

Moira sighed.

"We go to Ballynareen. If Red is right and there are shepherds, perhaps we shall find someone who knows the side crossings."

"And if they sell us?" I asked.

"Then we shall have fewer horses and more problems."

"I admire your gift for reassurance."

"I am not trying to reassure."

"I know. That is what makes it so effective."

We moved on, no longer along the road but beside low stone walls, across wet meadows where the grass splashed beneath the horses' hooves and sheep looked at us with expressions as though they were the local moral council and had just unanimously declared us hopeless. The wind came from the west, cold and salty, carrying the smell of turf, wet wool, earth and something old, perhaps the sea, perhaps hunger, perhaps that peculiar Irish patience which is not gentleness but a refusal to disappear entirely.

The country changed slowly. The dirt of the port and the crush of the city lay behind us, but we entered no pastoral idyll. The Irish countryside did not open its arms, spread a green carpet beneath our feet or sing a sentimental song of return. It lay wet, stony and sparing, with cottages crouched beneath hills, chimney smoke travelling low over the ground, and people whose figures appeared far off by walls and vanished before one could raise a hand in greeting. This was not a land of consolation. It was a land of survival. Beautiful, yes, but with the beauty of someone who has survived a beating and does not wish anyone to admire the scars.

After a long while we saw the first cottages.

Ballynareen did not receive us as guests. It received us as a sign that the day had stopped being ordinary and begun to smell of trouble.

Before we had even managed to halt the horses at the edge of the muddy square, people were already watching. Not directly, not brazenly, but in the way poverty and long life beneath someone else's rule teach: from the corners of eyes, beneath lowered lids, through doors opened only to the width of a face, from behind fences, from behind sheep that had suddenly ceased to be the most interesting sight in the district.

Two women carrying buckets stopped mid-step. A boy with a stick halted the sheep so abruptly that one ran into another and began bleating in outrage. An old man by the wall did not move, but his eyes sharpened.

Then they saw the horses. That was the moment curiosity became arithmetic. Too good. Too clean. Too clearly not ours.

Moirá dismounted first, calmly, without sudden movements, like someone who knew every gesture was being read as a sentence in an account book. I got down less elegantly because the chestnut had apparently decided I was not her destiny but a temporary mistake. Red remained in the saddle a little longer.

And that was a decision. Not accidental. Not nervous.

The decision of a woman who knew that if she came down to earth too quickly, she would become one of them. And she had not come here to be one of them.

She dismounted only when everyone was already watching. Slowly. Without haste. Without a smile.

She stood in the mud as though the mud belonged to her rather than the other way round. She adjusted her coat, wiped a hand across her face, leaving a streak of dirt on her cheek, and looked at the people as one looks at someone who may be a problem or a solution depending on how quickly they understand the situation.

"Good morning," she said.

There was nothing polite in it. It was a statement. The woman who came out of the largest cottage studied her for a long time.

"You do not look like good morning."

Red smiled crookedly.

"Because we are not."

The silence thickened.

It was the kind of silence that is not peace but choice: speak or do not speak, ask or close the door, remember faces or pretend they were never there.

Red took a step forward.

"We are looking for one night and a road that does not exist on maps."

"Roads always exist," the woman said. "The question is who walks them."

"People you did not see."

"And yet they are standing before me."

Red tilted her head.

"And that is your problem."

There it was. The first blow. Not a threat. Not yet. But something that set the table. The woman narrowed her eyes.

"And what is my problem, girl?"

Red did not answer at once. She looked at the people around us, at the doors, at the boy, at the old man, at the horses.

Then she said calmly, almost softly:

"That if anyone asks about us tomorrow, you will have to choose whether you remember or live quietly."

It was not loud. It was not theatrical. But it travelled through the village faster than a shout.

The boy stopped breathing for a moment. One of the women looked away. The old man by the wall spat beside himself and studied Red more closely.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Red looked at him.

"Someone you do not want to meet at the wrong moment."

"Plenty like that walk this land."

"Few come back."

That was the second blow. And now there could be no doubt that Red was not trying to fit in. She was setting terms. The woman stepped closer.

"This is not the port. Your boys with knives do not rule here."

Red raised one eyebrow slightly.

"You think I came here from the port?"

"You look like trouble."

"Because I am."

Silence. Brief. Taut. Then Red did something I had not expected. She raised her sleeve. Not all the way. Just enough to show part of an old scar on her forearm. It was not an accidental mark. Too straight. Too even. Too deliberate. The old man by the wall drew breath through his teeth.

"That is not the work of a street knife," he said quietly.

Red looked at him.

"No."

"Where did you get it?"

"Where people stop asking whether it is worth it."

That was enough.

She did not need to say more.

She did not need to say "rising", she did not need to say "the boys from the west", she did not need any of the grand words newspapers enjoy. The scar was enough, the tone, and the way she said "there".

The old man nodded. Slowly. Like someone who had just calculated the risk and decided it was not worth testing. The woman looked at him, then at Red again.

"And those two?" she asked, pointing at me and Moira.

Red did not even turn.

"Englishwomen."

Several heads jerked.

That word always did something to the air.

"Taken from the wrong place," Red added. "They work with me."

She did not say "they work for me".

She did not say "they are on my side".

She said "they work with me".

As though it were a decision, not a choice.

The woman looked at me for longer.

"And you?"

I smiled faintly.

"I stopped belonging to the people who raised me a long time ago."

It was neither a lie nor the whole truth. It was enough. Moira said nothing. And that was the best thing she could do, because silence in her hands was heavier than words. The woman returned her gaze to Red.

"What do you want?"

"A night."

"For free?"

Red looked at the horses.

"No."

"One horse."

"No."

It was quick. Hard. Immediate. The village shifted slightly. This was the moment everything could have gone wrong. But Red did not retreat half a step. Instead she did something more dangerous still. She smiled. Not broadly. Not kindly. Just a little.

"Listen to me carefully," she said calmly. "We did not come here to ask. We came here to stop. The difference is that if we are not here, someone else will come asking where we went. And they will not talk as long as I do."

Silence fell like a heavy coat.

"We shall move on," she added. "With a horse or without. But if we pass through your village without a roof, without a fire and without silence, then tomorrow what you remember will no longer be your decision."

It was a threat. Clean. Clear. Dressed in no pretty words. The old man rose slowly.

"Enough."

The woman looked at him.

"Seán..."

"Enough," he repeated. "They stay."

He looked at Red once more.

"One night."

"One night," Red repeated.

"Food."

"We shall pay."

"Silence."

Red nodded.

"Your best bargain today."

Seán spat again, this time nearer.

"And the worst if I am wrong."

Red shrugged.

"Then tomorrow you will have a more interesting story."

The woman turned and pointed to the door.

"Come in."

Red looked once more at the village. At the doors. The people. The boy with the sheep. And for a fraction of a second I saw something in her face. Not triumph. Not relief. Something between. As though she had returned for a moment to a place she had never truly left. Then she went inside.

And the village, though nobody said it aloud, already knew one thing:

Three women had not arrived. A history carrying trouble had arrived. And it was best not to keep it longer than one night.

For the first hour after Red finished speaking, Ballynareen behaved as though someone had driven a knife into the middle of the village and ordered everyone to pretend it was merely a new kind of signpost.

Nobody threw us out. Nobody truly welcomed us either. It was that peculiar Irish state between hospitality and fear in which a person receives a bowl of potatoes, a place by the fire and a look saying plainly: eat, warm yourself, and then may God, the devil and all the dead take you away before your troubles begin breeding on our threshold. We sat by the hearth in the cottage while people around us did what people always do when they try to pretend the presence of misfortune changes nothing: moved pots, added water, adjusted blankets, fed children, carried buckets out, checked the sheep, but every movement was a fraction too careful, every glance a fraction too quick, and every silence so full of unspoken questions that one could have plugged holes in the roof with them.

Red sat at the table, but she did not rest.

That was the worst thing about her, and perhaps the most beautiful: even when she sat down, she looked as though she had only changed position for a moment before the next leap. Wet hair had slipped from beneath her scarf and clung to her temples, a streak of mud marked her cheek, dried blood stained her sleeve, whose I did not know because blood had lately become so common that it was beginning to lose names, and yet the people in the room kept glancing at her, not at me, not at Moira, not at the pistol hidden beneath a coat, but at Red, as though waiting to see whether she would speak again and what she might order their consciences to do this time.

They did not like her. That was plain. But they were beginning to fear her in a way that had nothing to do with a knife.

A knife is simple. It flashes, cuts, leaves a wound that may be dressed or not. Red had done something more unpleasant: reminded them that silence too can be a choice, that fear does not absolve guilt, that a person may live an entire life honestly in other

people's eyes and then see a cart with a crying girl, give her water, and never again be as clean as before.

Poor people do not like being told that poverty does not cancel responsibility.

I do not blame them. I did not like it either.

The old woman whose name we did not yet know, though everyone addressed her as if a name were unnecessary, sat opposite Red and stirred a bowl she did not eat from for a long time. Seán sat by the door with a pipe but did not light it, which in itself was a sign that he was thinking more seriously than he wished to admit. The young woman with a baby at her breast looked at Moira, then at the ribbon lying on the table, then back at Moira, as if trying to connect a piece of blue cloth with the face of a girl she had given water three weeks earlier and failed to save.

Moira kept her hands beneath the table.

Not because it was cold.

I saw her rub from time to time with her thumb at the space between her fingers, where Eamon's blood seemed to sit deeper than skin. Her hands had already been washed. Three times. In water, then water with ash, then water with something the old woman had handed her without a word, as though she understood there are stains a person tries to scrub not because she believes it will work, but because she must occupy her hands with something before they tear her memory apart.

A child sat by the hearth.

A little boy, perhaps five, legs tucked beneath him and a piece of wood in his hand which he pretended was a horse, a ship or a weapon, because children have that miraculous, cruel gift of turning everything into play until the world brutally explains that adults use the same objects for irreversible things. The boy watched Moira with the shameless curiosity of children and foolish officials, except that in children at least it does not come from contempt.

"Can you shoot?" he asked suddenly.

Everything in the cottage grew quieter still.

Moira raised her head.

Her face was calm, but I saw something in it shift. Not violently. Like a thin layer of ice beneath a foot.

"Yes," she answered.

"At people?"

The boy's mother hissed at once:

"Quiet, Pádraig."

But it was too late. The question already lay on the floor between us, small, dirty and innocent only because it had come from a child's mouth.

Moira looked at the boy for a long time. Too long. Then she said in a voice so level it hurt:

"Do not learn it."

The boy frowned.

"Why?"

Moira looked away first.

She did not answer.

Red rose from the table so abruptly that the bench groaned beneath her leg. She took her bowl, set it beside the hearth and moved towards the door.

"I am going to see whether our inherited horse has eaten anyone important yet," she threw over her shoulder.

"The grey has better moral judgement than half the people we know," I said, getting up behind her.

"Exactly why I shall check whether he has founded his own republic in the stable."

The old woman gave me a sharp look.

"You stay."

"Me?" I asked with an innocent expression that would not have fooled even the farting spaniel from the Hargreaves house. "But I am the calmest part of this expedition."

Red stopped in the doorway and looked back.

"Nell, darling, you are calm only when you are asleep, and even then you probably insult people in your dreams."

"I have no evidence of that."

"I have an instinct. Enough."

The old woman sighed like someone who had understood that arguing with us was an occupation without a future.

"Do not go farther than the barn."

"We are not planning to overthrow the government after dark," Red said.

"Does that usually stop you?"

Red gave her a brief smile.

"No. But today I am tired."

We went out.

Outside, evening had settled over Ballynareen, heavy and wet, not black yet, rather dark blue, poured across stones, walls, roofs and sheep standing in their pen like compact woollen pangs of conscience. Turf smoke drifted low from the chimneys, acrid, catching in the throat and clothes, while mist hung over the hills so thick that the farther cottages looked like a thought somebody had failed to finish. Somewhere a dog barked. Somewhere a child cried. Somewhere a woman closed her shutters too quickly when she saw us come out.

Red stopped beside the stone wall beyond which the grey horse stood. The animal raised his head, saw her, and immediately turned his muzzle away with the expression of an aristocrat offended by a change in the system of ownership.

"You see?" Red said. "He is judging me already."

"Perhaps he is right."

"A horse with conservative views is the worst thing that could happen to us."

"We stole him from an English house. Perhaps he is suffering a crisis of loyalty."

"Then let him suffer more quietly. I have problems too and I do not snort at people."

"Red, you snort metaphorically without cease."

She leaned against the wall and for a while said nothing. She looked at the grey, but I knew she did not see the horse. She saw something much farther away, perhaps Galway,

perhaps Maeve, perhaps the faces of the people she had just frightened with an old sign and her own voice.

"You did well," I said.

She snorted.

"Intimidating poor villagers? Thank you, I always dreamed of such a noble talent."

"You did more than intimidate them."

"Did I? Lovely. I was afraid I was losing my touch."

"You reminded them of something."

"Exactly. The worst kind of violence. The sort after which a person beats himself from the inside."

The sentence was so bitter that for a moment I did not know whether to answer.

Red ran her fingers across the wall, scraping moss away with a nail. She did it too carefully. Too hard.

"I hate it," she said after a while.

"What?"

"Using those people like a scarecrow."

I did not need to ask which people.

Her metal token still hung at her throat, dark against wet skin.

"They were not there so I could wave them before peasants by a fire," she continued. "They did not die so that years later I could stand in somebody else's cottage, show a scrap of metal and say: fear me because I knew the dead. It is disgusting."

"Effective."

"Which makes it more disgusting."

The wind tugged at her scarf. She adjusted it nervously.

"Once I believed in all of it more simply," she said. "That there were us and them. That if a person went with the right people, she did the right things. That if you suffered for the cause, the suffering had meaning, and if someone died, at least he did not die like a dog under a cart. Then I saw that causes have pockets too, and inside the pockets sit people, money, pride, betrayals, boys sent with messages and girls who pay the highest price for somebody else's courage."

Maeve was in that sentence, though her name was never spoken.

She stood between us so clearly I could almost have moved aside to make room for her by the wall.

"Do you think you have no right to judge them?" I asked.

Red looked at me sharply.

"Do I?"

"I do not know. Lately I have had trouble with rights. It keeps turning out they are granted by people I would most like to hit with a chair."

"That is a universal principle of politics."

"All I know is they saw girls by the well. One had a split lip. One was crying. One left a ribbon. And nobody did anything."

Red looked away.

"And after Maeve, I ran."

She said it so quietly that for a moment I thought I had misheard.

"Red..."

"I ran," she repeated, harder this time, as though she preferred to drive the word into her own skin before someone else could. "Liam stayed. Others stayed. I walked away from it, went to work, to Liverpool, then the boiler room, pretended that if I kept busy enough the past would not find my address. And now I stand in a cottage before people who were afraid to open their mouths and tell them their silence has a price. What a splendid saint I am, eh?"

"You are not a saint."

"I know. My hair is better."

"You are someone who came back."

She looked at me.

"Years later."

"Time is part of returning too."

"You sound like someone trying to comfort me who does not know where the tools are kept."

"I have very little practice. Usually I insult the problem until it leaves of its own accord."

A shadow of a smile appeared on her lips, but died quickly.

"Maeve did not leave."

"No."

"Eamon did not either."

"No."

"Tommy?"

My heart tightened so violently that for a moment I had to look at the wall.

"Not him either."

Red nodded as though she had received the answer she expected and it still hurt.

"Then you know."

"I know a little."

"Enough."

For a long while we stood beside one another in silence. Behind us the village lived quietly and carefully, like someone pretending to sleep so as not to be asked for help. Through the cottage window I could see Moira at the table. She still sat with her back straight, but her head was bent. Beside her the young woman with the child was whispering something. Moira did not answer. Only listened.

"She will fall apart," Red said, looking at the same window.

"Moira?"

"Not today. Not in front of people. She is the kind who files the report first and bleeds afterwards."

"Beautiful and awful."

"Suits her."

"Are you worried about her?"

Red grimaced.

"Do not use words like that. They sound as though a person owns a clean apron and has time for tea."

"How should I put it, then?"

"That I do not want her collapsing on us along the road. Practical."

"Of course. Very practical, the way you looked at me when you refused to leave me in prison."

"That was different."

"How?"

She was silent for a moment.

Then she said:

"You annoyed me first."

I smiled in spite of myself.

"Disgustingly romantic."

"Do not get used to it. Next time I shall say something worse."

"I am counting on it."

Red looked at me, and for that one brief moment the whole world, with Ballynareen, Galway, Ashford, Oisín, Colm, the dead boy, the blue ribbon and all the roads that wanted to swallow us, moved half a step away. It did not vanish. It was never that polite. But it moved far enough for me to feel that I stood beside someone alive, warm, furious, funny and frightening, and that perhaps this was precisely why a person kept running even when she no longer knew whether there was anywhere left to go.

Then a short, strangled sound came from the cottage. Moira. Not a scream. Not weeping. Something between. Red moved first.

Inside we found Moira standing by the table, very pale, with the child Pádraig close beside her. The boy held a little wooden horse in his hand and stretched it towards her.

"He said I could give it to you," he mumbled.

"Who?" asked the young mother, frightened now.

The boy pointed vaguely towards the door.

"The boy who died."

The room became so quiet that the fire in the hearth suddenly sounded loud.

Moira stared at the wooden horse.

"He said nothing," she replied very calmly. "You did not know him."

The boy hesitated.

"But you look as though you lost him."

He was a child. Children sometimes tell the truth not because they are wise, but because they have not yet learned how to go around it.

Moira slowly sat down.

"I did not lose him," she said. "Not like that."

The boy placed the horse on the table beside her hand.

"You can have it."

His mother moved to pull him away, but the old woman stopped her with one hand.

Moira did not touch the toy at once. She looked at it as she had earlier looked at the blue ribbon. Like a small thing carrying too much. Then she took the horse between her fingers. Gently. Almost fearfully.

"Thank you," she said.

The boy nodded with the solemnity of children who have just performed a great duty, then returned to his mother.

Moirá put the horse in her pocket.

She did not cry.

But when she looked at me, I saw that something in her had been disturbed so deeply that no words should push their way in there now.

I said nothing.

Sometimes, miracle of miracles, I could.

Night came early, heavy and starless, with rain tapping the roof and wind scraping at the door like someone who knew the name of everyone inside. We did not truly sleep. Red dozed against the wall with a knife beneath her hand. Moirá sat by the hearth long after everyone pretended to be asleep, and the wooden horse rested in her pocket. I lay on a bench beneath a blanket smelling of sheep's wool and smoke, listening to the breathing of people who had given us a roof because they feared Red, were ashamed of the ribbon and perhaps, just perhaps, still possessed something the mechanism had not yet rubbed away.

Before dawn someone knocked at the door. Not hard. Three times. Then twice.

The old woman woke immediately, though I do not know whether she had slept at all. Seán, lying by the door, reached for his stick. Red opened her eyes at once, without any haze of sleep, like an animal accustomed to the fact that night never ends peacefully. Moirá rose quietly, pistol already in hand.

The old woman looked at us and pointed to a small storeroom behind a curtain.

No explanation was needed.

We hid there, squeezed between sacks of wool, a barrel and old tools. Through a slit in the cloth I could see part of the room, the door, the table, Seán and the old woman standing by the hearth as though nothing were happening.

The knocking came again.

"Who?" Seán asked.

"A man from the road," a male voice answered. "I am looking for something lost."

Red leaned towards my ear and whispered almost soundlessly:

"If it is another horse, I am handing the whole matter over to religion."

I suppressed a breath that nearly became laughter. Moirá did not even look at us.

Seán opened the door.

A man entered in a wet coat, hat in hand, mud to his knees. He did not look like a soldier or a policeman. He looked like a trader, perhaps a messenger, someone who travelled between villages and knew where people kept money, gossip and fear. That was precisely why he was dangerous.

"Forgive the hour," he said. "Two women and a girl may have passed this way yesterday. One red-haired. One English. One dark-haired and quiet. They may have had a good horse."

The old woman poured water into a cup.

She did not flinch.

"People pass through Ballynareen. Sometimes even those someone is looking for."

The man studied her more closely.

"Did you see them?"

"We saw three women."

My heart struck my ribs. Red beside me went utterly still. The man took a step closer.

"When?"

"Before evening."

"Where did they go?"

The old woman held out the cup.

"North."

The man did not take it at once.

"Are you sure?"

Seán spoke from the bench:

"One coughed hard enough to wake the dead. Another cried. The third looked as though a dog had bitten her and the dog regretted it. They went north. Did not stop."

The man watched him for a long time.

"Did they have a horse?"

"A poor one," Seán said. "Grey, thin, bad-tempered."

Red whispered by my ear:

"I am offended on the horse's behalf."

At last the man took the cup.

"And the red-haired one?"

The sheep boy, the same one who had earlier watched us with open curiosity, stood by the hearth holding a bowl. I saw his eyes dart from the man towards the curtain.

Oh no. No. The man saw it too.

"You," he said. "Did you see the red-haired woman?"

The boy opened his mouth. The old woman was too far away. Seán too slow. Red beside me tightened like a spring. And then the young mother, Pádraig's mother, dropped a clay bowl on the floor. It shattered with a crash. The child began to cry. Everyone turned that way.

"For God's sake," the woman hissed, kneeling among the shards. "I have two hands, three pots and a child sucking the life out of me, and you are asking a boy about red-haired women like a priest about sins. Help or stop standing in the doorway letting the cold in."

It was so beautifully ordinary, so angrily domestic, that even the man from the road lost his thread for a moment. He looked at the shards, the crying child, Seán, the old woman, then at the boy, who had managed to lower his eyes and look as stupid as only a village boy can when he understands he has just been saved without yet knowing from what.

The man finished the water.

"If they return, tell the priest in Carrigmore."

The old woman took back the cup.

"If they return, I shall tell them not to. More sensible."

The man did not smile.

"There is good money for information."

Seán spat into the fire.

"Good money usually comes with people after whom the threshold needs washing."

The man put on his hat.

"Mind what you say."

The old woman looked at him so coldly I felt it through the curtain.

"Mind where you ask."

He left. The door closed. For a long moment nobody moved. Then Red pushed aside the curtain and came out first.

The sheep boy looked at her with such a mixture of fear and admiration that I could almost see this night already turning in his head into a story he would one day repeat by a fire, naturally adding to himself the courage he had nearly lacked today.

Red went over to the young mother.

The woman was still kneeling among the broken pieces, the child at her breast, her face pale.

"Good work," Red said.

The woman did not even raise her eyes.

"I dropped a bowl."

"You dropped it magnificently."

"It was my best one."

Red reached into her pocket and placed a silver coin from the Hargreaves house on the table.

"Now you have a worse bowl and a better story."

The young woman looked at the coin, then at Red.

"That is too much."

"It is for silence."

"Silence was already paid for."

"Then it is for the bowl."

The woman hesitated, but the old woman nodded to her. The coin disappeared into her hand.

Seán stood.

"You leave now."

"Before dawn?" I asked.

"After that question? Yes."

The old woman went over to Moira and handed her a piece of cloth wrapped around the blue ribbon.

"Do not show this to just anyone."

Moira nodded.

"We will not."

The young woman suddenly spoke:

"That girl by the well..."

Everyone looked at her.

She swallowed.

"When the cart moved off, she said something. I thought she was calling a name. But perhaps... perhaps it was a surname. She said, 'Tell Tierney.' Or 'Tierney knows.' I was not sure. I was afraid to remember."

Moira froze.

Red slowly turned her head.

"Are you sure?"

"No. But now that you have said Bríd..."

She did not finish. She did not need to. The ribbon ceased to be merely a possible trace. It became a voice. Thin, frightened, but alive. Tell Tierney. Moira tucked the cloth against her breast beside the documents.

"Thank you," she said.

Two words.

But this time they were not dry.

The chestnut waited outside the cottage. The grey had already been led deeper among the pens, where he looked like an aristocrat abducted by an agricultural revolution and still unreconciled to his fate. The sheep boy stood beside him holding the reins with the solemnity of a man entrusted with a monster from legend.

Red went over to him.

"If he bites you, bite him back."

The boy looked at her in horror.

"I cannot."

"Then at least do not show him you are afraid. Horses and Englishmen sense it immediately."

Seán led us behind the cottages towards the hill, where the stone walls grew lower and the ground wetter. We went on foot, leading the chestnut, because the path was too narrow and slick to ride without risking a broken neck, which would have been a very inelegant conclusion to our criminal careers. Red walked in front with Seán. Moira in the middle, holding the bag and documents. I followed them, my coat wrapped tightly around me and the thought that Galway had moved another day farther away, but Bríd had come one sentence closer.

On the ridge of the hill Seán stopped and pointed into the darkness.

"Shepherds' crossing there. Down, then across the bog, then an old footbridge. If you keep straight, you will reach the Carrigmore road. Do not stay on the road long. People there look at boots, horses and faces."

Red nodded.

"And if anyone asks about us here?"

Seán looked at her.

"You went north. One coughed. Another cried. The third was ugly."

"Careful," I said. "I am beginning to take that role personally."

The old man looked at me and for the first time truly smiled, though briefly.

"A good role saves lives."

Red offered him her hand. Seán hesitated, then shook it. Not as a friend. Not as a heroine. As someone worth remembering honestly, because perhaps one day her name would come down the road again.

"Do not bring this back to Ballynareen," he said.

Red looked at him seriously.

"If we return, it will only be with a reason bigger than fear."

"That is what I am afraid of."

"Wise."

We started down.

Behind us Ballynareen slowly disappeared into the morning mist, leaving us one horse fewer, some food, the trace of a ribbon, the words "Tell Tierney", and one night of silence that had proved more expensive than the silver from the Hargreaves house.

Ahead lay Carrigmore.

A place where people do not ask questions because questions have a price.

And we, as usual, went there with questions in our pockets, too tired to pretend at good sense and too deep inside somebody else's story to turn back now.

CHAPTER XVI

Practical Theology

We left Ballynareen before morning had managed to pretend it was anything more than a colder variety of night, and this time, thanks to God, the devil, or simply Red's shameless gift for negotiation, we did not leave a single horse behind, which I counted as one of the very few triumphs of common sense over the moral bookkeeping of rural hospitality.

Seán and the old woman allowed us to keep all three animals, though not without looks that made it perfectly clear that every horse leaving Ballynareen was like a coin taken from an open palm. Red did not beg. Nor did Red thank them in the manner of polite people, because polite people generally have homes they are not forced to abandon before dawn. She merely said that if we survived, one day we would return with something better than a promise, and the old woman looked at her as one looks at a fire in the hearth that may warm the house or burn off the roof, then replied that promises are light but horses are heavy, so we had better waste neither one nor the other.

We did not waste them.

At least not immediately.

The road beyond Ballynareen was not a road at all, but a test of character administered by mud, stones and Irish weather, which had apparently decided that since we had managed to escape a prison, a port, an ambush, an English house and a moral discussion with shepherds, it was now worth seeing whether something simpler might defeat us, such as a wet slope and a horse with no desire to cooperate with history. At first we rode single file along a narrow path between stone walls, then across sodden pasture where the grass reached the horses' fetlocks and every step made a wet, sucking sound, as if the earth were taking us into its mouth and considering whether we were worth swallowing.

The wind carried the smell of peat, sheep, rotting grass and distant smoke, that particular smoke from poor cottages which does not smell of home but of work done so that home does not freeze. Mist moved low across the hills in tatters, now exposing stony ridges, now devouring whole stretches of land, until it seemed we were not riding through a country but through the memory of one, torn, wet, unfriendly to strangers and even less welcoming to those who return after years with someone else's war on their backs.

Red rode first.

Not because she knew the exact way, for she knew it as one knows the face of a relative last seen in childhood: the outlines were familiar, not the details. She rode first because she did not know how to do otherwise. After Ballynareen something in her was inflamed and restless, as though all that improvised charisma, the intimidation of an entire village, the memory of old rebel men, the blue ribbon and Bríd's name dragged out of someone else's memory had not given her strength at all, but stripped away her skin so that everything beneath it now hurt with every movement.

Moira rode behind her, straight-backed and rigid, with that common sense of hers strapped to her spine like an iron brace. I could not tell whether she was more exhausted or more determined, but she looked like someone who had decided not to fall apart for purely practical reasons. In the bag at her side she carried the documents, the prayer book, a piece of blue ribbon wrapped in cloth, and the little wooden horse given by the child in Ballynareen, which she never showed us, though every so often she touched her pocket as if checking whether the loss of Eamon still possessed a shape she could carry.

I rode third, which had its advantages because I could watch them both, and disadvantages because my horse had apparently concluded that since I was not leading the group, I had no authority whatsoever, and several times tried to turn towards the grass with such conviction that one might have thought it had discovered a better escape plan there than all our councils put together.

For the first hour we said nothing.

Then Red halted her horse on a low rise where, through rents in the mist, a darker belt of land could be seen to the west, distant and uncertain, more promise than direction. She did not say "Galway", but her whole body said it for her.

Moira rode closer.

"We have to keep to the crossing towards Carrigmore," she said.

Red continued looking west.

"I know."

"Then we see whether the trail truly leads through the wagon with the girls or only through a rumour."

"I know."

"Only then do we decide whether we can turn farther on."

Red turned her head slowly.

"Moira, if you tell me once more what we 'have to' do, I shall begin to suspect that when you were a guard you missed regulations more than sleep."

Moira took it without any visible reaction, though her mouth tightened slightly.

"Regulations can be useful when people begin doing stupid things under the influence of anger."

Red smiled crookedly.

"Wonderful. My anger has its own column now."

"Your anger leads us west every time you look at the horizon."

"Because Galway is there."

"Which is precisely why everyone will assume you are going there."

"My family is there."

"I know."

"Brid may be there."

"I know."

"Maeve..."

She stopped. She did not need to finish. The wind passed between us sharp and cold, as though the land itself did not wish to hear that name. Moira looked at Red calmly, but no longer coldly.

"Which is exactly why you cannot ride straight there."

Red snorted.

"Oh, splendid. Now I cannot go where I must because I must go there too badly. Logic worthy of a court."

"Not a court. A pursuit."

"The pursuit can kiss my..."

"Red," Moira cut in, more sharply this time. "Eamon is dead because someone knew our road. Colm sold us, or allowed us to be sold. Reilly's men were where they had no business finding us. Ashford, or someone working for him, already understands that direction matters more than speed. If we ride straight for Galway now, it will not be courage. It will be a gift to people already waiting with a knife on the table."

Red stared at her for a long time.

The horse beneath her shifted its head uneasily.

"Do not use Eamon to win an argument," she said quietly.

The sentence struck harder than a shout. Moira went pale. Not dramatically. Only as someone pales after being hit in a place with no skin left on it.

"I am not using him," she replied after a moment. "I am remembering him."

"Conveniently similar."

"To you, anything that stops you sounds like a chain."

"Because usually it is."

"No. Sometimes it is a hand on your shoulder before you walk into the fire."

Red leaned slightly forward in the saddle.

"And you like standing at doors and telling people when they may pass through?"

Moira drew in a breath. That was ugly. Too ugly. Even for Red.

I saw that Red understood it too, but only a second later, when the words were already between them and could no more be recalled than a bullet that had decided to find a child instead of a wall.

Moira did not raise her voice.

That would have been easier.

"Yes," she said. "I once stood at doors. And sometimes I told people they could not pass. That is why I know what a key weighs, what an order weighs, and what the moment weighs when someone tells herself that one more exception will not kill anyone. You want to ride straight to Galway because pain is pulling you there. I am telling you that pain is not a map."

Red was silent.

So was I.

Not because I had nothing to say. Of course I did. I had at least six remarks, three half-jokes and one stupid attempt to ease the tension by comparing our plan to a sick cow, but even I knew this time that if I put my tongue between them, I would either lose it or, worse, make them both look at me as though I were an idiot, which I am only in part.

Red looked away first.

"Carrigmore," she said.

Moira nodded.

"Carrigmore."

"But if we find nothing there..."

"Then we decide what comes next."

"No. Then we go west."

Moira weighed her answer for a moment.

"If we find nothing, we shall consider the west."

Red laughed briefly, without amusement.

"Consider.' God, Moira, if you ever fell in love with a man, you would probably send him a declaration of intent in triplicate."

"I have not fallen in love with a man."

"The most sensible decision of your life."

It was so unexpected that I looked at Red, then at Moira. Moira blinked. She did not smile, but for a moment the conflict lost its edge, like a knife struck against stone.

"Red," I said cautiously, "that may have been your most constructive insult yet."

"Do not get used to it. I am still furious."

"We noticed. So did the sheep."

Red looked back at the flock grazing below.

"At least sheep do not tell me to plan my emotions."

"Sheep plan nothing but chewing."

"Sounds peaceful."

"Ends in wool and a butcher."

"You always have to ruin dreams."

"That is my contribution to the group."

Red turned her horse back towards the path.

"We are going to Carrigmore. But if that village turns out to be another hole full of people who saw everything and did nothing, I shall be less charming than I was in Ballynareen."

"You were charming?" I asked.

"Shockingly so."

"Ah yes. I nearly forgot the part where you threatened the whole village with the memory of dead men."

"That was my gentle voice."

Moira moved on without comment, but I noticed that although the conflict had not vanished, something had shifted. There was no agreement. Agreement would have been too luxurious. There was a temporary truce, concluded on the back of a wet hill with three horses, several offended sheep and one deeply unpleasant fact as witnesses: neither woman could win that argument without endangering us all.

We carried on towards Carrigmore.

The route Seán had shown us first dropped steeply between rocks, then crossed a strip of bog where the earth yielded beneath the horses' hooves with a quiet, treacherous squelch. We had to dismount and lead them by the reins, because one false step might sink an animal to the knees or worse, and then instead of three horses we would have two horses, one tragedy and another reason to quarrel about common sense. Our boots sank into wet peat, our skirts grew heavy with water, and the wind pushed under our clothes with such persistence that it seemed to bear a personal grievance against our ribs.

Even so, the country around us was beautiful. Not gently. Not in the sort of way fit for a picture above a rich aunt's mantelpiece.

It was beautiful like the face of an old woman who has seen too much ever to ask for admiration. Dark hills rose and fell like the shoulders of a sleeping giant. Pale sky shone in puddles. Stone walls ran endlessly across the fields, dividing poverty into smaller, more comprehensible portions. Here and there solitary cottages crouched low, their smoke drifting close to the ground. From far away came the bleating of sheep, the cry of a bird, sometimes the knock of a hammer or the bark of a dog.

We saw no pursuit.

That did not reassure me in the least.

A pursuit you cannot see is worse than one breathing down your neck, because it leaves room for imagination, and my imagination, like everything else about me, had a tendency towards excess and bad manners.

In the afternoon we stopped beside the ruin of a little stone shrine, so small and overgrown that it looked as though God had once come here briefly, surveyed the neighbourhood and decided to leave matters to the local women. We ate bread, some cheese and cold meat from the Hargreaves house. Red chewed in silence while looking west, Moira checked the map and her notes, and I tried to scrape peat from my boots with a stick, but peat was defeating dignity, as usual.

"How much farther to Carrigmore?" I asked.

Moira glanced at the paper.

"If we are going the right way, we should see the first buildings before dark."

"And if we are not?"

"Then we shall see a different disaster."

Red snorted.

"They need a sign. 'Carrigmore: disaster to the left, slaughterhouse to the right, questions payable in advance.'"

"Perhaps there will be an inn," I said with the hope peculiar to people who never learn from their mistakes.

"Inns have ears," Moira replied.

"Everything has ears. Yesterday even the sheep looked like informers."

Red looked at me.

"One of them definitely worked for Ashford. Its eyes were too empty."

"That might also indicate a career in administration."

"Little difference."

Moira folded the map.

"In Carrigmore we do not begin by asking about Bríd."

Red looked up at once.

"No?"

"No. First we learn who runs the place, who drinks with whom, who fears whom, and whether anyone recognises the sign or Ashford's name. If we go in asking about transports of girls, they will learn about us faster than we learn about them."

Red swallowed a piece of bread.

"Common sense again."

"Yes."

"Do you keep it in the bag beside the pistol?"

"I would prefer more of both."

"You know that the longer we circle around, the greater the chance Bríd disappears farther away."

"I know."

"Do you?"

Moira looked at her calmly.

"Yes."

"Because you speak as though Bríd were an entry in a register."

This time Moira did not go pale.

This time she hardened.

"Bríd is a name, a trail and a possible witness. If we find her dead, the document can still speak. If we find her alive, she can speak. If we die before Carrigmore, no one speaks. That is what I know."

Red opened her mouth but said nothing.

Moira went on, more quietly:

"I am not indifferent. I simply cannot afford to be not indifferent in the way you are."

The sentence remained between them for longer.

Red lowered her eyes.

"Fine."

A "fine" from Red was like a signature on a truce carved into wet wood with a knife.

It was enough.

For now.

Towards evening the landscape began to change. Bog gave way to firmer earth, fields widened, walls grew higher, and the paths showed wheel marks more often. Smoke appeared in the distance, then another plume, then a dark smear of buildings hidden between low hills. From afar Carrigmore did not look particularly large, but at once it possessed something Ballynareen did not. Less crouching poverty, more movement. A forge stood beside the road and the metallic blows of a hammer carried through the air. Farther on, by the square, stood a building with an inn sign, two stables, a small chapel, several houses with better roofs, and a group of men beside a wagon talking in the manner of people guarding something they would never name aloud.

At the edge of the settlement stood a cross. Not holy in any comforting sense. More like a warning.

Someone had tied pieces of ribbon, bits of cord and little wooden medals to it, as though people left there pleas or apologies that no longer fitted inside their homes. The wind stirred them softly. Among the faded colours a strip of blue flashed before my eyes for a second.

Moira saw it too. She stopped her horse. Red looked at the cross, then at us.

"Carrigmore," she said.

No one answered. A man with a pockmarked face crossed the square. I did not know whether it was the same man. I could not know.

He was too far away, visible too briefly, and almost at once he passed between the wagons and vanished beneath the awning by the inn.

But it was enough. Red stopped breathing for the fraction of a moment. Moira put a hand on the bag containing the documents.

I felt my horse step sideways beneath the saddle, as though even it understood that we had not reached the end of the road but a place where the road had begun to demand answers.

"Remember," Moira said quietly. "First we watch."

Red smiled without amusement, her eyes still fixed on the place where the pockmarked man had vanished.

"Of course. I am a model of patience."

"Red."

"I know."

Her voice said otherwise.

We did not ride into Carrigmore.

It was the first sensible decision we had made in some time, so naturally we accepted it with the expressions of people who had just lost an argument with their own instincts.

We stood on a low rise between wet gorse bushes and a stone wall that looked as if it had spent a century holding back wind, sheep and other people's secrets, looking down at the settlement which from that distance seemed almost peaceful. Almost. And "almost" had lately become a warning more effective than any alarm bell.

Carrigmore lay in a shallow valley, spread around a crossroads like a stain left by something someone had tried to wipe away and only rubbed deeper into the earth. There was an inn with a dark sign swinging in the wind, a forge, several stables, a long warehouse by a side road, a small church whose modest tower looked less like a finger raised in prayer than in warning, and a presbytery standing a little apart behind a low wall, with a garden in which nothing grew enthusiastically. Smoke hung low and heavy from the chimneys, mingled with the mist, and made the whole settlement appear to breathe through a blocked throat.

What mattered most, however, was that we could see movement.

Too much movement for an ordinary village.

Men stood by the inn who looked like neither shepherds nor drunkards, though perhaps they worked as both after hours. A covered wagon stood by the warehouse, and two men talked at its rear without laughing, smoking or wasting energy on anything that might look innocent. A boy with a lantern lingered near the church, and every so often light appeared in the presbytery and vanished again, as though someone were moving from room to room counting not prayers but something more profitable.

And then we saw him.

The man with the pockmarked face.

I did not know whether he was the same man the woman in Ballynareen had spoken of. I did not know whether he had stood by the wagon with the crying girls, or whether fate merely possessed an especially malicious sense of repetition. But when he crossed the square and turned his head for a moment, the scars on his face caught what remained of the light so clearly that I felt Red beside me stop breathing.

Not violently. Not loudly. Her whole body simply went quiet.

"We are not riding in," Moira said.

Red did not answer at once.

"No," Moira repeated, more sharply. "We are not riding in."

"I heard you."

"Your horse heard me. I am not certain you did."

Red turned her head.

"Moira, if you mistake common sense for a sermon once more, I shall steal that pistol simply so you have to speak to people with less confidence."

"If you ride after that man now, you will not be speaking to anyone. You will be hanging or lying down."

"How kind of you to leave me a choice of position."

"Red."

In that one word from Moira there was exhaustion, warning and something else I had never heard so clearly before: fear. Not for herself. For Red. For us. For the fact that we were already so close to something real that one shove from anger might throw us straight into the hands of people who had waited more patiently.

Red tightened her fingers on the reins.

"He may know where Bríd is."

"Which is precisely why he cannot see us first," Moira said.

I looked at Carrigmore, at the inn, the church, the presbytery, the road leaving the settlement towards the west.

"Moira is right," I said, which sounded so strange in my mouth that I nearly turned to see whether someone more sensible was standing behind me and had said it instead. "I know it hurts, but sometimes even common sense accidentally lands on something useful."

Red looked at me as though I had just betrayed the cause.

"You too?"

"Me too. With profound disgust at myself."

Red snorted, but the tension in her shoulders did not ease.

"So what do you suggest? That we stand here admiring the local criminal architecture?"

Moira pointed towards a wooded hollow to the left, where several crooked trees grew between two low hills and a ruined stone shed stood, probably once a shelter for shepherds or a place where sheep came to die with a little more privacy.

"There. We hide the horses. Wait until dark. Watch. Ask nothing. Show no faces."

Red looked at the presbytery for a moment.

"And then?"

"Then we decide."

Red smiled slowly.

It was not a good smile.

"I have already decided."

Moira closed her eyes.

"Of course."

"The priest."

I looked at her.

"The priest?"

Red nodded towards the presbytery.

"In Ballynareen they said the paper was shown to a priest from the neighbouring parish. Carrigmore has a presbytery, a church and men by the wagons. If someone is blessing transports of girls as 'work', then he is either stupid or paid. And if he is both, all the better, because he will have papers."

Moira was silent.

For too long.

Then she said:

"It is not the worst idea."

"Oh, wonderful. Does that mean I shall be entered in your regulations under 'occasionally useful, though unbearable'?"

"Do not flatter yourself. It is a risky idea, not a good one."

"All good ideas begin as risky ones. Then they either become legends or death certificates."

"I have seen too many death certificates to find that amusing."

Red lowered her eyes. This time she did not answer at once. Good.

We moved towards the hollow between the hills, leading the horses on foot for the last stretch so as not to leave tracks too clearly in the soft ground. The shed proved more a hole with ambitions than a building, but it had three walls, part of a roof and a drier patch of floor, which by our current standards made it almost a hotel, merely without a maid and with a greater chance of finding a dead rat beneath a stone. We tied the horses deeper among the trees, covered the brighter parts of the tack with stolen coats and left them a little oats, not enough, but horses, being wiser creatures than people, made no political statement about it.

We watched Carrigmore until dusk.

It was the worst sort of waiting. Not the kind full of shouting, not the kind with bullets, not the kind where you know you will have to run in a moment. This was the waiting in which every movement in the distance becomes a possible sign, every man might be the right one, every wagon might contain a girl, a corpse, a document or a sack of potatoes, and you begin to hate your own eyes for being unable to see through walls.

The pockmarked man entered the inn twice and once came out with another man, short, broad, wearing a dark hat. A lamp was lit by the warehouse. The wagon was moved closer to a side stable. A woman with a bucket appeared near the church, but did not go inside; she left something by the presbytery wall and hurried away so quickly that Moira memorised her exact route and Red her exact fear.

When evening fell, the presbytery came alive.

One ground-floor window was lit, another above it more faintly. A young priest or curate knocked at the door, though I have never known how one distinguishes grades of holiness by a hat and a tired walk. He was admitted quickly. Then for a while two shadows moved across the curtain: one younger and thin, the other older and heavier,

with a round head and a gesture of the hand so confident that blessing, order and signature seemed to be the same motion to him.

"The parish priest," Moira said quietly.

"Or an exceptionally ambitious cook," I murmured.

Red did not take her eyes from the window.

"We wait until the village goes to sleep."

"And then?" I asked, though I knew the answer.

Red looked at me.

"Then we pay a pastoral visit."

Moira sighed.

"No killing."

"Moira, I am honestly beginning to feel you hold a deeply unfair opinion of me."

"My opinion of you is extremely accurate."

"That is worse."

"No killing," she repeated.

Red smiled briefly.

"Fine. Conversation first. Then we see whether God is on our side or, as usual, pretending He is not at home."

The sky darkened completely. Carrigmore dimmed, though it did not entirely sleep. Places like that never do. Someone is always coughing behind a wall, someone coming home from the inn, someone guarding a horse, someone fearing a debt, someone counting money, someone praying not for salvation but that no knock will come in the morning.

We set off on foot, leaving the horses hidden in the hollow. We crossed wet grass, then followed a wall, then went behind the gardens where the ground was soft from rain and smelled of cabbage, smoke and manure, the three pillars of rural civilisation. Red led. Moira followed close behind with the pistol under her coat. I came last, knife in my pocket and heart beating so loudly that I was certain a window would open at any moment and someone would shout at my organs to behave more quietly.

The presbytery stood behind a low wall with an unlocked gate, which I took as evidence either of trust in God or the arrogance of a man who believed no one would dare rob the holy representative of local authority. I found both assumptions equally amusing.

We did not use the front door.

Not because we lacked cheek, but because even Red had moments of practical genius. At the back, beside the kitchen, was a small entrance for servants or deliveries, partly screened by barrels and a stack of wood. A light still burned in one window. Voices came from inside. Male voices. One younger, one older. We could not make out the words, but the older man's tone was that of someone accustomed to the end of his sentence being the place where others agreed.

Red put a finger to her lips.

Moira nodded.

I nodded too, because it was not an especially difficult instruction, though my mouth felt as if it had been deprived of the vote.

The kitchen door yielded after a short while. I will not call it a miracle, because a miracle ought to have better scenery than a damp handle and Red muttering about the shoddy work of saintly craftsmen. We went inside.

The kitchen was cleaner than the cottages in Ballynareen and poorer than the Hargreaves kitchen, which meant it belonged to a religious institution: orderly enough to smell of discipline, but not humble enough to let one forget that the Lord God is very fond of silver teaspoons near His people. On the table stood a jug, bread, remnants of cold meat and a candle. A coat hung by the hearth, and beside the door to the corridor stood boots muddled to the knees.

Red pointed at the boots.

"Someone walked a long way today," she whispered.

Moira crouched beside them and touched the mud on the sole.

"Bog. Not only the village."

"So our holy shepherd has very practical sheep," I said softly.

Footsteps came from the corridor.

The young priest entered the kitchen so suddenly that for one second we all looked equally foolish.

He was thin and pale, perhaps in his mid-twenties, with the face of a man who had not yet decided whether he wanted to be good or merely safe. He held a candle. He saw Red, Moira, me, the pistol beneath Moira's hand and Red's knife.

He opened his mouth. Red was on him before he could make a sound, one hand gripping his cassock at the throat, the other pressing the knife to his side.

"Not a word, Father, Brother, Reverend, or whatever the first rung on the ladder to disappointment is called," she whispered. "A scream is a sin if it brings armed men down on women."

The young priest froze.

Moira shut the kitchen door and positioned herself to cover the corridor.

"We do not want to hurt you," she said quietly.

Red looked at her.

"Speak for yourself. I am still gathering information."

"Red."

"Fine. We do not want to hurt you if you are sensible. See? I can cooperate with morality."

The priest breathed rapidly.

"Who are you?"

"Penance arriving late," Red said.

Moira took a clean cloth from the table and gave me a look that said this was no time for whatever face I was making. We tied his hands with the belt from his coat, quickly, without unnecessary brutality, but effectively. When he tried to speak more loudly, Red placed a finger against his lips.

"Do not make me do unpleasant things in a kitchen. Kitchens are for bread, lies and the occasional affair with a maid, not performances."

The young priest went even paler.

"He is in the study," he whispered.

Moira looked at him carefully.

"Who?"

"The parish priest. Father Kearney."

Red leaned closer.

"And why did you tell us that so quickly?"

The priest swallowed. He did not answer. That was more interesting than an answer.

We left him tied beside the pantry, without a gag for the moment, because Moira decided that if he began shouting, we would hear him in time. Red decided that if he began shouting, he would regret it in time. Both versions had their charm.

The corridor smelled of wax, dust, damp wood and papers kept under lock. A crucifix hung on the wall, beside it a picture of the Virgin with a face so patient that I wanted to apologise to her on behalf of all her employees. From the study came the scratching of a pen.

Father Kearney sat at a desk.

He was older and broad, with a face softened by good eating and small, watchful eyes, far too human for a man who spoke professionally about eternity. On the desk lay ledgers, letters, a seal, a bottle of something strong and a little silver tray with coins. He looked at us first with outrage, then disbelief, and then, very quickly, calculation.

The last told me more than all the expressions before it.

"What is the meaning of this?" he began, rising. "How dare you..."

Moira aimed the pistol at him.

"Please sit down."

He sat. Not because he believed in courtesy. Because he believed in the weapon. Red shut the door behind us and turned the key.

"Good evening, Father. We have come to talk about work for girls without families. It sounds like a lovely Christian matter until one begins to smell the paper."

Kearney looked at her sharply.

"I do not know what you are talking about."

"Of course. Priests never know until someone opens the correct drawer."

Moira approached the desk.

"The Saint Martha Foundation. Transports through Carrigmore. Girls sent west for work. Bríd Tierney."

At Bríd's name his face hardly changed at all. Hardly. Hardly was enough.

"I know no such person," he said.

Red planted both hands on the desk.

"Father Kearney, let me give you some advice. When you lie to a woman who has spent the last few days with documents, corpses and people trying to kill her, at least try not to look as though you are checking in your head where you hid the receipt."

Kearney pressed his lips together.

"Get out of my house."

"It is God's house, not yours," I said. "Unless the two of you signed some very interesting agreement."

Red glanced at me.

"Nell, darling, do not begin negotiating with theology. We are short of time."

Moira began going through the papers on the desk. She did not do it chaotically. Her hands moved quickly, but with cold order, as though she had returned to her old work with files, only this time the documents were not meant to lock women away but to open doors. Kearney shifted, but Red immediately laid the blade against the hand he had resting on the desk.

"No. Fingers are very useful for the rosary. Let us not risk them unnecessarily."

"This is profanation," he hissed.

Red smiled.

"No, Father. Profanation is selling girls and calling it care."

She had struck home. I saw it. Something jumped in his eyes like a rat beneath a floorboard. Moira opened the bottom drawer. Locked. She looked at me, then at Red. Kearney went pale.

"Those are private parish documents."

"Wonderful," I said. "Privacy is usually the first place people hide public crimes."

Red took a small knife from her pocket and handed it to Moira.

"Open it."

Moira worked at the lock for a moment, and when the drawer gave way, Kearney closed his eyes. Inside were letters. Not one. Not two.

A whole bundle tied with string, several small ledgers, a pouch of coins and sheets bearing names. Moira took out the first ledger, opened it, and after only a few lines her face became so still that I felt cold in my stomach.

"Nell," she said quietly.

I went over.

I did not understand everything at once, because the ledger was kept in abbreviations, initials, dates, place marks and columns whose innocence was so carefully performed that it became obscene.

"Received."

"Directed."

"Travel expense."

"Debt to be worked off."

"No family."

"Spiritual confirmation."

"West."

"House by the water."

"St M."

And beside some names, a small mark. The eye above the wave. Moira turned the page. Stopped. Bríd Tierney. Not a rumour. Not a ribbon. Not a shadow by a well. A name. A date.

A note: "Transferred by C. after verification. Wagon through Carrigmore. Final destination G."

G. Galway. Red bent over the ledger. She said nothing. That was the worst of it.

Kearney began speaking quickly:

"You do not understand. Those girls had nowhere to go. Hunger, filth, families unable to feed them, streets, ports, men worse than anything you can imagine. We gave

them work. Order. A place. Sometimes one must sign for them because they cannot write. Sometimes an agreement must be made so that someone will bear the cost of travel. This is not..."

Red struck the desk with her palm so hard that the candle trembled.

"Do not finish that sentence."

Kearney fell silent.

Red spoke quietly, but every word was harder than the one before it.

"Do not dare call this mercy."

"What did they have?" he burst out. "What did they have? The streets? Brothels? Death in a ditch? You rebels, you romantics, always arrive with a knife when someone else has to keep the ledgers of hunger. The world does not become clean because you shout at it."

Red leaned over him.

"No. But your signatures make it dirtier."

Moira took a letter from the bundle.

"Ashford," she said.

Kearney went paler still.

The letter was short, dry, administrative. No grand confession of evil, no diabolical flourishes. That was precisely why it was terrible. It spoke of "girls without family protection", of "redirection into employment", of "avoiding local unrest", of "confirmation of moral consent by the parish", of "not disclosing the full route to third parties". The signature was not full, only initials, but the seal and hand matched what we had seen before.

Moira laid the letter on the ledger.

"The chain," she said. "Foundation. Office. Parish. Transport. Debt. Recipients."

Kearney was silent.

Red seized him by the collar of his cassock and dragged him towards her.

"Where is Bríd?"

"I do not know."

"Wrong."

"I do not know!"

"Still wrong."

"Galway was entered, but they do not always take them there at once. Sometimes they are held on the way. Sometimes they go to a transit house. I do not know all the places."

"But you know some of them."

Kearney shut his mouth.

Red smiled.

"Father, please, let us not return to the part where you pretend to be brave. It wastes the evening."

Moira stepped closer.

"The transit house. Where?"

Kearney looked at her. Perhaps he saw something in her face worse than Red's anger. Perhaps he saw a person who knew how to lock people away and understood fear

in a room without witnesses. Moira did not need to threaten him. Sometimes it was enough that she stood there with a pistol, pale and silent, with the eyes of a woman who had already failed to save one child that day and had no room left for another "I do not know".

"An old house on the road to Loughrea," he said at last. "Not the main road. A former coaching inn. They call it the House of the Heron Sign. The girls stop there before they go farther. Not all of them. The ones who need to be... calmed."

"Calmed," I repeated.

My voice was quiet, but I wanted to force the word down his throat.

Red released his collar.

"Was Bríd there?"

"Possibly."

Red seized him again, harder this time.

"That is not an answer."

"She was entered for transport through Carrigmore! Then she was meant to go to the Heron Sign before... before farther on. To Galway or to a house by the coast. I do not know whether she arrived. I swear it."

"An oath from your mouth is like water from a gutter," Red said. "It flows, certainly, but no sensible person drinks it."

Moira closed the ledger.

"We are taking this."

Kearney sprang up.

"You cannot!"

Red put the knife to his throat so quickly that his protest broke off in the middle of a breath.

"We can. See? Practical theology."

A soft knock came from the corridor. The young priest. Moira immediately turned towards the door.

"He heard."

Red looked at Kearney.

"Good. Let the young learn from the mistakes of their elders."

We left the study carrying the ledger, the letters, the coins and several sheets of names. The young priest stood in the kitchen, still tied, though he had managed to move closer to the door. He had not shouted. He watched us with a face so pale that he looked as though the last few minutes had taught him more truth than his seminary had included in the curriculum.

"Did you know?" Moira asked.

The young priest shook his head. Too quickly. Red walked over to him.

"Young man, I truly have no patience today for holy little lies."

He squeezed his eyes shut.

"I knew there were transports. That the parish certified girls for work. I did not know... I did not want to know more."

"A very common illness," I said. "It is called a convenient conscience."

He looked at me, and tears appeared in his eyes.

"One girl cried in the corridor. She said she did not want to go. Father Kearney told me to bring water. Then he said poor girls are frightened by change. That they must be guided firmly."

Moira turned her face away.

Red said nothing for a while.

Then she bent over him and spoke very quietly:

"If tomorrow you are still pretending you did not know, you will become like him faster than you can earn a study of your own. If you want to keep a soul, run from this house or burn it from the inside, paper by paper. But if you fetch men, if you tell anyone which way we left, if a single child ends up in those wagons because of you, I shall come back. And next time I shall not talk."

The young priest nodded.

I do not know whether from fear or shame.

To be safe, Moira tied him more securely and this time gagged him, more gently than the circumstances might have led one to expect. We left the parish priest in the study, bound to his chair with his own handkerchief stuffed into his mouth, which I considered an elegant symbol: a man who had spent years speaking in other people's voices was finally forced to listen to his own silence.

Before we left, Red returned once more to the study. I do not know what she said to him because she spoke too softly. But when she came back, her face was white with anger.

"We go," she said.

We left through the back door into rain and darkness, carrying a ledger heavier than it ought to have been. Not with the weight of paper. With the weight of names. The weight of all those girls entered as a problem to be solved, an expense to be worked off, a soul to be transferred, a body to be moved. Behind us the presbytery stood peacefully, with a cross on the wall, a light in the window and two bound servants of God inside.

Carrigmore slept or pretended to. We made our way back to the horses through wet gardens, with a new trail and an old rage. The House of the Heron Sign. The road to Loughrea. Bríd might still be there. Or she might already be gone.

And that "or" was sharper than Red's knife.

We slipped out of Carrigmore as one slips out of church after hearing a confession never meant for one's ears: quietly, sideways, heads bowed not from humility but from the very practical need not to show our faces to anyone who might later say they had seen three women coming from the presbytery with the expressions of people who had just stolen something heavier than silver.

The rain had stopped, but the earth still remembered it. Every step in the wet grass made a quiet, sticky sound, as if Carrigmore were trying to hold us by the soles since it had failed to catch us by the throat. We moved behind gardens, along low walls and crooked fences, past shuttered windows, barrels, piles of wood and sleeping dogs which, by the mercy of all the saints or simple laziness, did not consider us worth barking at. The murmur of the inn still carried from a distance, muffled, drunken, human, the sort of noise that can roll through a village even while two clergymen sit tied in a presbytery and their drawers have suddenly become very empty.

Red went first, the ledger pressed beneath her coat so tightly that she looked less as though she carried paper than a baby or a bomb. Moira followed with the pistol in her hand, held low beside her skirt, ready to hide it if a door opened. I came last, Ashford's letters and several sheets of names in my bag, feeling their weight strike my hip with every step, small, rhythmic, almost polite, like a reminder: congratulations, Nell, you have once again done something that cannot be undone.

I said nothing until we reached the last wall beyond the presbytery.

One should appreciate the scale of the event. Me. Silent. After breaking into a presbytery. After tying up a priest. After threatening a parish priest. After stealing parish documents and money, though in my own mind I regarded the money as no more than a modest advance against all future settlements with Heaven.

Only when we passed through a gap in the stone wall and reached a dark strip of field beyond the village did I feel that if I did not say something at once, my tongue would suffer an apoplexy from professional neglect.

"You know," I whispered, "the last time I compiled a list of my criminal achievements, I thought it looked fairly substantial. Agitation, assaulting a superior, escaping from prison, illegal sea transport, burglary, horse theft, robbery of an aristocratic roast, contempt of court, possible incitement to riot and activity against the Crown. And now, look at this, I have to add sacrilege, assault on the clergy, abduction of parish records and probably unauthorised reform of church administration."

Red stopped half a step and looked back over her shoulder.

"Do not exaggerate. We did not burn down the presbytery."

"Yet. Let us not waste our potential for growth."

"I would call it pastoral quality control."

"And the gag in the parish priest's mouth?"

Red pretended to consider.

"The first honest sacrament I saw there all evening."

Moira, who had been walking in silence until then, said quietly but sharply:

"Lower your voices."

"See?" I whispered to Red. "Moira does not appreciate practical theology."

"Moira appreciates that if anyone hears us now, we shall have the opportunity to make a very short journey from sacrilege to the grave," Moira replied.

"I concede the point. Strong argument."

Red snorted, but did not truly laugh. None of us did. Jokes were like little stones thrown ahead into the darkness to test for a precipice. Sometimes they struck the ground. Sometimes they vanished without a sound.

Behind us the presbytery remained a dark shape against an even darker sky. A light still burned in one window. I thought of Father Kearney tied to his chair, of his round face becoming less holy and more human in the worst sense of the word with every page of the ledger. I thought of the young priest, of his eyes full of fear and shame, of how perhaps tomorrow morning he would weep, pray and swear himself into a new life, and the day after, if the world pressed him hard enough, begin saying again, "I did not know everything." That was the sickness of the mechanism. It did not need only monsters. Monsters are rare and impractical. The mechanism preferred people who know a little,

ask no more, and lay their heads on the pillow at night convinced that in the end someone wiser must have approved it.

We continued in silence until the lights of Carrigmore began to disappear behind us and the path entered wet bushes and stones once more. The hollow where we had left the horses was quiet. Too quiet for that first second in which one immediately imagines empty reins, prints from strangers' boots and another disaster waiting patiently beneath a tree. Then the chestnut mare snorted in offence, Red's grey struck a hoof against the ground, and the third horse lifted its head with an expression that seemed to ask why an assault on the local clergy had taken us so long.

"They are here," Moira said.

She sounded calm, but I heard the relief in her voice.

Red walked to the grey, stroked its neck and murmured:

"See? I did not give you to the shepherds, and you did not even run away. A moving story of loyalty between a thief and the property of an English lord."

The horse tried to nibble her sleeve.

"Do not spoil the scene," she hissed.

We made something that, with enormous generosity, might have been called a camp, though in practice it consisted of several damp blankets, hidden horses, a bag of food and three women sitting beneath what remained of the roof of a stone shed as though we had just returned from an evening walk rather than from breaking into a presbytery and extracting evidence of the trade in girls under church blessing. Red placed the ledger on a flat stone. Moira sat opposite, took out a candle stolen from the parish priest's kitchen and shielded the flame with her hand. The light was small, yellow, nervous. Enough to see the paper. Not enough to feel safe.

Safety had lately required considerably more than a candle. Moira opened the ledger at Bríd's name. For a while none of us spoke. Bríd Tierney.

A name written by a man who probably finished the note, said a prayer, ate his supper and went to bed without any sense that he had just helped move a living girl from the category of person into the category of consignment.

"Transferred by C.," Moira read quietly. "That could be Colm."

Red went still.

"Or someone else whose name begins with C."

"Perhaps."

"Do not say 'perhaps' in that voice."

Moira did not look up.

"It could be Colm."

Red clenched her jaw so hard that for a moment I feared her teeth would crack.

"If Colm had a hand in this earlier, not only in betraying us..."

"We do not know."

"But we can guess."

"Guesswork is useful until it begins leading you by the hand."

Red struck the ledger with one finger, just beside Bríd's name.

"That girl has no time for elegant distinctions."

Moira finally looked at her.

"Which is exactly why we must be careful."

"Careful. Again. If caution were a person, I would strangle it with my own scarf."

"Caution is why we came back from the presbytery with a ledger instead of an alarm on our heels."

"There will be an alarm on our heels within the hour anyway."

"Probably."

The word sounded terrible.

Probably.

Not "perhaps". Not "if". Probably.

Moira closed the ledger and laid her hand upon it.

"When they are found, people will know someone took the documents. The parish priest will say there were three women. The young priest, if he is frightened, will confirm it. Kearney will try to play the matter down because he will not want outsiders to know what he kept in his drawers, but at the same time he will have to warn his own people. The pockmarked man, if he is part of the transport, will learn quickly. And if the House of the Heron Sign is the next place on the route, someone may reach it before us or send word."

Red paced back and forth inside a shed too small for her anger.

"Then we ride now."

"At night?" I asked.

"At night."

Moira shook her head.

"The horses are tired. So are we. The road to that place may be watched. If we leave at once and make a mistake, there will be no second attempt."

"If we wait, they will clear Bríd out or move the girls farther on."

"If Bríd is still there."

"Exactly!"

Red turned so sharply that the candle trembled.

"Exactly, Moira. If she is still there. If she is sitting in some room with a split lip and no shoes, with no idea whether anyone remembered her name, while we sit here considering whether the horses have enough oats and whether the priest can untie himself before matins, what shall we tell her when all we find is an empty blanket? That we were sensible?"

Moira did not answer at once.

I saw that it had struck home.

Not because Red was entirely right. Precisely because she was partly right, and partial truth can be the cruellest kind, because it is so difficult to dismiss.

"And if we ride now," Moira said slowly, "and go straight into a place prepared for people like us? With the ledger on us? With evidence? With your face, which someone may know? With Nell, whom the newspapers may already be discussing? With one former prison guard whom no one there will need alive? What then do we tell Bríd? Nothing. Because we never reach her at all."

Red gave a short laugh.

"You speak as though death were an organisational problem."

"Sometimes it is."

That sentence stopped Red.

It stopped me too.

Moirira leaned over the candle. The light deepened the shadows beneath her eyes, the lines of her face, that terrible forced sobriety she had carried since Eamon's death.

"In prison people did not die only from beatings," she said. "They died from the wrong sequence. From someone entering a cell too early. From a door being opened before the corridor was checked. From one person shouting before another had the key. From a person deciding that because she felt righteous, she could skip the details. Details kill. Not as beautifully as great ideas, but more effectively."

Red stared at her without moving.

For a moment I thought she would answer sharply, perhaps too sharply, strike again at Moira's old uniform, her keys, her cells, all the things she had been unable to remove with the prison jacket.

But she did not.

"I do not want to lose her," Red said quietly.

And that was something else. Not anger. Not an order. Fear. Moira lowered her eyes to the ledger.

"Neither do I."

"You do not know her."

"I knew Eamon."

Red froze.

Moirira did not look at her, only at her own hands resting on the stone.

"And I know what it means to be one breath too late."

Silence fell. I had no right to break it. Naturally, my life was a series of things I had no right to do.

"In that case," I said quietly, "we have to do what we do best."

Red looked at me.

"Steal horses?"

"That as well, but I had something broader in mind."

Moirira looked up.

"Improvise."

"Exactly. A word that sounds much nicer than 'no plan and mounting panic'."

Red sat heavily on an overturned beam.

"Speak."

That was new.

Red telling me to speak, not stop.

Almost social advancement.

"We do not ride straight to the House of the Heron Sign by the main road," I began. "That would be so courteous to our enemies they might send us a thank-you note. But we do not sleep until morning either, because if the parish priest has men as quick as his ledgers are dirty, word will move before dawn. So we do something in between."

Red narrowed her eyes.

"I hate 'in between'."

"We all live in between. Between prison and the grave, between Galway and disaster, between piety and a gag in a parish priest's mouth. I would get used to it."

Moirá almost smiled.

Almost.

"What precisely do you suggest?" she asked.

"One of us has to go back closer to Carrigmore and see whether the alarm has already begun."

"No," Red and Moirá said together.

I felt almost appreciated.

"Wonderful, unanimity. Pity it is against me."

"No one goes back alone," Red said.

"I did not say me."

"Your face did."

"My face is sometimes overzealous."

Moirá shook her head.

"Returning to Carrigmore is too dangerous. But we can watch the road from above. If anyone leaves the presbytery or the inn towards Loughrea, we shall see the lights."

Red looked into the darkness.

"And if they send a man on foot?"

"Then we will not see him."

"Splendid."

Moirá opened the ledger once more, turned several pages and found entries beside other names.

"There are dates here. Not every transport moved at once. Some carry a note 'H. S.' or 'Heron'. It may mean the Heron Sign. The girls were sometimes held there for a day, sometimes two. If Bríd was transferred through Carrigmore, she may have stayed longer if she was a problem."

"A problem," Red repeated.

"She cried, tried to pass a message, may have resisted. That lengthens a route, not shortens it. Difficult people are not taken by the main road. They are held until they soften, or until someone pays for the next stage."

I hated how matter-of-factly she said it.

And I loved that she could.

Because if she spoke like Red, we would burn the world. If she spoke like me, we would describe it beautifully before it ate us. Moirá broke the fire into pieces in order to find a path between the flames.

Red sat down again.

"So she may still be there."

"May be."

"And she may already be gone."

"Yes."

"I hate you a little for answering so honestly."

"I know."

We began to make a plan by the candle, which went out three times and three times returned to life, a metaphor for our position so pretentious that I resented it. Moira wanted to leave before dawn, but not directly by the road, instead taking a wide arc through an old shepherds' passage which ought to bring us closer to the Loughrea road beyond Carrigmore's sight. Red wanted to leave earlier, after only a short rest, before anyone could organise pursuit. I, in a flash of extraordinary maturity, suggested first checking whether a light, a wagon or the pockmarked man left Carrigmore, and then deciding whether to race ahead or turn away.

"So we wait," Red said.

"Observe," Moira corrected.

"Waiting in cleaner clothes."

"We stole cleaner clothes, so it fits," I added.

Red gave me a look, but there was no real anger in it.

In the end we settled on something that possessed every feature of a plan except any certainty of success. Two hours' rest for the horses. No sleep. Not for us. For the horses, which, unlike us, still possessed certain biological rights. Then Moira and Red would climb the ridge and watch the road from Carrigmore. I was to guard the horses, the documents, and perform the act most contrary to my character, namely not go anywhere without a reason. If we saw movement towards the House of the Heron Sign, we would leave at once, but by another route. If we saw nothing, we would leave before dawn, before Carrigmore woke fully and discovered that its parish priest had spent the night in a very uncomfortable position.

It sounded sensible. Therefore suspicious. Red took the ledger and for a moment looked at Bríd's name.

"If she is there..."

"We will find her," I said.

Red looked up.

"Do not promise things you do not hold in your hands."

I said nothing. She was right. I hated it when she was right without a joke.

Moira closed the ledger and slid it into the stolen bag, wrapping it in extra cloth as though rain were a lesser threat than people.

"If Bríd is alive," she said, "we must find her before they understand that we know about the Heron Sign. If she is dead, we must find proof of where she was taken. Either way requires us to arrive alive."

Red stood.

"Then let us arrive alive."

"Red."

"What?"

"Alive. Not merely furious."

Red looked at her for a long time.

Then she smiled briefly, crookedly, tired and still beautiful in that dangerous way which probably ought to have been forbidden by some law, preferably one that could then be broken spectacularly.

"I promise no miracles."

"I am not asking for one."

"Good. After tonight's presbytery, miracles may be offended with us."

They left the shed a few minutes later, leaving me with the candle, the horses and a bag full of documents that might save girls or kill us faster than we could read every name. I sat by the entrance with the knife across my knees, staring into the darkness where Carrigmore hid its lights, priests, traffickers and people who turned other people's poverty into a road.

I thought about my list of sins. Sacrilege did indeed need adding. But more and more I had the sense that the true sin was not breaking into a presbytery.

The true sin was that once again we had seen the mechanism from the inside and still lacked the strength, the people and the time to smash the whole thing apart.

For now we could only steal its ledgers, tie up its priests, pull individual names from its machinery and chase them through the mud.

Brid Tierney. The House of the Heron Sign. The road to Loughrea.

The silence lasted perhaps half an hour.

Then Red's soft whistle came from the hill. One short note. The agreed signal. Movement on the road.

Red's whistle cut through the night, short, sharp and without a trace of ornament. One sound. Movement on the road.

CHAPTER XVII

The Wooden Horse

I sprang to my feet faster than was seemly for anyone who, only a few days earlier, had still been trying to pretend that the greatest problem in her life was work in a boiler room and an inability to keep silent in front of superiors. The candle trembled beside my knee, the horses shifted uneasily in the shadow of the trees, and the bag containing the ledger, the letters and the names lay beside me with such innocence that one might have thought it was not at that moment the heaviest object in all Ireland, heavier than stones, than Father Kearney's sins, than the young priest's conscience and than every wet road leading towards Galway.

For a moment I did not move towards the rise.

Not because caution had suddenly caught up with me, though it would have been nice one day to speak of it as a close acquaintance. I stood in the entrance to our stone hole with a knife in my hand and listened. At first, nothing. Then a faint whisper of grass. Then another sound, too low for wind, too even for an animal. Someone was moving among the bushes. Not one man. Not two.

Many feet. Many breaths. Many bad intentions, carefully wrapped in silence.

"Red?" I whispered into the darkness.

She did not answer.

That meant more than a scream.

I seized the bag of documents and backed away from the entrance, trying at once to see the horses, the path, the darkness between the trees and every possible death that might just then have been taking its place in the queue for my name. The chestnut raised her head and snorted softly. Red's grey horse, that aristocratic traitor with teeth and contempt in his eyes, jerked at the reins so violently that I understood at once: the animals already knew.

People. Strangers. Close. Something metallic flashed to the right.

I had not even managed to raise the knife properly when the shape of a man emerged from the dark. Then another. Then a third. They did not rush us shouting, did not do it stupidly, not like drunken farmhands or harbour scum hired for a handful of coins. They moved low and quickly, in a half circle, like men who knew the night, knew the fields, knew the fear of horses, and understood that if you want to catch people who are running, you do not stand in front of them. You take every direction in the world away from them at once.

In a single moment the shed that had just been our miserable refuge became a trap.

"Hands away from the weapons," someone said in Irish, then in English with a hard accent. "Slowly."

"That is a very rude way to arrive," I said, though reason, that cowardly lodger in my body, was telling me to shut my mouth. "Usually one knocks before entering a ruin."

The man in front of me raised his gun.

"Hands."

"Oh, so the conversation is official after all."

"Nell!" Moira hissed from the darkness to my left.

Only then did I see her. She stood by the low wall with her pistol only half drawn, while two men beside her aimed at her chest. Red was a few steps higher up the slope, knife in hand, but already surrounded. Three men held her at gunpoint, a fourth was coming round behind her, and a fifth, tall, in a dark coat with a scarf wrapped around his face, watched her the way one watches a familiar problem that has returned in worse company.

These were not Ashford's men.

They did not look like the men from the road, there was none of that harbour fatness in their movements, and they did not smell of violence done for pay. They were dirty, wet and gaunt, armed with a mixture of old guns, pistols, knives and pitchforks cut down until they had ceased to be tools of work and become arguments. One wore a dark ribbon on his cap. Another had beneath his coat an ammunition belt so old it looked like a keepsake from someone else's war. A third, grey at the temples, held his weapon with such calm competence that even Red must have noticed.

People of old oaths.

People of the night, not of newspapers.

The kind who might once have carried messages for the Fenians, hidden weapons in peat, burned the hayricks of men involved in evictions, left warnings beneath the doors of landlords' agents and sworn that an English landowner might possess a paper for a field but not the soul of the man who ploughed it. This was no army. Armies have uniforms, drums and idiots willing to die in straight rows. This was something older and dirtier: a group of people brought together by anger, memory and accounts that could not be settled with coin.

And we, three women with two English voices, stolen horses and a parish ledger full of names, must have looked like a gift from fate to any man suffering from suspicion.

"Weapons on the ground," said the tall man.

Red smiled slowly.

"Do you always begin with compliments, or are you making a special exception for ladies today?"

"Weapons."

"That is not an answer."

"It is an order."

"Orders sound better when there is a king above them. And I have very poor relations with kings."

One of the men took a step towards her and raised his gun higher.

"Redhead, one more word and I will knock half the teeth out of your mouth."

Red looked at him in a way that, had I been in his place, would already have had me writing my will.

"Try it, and you will count your own fingers with a tongue I will not leave you."

"Red," Moira said quietly.

The name hung between us.

The men reacted.

Not all of them, but several. One moved sharply. Another narrowed his eyes. The tall man looked at Red more carefully.

"Red?" he repeated. "Red who?"

Red did not answer at once. That was either a mistake or a decision. With her, the difference was often impossible to tell.

"Who is asking?" she said.

"Someone who sees two Englishwomen at your side and a ledger under the arm of the mouthy one."

"The mouthy one has a name," I said.

"The mouthy one should be grateful she still has a tongue."

"I am grateful every day. Other people less so."

The man in front of me came closer and tore the bag from my hand.

"No!" Moira took a step.

At once two guns swung towards her.

"Stay."

Moira stopped, but her face turned to ice.

"There is evidence in that bag."

"Evidence of what?" asked the tall man.

"The trafficking of girls," Moira answered. "The Saint Martha Foundation. Carrigmore parish. Ashford. Transports west."

At Ashford's name several men glanced at one another. Not like men who had never heard the name. Like men who had already heard it in the wrong places.

The tall man went to the one holding the bag, took it from him and opened it. He pulled out the ledger. He turned several pages in the weak light of a lantern someone raised behind him. His face barely changed, but the tension around his mouth told me he could read enough.

"Where did you get this?" he asked.

Red answered first:

"From the rectory."

A low murmur passed through the group.

Some looked at her with respect. Others with even greater suspicion, because if a person breaks into a rectory, she may be a hero, the devil, or an Englishwoman with a very bad plan.

"Kearney?" asked the grey-haired man.

"He is sitting in his study with a handkerchief in his mouth and all his sins on the table," Red said. "For the first time in years he has done something useful: he has shut up."

Someone gave a short snort of laughter.

The tall man did not.

"And you?" He looked at Moira and me. "Who are you?"

"Tired," I said. "Hungry. Wanted. Very badly disposed towards the clergy."

The man did not even blink.

"Englishwomen."

"No one is perfect."

One of the younger men spat into the grass.

"Spies."

Red turned towards him.

"Say that again."

"English informers. You brought them here to draw people out of their hiding places? To catch the ones who burn rent ledgers? To point out the houses where we hide weapons? Two Englishwomen and a former prison bitch, is that it?"

Moira did not flinch.

But I felt something inside me stand up.

"Careful," I said quietly.

The young man looked at me with contempt.

"You are telling me to be careful?"

"Yes. For lack of better occupation, I have begun giving advice to people who want to die stupidly."

Red stepped in front of me.

"They are travelling with me."

"That means only as much as you say it does," the young man replied. "And you can say a great deal."

"True," I said. "She has a gift. So do I. We could open a school if the world did not keep trying to kill us."

The tall man raised a hand.

"Silence."

This time everyone fell quiet.

Even me, which I record with some regret.

"Tie them," he said.

Red went rigid.

"No."

Two men moved towards Moira and me. One seized my arm, the other reached for rope. I jerked away by instinct, but the gun in front of my face was a very direct argument, and lately I was beginning to understand that courage is beautiful mainly when it is not standing opposite a barrel.

"Do not touch her," Red growled.

"Shut your mouth, redhead," said the young man.

Red moved so quickly that it took two men to catch her at once, one from behind, the other gripping the arm with the knife. She twisted, bucked, almost broke free, and for that one second I saw the whole group instinctively retreat half a step. They were afraid of her. They did not yet know who she was, but sometimes the body recognises danger faster than the mind.

"Red!" Moira shouted. "Stop!"

"They are not tying you!"

"If you start cutting, they will kill all of us!"

"Let them try!"

The tall man walked up to Red and slapped her across the face with an open hand. Not hard. Hard enough. The world stopped. Oh no. I thought it very calmly. Oh no, my

friend. Red slowly turned her head back towards him. A thin line of blood appeared on her lip. She smiled. Not broadly. Not like a human being.

"You did that," she said softly, "only because your mother cannot see you."

The man did not answer.

But I saw that his hand did not repeat the movement.

"Tie them," he said.

Rope tightened around my wrists. Then around Moira's. They took longer with Red, more carefully, as though they were binding not a woman but a flame wrapped in a wet coat. She did not try to fight now. That was worse. Red standing still was more dangerous than Red with a knife.

"You are making a mistake," she said.

"Everyone says that when they are caught," the tall man replied.

"Because sometimes it is true, genius."

"Why should I believe you?"

Red raised her head.

"Because if you are what you look like, then you fight men who take land, rent, children and girls and then call it law. We have just taken a ledger from a rectory that shows how they turn girls into goods under the eyes of a priest, an official and a foundation. If you tie us up and amuse yourselves with an interrogation, we lose time. If we lose time, a girl named Bríd may disappear from the House of the Heron Sign before we can reach it. And then you can stick your magnificent suspicion somewhere even an Englishman does not charge rent."

Several men shifted uneasily.

That was Red.

Furious, bound, blood on her lip, and still able to speak in such a way that even men with guns began to feel they might be standing on the wrong side of their own history.

But the tall man was harder.

"Pretty speech."

"Thank you. I am writing another called 'How a Band of Idiots Helped Ashford Through Pride'."

"How do you know Ashford?"

"By the smell."

"Specifically."

Moira spoke calmly:

"Documents. Letters. Signatures. The parish certified girls as being sent to work. The transport passed through Carrigmore. The House of the Heron Sign may be a staging place. Bríd Tierney was one of them."

"Tierney," the grey-haired man repeated. "A Dublin name?"

"Yes," said Moira.

The young man snorted again.

"She talks like a report."

"Because reports are read before people are hanged," Moira answered. "I know. I have seen them."

The tall man looked sharply at her.

"You were a warder."

"Yes."

"And we are supposed to trust you?"

Moira lowered her eyes to her bound hands.

"No. You are supposed to read the ledger."

It was so simple that it worked.

The tall man looked at the documents again.

For a moment I truly thought we might have persuaded them. Not completely, not entirely, but enough for them to stop pulling the rope so tight and let us go on talking. They were not Ashford's men, after all. They did not look like men who sold girls. They looked like men who had often seen an English landlord throw a family into the rain, a rent agent arrive with police, poverty entered into ledgers under a prettier name. They ought to recognise the mechanism. They ought to.

But 'ought to' was another phrase fit for burial.

The young man, the angriest of them, came up to me and yanked at my bound hands.

"An Englishwoman can carry a ledger and lie as well as anyone."

Red immediately took a step towards him despite the two men holding her by the arms.

"Touch her again."

"What will you do? You are tied."

"I will remember."

And oddly enough, that sounded more threatening than a knife. The young man hesitated. Then a voice came from the darkness at the rear of the group.

"Let her go."

No one moved.

The voice was low, familiar, tired in a way that cannot be imitated, because it comes not from one sleepless night but from a life chewed through by too many lost causes.

"I said let her go."

The tall man turned his head.

"You know her?"

A figure came out from between the trees, at first only a shadow, then a man in a wet coat, his face partly hidden beneath a hat. He stepped closer to the lantern light. I saw dark hair, hollow cheeks, fatigue around the eyes, a scar above one brow.

Red drew in a breath. Not like a surprised woman. Like someone who suddenly sees a dead man before remembering that this particular one is still alive. The man looked at her. Then at me. Then back at Red.

"I know her," he said.

The silence among the armed men changed shape.

Red moved her lips, but for a moment no sound came from them.

At last she said:

"Callum."

Callum.

The name moved through the night differently from all the words before it. Not like an answer. More like a door opening in a wall that, a moment earlier, no one had suspected contained one.

Red said it quietly, but there was more in that quiet than in a scream: astonishment, relief, fury, an old loss and something else I could not name, because there are bonds that do not look like friendship, do not sound like love, fit into no respectable drawer, and yet can survive prisons, ports, funerals, failed revolutions and all the filthy time between one farewell and the next meeting.

The men around us did not lower their weapons at once. That would have been too beautiful, and beautiful things lately either turned out to be stolen or had Ashford's signature underneath. But something changed. The guns no longer aimed quite so steadily, fingers moved a fingernail's width away from triggers, and the young man who had just called Moira a prison bitch suddenly wore the expression of someone realising he might have insulted a person beside whom his own courage looked like a newly hatched chick trying to threaten a fox.

Callum came closer.

He did not hurry. He carried the sort of exhaustion that does not slow a man but makes every movement more deliberate. His wet coat hung heavily from him, his boots were caked in mud, his face cut by fine lines of sleeplessness, and above his eyebrow was a fresh or badly healed wound. He held a pistol, but low, without theatrical waving. He did not need it. The people around him watched him the way one watches a man who may not hold the highest rank but has been where others merely swear they would go.

"Untie them," he said.

The tall man in the dark coat did not move.

"Explain first."

Callum looked at him slowly.

"Padraic, if you make me explain while they still have ropes on their hands, I will begin by explaining why stupidity in the field is more dangerous than an English rifle."

"Two of them are English."

"One of them is Nell Whitmore."

My name worked better than my knife, which was in any case temporarily somewhere beyond my control, a piece of rudeness on reality's part that I deeply resented.

Several men shifted nervously. Someone at the back whispered something in Irish. The young man with the contemptuous face looked at me again, this time not as at a spy but as at an unpleasant rumour that had unexpectedly acquired a body, hair and mud on its skirt.

"That Whitmore?" asked the grey-haired man.

"That one," Callum said. "If you know the newspapers, she is the one who made Manchester speak louder than gentlemen in clean collars found convenient. If you know people, she is the one we pulled from custody before they sent her to labour in the colonies. If you know English fear, she is the one whose name is currently moving through police stations, factories, ports and probably drawing rooms so high above us

that perhaps even the old queen has heard over tea that some girl from Manchester has made more noise than half the House of Commons."

"I would rather the queen did not stir me into her tea," I said. "It sounds like a waste of sugar."

Callum looked at me properly for the first time.

Something that might have been amusement appeared in his eyes, but it was too tired to reach the end.

"You still talk."

"I was under the impression it was one of the few things not yet formally confiscated from me."

"Give them a knife, a pistol, a horse, a ledger and half a parish, and she will still worry about her tongue," Red muttered.

Callum looked at her.

And for one brief moment there was no group of armed men between them, no me, no Moira, no ledger, Ashford, Carrigmore or wet field. There was something older. A port. Liverpool. The prison rescue. Perhaps Galway years ago. Perhaps Maeve. Perhaps all the things they had not yet said and which therefore occupied more space than those spoken aloud.

"Red Gallagher," Callum said to the others without taking his eyes off her. "For those of you who were children or cowards when her name meant more than the colour of her hair: she carried messages, weapons and people through places your fathers were afraid to cross after dark. She knew the men you now remember by the fire when you want to sound braver than you are. If she says these women travel with her, then they travel with her."

Red raised an eyebrow.

"Pretty. I almost sounded like a saint."

"Do not exaggerate. Saints swore less."

"You know poor saints."

Padraic, the tall one, was still looking at Moira.

"And her?"

Callum turned his gaze to Moira.

Here his voice changed slightly. It did not soften. It became more careful.

"Moira was a warder."

The men shifted again with obvious dislike.

Moira stood quietly with her hands bound and her face still, though I saw her fingers tighten by a fraction. She did not defend herself. That was perhaps the most unsettling thing. If she had shouted, I could at least have believed she still had strength for anger. But after Eamon, Moira carried the silence of someone who no longer wants to explain because she knows that even truth does not wash everything from the hands.

"And that is supposed to help us?" asked the young man.

Callum turned to him.

"She opened the cell."

The young man fell silent.

"She passed the letter. She gave the key. She risked the rope to get Nell out of custody while half the men talking about freedom sat in public houses checking whether anyone was listening. You do not have to like her. You do not have to trust her. But if you call her that word again, the one you used a moment ago, I will tie you up and leave you here until morning with a card on your chest saying: 'learning to think before speaking'."

Red smiled at the young man.

"I will add punctuation with a knife."

"No knife," Moira said automatically.

"See?" Red indicated her with her chin. "Even tied up she spoils my pleasure. That is character."

Padraic looked at Callum a while longer, then at us, then at the ledger in his hand. At last he made a gesture.

"Untie them."

The rope fell from my wrists. My skin burned, but I did not complain, which again ought to be recorded in the chronicles as evidence of my advancing maturity or temporary shock. Moira rubbed her hands very slowly. Red tore her hands free of the loosened bonds so violently that the man untying her jumped back a step.

"Lovely," she said. "Now perhaps someone could give me my knife before I begin to feel naked."

"No," Padraic said.

Red looked at him.

"Oh, brave."

Callum sighed.

"Give her the knife."

"Callum..."

"Give it back. If she wants to kill someone, she does not need your permission or her best blade."

For a moment Padraic looked as though he meant to object, but in the end one of the men handed Red the knife hilt first. Red accepted it with the dignity of a queen receiving a crown, only less boring and more inclined to murder.

"Thank you," she said. "You see, Padraic? Civilisation."

"Do not get used to it," he grunted.

"Do not worry. You look like the sort of man around whom that would be difficult."

Only then did Callum move closer to Red.

They did not embrace.

Of course they did not. Red was not a woman who threw herself around people's necks, especially in front of an audience that had just tried to turn us into parcels tied with string. Callum did not look like a man who believed tenderness was the first language of survival either. They stood facing one another, too close for strangers, too far apart for people who had once gone through something bloody together.

"I thought you would be farther on by now," he said.

"I thought many things too. Most turned out to be stupid or shot."

His face twitched.

"I heard about the boy."

Red went rigid.

"From whom?"

"News travels faster than people. Reilly lost two men at Máire's. One dragged himself as far as Carrigmore and talked before he died or before someone helped him stop."

Moirá looked sharply at him.

"Do they know we have the ledger?"

Callum studied her carefully, as though only now truly assessing her.

"Not yet. They know you were at the rectory. They know Kearney was found tied up and red from shame or lack of air. The young priest is apparently keeping quiet. For now."

Red breathed out through her nose.

"Good."

"Not good," Callum said. "The silence of young priests usually lasts until the first stronger voice of a superior."

"We can go back and improve the gag," I suggested.

Callum looked at me with something like astonishment.

"Is she really like this?"

Red answered without blinking:

"Worse. She is tired now."

"That sounds like praise," I said.

"It was not."

Moirá stepped closer.

"What is happening in England?"

The question changed the air.

Not because we had suddenly remembered England. It had followed us from the beginning, in newspapers, orders, pursuit, in my accent, in Moirá's former uniform, in Ashford's name and in that filthy feeling that even with the sea behind us the Empire had arms long enough to touch us through someone else's pocket. But hearing the question spoken aloud here, in a wet Irish field among old rebels and men fighting landlords, was like opening the door to a room in which we had left the bodies.

Callum removed his hat and ran a hand through his wet hair.

"England is boiling."

He did not say it with joy.

That was the first thing I noticed.

"Manchester especially. After your escape and what happened later, the factories began to move. Not all of them. Do not make a song of it too soon. But enough for the gentlemen to sleep more lightly. The newspapers write about the Manchester Martyrs. Some make you a plague. Others make you saints. The worst try to make you both, because they sell more copies."

I swallowed.

"Manchester Martyrs."

"Yes."

"How many?"

Callum did not answer immediately.

Red looked at him.

"Callum."

"Officially? Several killed in clashes after strikes and raids. Unofficially, more. The arrests spread wide. Printing shops, public houses, workshops, rooms. If you had a leaflet, you had a problem. If you knew your name, you had a problem. If your face was too loud, you had a problem too."

I felt the night tighten.

"Greta?" I asked.

I had not meant my voice to sound like that. But it did. Callum looked at me, then at Red. And to my astonishment he smiled briefly.

"Greta is alive."

I did not know I had been holding my breath until I let it out.

"Alive," I repeated.

"Alive and, if I am honest, terrorising half the harbour network more effectively than the police. She stayed with Doyle."

Red snorted.

"With Captain Doyle?"

"Yes."

"God. That sounds like a marriage arranged by disaster."

"They get on brilliantly."

"Of course they do," I said. "Greta and a smuggler captain. Two souls bound by a shared passion for shouting at people near water."

This time Callum really smiled, though only briefly.

"Doyle says Greta is the only woman who came aboard his ship and within an hour began correcting the way he ran his smuggling."

"Greta would correct the way her own gravedigger buried her," I said, feeling something warm and painful spread beneath my ribs at the same time. "That means she is herself."

"She is herself. And she asked about you."

The sentence hit me harder than I expected.

"What did she say?"

Callum looked at Red as if seeking permission, then apparently decided that if Greta had said something, no force in existence could make it delicate anyway.

"She said that if you die because of your own tongue, she will personally sail to Ireland, dig you out of the grave and make you apologise for your lack of discipline."

I smiled. I did not want to. But I smiled.

"Yes. That is Greta."

Red looked away, but I saw that her face had softened a little too.

Moirá asked:

"Is Doyle safe?"

"No one is safe," Callum replied. "But Doyle is clever, old and slippery enough to survive his own funeral if there were money in it. He hides people, carries messages, sometimes transports more rumours than cargo. Greta keeps a group with him, people who fled Manchester or Liverpool. She helps, though she insists she is not helping, only 'sorting out the mess left by idiots'."

"That is Greta too," Red said.

Padraic cleared his throat impatiently.

"And the rest of the lads?"

Callum grew serious. That alone was enough. Red noticed.

"No."

Callum looked at her.

"Red..."

"Do not begin with my name in that voice."

"Finn was caught in Liverpool."

Red closed her eyes for a second.

"Alive?"

"The last I heard, yes. But they took him for questioning. We do not know where. London, perhaps. Manchester. Perhaps nowhere official."

"Seamus?"

Callum said nothing.

Red took a step.

"Seamus?"

"Dead."

The word was simple.

That was precisely why it hurt.

"At the docks," Callum said. "They tried to stop two of Doyle's men. Seamus drew them onto himself. Took a shot in the stomach. There was no time."

Red did not move.

But the colour left her face.

"Patrick?"

"The wound opened again. Máire tried. Doyle had a doctor. It was not enough."

Red turned sharply away and for a while stared into the darkness behind us, as though all those left along the road might be visible there among the wet trees. Finn, Seamus, Patrick, Eamon, Maeve, Tommy. The names arranged themselves inside me like stones put into the pockets of someone being led to the river.

Moirá spoke quietly:

"How many are left?"

After a moment Callum answered:

"From that group? Me. Perhaps Finn, if they have not broken him. Two of Doyle's men somewhere on the coast. Greta. The rest are dead, hidden, or so frightened they are dead to the cause."

Red laughed suddenly. Briefly. Uglily. Without joy.

"The cause. The cause always remains. People rot, and the cause grows beautiful in the mouths of those who happen to survive."

Callum did not deny it.

"Yes."

That 'yes' was heavy, but honest.

"And you?" Red asked. "How did you end up here?"

Callum looked at the people around him.

"After you sailed, England became too dense. Doyle got me across with a cargo of coal and barrels best not opened near holy images. I was meant to find a contact near Loughrea because girls from the west have been disappearing for months and someone started connecting it with the foundation, priests and transport men. Then word came that Red Gallagher was in Ireland with an Englishwoman from Manchester and a former warder, so I decided that if it was true, God really did have a sick sense of humour and I ought to follow the smoke."

"God?" Red raised an eyebrow. "After today's rectory I would change your source of information."

"We were also following a rumour about stolen horses."

"Ah. Our contribution to local transport."

Callum looked at the horses.

"Nice."

"Stolen from Englishmen," I said. "So morally almost baptised."

Padraic still looked sceptical, though rather less eager to tie us up for sport.

"If all this is true," he said, "why are you travelling alone?"

Red looked at him with a face that would have made a wiser man withdraw the question for his own good.

"Because most of the people who travelled with us ended up dead, captured or too far away to count. Is that romantic enough for your song?"

Padraic pressed his lips together.

Callum lifted the ledger.

"Where are you going?"

Moira answered:

"The House of the Heron Sign. On the road to Loughrea."

The group's reaction was immediate. Several men glanced at one another. The grey-haired man swore under his breath. Padraic stopped pretending calm. Callum slowly closed the ledger.

"Where did you get that name?"

"From Father Kearney," Red said. "After a short conversation about his duties towards God and women."

"He said Bríd might have been taken there," Moira added. "Girls in transit. The ones who need to be 'calmed'."

Callum did not answer for a long time.

"You are not going there alone."

Red raised her head at once.

"I do not need a nursemaid."

"I am not offering a nursemaid. I am offering people who know the road and know that the Heron Sign is not an ordinary inn."

"What do you know?" Moira asked.

Callum looked towards the dark west.

"I know that place has appeared in connection with evictions, transports, missing girls and men who suddenly had money to pay rent though a week earlier they had none for bread. I know landlords pretend not to know, priests pretend to bless employment, and transport men pretend they are carrying servants. I also know two of ours went there a month ago and never came back."

Red smiled grimly.

"So at last, a place with a good reputation."

Callum looked sharply at her.

"Red."

"What?"

"This time you are not walking in there with nothing but a knife and anger."

"I also have Nell."

"Even worse. She brings commentary."

"Excuse me," I said, "my commentary has repeatedly saved morale."

Moira looked at me.

"And just as often made the situation worse."

"So it is versatile."

Callum shook his head, but something strange appeared in his eyes. Not relief. Not joy. More a very tired recognition that despite the bodies, the pursuit and the ruins we had left behind, we still carried that absurd reflex of life which makes people joke while tied up, mock at gunpoint and speak of the moral baptism of stolen horses.

"Fine," he said at last. "We take them with us."

Padraic objected immediately:

"We do not know if we can trust them."

Callum looked at him for a long moment.

"You do not have to trust them. You have to go."

"And if it is a trap?"

Red walked up to Padraic, calmly this time, without a knife in her hand, which may have been worse.

"Listen, boy. If I wanted to lure you into a trap, I would invent something more elegant than a wet shed, three stolen horses and a rectory with a priest wrapped in his own handkerchief. This is not an intelligence operation. This is despair in boots, and even that is soaked through."

Padraic looked into her eyes for a while. Then he looked away. He did not apologise. But he yielded. Callum handed the ledger to Moira.

"Guard this. If you die, throw it to someone who can read and has no soul for sale."

Moira took the ledger.

"That narrows the choice."

"Exactly why you should hold it tightly."

Red looked at Callum.

"And you? Do you have people? A plan? Or do you simply appear dramatically in bushes and assume the rest will arrange itself?"

For the first time Callum smiled almost like the man he had once been.

"I learned from the best."

"Do not blame all your stupidity on me."

"Not all of it."

For a moment they looked at one another with something that might have become laughter if there had been fewer bodies in the world.

Then Callum turned to his people.

"We move before dawn. Not by the road. Across the bog and past the old mill. Two ahead. Two behind. No fire. No talk about the Englishwomen. If anyone has a problem with Nell Whitmore, remember that the English want her head more badly than ours, which makes her temporarily useful. If anyone has a problem with Moira, look at the ledger she is carrying. And if anyone has a problem with Red Gallagher..."

He looked at Red. "...then that is his last problem." Red bowed her head with false modesty.

"Touching. Would you like to write my funeral speech?"

"I already have a draft. Too much swearing, too little repentance."

"A faithful portrait, then."

The night around us was still wet, cold and full of armed men who had wanted to bind us moments earlier and were now supposed to lead us towards a place from which two of their own had never returned. I did not trust them. They did not trust us. Callum trusted Red, Red trusted Callum only as far as a history full of guilt permitted, and Moira trusted mainly the facts she now held beneath her coat.

This was not safety.

It was another very ugly version of an alliance.

But when we moved deeper between the trees, no longer as three women running through darkness but as part of a larger, more dangerous group, I felt that the road to the House of the Heron Sign had just become less lonely.

Not less frightening. Only less lonely. And sometimes that was enough to keep walking.

Callum did not lead us straight to the Heron Sign, which Red received with the expression of a woman who had just been denied the right to do something stupid, violent and deeply satisfying.

She did not say so at once, of course. Red had different kinds of silence, and this was one of those that walks beside a person with a knife in its pocket and waits for someone to ask whether everything is all right. No one asked. Even I was not that devoted to social suicide.

We walked through the forest in a group that looked like something between a rebel detachment, a gang of smugglers, a funeral procession without a coffin and a travelling troupe of people no host in his right mind would allow into a kitchen. Two of Callum's men went first, low and almost soundless, as though the forest knew their feet and did not care to complain to the branches. Behind them came Callum, then Red, Moira and me, with several others farther back, including Padraic, who kept glancing at us with suspicion so heavy one could have weighted a bridge with it, had Irish bridges been in the habit of trusting people. Our horses were led along a separate path because, as it

turned out, stolen animals could also require conspiracy, another proof that crime is much more administrative than songs promise.

The night was thick, wet and full of small sounds. The forest did not rustle romantically. It creaked, dripped, breathed, hid things in darkness and from time to time snapped a branch in such a way that a person immediately saw his own obituary before his eyes, written carelessly by someone who had never liked him. We went down, then up again, along paths so narrow that coats caught on bushes and wet leaves struck our faces with nature's gratuitous hostility. Somewhere far away an owl hooted, or a man who had learned to imitate an owl, because in this part of the world nothing could be accepted without suspicion.

At last Red could bear it no longer.

"Callum," she said quietly, but in a tone with an edge. "If you are leading us somewhere a group of men can spend longer debating whether two Englishwomen ought to be hanged before supper or after it, warn me so I can warm up my wrists."

Callum did not turn around.

"I am taking you somewhere we have people, weapons, supplies and a roof."

"Sounds suspiciously luxurious."

"The roof leaks."

"What a relief. I was beginning to fear the revolution had started caring about comfort."

Padraic muttered something under his breath.

Red looked at him immediately.

"If that was about me, say it louder. If it was about the Englishwomen, say it more intelligently. If it was about yourself, you have my sympathy."

Padraic pressed his lips together.

Callum sighed.

"Twenty more minutes. Try not to begin a civil war inside the group before we arrive."

"I do not promise impossible things," Red said.

"That, at least, we know," Callum replied.

I do not know whether it reassured me, but it reminded me that those two had known one another long enough to insult each other without a formal introduction. There was something oddly human in it. After the last few days, in which most acquaintances began with a barrel, rope or a lie, an old tone between people sounded almost like luxury.

After a while the forest began to thin, but it did not open onto a field. Instead we entered a narrow ravine so overgrown that the path could not have been seen from above unless one knew exactly where to look. Dark, wet banks rose on both sides, tree roots hanging from them like old fingers, and along the bottom ran a thin stream, more moving mud than water. One of Callum's men pulled aside branches that concealed a low gate made of planks, brushwood and iron bars, blended so well into its surroundings that I would have passed it three times and taken it as proof that nature too had poor taste in construction.

Beyond the gate began their den.

I do not know what else to call it. Camp would have sounded too military, hideout too modest, settlement too peaceful. It was a handful of buildings hidden in the forest around the old yard of something that might once have been a small sawmill, a woodland distillery, an illegal storehouse or simply a place where people did things parish ledgers preferred not to mention. There was a long shed with a roof covered in turf and branches, two low stone buildings, one more like a stable, the other a dwelling room, and farther off a half dugout with its entrance covered by canvas. Wet coats hung between the trees. Beneath an awning lay sacks of flour, barrels, tools, crates, rolled blankets and several saddles. In one corner someone sharpened a knife. At another table a woman loaded cartridges with the same indifference she might have shown preparing dumplings for Sunday.

There were women there.

That struck me harder than it should have.

Not because armed women were new to me after Red, Greta and Moira. Rather because these women were not decoration, not nurses to the revolution, not standing aside waiting for the men to finish being historical. One was stitching a torn coat with a pistol beside her. Another counted coins and wrote something in a small notebook. A third, one side of her face burned, was laying out the contents of a sack on a table: candles, silver spoons, two watches, a box of tea, men's cuff links, a bottle of brandy, several letters and a rolled document bearing the seal of some English estate. Supplies from raids, I thought. Not random theft. Not hunger pushing a hand into someone else's pantry. This was one system answering another, bookkeeping from the forest against the bookkeeping of landlords.

An older man with one arm in a sling sat by the fire talking to a girl of perhaps seventeen who was cleaning a gun barrel. Two young men slept against the wall, one with his boots still on, the other with a rosary clenched in his hand. Three things hung from the beam above the entrance: a broken nameplate belonging to some agent, a piece of red cloth and a cracked whip.

"Homely," I said quietly. "All that is missing is lace curtains and an aunt asking whether we have eaten enough."

Red glanced at me.

"Here the aunts probably ask how many cartridges are left."

"More sensible women."

When we entered the yard, the conversations stopped.

Of course.

I was beginning to suspect my life had become one long series of entrances after which people stopped talking and stared as though a plague, a legend or a tax bill had just stepped across the threshold. Callum raised a hand, though at first he did not need to say anything. It was clear the people knew him and that his presence kept them from reaching for weapons quite so quickly, though not from thinking about it.

The woman with the burned face came forward first.

She might have been thirty, might have been forty. It was hard to tell because scars and life have the same habit: they take simple chronology away from a face. She looked at Red, then Moira, then me. Her gaze rested longest on me.

"These are them?" she asked.

"Yes," Callum said.

"Englishwomen?"

"One Englishwoman from Manchester whom England is hunting more nervously than its own conscience," Callum said. "The other a former warder who opened the right door. And you know Red by name if you listened to old people instead of merely feeding them."

The scarred woman shifted her gaze to Red.

"Gallagher?"

Red nodded.

"Depends who is asking."

"Sorcha Byrne."

Red narrowed her eyes.

"Byrne from the burned estate office near Athlone?"

Sorcha smiled with one corner of her mouth, the less damaged one.

"We did not burn the office."

"No?"

"It became unwell in the presence of a lantern."

For a second Red looked at her seriously, then gave a quiet snort.

"In that case, pleased to meet the architect of structural illnesses."

Sorcha looked at me.

"And you are the Manchester one."

It did not sound like a question.

"That depends whether you mean Manchester as a city, a catastrophe or a growing administrative problem."

Sorcha watched me a moment longer, then said to someone behind her:

"Give them some fire. And something to drink."

Padraic snorted.

"An hour ago we did not know they were not informers."

Sorcha turned slowly towards him.

"An hour ago you did not know. That is different."

Someone in the background laughed softly.

Padraic glared at him but did not answer, which I took as proof that even in forests there exists a hierarchy of people one is better advised not to bark back at.

We were taken into a larger room in a stone building. It was warm inside, though smoke filled the upper part of the room so thickly that any holy picture, had one been hanging there, would immediately have lost patience and fled outside. Coats, maps, scraps of newspapers, lengths of rope, ammunition belts and an old gun with a cracked stock hung from the walls. In one corner behind a curtain I saw crates. One stood open. Inside were pistols, powder, packets of cartridges, two short rifles, knives and something that looked like small charges wrapped in cloth.

Moirá noticed them too.

"Explosives?" she asked very quietly.

Callum looked at her.

"For opening locks whose owners dislike negotiation."

"Sounds like a definition of most locks in history," I said.

Sorcha set cups before us filled with something so strong, sharp and unpleasant that after the first swallow I felt as though someone had set fire to my throat for patriotic purposes.

"What is this?" I asked, coughing.

"Medicine," Sorcha answered.

"For what?"

"Memory."

Red drank without flinching.

"Good."

"You would drink turpentine if someone with the right accent served it," I said.

"Do not be jealous, Englishwoman. Your empire also has drinks that taste like punishment."

Callum sat at the table and spread the ledger from the rectory before him. Padraic, Sorcha, the grey-haired man and two others stood nearby. One was an older woman with hair grey as ash, whom they called Nuala. The other was a young man with a face too delicate for the gun he carried, though his hands were steady. Moira sat opposite Callum without asking permission. Red remained standing. I, as a person of considerable dignity, sat on a crate that creaked beneath me in a manner suggesting even furniture had complaints about me.

"Before we go to the Heron Sign," Callum said, "you need to know what we know. And you will tell us what you have besides this ledger."

Red folded her arms.

"Liam first."

Callum looked up.

"Red..."

"No. Do not begin with my name in that voice. Liam was in Dublin. He appeared, disappeared, spoke in half truths and looked as though he carried someone else's grave in his pocket. Now he is gone. I want to know where."

Callum turned his cup in his hands for a while.

"Liam disappeared two days ago."

Red did not move.

"Disappeared as in ran, or disappeared as in taken?"

"We do not know."

"A very convenient answer for everyone except me."

"I know."

"Did anyone see him after the attack on Máire?"

"Yes. One of Doyle's boys said Liam was at the old quay. Talking to one of Reilly's men."

Red stepped towards the table.

"What?"

"We do not know what about."

"Of course you do not. People in this story have a remarkable talent for seeing exactly enough to say 'I don't know' afterwards."

Padraic spoke sharply:

"Careful."

Red turned her head.

"You really love that word. You should have it embroidered on your shirt."

Sorcha struck her cup against the table.

"Padraic, shut up. Gallagher, let him speak."

Red looked at Sorcha, then back at Callum.

"Speak."

Callum sighed.

"Liam may have been trying to learn who was putting pressure on Colm. He may also have been arranging his own survival. Nothing with him was ever simple."

"Nothing with him was ever clean," Red said.

"That too."

"And Colm?"

At that, the atmosphere around the table changed noticeably.

Nuala, the older woman, placed her hands on the tabletop.

"Colm did not sell you the way a man sells for profit."

Red looked sharply at her.

"You know him?"

"I knew his sister. And his debts. Sometimes that is better than knowing a face."

Callum pushed the ledger closer to Moira and took a small folded letter from his pocket.

"This reached us through a boy from the northern road. Colm left it with an old farmer before he vanished."

Red almost tore the letter from his hand, opened it and began to read. I saw her face harden with every word, though I did not know what it said. After a moment she threw the paper onto the table.

"It may be a lie."

Moira took the letter more calmly.

She read aloud, not all of it, more selecting fragments:

"'I had no choice.' Of course. That sentence deserves its own prison. 'They had Mary. They showed me the child's hair.' Who is Mary?"

Nuala answered:

"Colm's sister. Lived near Mullingar. Two children. Her husband died after an eviction."

Moira read on:

"'They said if I did not give them the place, they would take her and the little one. It was only meant to be taking the ledger. No shooting. No boy.'"

Red closed her eyes. Not from sympathy. More to stop herself doing something immediately.

"There is always a 'no boy'," she said quietly.

No one answered.

Because everyone, even those who had not known Eamon, understood that it was no longer about one boy.

Callum added:

"Colm may have been forced. That does not make him innocent. But it tells us who is holding the rope."

"Who?" Moira asked.

Sorcha took several sheets from a small box and spread them beside the ledger.

"Reilly at the port. Ashford in the papers. Kearney in the parish. Two men with the transports: Cavanagh, the pockmarked one, and a younger man, Nolan. Cavanagh appeared in Carrigmore. Nolan travels farther, between the Heron Sign and a house on the coast."

"A house on the coast," Red repeated.

Callum nodded.

"We still cannot place it. Kearney's ledger confirms the route goes beyond the Heron Sign. But not every girl goes there. Some are sold into work on farms, in laundries, kitchens, houses. Some..."

He stopped.

"Say it," Red demanded.

Callum looked at her.

"Some disappear from the register."

Moira touched the page bearing Bríd's name with her fingertips.

"Beside Bríd is the note 'destination G'. Galway or something beginning with G."

"Galway," Red said at once.

"Perhaps," Moira replied.

Red looked at her.

"If you say 'perhaps' once more, I shall start charging you."

"Charge me in good sense. You could use some."

Sorcha looked with interest from one to the other.

"Are they always like this?"

"Worse when rested," I said.

Nuala bent over the ledger.

"Girls with an entry like that sometimes ended up in large houses under a new name. Debt for the journey, debt for clothing, debt for placement. You do not need chains if you sign someone's life in such a way that she can never repay the beginning."

"That is the most disgusting part," I said. "Chains at least do not pretend to be a contract."

Moira looked briefly at me with something like quiet agreement.

Callum ran a finger along the map lying on the table. It was inaccurate, hand drawn, full of abbreviations and signs, but showed forests, roads, streams, old mills and places best omitted from official documents.

"The Heron Sign stands here," he said, tapping a point between Carrigmore and the old road to Loughrea. "An old inn. Two buildings. Stable. Well. Probably a cellar. People say it is merely a place for carters and traders, but too often wagons pass it empty and return heavier. Or the other way round. Depends whom you ask."

"How many men?" Moira asked.

"Perhaps four or five permanently. More if a transport is due to move. Cavanagh is there sometimes. Nolan more often."

Red placed both hands on the table.

"We go today."

Callum shook his head.

"Not the whole group at once. Reconnaissance first."

Red looked at him in a way that might have made even the candle flame retreat.

"She may be there."

"And if she is, and if we rush in like a herd of drunken heroes, they will kill her or move her before we get through the door."

"Do not treat me like a child."

"Then do not behave like someone who wants to punch a door because pain is behind it."

Red straightened.

For a moment I was certain she would go for his throat. But Callum did not step back, and perhaps that was precisely why she did not. There were old things between them, not all good, but strong enough sometimes to stop a knife halfway.

"Reconnaissance," she said at last. "Who?"

"Me, Sorch, Padraic."

"No."

"Red..."

"I am going."

"You are too recognisable."

"By whom? Cavanagh? Excellent. Let me be the last thing he sees in his life."

Moira spoke calmly:

"I will go."

Everyone looked at her.

"No," Red said at once.

Moira raised her eyebrows.

"Interesting. Since when are you the one handing out common sense?"

"Since yours started looking like suicide in a neat collar."

Moira pointed to the ledger.

"I can read records, recognise the layout of buildings, look for exits, count people and refrain from throwing myself at the first pockmarked face I see. That makes me useful."

"It makes you a target."

"Every one of us is."

Nuala looked at Moira for a long time.

"A former warder knows locks and corridors. Let her go, but not alone."

Red opened her mouth.

Callum raised a hand.

"Red, if you go, there will be a fight. If Moira goes, she may come back with a plan."

"And if she does not come back?"

Moira answered for herself:

"Then at least you will not lose everyone at once."

Red closed her eyes.

"I hate all of you."

"That, at least, we have in common," Padraic muttered.

Red opened one eye.

"You are at the top of the list, boy."

Sorcha laughed softly, and for the first time the tension in the room eased a little, though it did not disappear. It could not. It lay on the table between the ledger and the map, between Bríd's name and Colm's letter, between Liam's fate and the memory of Seamus, Patrick, Finn and Eamon.

Suddenly someone called from outside:

"Horses ready. Road from Carrigmore clear."

Callum nodded.

"Good. You have an hour, perhaps less. Food, dry coats, cartridges, whatever anyone needs. Then reconnaissance."

Sorcha looked at me.

"You stay."

"Me?"

"You."

"I am touched, but usually when people tell me I am staying somewhere it ends in arrest."

"This time it ends in supper and you telling us exactly how a girl from Manchester made English gentlemen choke on their own order."

Several heads in the room turned towards me.

Only then did I notice that the original distrust had changed into something strange. Not sympathy. Not yet. Curiosity, cautious respect, the kind of regard people at the bottom have for someone who spat upwards and, to everyone's surprise, hit someone important in the face.

I was English. That still stood between us. But I was also an Englishwoman England wanted rid of.

That made me something less suspicious and more useful. Perhaps even, in some very dirty and very funny sense, a kind of ally.

"If you want the short version," I said, "I hit a man with a shovel and refused to apologise to the Empire for my existence."

Sorcha smiled.

"And the long version?"

Red put a hand on my shoulder as she passed me towards the door.

"The long version has more swearing and better pacing. Give her alcohol, or she will start suffering literarily."

"I do not suffer literarily," I said. "I suffer historically."

"Even worse."

Moira took the ledger, the map and the pistol. Callum was already speaking with Sorcha and Padraic by the door, fixing the route, signs, distances, words that were not to

be shouted even while dying. Red stood to one side, furious that she was not going, more furious that she understood why, and most furious of all that everyone could see it.

I went over to her.

"You do not like staying behind."

"Surprising, isn't it? A woman with a minor history of escape and fighting has a problem with waiting."

"Moira will come back."

Red looked at me.

"Do not promise."

I did not.

For a while we stood side by side in a den full of weapons, stolen supplies, wet coats, rebels, women counting loot taken from English landlords and people who for a moment looked at me not as a stranger but as a story worth hearing before the next risk.

Outside the door the forest breathed darkness. Ahead was the Heron Sign. Behind us Carrigmore, the rectory, betrayals and the dead.

And in the middle, at a table with a map, a ledger and a candle, sat a new, very unstable version of hope.

Not pure. Not safe. But armed. Moira was already about to leave.

Not dramatically, not with the raised head of a heroine, not with the kind of courage painters later exaggerate on canvas, adding more light than existed in real life. She simply stood by the door of the forest den in someone else's coat, a pistol tucked into her belt, the ledger wrapped in cloth and pressed to her side, her face pale with exhaustion but still, as though every feeling that might stop her had been locked away deep inside and she, a former warder, knew better than anyone how effectively doors are secured from within.

Callum was still saying something to Sorcha and Padraic, bent over the map and tracing with his finger the route between the old mill, the stream and the inn at the Heron Sign. Red stood several steps away with her arms folded, angry in such a visible fashion that if anger had been smoke she would have suffocated the entire room along with the powder, flour and stolen tea. She pretended to be looking at the map, but I saw that she was looking at Moira. Everyone was. Even those pretending to adjust cartridges, fasten straps, check locks on weapons or count sacks of supplies glanced at her from the corners of their eyes, because a person going out on reconnaissance to a place like that carries a strange silence, like the silence beside a sickbed when no one yet says aloud that the patient may never rise.

Moira checked the strap on her bag. Once. Twice. Three times. Too carefully.

I saw it. Red saw it too. Callum probably did as well, but men often mistake another person's fear for preparation because it is more convenient and lets them set off sooner. Moira was not afraid of death in a simple way. Not like me, who sometimes feared it very specifically: a bullet, a knife, a rope, cold water, a badly placed horse, Red too close to her own anger. Moira feared something worse. She feared she would once again be one breath too late. That once again she would hold someone's body and feel life running out between her fingers despite all her logic, all her sobriety, all her control, all that damned common sense that could not stop the hole in Eamon's chest.

And suddenly I understood that I could not watch her leave. Not like this. Not without a word. Not after everything.

"Moira," I said.

My voice sounded strange. Quiet, but sharp, as though it had come out of me through a wound rather than my throat.

Moira turned her head.

"What?"

I wanted to say something ordinary. Something Nell-like, which naturally meant foolish, clever, defensive, about as useful as an umbrella in a fire. I wanted to tell her not to get killed because there was no room left in our schedule for another funeral. Or that if she died I would be deeply offended because someone had to keep Red from murdering the whole geography of western Ireland. Or that reconnaissance was a beautiful word meaning 'go where other people are afraid to look', and therefore she ought to be careful, preferably in wholesale quantities.

I said none of those things.

Instead I walked up to her.

Not quickly. Not theatrically. Simply. Perhaps even awkwardly, because suddenly my legs were heavy and the whole room, with all those people, weapons, maps, wet coats and eyes, seemed too full of witnesses. Moira watched me questioningly, a little surprised, a little concerned, as though she did not know whether I was about to make a speech or collapse from lack of sleep. I stopped just in front of her and saw that beneath her collar she had tucked a small wooden horse.

The one from the child in Ballynareen.

She had not hidden it deep. Had not left it in the bag. She carried it with her, just beneath her coat, so that a piece of the uneven wooden head protruded, dark from touch and from that absurd, childish meaning that cannot be bought or stolen, even if lately we had specialised in both activities.

And that broke me.

Not a bullet. Not prison. Not the court. Not the priest with his ledger. Not the dead attacker by the wall. Only that small, clumsy horse in the pocket of a woman who pretended she needed nothing and carried a stranger child's toy against her heart because it reminded her of the boy she had failed to save.

"Do not go," I said.

Everything in the room fell silent.

Callum broke off mid sentence. Sorcha looked up from the ammunition straps. Padraic, that eternally suspicious boy with the face of a man born with a fist lodged in his throat, suddenly stopped looking like someone with an insult ready. Red slowly turned her head.

Moira looked at me.

"Nell..."

"Do not go," I repeated, more quietly this time, but less certainly, and it was that uncertainty that was worst because I had nothing with which to cover it. "I know it is sensible. I know you can watch, count exits, read buildings, judge people and do all those

things that normally bore me until they start saving my life. I know you are the best person for this reconnaissance. And that is exactly why I do not want you to go."

Moira said nothing.

Her face was no longer still.

Something in it was cracking very slowly, like ice on water that still holds its shape though the current beneath has already begun to move.

"That is not a reasonable request," she said.

"I know."

"This is not a good moment."

"I know that too."

"Then why?"

And then I had nowhere left to run.

My tongue, that faithful knife of mine that had so often rescued me from silence or pushed me into even greater trouble, suddenly found no joke, no sharp edge, no sentence pretty enough to hide the truth. I stood before Moira in someone else's coat, mud on my skirt, my face exhausted almost beyond humanity, and felt my eyes grow wet.

I became furious with myself at once.

Of course.

Tears had always seemed to me a form of the body's surrender to the world, and I hated giving the world proof that it could touch me. But this time I had no strength to order my eyes to behave with dignity. Not after Eamon. Not after Bríd. Not after everything that had begun with my shovel, my tongue, my trial, my escape, my name, which was now apparently travelling through newspapers and causing riots as though a name could be a fuse and I not a person but a defective lamp left in a powder store.

"Because all of this is because of me," I said.

Red moved immediately.

"Nell."

"No," I cut her off without even looking at her. "Not now. Do not defend me from this, because I no longer know whether it is something anyone can defend me from."

Moira took a step closer.

"It is not because of you."

I gave a short, ugly laugh. Almost soundless.

"Really? Interesting, because wherever I go someone ends up tied, dead, wanted or dragged into a story they never ordered. I hit Mowbray because I could not stand there watching him beat Red, and I would say I would do it again because I would, of course I would, but then came arrest, trial, sentence, escape, shots, Eamon, Manchester, Greta, you, Red, everyone. People die around me, Moira. And now you are going there because I opened this damned wound and did not know how to stop digging inside it."

"No," Moira said more sharply.

"Yes."

"No."

At last her voice trembled.

Not much. But enough.

"Do not take my decisions away from me just so you can keep all the guilt for yourself," she said. "That is not nobility. It is pride in a mourning coat."

I fell silent. The blow landed cleanly. Moira was breathing faster.

"I opened the cell. I handed over the keys. I walked out of the uniform, though I could have remained behind bars on the proper side and pretended not to see. I went with you. I carry the ledger. I want to go on reconnaissance. Not because you push me. Not because Red burns. Not because Callum needs someone who understands locks and corridors. Because for years I stood beside doors and watched women learn silence. And now, if I know where the next doors may be, I will not sit at a table waiting for someone else to find out whether a girl is breathing behind them."

Her eyes were wet.

Moira.

Always even. Always calm. Always holding everything so tightly as though emotion were a weapon that might fire by accident.

And now she stood before me with a small wooden horse against her heart and a voice cracked by names she had not spoken.

I could not bear it.

I embraced her.

At first I probably collided with her more than hugged her, because I had no practice in gentleness, and she went rigid immediately like someone whose body had been taught for years that touch usually takes something away. But I did not let go. I pressed my face to her shoulder, to the rough wool of the coat smelling of smoke, rain and that strange cleanness of Moira's which had nothing to do with an absence of dirt, only with the fact that even when she dirtied her hands she did so with pain, not convenience.

"I am sorry," I whispered.

Moira did not move.

"Nell..."

"I am sorry. For the prison. For making you choose. For Eamon. For the fact that now you are going because all of us are already so deep that there is no getting out without leaving pieces of ourselves along the way. I do not want anything to happen to you. I do not want to watch someone go into the dark because of me again."

Only then did Moira embrace me.

Not violently. Not the way Red might embrace someone if she ever admitted she embraced anyone. Moira did it slowly, carefully, as though both of us were learning something no one had ever properly shown us. One hand stopped on my back. The other held me at the shoulder. I felt her breathing unevenly.

"I am afraid too," she said very quietly.

That was worse than everything.

Because Moira could talk about locks, plans, distances, risk and reports, and then a person could pretend fear was something technical, something that could be drawn on a map. But when she said 'I am afraid', without cover, without instruction, without procedure, suddenly the whole room became too small for all of us.

"I know," I said.

"I do not want to hold someone again while they go."

I squeezed my eyes shut.

"I know."

"And I do not want someone holding me."

I did not answer at once.

Because what can one say to a sentence like that? That there will be no need? A lie. That we will make sure? Pride. That God will help? After Kearney's rectory even holy pictures ought to lower their eyes.

"Then come back," I said at last. "Just come back. Not heroically. Not beautifully. Not as proof, not as a symbol, not as redemption for every door beside which you once stood. Come back dirty, furious, exhausted, with information or without it, so long as you are alive. I do not need another story about someone who did the right thing and did not return."

Moirra held me tighter. And then I heard a small, suspicious sound from the side. Red.

She was still standing several steps away with her arms folded, her face turned slightly towards the wall as though maps, beams, smoke, anything except us had suddenly become extremely interesting. Except her eyes were shining. And when she saw me looking at her, she immediately made such an offended face that one might have thought she had been caught stealing a prayer book.

"Not one word," she said.

Her voice was lower than usual.

"Red," I began.

"I said not one word."

"Are you..."

"No."

"But..."

"Nell, I swear on every sacred cow in this wet country, if you say I was moved I will tell everyone you cried over the priest."

"That is a very serious accusation."

"I have witnesses. I will invent them."

Moirra snorted.

It was a small sound, broken halfway between laughter and crying, but real. And that sound was what stripped Red of the last of her defences. She rolled her eyes, muttered something in Irish under her breath, came over to us and embraced both of us so violently that it was less a hug than an attempt to hold the world physically in place.

"Stupid women," she muttered into my hair.

"Beautiful words of support," I said through a tight throat.

"Shut up or you will spoil it."

"You already spoiled it."

"I have the right. It is my speciality."

Moirra was laughing and crying at the same time, very quietly, as though she did not want her body to become too accustomed to either activity. Red held us tightly, and I felt

her fingers trembling on my shoulder. I did not mention it. I was not a monster. At least not at that moment.

No one in the room spoke.

And that may have been the most extraordinary thing.

Those people who not long before had wanted to bind us, who lived by raids, pursuit, weapons and night oaths, suddenly behaved with awkward, rough gentleness. Sorcha looked away and began adjusting cartridges with enormous concentration. Nuala stood and added water to the kettle though there was no need. Callum stared at the table with the face of a man who had remembered his own losses and knew he had no right to step between someone else's. Padraic, to my astonishment, was so completely silent that I nearly began to like him, but fortunately recovered my senses quickly.

After a while Moira was the first to move away.

She wiped her face with her sleeve, without shame but without theatre either. She took the wooden horse from her pocket and looked at it. Small, crudely carved, one leg slightly shorter, its mane cut with several careless strokes of a knife. A child had made it or received it from someone and then given it to a woman who looked as though she had lost a boy.

Moira ran her thumb along the wooden back.

"When I received it," she said quietly, "I thought I should not take it. That it was not mine. That I had no right to carry something a child had given out of pity."

"It was not pity," Red said.

Moira looked at her.

Red shrugged, trying to return to her ordinary tone, but her voice was still a little hoarse.

"Children do not give pity. They give things. That is worse. More binding."

Moira nodded.

"I suppose so."

"Take it with you," I said.

"I am."

"And come back with it."

Moira closed her fingers around the horse.

"I will come back."

She did not say 'I promise'.

Good.

Promises in our world were too fragile to throw about.

But that 'I will come back' was enough, because she said it not like someone trying to comfort us but like someone who had made a decision and would hold to it as long as her body allowed.

Red touched Moira's arm lightly. Very lightly. So lightly that anyone who blinked might have missed it.

"If you see Cavanagh," she said, "do not try to be me."

Moira raised an eyebrow.

"That is the least tempting advice I have received today."

"Good. Because even I find me difficult."

"I noticed."

Red smiled briefly.

"Look. She can joke. Reconnaissance has already ruined her."

Moira slipped the horse back into her pocket, just beside her breast.

"If I do not come back..."

"You will," I cut her off sharply.

She looked at me.

"Nell."

"No. Do not begin a sentence with 'if I do not come back', because then I will have to do something dramatic, and lately dramatic things end in indictments."

Red nodded.

"She is right. We very much do not want another of her speeches beside a corpse. It would be exhausting even for the dead."

Moira looked at us both.

This time she smiled properly.

Not broadly. Not lightly. But truly, through exhaustion, fear and the shadow of Eamon standing beside her like a second breath.

"Very well," she said. "I will come back to avoid your rhetoric."

"The healthiest motivation," I replied.

Callum came closer then, carefully, like a man who did not want to step on something sacred though he would probably never have used such a word.

"We have to move," he said quietly.

Moira nodded.

Sorcha handed her a darker coat.

"This one is less visible."

Padraic, after a brief hesitation, gave her an extra knife. He did not look her in the eye, but he offered it hilt first, which in that room meant more than an apology, because apologies can be spoken cheaply, while a knife is handed to someone whom, at least for the moment, one does not plan to stab in the back.

Moira accepted it.

"Thank you."

Padraic muttered:

"Do not lose it."

"I shall try."

"And do not get caught."

Moira looked at him calmly.

"That is in the plan too."

Red leaned towards me as Moira began fastening the coat.

"See? Even Padraic has feelings. Tragedy. Now I will have to treat him like a human being."

"Let us not exaggerate," I whispered. "He still has time to ruin everything."

Red almost smiled.

But when Moira moved towards the door with Sorcha, Padraic and Callum, Red no longer joked at all.

She stood beside me very straight, her hands clenched so tightly that her knuckles had gone white. She watched Moira leave into the night, the ledger safely hidden, the pistol beneath her coat, the wooden horse against her heart and all our fear following her like an invisible procession.

Moira turned once more in the doorway. Not to everyone. To us.

"Do nothing stupid before I return," she said.

Red lifted her chin at once.

"That limits our options."

"Exactly the point."

"Come back quickly, or Nell without supervision will start planning revolutionary poetry."

"A lie," I said. "I plan only crimes with literary elements."

Moira shook her head. And left. The door closed behind her softly. Too softly.

For a while Red and I stood side by side staring at the wood as though it might return Moira to us merely because we looked hard enough.

"She will come back," Red said.

I did not know whether she was speaking to me or to herself.

"She will," I answered.

And this time I allowed myself to sound certain.

Not because I was certain.

Because sometimes a person has to borrow the voice of hope even when she possesses no papers for it, no title of ownership and no guarantee of return.

CHAPTER XVIII

An Hour. Maybe Less

The door closed behind Moira so quietly that it made me angry.

There was no bang, no dramatic crack of wood, no proper sound at all to which memory might later be tied and made to say: that was exactly when the worst began. Only a short, soft click, as if the world had the insolence to pretend that sending Moira out into the night, towards a place where girls were kept like goods awaiting the next sale, was an ordinary household act, no different from shutting the pantry or setting a cup back on a shelf.

For a while I simply stood there staring at the door, wanting to walk over, open it again, call her back and say that we had changed our minds, that reconnaissance could go to hell, that Callum, Sorchá and Padraic looked sufficiently grown-up to find their own way to the House of the Heron Sign without leading our Moira there like a human sacrifice offered to common sense. But I did not, because common sense, that mean, skinny rat, was sometimes right after all, and I hated it all the more each time it saved our lives.

Red was staring at the door too.

She no longer stood quite as steadily as she had before. Naturally, had anyone asked, she would probably have said that she was standing exactly as usual, and that anyone seeing otherwise ought to wash their eyes with alcohol or a stick, depending on what happened to be available. But I saw it. I had watched her too long by then, seen too many times how she covered fear with anger, tenderness with mockery, pain with a dismissive flick of the hand, as though she were brushing away a fly rather than trying not to fall apart in front of people. Now she stood with her arms folded over her chest, chin slightly raised, lips pressed tight, gaze fixed on the closed door, and only her fingers, those treacherous little creatures, dug so hard into the cloth of her sleeve that her knuckles had gone white.

The hideout grew louder again, though not truly.

It was the noise made by people who do not want to hear their own thoughts. Someone shifted crates of ammunition, someone stirred a pot with such concentration that one might have thought the soup would betray the secret of the Heron Sign if treated firmly enough, someone cleaned a weapon, someone untangled rope, someone argued under his breath about the route across the bog. Everything had the appearance of preparation, but beneath that appearance sat waiting, and waiting was the worst kind of work, because a person grew tired while doing nothing and did not even earn the dignity of sweating honestly for it.

Red lasted perhaps five minutes.

Then she went to the table, picked up her knife, inspected the blade although it was clean, wiped it on her sleeve although there was nothing to wipe away, sheathed it, drew it again, checked the pistol, then suddenly turned on one of Callum's men, who was sitting too close to a crate of ammunition and had been looking at her for too long.

"Have you got a problem?" she asked.

The man, broad-shouldered, with a beard like a wet brush and one eye slightly smaller than the other, blinked.

"No."

"Then why are you staring as if you're trying to remember whether you've buried me before?"

"I wasn't staring."

"You were."

"Maybe."

"Then stop."

"What am I meant to look at?"

Red pointed at the wall with her knife.

"The wood. It's more conversational and less irritating."

The man raised both hands in surrender and several people by the fire snorted quietly. Red did not smile. She moved away, stopped beside a barrel, poured something into a cup and drank so quickly that it looked less as though she were quenching thirst than trying to kill a thought that had already come too close to her throat.

I went over to her.

"If you're planning to beat everyone in this room one by one, warn me first so I can take notes. We might finally produce a proper set of rules for our group."

"Don't start," she muttered.

"Starting is my speciality. Without it I don't know who I am."

"You're the person I'm about to send to watch the horses unless she shuts her mouth."

"The horses don't respect me."

"Intelligent animals."

She leaned one hip against the table and turned her face away, pretending to watch the people around the hearth. In the firelight her profile looked sharper than usual, her cheekbone casting a shadow, her lips still tight, and in the one eye visible from where I stood there glinted something she very much wanted to sell as anger. Unfortunately for her, I knew the difference by then. Red's anger went outwards, like flame from a furnace. This stayed inside and burned her from within, without smoke, without use, without the possibility of warming anyone.

"You're worried about her," I said quietly.

Red took another swallow and grimaced.

"No. I simply don't like people taking my common sense and walking into the night with it without my permission."

"Your common sense?"

"Yes. Moira borrowed it from all of us. In my case the contribution was very small, but still personal."

"Red."

"What?"

"You're worried."

She looked at me so quickly that for a second I thought I might actually be hit with the cup.

"Of course I'm worried," she hissed at last. "What am I meant to do, dance? That damned woman has gone to an inn where they may be holding girls, traffickers, Cavanagh's men, perhaps Cavanagh himself, perhaps half of hell in the stable and the other half in the cellar, and she'll go in there wearing that face of a person who believes that if she counts the doors properly, death will politely wait its turn."

She fell silent at once.

As though frightened by how much she had just said.

The room grew slightly quieter for a moment, because several people had heard her, but Sorcha gave them such a look that everyone immediately returned to their extremely important occupations, namely moving objects from one place to another and pretending they had no ears.

Red turned towards the wall.

"I hate waiting," she said more quietly. "When you're fighting, at least you know where to keep the knife. You know who is standing in front of you, who wants to kill you, whether the ground is slippery, whether the weapon is loaded, whether you've still got breath left. Waiting is worse. Waiting gives you too much room inside your own head. And my head, Nell, is not a place anyone should enter without an armed escort."

"I can imagine. There are probably warning notices, filthy songs and at least one person buried under the floorboards."

"Two. Don't flatter me."

I wanted to smile, but could not quite manage it.

Neither could Red.

For a while we stood side by side, while around us the forest camp breathed through its strange outlaw routine: the woman with the burned face counted cartridges, Nuala whispered with a young boy over a map, someone added wood to the fire, someone slept against the wall with a hand on the butt of a pistol, and outside came the snorting of horses and the distant wind tugging at branches as though the forest itself were trying to overhear our plans.

"She's dreadful," Red said suddenly.

"Moira?"

"No, Queen Victoria. Of course Moira."

"Dreadful in what way?"

"Every way. With that calm of hers, as if hell could be arranged according to cell numbers. With that look that measures risk before the rest of us have had time to curse it. With that voice that makes you want to do what she says because she sounds as if she has already seen what happens if you don't. And with that damned little horse against her heart."

She said the last words more quietly.

I looked at her.

"You saw it?"

"I'm not blind."

"You didn't say anything."

"Because sometimes, imagine this, I can."

"That must have hurt."

"Terribly. Please appreciate the sacrifice."

But the joke did not hold for long.

Red rubbed a hand over her face, as if trying to wipe away the exhaustion along with the last traces of mud.

"That little horse finished me," she said. "Not Eamon. Not entirely. Eamon was... I don't know. Too fresh, too bloody, too visible. You don't understand a wound while it's still steaming. But that little wooden horse... She took it. Moira. A woman who looks as though she keeps even her own tears in a locked drawer marked 'open in the event of the end of the world'. She took a child's toy and carries it with her like a relic. And now she's gone into the night with that horse at her heart, as if the poor scrap of wood could guard her better than all our men with guns."

"Maybe it can."

Red looked at me sidelong.

"You're becoming sentimental. Dangerous. Next you'll start believing in signs."

"After today I mostly believe priests ought to have stronger locks on their drawers."

"A very secular faith."

"The safest kind."

Red turned towards the fire.

"I've grown attached to her," she said suddenly.

Just like that. No shield. No joke. No warning.

For a second I did not know whether I ought to pretend I had not heard, because Red sometimes spoke the truth like a person accidentally dropping a knife, and any glance made too quickly could cause her to snatch the weapon back at once.

So I looked into the fire.

"To Moira?"

"No, to that barrel. Of course to Moira. Don't make me sound even stupider than I already do."

"You don't sound stupid."

"I sound tragic. That's worse. Stupidity at least sometimes has better timing."

The fire cracked, sending up a few sparks that died beneath the smoke-blackened roof.

"I didn't want this," Red said. "I didn't want people. Not like this. After Maeve I learned a very elegant art: keep your tongue sharp, your heart shut and your legs ready to run. It worked rather well. No one could take anything if I first pretended I was holding nothing. Then you charged at Mowbray with a shovel like a small, furious catastrophe in a skirt, Moira opened the door, Greta started organising the world as though it were a badly kept warehouse, and suddenly one wakes up in a forest hideout worrying about a former gaoler with a wooden horse in her pocket and wondering whether life has made a very unfunny joke at one's expense."

I felt something tighten around my throat.

"Red..."

"Don't interrupt. I'm already halfway to humiliation."

"All right."

"After Maeve I was sure all I would do from then on was endure. Not live. Endure. Work, eat, sleep, swear, sometimes fight, sometimes sing if someone had alcohol and did not sing too badly. Then Liverpool, factories, boilers, smoke, men who think that if a woman is poor she belongs to them as well. And my tongue, of course. A mask so comfortable I nearly forgot there was a face underneath it."

She turned towards me.

Her eyes were wet.

She was not crying yet, or perhaps she already was and doing it with such spiteful discretion that even the tears were afraid to admit involvement.

"And then you stood up for me," she said. "You, Nell Whitmore, damned factory witch of Manchester, who hardly knew me at all, and yet you saw Mowbray dragging me along the ground and something in you decided the world had no right to look like that. You didn't calculate. You didn't ask whether it was worth it. You simply struck him."

"And because of that..."

"No."

She said it sharply.

"Don't take that away from me."

I fell silent.

"You think you dragged me into misery," she went on. "You're a fool, Nell. I was already in it up to my neck, I just wore a better expression and had more practice pretending the mud was a choice. You didn't bring me the war. The war was here before you. You only reminded me that I still had someone worth fighting it for."

I do not know what happened to my face.

Probably something deeply compromising.

Because Red grimaced at once and added:

"And if you start crying poetically now, I'm going out into the rain."

"I don't cry poetically," I said, though my voice broke. "I cry practically."

"Good. Moira would approve of practicality."

"I'm not sure Moira approves of crying."

"Moira approves of anything that can be survived with minimal noise."

I laughed through my tears, which was disgustingly undignified and therefore probably human.

I sat down on the crate beside her because my legs suddenly refused to perform political, moral and physical duties simultaneously. Red sat beside me, her shoulder almost touching mine. Almost. Then, after a few breaths, she stopped pretending it was accidental and simply leaned lightly against me, the way a person leans against a wall when she does not want to admit that she needs one.

"I don't know whether I have anywhere left to go back to," I said.

The words came by themselves. Quietly. Without my permission, which was insolent even for words. Red did not move.

"Manchester?"

"Anything. Home. My mother. My father, if he still... if he still breathes in this world and not only in my memory. I don't know whether the police came to them because of

me. I don't know whether Mother knows I'm alive. I don't know whether she read about me in the papers. I don't know whether she cried, prayed, or cursed the day I learned to speak in complete sentences."

Red was silent.

And I went on, because once guilt finds a crack it pours through like dirty water from a broken dam.

"In court she looked at me as though she no longer understood who I was. As though she saw a daughter and a strange woman at the same time, one she could not stop. I explained nothing to her. I did not say I was frightened. I did not say I had not wanted to hurt her. Instead I made a spectacle. I always make a spectacle. I talk, shout, mock, until everyone is looking, and then I act surprised when the world begins to burn because of it."

"Nell."

"Maybe we really are cursed, Red. Maybe we are. Wherever we go, someone is left behind dead, tied up, beaten, burned or forced to lie. Manchester. Prison. The ship. Dublin. Ballynareen. Carrigmore. Moira out there in the dark now. Bríd somewhere, if she's still alive. Eamon. Patrick. Seamus. Finn. Your Maeve. My Tommy. It no longer looks like chance. It looks like a procession."

Red turned her whole body towards me.

She took my chin between her fingers, not particularly gently, because Red and gentleness probably knew one another by sight, but carefully enough for me to understand that she did not mean to hurt me.

"Listen to me," she said.

"Red..."

"No. My turn. You've had your little performance of guilt and it was very convincing, I almost bought a ticket, but unfortunately I know the author and I know she exaggerates professionally."

"I'm not exaggerating."

"You exaggerate for a living."

"It's not my fault I have talent."

"Exactly. So use it for something better than building a gallows inside your own head."

She looked straight into my eyes.

Her face was close, tired, dirty, beautiful in a way so indecently at odds with all our misery that one wanted to accuse her of sabotaging despair.

"We are not cursed," she said. "Cursed are the people who made a world in which three women have to steal horses, tie up priests and sleep in a forest so one girl does not disappear into someone else's ledger. Cursed are the people who beat beside boilers, sell behind desks, bless at altars, sign by candlelight and then sleep like children. Not you. Not Moira. Not me. We are the side effect of their sins, Nell. A very loud, very dirty, sometimes badly behaved side effect, but a side effect all the same."

"People die because of us."

"People were dying before we came."

"But now they die closer."

"Because at last we're going where they used to be killed quietly."

The sentence went deep into me.

It did not comfort me.

True things rarely comfort at once. They merely shift the weight from one rib to another so a person can breathe a little differently.

Red let go of my chin and looked away, as if suddenly realising she had said something far too wise and needed to rescue her reputation immediately.

"Besides," she added, "if we are cursed, at least we're cursed elegantly. I've seen worse curses. Some wore hats and collected rent."

"Your definition of elegance includes blood on the sleeve and stolen boots."

"At last you're beginning to understand me."

I rested my head against the wall and then, perhaps from exhaustion, perhaps from a need I no longer had the strength to name, placed it on Red's shoulder. She stiffened for a brief moment, as she always did when tenderness arrived without warning, then breathed out and did not move away.

That was all.

And precisely because of that, it was so much.

The fire in the hideout began to sink. Someone added a log, reluctantly and sparingly, because wood, like ammunition and courage, could not be wasted merely for comfort. Nuala covered a sleeping boy with an extra blanket. Sorcha sat at the table still counting something, but more and more slowly, as though the numbers too had begun to fall asleep. Padraic, the same Padraic who a little earlier would gladly have tied us up for the safety of the world, sat by the door with his face hidden in shadow and pretended not to look our way. From him, that was the closest thing to delicacy I could imagine.

"She'll come back," I said after a while.

Red did not answer at once.

"I know," she said finally.

"You don't know."

"I know."

"Red."

"Nell, if you tell me to be sensible now, I'll bite you."

"You or the horse?"

"Both. We have a joint position."

I smiled weakly.

"Do you miss it?"

"The horse?"

"Galway."

Her shoulder beneath my head tightened slightly.

"Yes."

A simple word.

No joke.

"I'm afraid to go back," she added after a while.

That too was simple.

Worse still.

"To your family?"

"To a place that remembers me younger, stupider and perhaps better. To my mother, if she'll still let me in. To streets where I might see someone who remembers Maeve. To graves I never visited. To myself from before all this."

"Maybe that girl is waiting for you too."

Red snorted quietly.

"If she is, she ought to be angry with me."

"She probably is."

"Good. At least one person in Galway will be consistent."

We fell silent.

There was something soft in that silence, although everything around us was hard: the wall, the crate, the weapons, the floor, fate. Perhaps that was precisely why our bodies began shamelessly to betray us. Eyelids grew heavy, thoughts started losing their edges and the fire blurred before our eyes. The last few days had eaten more of us than we wished to admit. Hunger, riding, flight, arguments, death, fear, the presbytery, the documents, Moira in the dark. A person can deceive the soul for a long time, but the body is simpler. In the end it says: enough, and switches off the world without asking permission.

Red shifted slightly.

"Don't fall asleep."

"I'm not asleep."

"You're sleeping with your voice."

"A new talent. Very useful under interrogation."

"We're meant to wait."

"I am waiting. With my eyes closed. It's more economical."

"Nell."

"Red."

"If Moira comes back and finds us asleep, she'll have that look."

"Which one?"

"The one that says we've disappointed her as an organisational project."

"Then we can't take that away from her. She needs small pleasures."

Red made a sound that might have been laughter if it had not been so tired that it sat down halfway there and changed its mind.

"Just one minute," she said.

"Of course."

"I'm not asleep."

"Neither am I."

The greatest lies of that night, immediately after "the priest knew nothing" and "it's only work for girls without families".

I do not know when sleep took us.

It did not come gently. It was no mother's soft hand, no peaceful sinking into warmth. It came like a guard after a long march, laid a heavy hand on the back of my neck and said: now you will be silent, whether you want to or not. The last thing I remember was Red's arm against mine, the smell of smoke, wet wool, gunpowder and

that dreadful forest liquor which was supposedly a cure for memory, although I suspected it merely set memory alight.

And somewhere in the darkness Moira was walking towards the Heron Sign. With a pistol beneath her coat. With the ledger in her bag. With the wooden horse against her heart.

And all of us, though not one of us knew how to say it without anger, a joke or tears, waited for her to return.

Sleep did not leave me gently.

There was no slow surfacing from warm darkness, no lazy morning, no human right to open my eyes one after another, thoughtfully and with dignity. Sleep was ripped from me like a dirty rag from a clenched fist, violently, without asking, by a sound I had come to know far too well over the past few days: quick footsteps outside the door, muffled voices, the jerk of the bolt and that particular sort of silence that comes just before bad news, as if even the fire in the hearth held back its flame in order to hear better.

Red sprang up before I did.

Of course.

A second earlier she had been sleeping with her arm against mine, head slightly bowed, hair fallen around her face and one hand resting on her knife as naturally as other women keep a rosary or handkerchief close. The next moment she was already standing, blade in hand, eyes wide open, instantly sober, as though sleep were merely another opponent she could kick in the teeth on command. I rose less impressively, because my body had decided that, having recently survived prison, a ship, horse theft, a break-in at a presbytery and an emotional conversation beside a crate of ammunition, it was entitled for the first three seconds not to know whether it was a human being, a sack of oats or an exhibit in the case against its own stupidity.

The door flew open.

Callum came in.

No, in truth he did not come in. He burst in, followed by Sorchá and a man named Conor, all wet with mist, mud and exertion, their faces so taut that everyone in the room immediately stopped pretending to sleep. Callum had a cut across one cheek. Sorchá held a hand to her side but was walking by herself, so the wound could not be fatal, at least by the new and drastically lowered standards our lives had introduced without consultation. Conor looked as though he had aged five years in a single night and understood at least two things he would rather never have known.

And behind them was Moira.

For one brief, terrible moment I thought she was not walking at all, that someone was leading her, because her stride was too even and too empty, as though her legs remembered the road while the rest of her had remained somewhere beside the Heron Sign. Her coat was buttoned crookedly, hair had escaped from beneath her scarf and stuck to her pale face, and on her right sleeve, from cuff almost to elbow, blood had gone dark.

A great deal of blood.

Not a spray. Not a streak from a graze. Blood that had had time to soak into the cloth and leave a heavy black stain, still glossy in places in the firelight.

Red moved first.

"Moir.".

Moir raised her eyes.

"It's not mine," she said at once.

And the fact that she said it at once, so calmly, so obediently in the face of our panic, was worse than if she had screamed.

Red stopped directly in front of her and checked her quickly, with eyes and hands, without asking, without embarrassment, like someone who knows the price of delay. She touched her arm, neck, side, checked whether the coat concealed a wound, while Moira stood motionless and let her do it with a strange gentleness that at another time might have been funny, because Moira usually looked like a woman who would require even her own pain to introduce itself first.

"Not yours," Red repeated.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

Moir looked at her.

"Red."

"Answer me."

"I'm sure."

Only then did Red breathe out, though she did not remove her hand.

I stood several steps away, unable to move during that one second when the body still lives in a future in which someone has returned dead, even though the eyes can already see them standing alive in front of you. Then I went over and caught Moira's other hand, the cleaner one, though even that had dirt, peat and something dark beneath the nails.

"You came back," I said.

Very clever.

Truly, after all my speeches, images, comparisons and the supposed reputation of a woman capable of making a court choke on its own wig, at the most important moment I found two words worthy of a child counting cups on a table.

Moir looked at me, and only then did her face twitch.

She did not smile. She could not. But something living appeared in her eyes.

"I said I would come back."

Red snorted quietly, too sharply, too wetly.

"Next time come back less theatrically."

Moir looked at her bloodied sleeve.

"I hadn't planned it."

Callum closed the door and leaned his back against it. Everyone in the room was standing now. Nuala, Sorcha, the people by the crates, the woman with the cartridges, the young boy, even Padraic, who until recently had seemed prepared to suspect his own shadow of English espionage. No one spoke. They waited.

Callum took off his hat and threw it on the table.

"We've got an hour. Maybe less."

That sentence turned the entire room into a weapon.

At once.

There were no more half-sleeping faces, no remnants of warmth from a brief rest, no illusion that the scouting party would return, report what it had seen and then everyone would sensibly discuss the next step over a cup of that atrocious forest medicine for memory. An hour. Maybe less. That is how one speaks not of a plan, but of a fire already visible through the wall.

Red spun round.

"What happened?"

Callum looked first at Moira.

And that look alone was enough for Red to step between them at once.

"Don't look at her as if she's a wound. Speak."

Moira spoke first:

"There were guards."

Her voice was calm but empty around the edges.

"How many?" Nuala asked.

"We saw four outside," Callum said. "Two by the stable, one at the side entrance, one on the road behind the inn. More inside. Lights in the cellar. Fresh cart tracks by the well. Not one cart. At least three in the last two days."

Sorcha sat down heavily on a bench and hissed, touching her side.

"They had a dog," she added. "Quiet bastard."

"The dog scented us," Conor said, and shame still sat in his voice. "Followed us from the stable."

"Not only the dog," Callum added. "One of the guards came up behind us. Young, but not stupid. He saw Sorcha before she could get lower. He meant to shout."

Moira lowered her eyes to her sleeve.

Red watched Callum.

"And?"

Callum did not answer at once.

Moira did.

"I stopped him."

Silence.

Not like before. That had been tension. This was knowledge beginning to understand itself before anyone spoke it aloud.

"How?" Red asked quietly.

Moira did not raise her eyes.

"With a knife."

My fingers tightened around her hand.

She did not pull it away.

"She had no choice," Callum said immediately.

He spoke quickly and firmly, as though trying to build a wall of words around her before anyone in the room had time to think the wrong thing.

"He was too close. Had a whistle at his neck. If he'd managed to blow it, the Heron Sign would have sealed itself from the inside and we'd either have died there or come back with nothing. Sorcha had her back turned, Conor was too low, I was by the cart.

Moira saw him first. He lunged at her, caught her coat, tried to shout. She struck him once. It wasn't enough. He had a knife. Cut her sleeve, not her. Then she..."

He broke off.

Moira finished for him:

"I put the knife under his ribs."

No one spoke.

The fire in the hearth cracked suddenly, as if the wood had more courage than the people.

Moira went on in the same flat voice, which hurt more than a scream:

"I only wanted to silence him. Hold him. Hit him. I don't know. He pulled at my coat, tried to reach the whistle, I felt the blade at my sleeve and then..."

She stopped. For the first time her voice broke. Only very slightly. But enough for Red to seize her by the shoulders.

"Look at me."

Moira did not.

"Moira."

Only then did she raise her eyes.

Red spoke more quietly than I think I had ever heard her speak:

"Breathe."

"I am breathing."

"No. You're performing a technical function. Breathe properly."

Moira pressed her lips together, then drew in a deeper breath, as though Red had just given her an order stronger than all the old regulations.

Callum said to the others:

"She did what she had to. Saved us. Saved the reconnaissance. If not for her, Cavanagh would know about us before we'd made it back to the trees."

Red did not even turn her head.

"Callum, shut up for a moment with the heroic speeches."

Callum raised his eyebrows.

"I'm trying to say..."

"I know what you're trying to say. And you're right. But she doesn't need someone making a heroine out of her while the first body is still fresh."

It struck me almost physically. The first body. Moira closed her eyes.

Red moved her hands from Moira's shoulders to her face, awkwardly, almost too forcefully, but held her so that Moira could not collapse somewhere inside herself.

"Listen to me," she said. "I won't tell you it's nothing. Because it isn't nothing. A person you kill does not vanish just because he had a whistle, a knife and bad intentions. He'll come back. At night. In water. In sounds that resemble the last breath. Sometimes in completely stupid things, like a stain on a sleeve or the smell of wet leather. And if anyone tells you that you'll get used to it so completely it stops hurting, kick him in the teeth for me, because he's lying or has killed too many people to remember when he began rotting from the inside."

Moira stared at her without blinking.

No one in the room moved.

Red continued:

"But there's another thing. And this is the one you have to hold on to. You didn't kill him because you wanted to feel powerful. You didn't kill him to prove something to yourself. You didn't kill him for money, for an order, for convenience or because he stood between you and someone else's profit. You killed because if he'd shouted, other people might have died. The girls in the cellar might have been moved. Bríd might have disappeared. Sorcha might have taken a bullet in the back. Padraic might have had an even stupider expression than usual, only dead."

"Oí," Padraic muttered, very quietly.

No one paid him any attention.

Red wiped a streak of mud from Moira's cheek with her thumb.

"That doesn't make you clean. Nothing will make you clean. Good. People who feel clean after killing are the worst people in the world. But it doesn't make you a monster either. Do you understand?"

Moira swallowed.

"I don't know."

"I know. That's why I'm saying it for you."

My throat tightened so hard that for a moment I struggled to breathe. Red, who only a little earlier had wanted to blow apart the whole map of western Ireland by anger alone, now stood before Moira like someone who already knew the road through the first night after killing a person and hated it enough not to let someone else walk it entirely alone.

I stepped closer and put an arm around Moira from the side.

I did not ask.

I simply did it, because a question at that moment would only have been an invitation for her common sense to refuse on behalf of her heart.

Moira stiffened, but only for a second.

Then she rested her forehead against my shoulder.

"I didn't want to," she whispered.

"I know," I said.

"He was so young."

I closed my eyes.

Eamon returned at once. Of course. Death has a talent for arriving in pairs even when no one invites it to the table.

Red felt it too. I saw it in her face.

"Youth does not cancel a knife," she said quietly.

"But..."

"I know."

One word.

I know.

In Red's mouth it sounded not like comfort, but like a dark room in which someone lights a small candle and says: I've been here before, mind the step.

Moira reached into her pocket.

For a moment I thought she was looking for a handkerchief, but she drew out the wooden horse. She held it in her bloodstained hand, and because of that it looked even

more defenceless, that small, crookedly carved piece of a child's kindness now sitting in her fingers beside death, as though the world truly did not understand that certain things should never be mixed.

"I had it with me," she said. "When I did it."

No one answered.

"I felt it afterwards. Here." She touched the place at her breast where she had hidden the toy before. "As if... as if Eamon were watching."

Red drew air through her teeth.

"Don't do that to yourself."

"I don't know how not to."

"You'll learn."

"How?"

Red looked straight into her eyes.

"Badly. Slowly. With a great deal of swearing. Sometimes with alcohol, though I don't recommend it nearly as much as I practise it. Sometimes with someone beside you. Sometimes not at all. But you'll learn to tell memory from sentence."

Moira closed her hand around the horse.

"Can you?"

Red smiled very sadly.

"On good days. And today, my dear, is a day as vile as an English land agent, so let us not demand miracles."

Moira almost smiled. Almost. And that almost was enough for everyone in the room to breathe again, though no one did it loudly.

Callum waited until Red stepped away from Moira. Only then did he continue, this time without that hard attempt to turn her into a heroine.

"After the guard went down, we couldn't stay long. But we saw and heard enough."

Red's eyes went back to him at once.

"Brid."

Callum nodded.

"She's alive."

The words struck the room like light. Not bright. Not safe. But real. Moira closed her eyes. Red took a step back as though someone had shoved her. I think I stopped breathing.

"You saw her?" I asked.

Sorcha answered because Callum was looking at Red.

"Not face to face. Not well enough to swear to it in court, assuming anyone here still cares about courts. But there was a window in the cellar. Small, close to the ground, on the stable side. Boards covered part of it, but one was loose. Moira noticed someone had been trying to scrape at the wood from inside. We went closer."

Moira continued quietly:

"We heard girls. At least four. One was coughing. One was crying very softly. Someone said Brid's name."

"Who?" Red asked.

"I don't know. In a whisper. Perhaps another girl was calling her. Perhaps she was answering. Then someone upstairs struck the floor and told them to be quiet."

Padraic added:

"Cavanagh was there."

Red turned her head so slowly that I felt cold.

"You saw him?"

"Yes. Pockmarked face. Arrived after midnight. Spoke to Nolan. They said 'Tierney is still breathing and still biting'. Those were his words. Said women like that are the most trouble, but sometimes worth more if someone knows how to break them."

Red stopped being a woman.

For one second.

She became something much simpler and much more dangerous: a blade that had not yet found a throat.

Callum spoke quickly before she could walk out:

"The transport was meant to leave before dawn."

"Was?" Moira asked.

"Was," Callum repeated. "But after the guard they may bring it forward. If they find him in time, they'll seal the place or move at once. If they don't, they'll leave according to plan. Either way, they already know something is wrong."

"Did anything get away?" Nuala asked.

Sorcha grimaced.

"The dog came back."

The room grew heavy again.

"The dog?" I repeated.

"Afterwards," Callum said, "when we were withdrawing from the stable, the dog tore free of the line or someone let it loose. Padraic hit it with a stick, but didn't kill it. It ran back towards the inn. If they start looking, they'll find the place where we fought. Blood. The body or the marks, unless the mist covers them. They'll know someone was close."

"And they'll come after us?" I asked.

Callum looked at me.

"Probably."

Moira closed her eyes for a second.

"They may not know the way to the hideout."

Padraic snorted.

"If Cavanagh has people in Carrigmore, he knows more roads than the priest knows prayers. And after the presbytery and the reconnaissance he'll be looking for a group, not three women. Our camp isn't a secret from God and every rat in the county."

"Then we can't attack them," Moira said.

Red turned on her at once.

"What?"

Moira repeated, more clearly:

"We can't attack them."

"Brid is there."

"I know."

"Alive."

"I know."

"And you're saying we sit here?"

"I'm saying that if we move on the Heron Sign now, we'll walk into a place that may already be preparing for attack, with girls locked in the cellar, Cavanagh inside, and men who can kill the hostages before we cross the yard."

Red clenched her hands.

"Don't call them hostages."

"What are they, then?"

The question cut Red.

Moira continued, a little more firmly now, as though the killing, the blood and the return from darkness had given her voice a new, bitter hardness:

"If Cavanagh knows someone is watching him, he'll do one of two things. Move the transport immediately or come for us to recover the ledger and stop the people who saw the Heron Sign. If we go there now, we give him the ground. If we stay here and prepare a defence, we may force him to come to us."

Red looked at her as if every word were a slap.

"And Bríd?"

Moira squeezed the wooden horse so tightly I was afraid it would crack.

"If they move her, we stop them on the road. But not by blindly attacking the inn. With an ambush or a defence at the crossing. If they come here, we defend the ledger and the people. If they move the transport, we strike on the road, where they don't have a cellar, walls and girls to use as shields."

Callum nodded slowly.

"She's right."

Red closed her eyes.

"I hate it when she's right."

"So do I," I said quietly. "It's becoming an unbearable habit."

Moira looked at me, and in her eyes, beneath the shock, beneath the blood, beneath all that fresh darkness, appeared a trace of gratitude that the joke was not an escape from her truth, but a small bridge over the place into which all of us might fall.

Nuala came to the table.

"Defence," she said. "If they're coming, not here where the wounded sleep and the supplies are kept. We meet them before they reach us. Two approaches to the ravine. One through the stream, one by the old path from the north. If Cavanagh moves quickly, he'll choose the stream. If cautiously, the north."

Sorcha placed three cartridges on the table.

"We've got people for both. Little powder. Some charges. Two fast horses, the rest mediocre."

Padraic added:

"If they come from Carrigmore and the Heron Sign together, they'll outnumber us."

"How many?" Red asked.

Callum answered:

"We don't know. Ten. Maybe fifteen. Maybe more if Reilly or Ashford's people are closer than we think."

"Wonderful," I said. "So numerically we are somewhere between 'bad' and 'I hope someone here has a talent for miracles'."

"We haven't got miracles," Sorcha said. "We've got three charges, five good rifles, seven pistols, too few bullets and people who don't want to die today for someone else's ledgers."

Red looked at her.

"They are not someone else's ledgers."

Sorcha took that without offence.

"That's exactly why we'll fight."

Everyone began talking at once.

Not chaotically at first, more like a mechanism suddenly restarting after too much silence. Callum spread out a map, Nuala pointed to paths, Sorcha counted weapons, Padraic argued about the position on the hill, someone ran to the stable to check the horses, someone else carried sacks of supplies deeper into the dugout, two women began packing bandages, water and alcohol into baskets as though they were preparing not for a battle but a very grim picnic at which ammunition would be served instead of cake.

Red still stood beside Moira.

She did not go to the map at once, although everything in her body strained towards action.

"You're going to sit down," she told her.

Moira raised her eyebrows.

"No."

"That wasn't a suggestion."

"Red."

"You've got blood on your sleeve, a corpse in your head and hands that are about to start shaking if they haven't already. You will sit for five minutes, drink that disgusting medicine of Sorcha's, wash your hand, and only then will you save the world by arranging the doors in the correct order."

Moira wanted to protest.

I could see it.

But her body betrayed her first. The fingers holding the horse suddenly trembled, barely, but Red noticed. So did I.

Moira looked down as if seeing her own hand for the first time.

"It's not my blood," she said again.

More quietly this time.

Red laid a hand over hers.

"I know."

"But it's on me."

"I know."

"I don't know if it will come off."

Red looked at her very seriously.

"Not all of it will."

Moira closed her eyes.

Red squeezed her hand.

"But it doesn't have to. Not today. Today it only has to stop getting in the way of your holding a weapon."

It was awful.

And perhaps precisely because of that, true.

We led Moira to the bench by the wall. Nuala brought water, Sorch a strip of cloth and a cup of alcohol. Moira washed her hands slowly, without the feverish desperation she had shown after Eamon. This was different. Not calmer. Perhaps more aware that not everything can be washed away, so one has to remove at least enough for the fingers to work.

She set the wooden horse on her knees.

Small, dirty, one leg shorter than the others.

It sat there among weapons, maps, defence plans and people preparing for battle, absurd and holy in a way no Father Kearney could have understood even after being tied to a chair and granted an entire evening of honest reflection.

I sat beside her.

"Bríd is alive," I said quietly.

Moira nodded.

"She was alive when we were there."

"That's enough for now."

She looked at me.

"I don't know."

"Neither do I. But if we start demanding certainty, we'll have to crawl back into our mothers' wombs and begin the whole thing again."

"Your attempts at comfort are getting stranger."

"Pressure to develop artistically."

Moira gave me something that was almost a smile.

Red stood in front of us with a cup.

"Drink."

Moira took the cup and sniffed it.

"What is it?"

"Medicine for memory."

"It doesn't work."

"Then drink more."

Moira took a swallow and grimaced so visibly that Red looked deeply satisfied.

"See? You're alive. The dead don't insult alcohol with their faces."

Moira handed the cup back.

"I haven't yet decided whether that's alcohol or violence in liquid form."

"A local speciality," I said. "Survival distilled from grief and bad decisions."

Red looked at me.

"You should write labels."

"For bottles or coffins?"

"With us, often the same thing."

For one brief moment, a very brief one, amid all the chaos of preparation, the blood, fear and approaching fight stepped back. Moira sat between us with washed hands, though her sleeve was still dark, the little horse on her knees, her face paler than before but no longer empty. Red stood beside her like the strangest guard in the world: ready to snarl at anyone who called her gentle, and ready to tear apart anyone who hurt Moira. I sat beside them with one hand on the bag containing the ledger, feeling that somewhere between Bríd's name and the bloodstain on Moira's sleeve, this night had ceased to be reconnaissance.

It had become the beginning of a siege.

Callum came over to us after a few minutes.

"We need to move the ledger to the dugout. If the defence collapses, someone has to carry the documents out through the northern exit."

"Who?" Moira asked.

Callum looked at me.

"Nell."

"Oh no," I said at once. "I don't like it when people assign me to survival. It always sounds like an insult to my level of activity."

Red showed her teeth in a smile.

"All the more perfect. You'll suffer while doing something sensible."

"I don't want to be sensible. Sense has dreadful style."

Moira put a hand on my shoulder.

"If the ledger is lost, Bríd becomes only a voice from a cellar. If the ledger survives, we have the mechanism."

That shut my mouth. Briefly. Callum looked around at each of us.

"Ready the weapons. Put out unnecessary lights. Hide the horses. If Cavanagh comes, we let them into the ravine and close it behind them."

"And if he doesn't come?" Red asked.

Callum looked towards the door, beyond which the night was still wet and silent.

"Then the transport leaves before dawn."

Red slid the knife behind her belt.

"So either way, dawn will be ugly."

"Yes," Callum said.

Moira lifted the wooden horse from her knees and tucked it back against her heart.

"Then let us not waste the night."

She stood. Unsteadily still. But she stood.

Red looked at her with something that resembled pride, though anyone naming it as such would probably have been insulted at once for their own good.

And I thought that the Heron Sign might have men, walls, a cellar, dogs, carts and Cavanagh with his pockmarked face.

We had less.

But we had Moira, who had returned with blood on her sleeve and refused to let that blood decide who she was.

We had Red, who knew how to lead someone through the first night after killing. We had a ledger full of names. We had Bríd's name, and it was still breathing. And we had an hour. Maybe less.

The hideout turned into a war camp faster than Father Kearney could have managed to say he knew nothing.

Only a moment earlier it had been a place trying to pretend it was shelter: several crooked walls, a roof stitched together from boards, turf and prayers to the weather, a fire at the hearth, wet coats hanging from beams, people sleeping against walls with a hand on a weapon, the smell of smoke, sheep's wool, sweat, alcohol and that particular human exhaustion which no longer sits on the face but in the bones. Then Callum said "we've got an hour, maybe less", and everything that had looked like a poor forest refuge suddenly began to work like an organism someone had kicked in the heart.

No one shouted without need. That was the strangest part. I would have expected panic, swearing, running in circles, men pretending to have a plan and women clearing up after their confidence, because that is generally how the order of the world looks when someone tries to save it in a hurry. But here every movement had purpose, even if the purpose was dirty, patched and smelled of gunpowder. Sorcha swept the cartridges from the table, sorted them into three piles and began distributing them without asking who felt heroic and who would rather stay with the cooking pot today. Nuala ordered two young men to move sacks of flour and dried meat into the dugout, and when one tried to carry two at once and nearly toppled over his own ambition, she struck him with such an effective look that he immediately learned humility before logistics.

Someone put out unnecessary lights by pinching the wicks between fingers until only three small flames remained in the room: one by the map, one by the weapon crates, one beside the place where Moira still sat with her wet, bloodstained sleeve, the horse hidden against her heart and the face of a woman who had just returned from darkness but whom darkness had not quite agreed to release. Someone else wrapped the horses' hooves in rags, tightly and carefully, as though preparing not animals for a possible escape but children to pass a sleeping monster. Two men carried a barrel of powder out of the main shed while whispering furiously about whether it should be hidden beneath the boards or moved closer to the ravine, and the woman with the scar on her cheek, who clearly had more sense than both of them together, told them that if they put powder beside the fire one more time she would blow them up herself to save Cavanagh the trouble.

I watched spare documents being carried out beneath a sheet, not the most important ones, because Kearney's ledger already lay wrapped in cloth beside Moira, but various letters, notes, receipts, names of people who for years had moved between landlords, ports, parishes and forest hideouts. Nuala ordered one boy to bury part of the papers beneath a flat stone behind the shed, another part to be pushed into a crack in an old beam, and a third bundle to be wrapped in waxed cloth and hidden in an empty herring barrel. If anyone ever writes songs about revolution, I thought, they will probably forget to mention the herrings, which would be a pity, because the truth looked less like banners in the wind and more like a woman arguing with a barrel, wet rags wrapped around horses' hooves, stolen cartridges counted by candlelight and a pot of soup set

aside because suddenly it mattered more to have somewhere to die with meaning than something to eat.

Revolution seen from the kitchen did not smell of freedom.

It smelled of smoke, sweat, metal, wet earth and fear which everyone pretended was merely haste.

For a while I stood against the wall holding the bag with Ashford's letters and several pages taken from the presbytery, feeling at once unnecessary and far too important, which is an exceptionally unpleasant combination because one does not know whether to help, run or merely avoid obstructing more competent people as they prepare their own deaths. Red had no such difficulty. Red, as usual, decided that if she was not yet permitted to kill anyone she could at least walk among people with a face so visibly prepared for violence that her presence alone sped up the work.

"Not like that, damn you," she snapped at a boy trying to load a pistol with hands shaking so badly he might as well have been threading a needle during an earthquake. "If you want to shoot off a finger, do it later. Right now we need everyone, even the stupid ones."

"You loaded a weapon for the first time once too," he muttered.

Red smiled without warmth.

"Yes. And the people standing beside me survived, so try to imitate me."

Moira, who ought to have been sitting, drinking, breathing and pretending the world had not just added her first corpse to her memory, rose all the same and went to the table with the map. She did not do it abruptly. More as a person lifts a weight she knows she must lift although the body is still protesting. Her face was pale, her eyes shadowed, the bloodstained sleeve partly covered with dark cloth, but when she bent over the map her voice returned to the tone I knew: quiet, sober, precise, irritatingly useful.

"Show me the ravine," she said.

Callum moved the candle closer.

The map was more a collection of memories than a proper drawing: lines for paths, dots for buildings, abbreviations, crosses, places marked not with names but with signs probably understood by people who lived outside the law and were therefore often more accurate than those who wrote it. Callum tapped a narrow passage between two wooded slopes.

"The ravine. From the stream side. If Cavanagh moves fast, following the dog or the scouting party, he'll come through here. Shortest route. Wet, but horses can pass. Men too."

"How wide?" Moira asked.

"Two, three abreast, no more. Further on the path narrows. Roots here. Stones here. Old footbridge here, really just two beams over the water."

"Visibility?"

"Poor at night. Good from above, if you've got eyes and don't mind lying in mud."

"Can they close us from above?" she asked.

Callum looked at her with respect, as though remembering that she had been a gaoler not because she looked pretty with keys, but because she understood confinement.

"They can, if they know the way round."

Nuala leaned over and pointed to a second line.

"Northern path. Old. Not for a cart. A man can pass, a horse with difficulty. If they're cautious, they'll send two or three that way to come at the camp from behind."

"They will," Moira said.

Not "they might".

"They will."

Sorcha looked at her.

"Why so certain?"

Moira rubbed the edge of the table with her thumb as though counting something in her head.

"Because if they know someone was at the Heron Sign, they won't assume random thieves. The dog returned. A guard died. The ledger disappeared from the presbytery. Kearney was tied up. Cavanagh will understand that someone is collecting evidence and knows the route. He won't come merely to recover papers. He'll come to see who knows and how many there are. If he's sensible, he won't send his whole force into the ravine without covering the north."

Red, standing beside her, grimaced.

"I would very much like our enemies to be stupider than Moira assumes. It would improve everyone's evening."

"You don't plan around other people's stupidity," Moira replied.

"Pity. My entire life strategy has just lost its foundation."

Callum pointed to the ravine.

"We let them in here. Two people high on the left, two on the right. A charge under the footbridge. We don't blow it until they're deeper in. If they come through the stream, we close behind them."

"We don't want fighting in the camp," Sorcha added. "The supplies, wounded, horses and documents are here. If they reach this place, it will be too late."

"How many can we place in the ravine?" Moira asked.

"Six, maybe seven. The rest at the northern path and the camp."

"Too few for a full attack."

"It isn't meant to be a full attack," Callum said. "It's meant to be a jaw."

Red smiled briefly.

"At last, something understandable."

Callum looked at her.

"You're not going forward."

Red's eyes narrowed at once.

"Pardon?"

"You heard me."

"I heard something very stupid, so I'm giving you a chance to correct yourself before I begin insulting you with commitment."

"You're not going in the first line."

Red laughed quietly.

It was not a good laugh.

"Callum, my dear friend who has survived far too long, if you think you're going to seat me beside the cooking pot while Cavanagh may be walking through the forest, you've been hit on the head more times than you remember."

"I'm not seating you beside a cooking pot."

"How gracious."

"I'm putting you at the side passage."

"So, at the side."

"Where you'll be needed most if they try to go around the ravine."

"Beautiful words for 'I don't trust you not to charge first'."

Moira spoke before Callum could answer:

"Because we don't."

Red turned to her.

"You too?"

Moira looked calmly back, though her face was still far too pale.

"Yes."

"Wonderful. Betrayal by committee. All we need now is a priest to bless it."

"Red, if you see Cavanagh in the ravine, you'll break formation."

"And if I see him at the side passage?"

"Then he'll be trying to get around the camp, and you'll be exactly where you can stop him."

Red pressed her lips together. She knew it made sense. She hated that more than if they had told her something stupid.

"I don't like it when you use my anger against me," she said.

Moira raised one eyebrow slightly.

"It isn't anger. It's predictability."

"Worse."

"Red," Callum said more quietly. "We need someone fast on the northern path. Someone who won't be frightened of the dark, who won't wait for an order if she hears footsteps. If Cavanagh's men go that way, they'll move quietly. I'm not putting a boy there who starts shooting at branches."

Red breathed heavily through her nose.

"Who goes with me?"

"Two. Maeve with the powder and old Donal."

Red flinched at the name Maeve, then immediately understood that he meant another woman, a young one standing by the crates of charges, her hair cut short at the jaw and the face of someone who never asks the world's permission.

"That name is taken," Red said dryly.

The young woman looked at her.

"Not by my doing."

For a moment Red looked as though she might answer sharply, then merely nodded.

"Fine. You know how to handle powder?"

"Better than people."

"I'd like you if it weren't for the name."

"I didn't ask."

"All the more."

Callum evidently decided this was the closest thing to agreement one could obtain from Red without bloodshed.

"Good. Red at the northern passage. Moira stays with the map and the central point."

Moira shook her head at once.

"I'm going to the ravine."

"No," Red and I said together.

Moira looked first at Red, then at me.

"Don't start."

"We already have," I said. "We're very consistent."

Red pointed at her sleeve.

"You've only just come back with blood on you."

"Not mine."

"That doesn't make it weigh less."

Moira did not answer immediately.

To my surprise, Callum sided with Red.

"You stay in the middle. I need someone to receive reports and move people if something goes wrong. You saw the Heron Sign. You understand what they may do. If we fall into chaos, someone has to think while the rest are shooting."

Moira looked at the map.

I knew she wanted to protest. Not because she desired a fight, but because guilt was trying to push her to the place where bullets flew thickest, where perhaps it would be easier to silence the young guard's face inside herself. Red knew it too. I saw it in her eyes.

"All right," Moira said at last.

Red blinked.

"That was suspiciously easy."

"Because you're right."

"Don't say that in front of people. I'll become weak."

Moira almost smiled. Almost. Then Callum turned to me.

"Nell."

I already knew I would dislike the next sentence.

I felt it in my bones, my stomach, in that whole part of a person which has long since learned to recognise other people's plans as threats to her own pride.

"You guard the ledger," he said.

I did not answer at once. Red gave me a warning look. So did Moira. That only made things worse.

"I guard the ledger," I repeated slowly.

"Yes."

"Meaning I sit with the papers."

"You keep the papers, letters and copies of the entries," Callum said. "If the defence collapses, you go out through the northern exit with Nuala or alone if necessary. You go

to the old peat hollow beyond the second stream. There's a cache there. If we're not back by dawn, you keep moving west."

I laughed.

Not because it was funny.

"So I run while all of you fight."

"You save the thing we're fighting for," Moira replied.

"Very nicely put. It almost doesn't sound like 'run, Nell, you're for the paper, we're for the blood'."

Red took a step towards me.

"Don't start with that."

"What am I supposed to start with? Joy that after all these crimes I've been promoted to librarian under siege?"

"The ledger matters more than your wounded pride."

"My wounded pride is one of the last stable things in my life, so please treat it with respect."

Moira spoke calmly but firmly:

"If the ledger is lost, Bríd will be only a girl someone heard in a cellar. If the ledger survives, we have names, routes, signatures, the mechanism. Ashford, Kearney, Cavanagh, the foundation. This is evidence, Nell."

"And if all of you die?"

Red looked straight into my eyes.

"Then at least someone will know why."

It was the worst thing she could have said.

Because it was true.

I had no clever answer. Naturally I tried to find one inside myself, because my tongue disliked losing very much, but none came. They all sounded hollow beside the map, the ledger and the people now fastening ammunition to their belts as though preparing not for battle but for a very practical conversation with death.

"I don't want to be the one who survives with the papers," I said at last, more quietly.

Moira came over to me.

"No one does."

"That sounds like convenient comfort."

"It isn't comfort."

"I noticed. In general you rarely distribute comfort in a form that can be recognised."

Moira laid a hand on the bag containing the ledger.

"You have to live with what you have seen. That is not the easier task."

Red came to stand on my other side.

"She's right."

"Oh, wonderful. Now the two of you agree against me and I'm supposed to pretend this isn't emotional treason?"

"It's the highest form of friendship," Red said. "Jointly preventing you from doing something stupid."

"Very touching. I hate you both."

"Good," Red replied. "Hatred will keep you alive longer than honour."

Moirra lifted the small wooden horse from her pocket. For a moment I thought she merely meant to adjust it, but she handed it to me together with the bag.

I froze.

"No," I said at once.

"Nell."

"No. Not that."

"If you have to leave with the ledger, take him."

"Moirra..."

"I don't want him left in the mud."

That sentence, small and quiet, disarmed me more thoroughly than every pistol in the hideout.

I looked at the horse. Crookedly carved, one leg shorter, its back worn smooth by Moirra's fingers. It was not evidence. It was not a weapon. It was not a map, a name or a signature. And yet suddenly it weighed almost as much as the ledger. Perhaps more. Because the ledger said what had been done to girls. The horse said why it was still worth refusing to let this world turn us entirely into paper, blood and orders.

I took it. I had no choice. And if I did, I did not want to know it.

"If I have to run," I said slowly, "then with the ledger, the horse, this wooden horse and my wounded pride. Logistically this is becoming complicated."

Red touched my shoulder.

"You'll manage. You've had plenty of practice carrying things heavier than they look."

I did not answer.

I was afraid that if I opened my mouth, something too soft for a room full of weapons would come out.

Callum watched us for a moment, then cleared his throat like a man who has realised he has walked into the middle of something intimate and does not know where to put his eyes.

"Right. Nell with the ledger at the northern exit. Nuala will know when to get you out if they reach the camp."

"If Nuala tells you to go, you go," Moirra added.

"And if I refuse?"

Nuala, standing by the door with a stick in one hand, looked at me so calmly that I immediately believed in her competence.

"Then I'll knock you unconscious and carry you."

Red smiled with genuine pleasure.

"I like her."

"I'm beginning to fear her," I said.

"Then it's working."

The plan continued to take shape, faster and tighter, like a rope being drawn around the future. Callum and Sorcha would lead the main ambush in the ravine. Padraic with two people would take the left slope, Maeve with the powder and Donal with Red the

northern route. Moira would remain at the central point, beside the map and the runners, with a pistol, a spare knife and the face of a woman who looked as though someone had torn out a piece of her soul and she had decided to use the empty space for a tactical plan.

I was given the ledger, the letters, the horse and an order to survive.

A very rude order.

People began leaving one at a time and then in pairs, extinguishing more lights as they went. The hideout darkened. It did not become empty, quite the opposite, it became more focused, more taut, like a fist closing around something sharp. Somewhere outside a horse snorted through cloth wrapped near its muzzle. Someone swore after stumbling over a stone. Sorcha adjusted a charge at the entrance to the ravine. Nuala brought me a dark coat and told me to hide the pale part of the bag beneath it, because "paper doesn't need to shine like a priest's conscience".

That one I remembered with respect. Red came to me shortly before leaving. She did not look like someone going to a side passage. She looked like someone who had been given the wrong entrance to the right violence.

"Don't do anything stupid," she said.

"Funny. I was going to tell you the same thing."

"I do stupid things professionally. You do them as an amateur, so you're at greater risk."

"If you see Cavanagh..."

"I know."

"No, you don't, because if you did you'd already be arguing. Don't go for him alone."

Red looked at me for a long moment.

"Nell."

"No."

"He said Bríd bites."

"And that's why it'll hurt him more when we find him. But not alone. Do you understand?"

She smiled crookedly.

"Now you're giving orders?"

"I have the ledger, the horse and a mission to survive. Apparently I've been promoted."

Red leaned in and for one second rested her forehead against mine. Briefly. So briefly someone might have thought it accidental. It wasn't.

"Survive with the papers, Nell Whitmore," she said quietly.

"Come back with the knife, Red Gallagher."

"Always."

She walked away before I could say anything else, which probably saved me from emotional disgrace, for which I ought to have been grateful if gratitude were not such an uncomfortably exposed feeling.

Moira came over immediately after her.

"Have you got the horse?" she asked.

I showed her, wrapped in a handkerchief and tucked into an inner pocket beside the letters.

"He's safer than I am."

"Good."

"That wasn't kind."

"It was meant to be true."

"Sometimes I miss lies."

Moira touched my hand.

"If the moment comes when Nuala tells you to go, don't look back."

"I don't promise."

"Nell."

"I don't promise things I may not keep."

For a moment we looked at each other in the half-dark.

Then Moira nodded.

"Fair."

"Awful, but fair."

"Yes."

Nuala called softly to me from the northern exit.

Time.

I took up the bag with the ledger, feeling the strap cut into my shoulder. Suddenly paper, wood and names weighed more than all my crimes together, or perhaps they were the meaning of those crimes if my crimes were ever to deserve anything better than a column in a police notice.

At the northern exit it was dark, cold and cramped. Nuala stood beside me with a stick and a pistol. Behind us the tunnel through which we could flee towards the peat hollow. Before us the camp, growing quieter and more ready. Somewhere farther away, in the ravine, Callum's people were taking positions. Farther still, the night held Cavanagh, the Heron Sign, Bríd and the answer to the question of whether we were late again.

I did not want to run.

I did not want to die either.

It was a very inconvenient discovery, because courage is easier when one pretends one of those desires does not exist.

I gripped the bag. Inside was the ledger. Against my breast I had the wooden horse.

And around me revolution breathed in the darkness, without banners, without music, without beautiful words, but with wet cloth wrapped around horses' hooves, powder beneath floorboards and women who knew that if the fight came, no one would ever write the whole truth of how it looked.

So I tried to remember.

Just in case.

For several minutes after Callum's final orders, the world became suspiciously orderly, and I never trusted order, especially when it looked as though it intended to survive more than three breaths.

I stood at the northern exit, if that black, damp gap between two boards, a stone and roots could be called an exit, the bag slung over my shoulder, Kearney's ledger hidden beneath my coat, Ashford's letters pressed to my side and Moira's wooden horse tucked against my breast so carefully that the crooked little piece of carved wood might have had a heart and been capable of fear at the noise still to come. Nuala stood beside me, short and grey-haired, with a face so calm that she seemed to have spent her entire life watching armed men and concluding that the most sensible course was to wait until they tired themselves or made a mistake. In one hand she held a pistol, in the other a heavy stick that looked older than most people in the hideout and considerably more trustworthy.

I did not like her.

That is, I liked her very much, but in the way one likes an old knife: you appreciate its presence but prefer not to find yourself on the wrong side of it.

"If I say 'go', you go," she said without looking at me.

"I'm beginning to notice that everyone in this group is unusually keen on giving me orders."

"Because you look like someone who enjoys not obeying them."

"That's a hurtful stereotype based entirely on facts."

Nuala glanced at me from the corner of her eye.

"Facts are the best kind of hurt."

I wanted to reply that the woman had a talent for sentences that ought to be embroidered on cushions or carved into gravestones, but from far away came the first faint crack, perhaps a branch, perhaps a stone beneath a boot, perhaps only the forest reminding us that it too had a voice, and every word stopped in my throat. The hideout, which a moment earlier had moved like a hive full of thieves, rebels, women with powder under their nails and men pretending they were no more afraid than anyone else, suddenly went still. Not completely, because nothing alive is ever truly still, but as still as a place full of breathing, hidden weapons and fear buried beneath discipline can become.

Almost all the lights went out.

Only the smallest remained, dimmed and hidden beneath pots or behind boards, more ember than flame, more memory of fire than fire itself. The hearth was covered with wet cloth so the smoke would not rise too high, and at once the room grew more stifling, heavier, as if all of us had entered the inside of a vast, exhausted lung. In the half-light I could see moving shapes: Moira at the map table, bent over a scrap of paper and listening to news passed in whispers, Callum at the main passage checking for the last time the people going to the ravine, Sorcha with a bandage beneath her ribs, leaning against a beam but still handing out cartridges as if her own blood were merely an irritating addition to her duties.

Red was gone.

That was the worst part.

I knew where she was, knew she had gone to the northern route with Donal and Maeve of the powder, knew the position made sense, that if Cavanagh tried to go around the ravine by the side path Red would be exactly where she needed to be, but knowledge is sometimes the cruellest form of uselessness. I knew many things. I knew the ledger

beneath my coat mattered. I knew Bríd was alive or had been alive recently. I knew Moira had returned with blood on her sleeve and refused to let that blood become shackles. I knew that if the defence collapsed I was to follow Nuala, not look back, not play heroine, not run towards the screams, only carry the paper, the names and the wooden horse through the northern crack in the world.

Knowledge made nothing easier.

My body still wanted to run to where Red was.

My heart still wanted to check whether Moira was breathing.

My head, that treacherously sensible traitor, repeated in Moira's voice: if the ledger is lost, Bríd will be only a girl someone heard in a cellar.

I hated it when my head spoke in Moira's voice.

It was harder to silence then.

A whistle came from the ravine.

One long, low note, almost birdlike but not quite. The agreed signal.

Nuala put a hand on my shoulder.

"They're at the stream."

I swallowed.

"How many?"

"If they knew, someone would have shouted a number. Since they didn't, there are enough not to waste time on arithmetic."

"Very comforting."

"I'm not here to comfort you."

"Everyone keeps saying that today. I'm beginning to miss someone incompetent."

Nuala smiled with only one corner of her mouth, then became stone again.

The first shot did not come at once.

That too was cruel.

Waiting stretched between us and the ravine like a rope on which someone hung, one after another, every possible image: Cavanagh with his pockmarked face, his men descending wet stones, the dog with its nose to the ground, Callum lying on the slope with a pistol, Sorchá gritting her teeth against pain, Red in the dark by the side path, Moira at the map, Bríd in the cellar of the Heron Sign, perhaps already bound, perhaps already pushed into a cart, perhaps still listening to every sound as I was, only without knowing that anyone at all was coming for her through the night.

Then came a dull boom.

Not a shot.

A charge.

The ground beneath my feet trembled as if a giant sleeping under the forest had suddenly been kicked in the ribs. Somewhere in the ravine cries rose, followed at once by two shots, then a third, then the whole chaotic answer of weapons whose echoes struck the slopes and returned to us ragged and multiplied, as if the forest had begun shooting at itself. Someone shouted in Irish. Someone else in English. It would almost have been funny if one were dead inside or worked for a newspaper: in darkness, mud and fear, languages mixed as easily as blood, and all the grand politics of Empire and resistance came down to who saw whom first and whether the powder was dry.

Moira raised her head from the map.

She did not run.

That was the strangest and most beautiful thing. Every muscle in her face wanted to run, I could see it even from where I stood, but she remained, listened, counted, watched the runner who burst in from the ravine side so suddenly that he almost tripped over the threshold.

"They're in!" he gasped. "Six in the ravine, maybe more behind them! The bridge went, two down, the rest pulling back beneath the slope!"

Moira immediately pointed to two people by the wall.

"You and you, right slope. Don't fire until Callum gives the second signal. If they retreat, don't chase. Let them come deeper."

The boy, one of those who an hour earlier had looked frightened of his own shadow, nodded and ran out. The second followed.

Moira turned to Nuala.

"The north?"

"Silence," Nuala answered.

"Too long?"

Nuala was silent for a moment.

"Too clean."

Moira looked towards the northern exit where we stood.

Our eyes met.

She said nothing.

She did not have to.

If fighting had already begun by the stream and the northern path was still silent, then either Cavanagh had sent no flanking party, or he had sent men who knew how to be quiet.

And Red was at the northern path.

I gripped the strap of the bag so hard the leather bit into my fingers.

"Don't move," Nuala said.

"I haven't done anything."

"Yet."

"It's genuinely insulting how well you know me after so short a time."

"People with your face do stupid things before they've managed to invent a reason."

"My face feels slandered."

"Your face looks guilty."

Another shot came from the ravine, closer than the others.

Then a cry.

This time I recognised Callum's voice.

Not the words. Only the voice.

Red was not with him.

Of course.

Red was somewhere on the other side of the darkness, beside a path that might at that very moment be taking Cavanagh's men into its wet throat. I was to stand still. I was

to guard the ledger. I was to be a witness, not a flame. I was to save the paper if people began falling.

Never before had I felt so humiliated by something correct.

Suddenly a second runner burst into the hideout, this time a girl with short hair plastered to her cheeks.

"The dog!" she gasped. "They had a dog! It went over the ridge, not by the stream!"

Moirra moved to the map so sharply that the candle almost went out.

"Over the ridge where?"

The girl pointed with a trembling finger.

"Northern crest. Donal gave the signal, then nothing. I didn't see Red."

The world contracted to one sentence.

I didn't see Red.

Nuala seized my arm more tightly before I had even taken a step.

"No."

"Let go."

"No."

"Nuala."

"Girl, if you run out now like an idiot, you won't save her, you'll carry the ledger straight under their boots."

"She's there!"

"And she knows what she's doing."

"Not always!"

Nuala looked at me so sharply that for a moment I genuinely thought she might strike me.

"That's exactly why someone like her is there, not you with papers and your heart in your throat."

It was cruel.

And true.

Moirra came over to us, her face white but her voice hard.

"Nell. The ledger."

One word.

Not: please.

Not: stay.

Not: Red will manage.

The ledger.

As though she had struck me in the chest not with a hand, but with the whole truth of the night.

I clenched my teeth so hard my jaw hurt.

"I hate this."

"I know," Moirra said.

"No, you don't."

"I know."

And then, from the northern side of the forest, came the first shot.

Then a second.

Then a woman's cry, short, furious, cut off not by pain but effort.

Red.

I do not know how I knew.

I simply did.

Perhaps a person recognises the voice of someone she loves even when that voice does not speak her name but curses someone in the dark who is probably having the misfortune to die. Perhaps that was foolish. Perhaps true things often begin in foolishness.

Moira closed her eyes for a fraction of a second.

Then she turned to the girl who had brought the message.

"To Maeve with the powder. Tell her: close the north, but don't blow it until Red gives the signal. If she gives no signal, wait for Donal. Run."

The girl ran.

I stood still.

I obeyed.

And I hated myself for it so much that for a moment I wanted to tear the bag with the ledger apart so that paper would stop being more important than living people. Then I felt Moira's wooden horse beneath my fingers, hidden against my breast, and remembered the boy from Ballynareen, Bríd in the cellar, the girls in the ledger entered as cost, debt and transport. The paper was not more important than people. The paper was the only way to stop people who disappeared from being turned into silence.

Understanding that brought no relief.

Only a reason to keep standing.

More shots came from the main ravine, shorter this time, broken, more desperate. Someone shouted that the footbridge was burning. Someone else called for Callum. From the north came a dull crash, as if something heavy had rolled down the slope or struck a tree. Then silence. Brief. Terrifying.

And then Red's laughter.

Not long.

Not joyful.

Wild rather, ragged, full of such fury that the hair rose on the back of my neck.

Nuala let out her breath.

"Alive."

"That was laughter?"

"From her? Probably prayer."

I almost laughed.

Almost.

Then a third runner burst into the room, this time a boy with blood on his forehead.

"They're falling back from the ravine!" he shouted. "But not all of them! Two went round the side! Cavanagh isn't among them!"

Moira froze.

Callum appeared in the doorway a moment later, breathless, face smeared with soot and mud, pistol in hand, blood on his collar, but standing.

"This isn't the main attack," he said.

Everything went quiet.

Even the shots from the ravine seemed for a moment to recede.

"What?" Moira asked.

Callum came to the map, breathing hard.

"A probing force. Maybe after the ledger, maybe to pin us down. Too few men. Too much noise. Cavanagh didn't come."

Red burst inside immediately after him.

Her sleeve was torn, blood was on her face, whose I did not know, her hair partly escaped from the scarf, her eyes bright with adrenaline and a knife in her hand. Alive. For one second the world became possible again.

"One got away," she said. "North. Wounded in the arm. If he reaches the Heron Sign..."

"They already know," Callum said.

Moira looked at him.

"The transport."

Callum nodded.

"It was a diversion."

Red went still.

"No."

Callum stared at the map, but his face said everything.

"If Cavanagh didn't come here, he stayed with the transport."

"Brid," I said.

I do not know whether it was a question or an accusation.

Moira spun towards the table, shoved aside the map, candles and cup, and put a finger on the road from the Heron Sign towards the west.

"If they moved, they won't use the main road after this noise. They'll take the track by the old quarry or the southern route."

Callum said:

"The quarry is faster, but harder for carts."

Red was already moving towards the door.

"Then we move."

"Not the whole group," Callum snapped.

"Don't start again!"

"The hideout is exposed!" he shouted at last, losing control for the first time. "If all of us go, we leave the wounded, supplies and the ledger! If we stay, the transport gets away! So we choose what we lose less stupidly!"

The sentence fell between us like an axe.

We choose what we lose less stupidly.

Not what we save.

What we lose.

And then I understood that the end of this night would not be victory. Not the sort stories like. Not the sort after which everyone stands in the dawn with clean faces and says it was worth it. This night had come to take something from each of us and had no intention of leaving empty-handed.

Red looked at me.
Then at the bag with the ledger.
Then at Moira.
Moira looked at Callum.

"We have to divide the people."

Callum closed his eyes for a second, as though he had just heard a sentence he already knew.

"Yes."

Red slid the knife behind her belt.

"I'm going after the transport."

"So am I," Moira said.

"No," I said at once.

Both looked at me.

Against my breast Moira's wooden horse suddenly seemed to weigh like a stone.

Callum turned to me.

"You stay with the ledger."

"Of course," I said, and my voice was strangely calm. "Because someone has to witness everyone else going where I ought to go with them."

Red came closer.

"Nell..."

Another shout came from outside.

Someone was calling that a sheet was burning in the ravine, that the wounded had to be moved, that one of Cavanagh's men was still alive.

Time broke into pieces.

Moira put a hand on my shoulder.

"We don't yet know what we'll do."

But I knew.

We all did.

The defence of the hideout had only partly worked. It stopped those who came for us. It did not stop the transport. Cavanagh was elsewhere, with Bríd or with the road to her, and we had a ledger, wounded people, an exposed refuge and a night which, instead of ending after the battle, was opening a new choice before us, worse than the last.

I tightened my hand around the bag strap.

Outside the forest roared with voices, smoke, footsteps and fear.

And somewhere beyond it, on a road I had not yet seen, carts might already be rolling.

With girls.

With Bríd.

With an answer moving farther away every minute.

I do not know exactly what broke inside me at that moment.

Perhaps the order. Perhaps fear. Perhaps that part of a person others call common sense and which in me had always been more a thin plank laid across a well than a proper bridge. I still stood at the northern exit, the bag heavy with the ledger, Ashford's letters beneath my coat and Moira's little wooden horse against my breast, while around me the camp shuddered with that new, worse haste that comes after a first fight, when people realise they have not won, only been moved to another part of the same trap.

Callum shouted orders. Nuala caught one of the wounded by the collar and told him to stop groaning if he still had enough strength to breathe. Sorcha sat against the wall, pale but stubborn, pressing cartridges into someone's hand as though she meant to beat death personally with accounts. Moira stood at the map table, one hand braced against the surface, her face so concentrated I might almost have believed the whole world to her was a system of doors, paths and possible passages, if not for the bloody sleeve and the empty shadow in her eyes which said that the first killing had not stayed behind her but was walking beside her, very close, step for step.

And Red was already leaving.

Of course she was.

She did not wait for the end of the council, did not wait for Callum to decide who stayed with the wounded, who ran after the transport, who moved the powder, who buried documents, who was allowed to die now and who only after dawn. In moments like that Red was not a person who waited. Red was an answer sent before the question had been asked. She moved towards the northern passage with a quick, springing stride, knife at her belt, pistol in hand and blood, whose I did not know, darkening her cheek. Her face was bright with fury, and yet in that fury was something desperate, almost childlike, something saying: if Bríd still breathes, I must not stand still, I must not think, I must not arrive too late again.

"Red!" Callum shouted. "Wait!"

She did not.

I should not have moved either.

I had orders.

I had the ledger.

I was to survive with the papers, which still sounded like the ugliest kind of honour anyone could give me. I was to stand beside Nuala, wait for the word "go", not look back, not run towards a scream, not behave like a girl who confuses her heart with a compass. I knew all of this so exactly it hurt. Which was precisely why I took the first two steps before I had time to forbid myself.

Nuala caught my arm.

"No."

"Let go."

"No."

"Nuala, she's going alone."

"Not alone. She's got a knife, a pistol and her own stupidity. That's more than most."

"There's someone there."

I do not know how I knew.

Perhaps I saw movement in the shadow behind a broken barrel by the side path. Perhaps I heard breathing, different from ours, shorter, broken, full of pain. Perhaps I simply felt that sudden cold prick beneath the ribs that sometimes comes one second before disaster, as though the body can see faster than the eyes. Red stepped through the opening, and behind her, by the low wall where darkness gathered in a thicker stain, something flashed.

Metal.

A small glint.

A barrel.

The world slowed in that revolting way it only slows when there is no time left. I saw Red in half-profile, still too focused on the road ahead. I saw Nuala only beginning to follow my gaze. I saw Moira at the table lifting her head, not yet understanding. I saw the man in shadow, one of those presumed dead or fled, one hand pressed to his side, face grey with blood loss and effort, but his pistol raised steadily enough to kill the woman I loved before anyone could say her name.

I did not think of the ledger.

That was the truth.

I did not think of Bríd, Ashford, the mechanism, the letters, all the girls recorded as travel cost and debt to be worked off. I did not think of Nuala, who was meant to knock me unconscious if I did something stupid. I did not think that if I died, the ledger might fall into mud and my name become another beautiful, useless noise in other people's mouths.

I thought only: not Red.

I tore free of Nuala.

I do not know how. Perhaps she was surprised. Perhaps I still had a little of the same strength that once raised a shovel against Mowbray before common sense had time to draft a petition. The bag with the ledger struck my hip, Moira's horse dug into my chest, and I threw myself forward, through the half-dark, through the opening, through Nuala's shout before it had time to become a word.

"Red!"

She turned her head.

Too late.

The man in the shadow pulled the trigger.

I do not remember the bang the way one ought to remember a bang. I remember instead the blow of air, a hot flash near my face, someone screaming behind me and Red's body as I crashed into her with all my weight, shoving her sideways so hard that we both went down. Something tore at my arm or side, not pain at first, more as if a huge hand had ripped the fabric and left fire under the skin which had not yet understood that it was fire. We fell into the mud behind the wall. Red swore, but her voice was alive. Her body was alive. That was the first thing, the only thing, the most important thing.

Then the world came back all at once, too fast.

There was no second shot because Nuala, that old, terrifying, wonderful woman, appeared behind me with a pistol in her hand and fired before the man could correct his aim. She hit him in the chest or throat, I do not know which, because I only saw his

body jerk backwards and strike the barrel with a dull, wet sound. Callum lunged towards him. Someone shouted to check whether he was alone. Moira ran from behind the table, white as ash. Suddenly everyone was everywhere.

Red lay beneath me.

For one second she looked at me without understanding.

Then she saw the blood.

Mine.

And all the fury vanished from her face so violently it was as though someone had blown out a flame.

"Nell?"

Her voice was small.

I hated that.

Red had no right to have a small voice.

"It's nothing," I said at once, which was such an obvious lie it deserved its own indictment. "It's only... only a graze."

I tried to rise, and then pain finally decided it was time to join the conversation. It struck from my side, from shoulder towards ribs, bright, hot, brutally personal. I hissed, and Red caught me before I slid back into the mud.

"Don't move!"

"You might try that advice yourself sometimes."

"Shut up."

"You always say that when you're moved."

"Nell, shut up, because if you die joking I'll kill you again."

Moira dropped to her knees beside us.

Her hands, the same hands that not long before had held a knife in a guard's chest, now opened my coat with such care that I nearly began to cry because of the gentleness alone. The ledger was still with me. The bag had shifted but the strap held. Moira looked first at it, then at me, then at the tear in the cloth.

"The bullet went along the side," she said.

She sounded calm.

She was not calm.

I could see it in her eyes.

"Arm and skin above the ribs. A lot of blood, but not deep."

"Wonderful," I gasped. "Even the wound decided to be theatrical but indecisive."

Red pressed a hand to the tear, and pain spread through me so sharply I saw white points.

"Sorry," she said at once.

That word from her mouth struck almost harder than the bullet.

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Apologise. You sound ill."

Her face twisted, but her eyes were wet.

Moira drew a bandage from her pocket, Nuala handed her another cloth, and Red kept holding me beneath the shoulders as though letting go would mean losing me and I

would come apart into mud, paper and all the sentences I had not yet said. Callum came back from the body with a pistol in his hand.

"Alone," he said. "One of those from the north. Must have played dead."

Red did not even look at him.

"Get him out of here."

"Red..."

"Get him out before I stand up and do something unnecessary to him."

Callum fell silent. He nodded to the men behind him.

Moira began dressing the wound. Every touch brought sharp, burning pain, but there was something strangely grounding in that pain too, something saying: you're alive, idiot, genuinely alive, though once again you've done everything possible to make the administration of heaven more difficult.

"The ledger," Moira said suddenly.

I tried to lift the bag.

"Here."

"Did it get wet?"

"Moira, I've been shot and you're asking whether the ledger is dry."

"Yes."

"I love your priorities. They're inhuman, but consistent."

Her lips trembled.

"Nell."

"It's dry," I said more quietly. "The horse too."

Moira went still.

Then her face changed so subtly someone else might have missed it. But I saw. Relief, shame at the relief, fear, tenderness and that terrible gratitude a person does not want to feel while someone is bleeding.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"It wasn't a service. It was a very chaotic fall with extras."

Red held me tighter.

"Why?" she asked.

At first I thought she meant the wound, the shot, the man in the shadows, but when I looked at her I knew she was asking something else.

Why did you move.

Why did you break the plan.

Why did the ledger, Bríd, the order, everything we agreed, cease to exist when you saw the barrel.

I wanted to answer with a joke.

I really did.

It would have been easier. Say that I could not let anyone kill the only person capable of insulting horses with such talent. Or that I had thrown myself out of habit, because I have a problem with men raising hands to women and had apparently extended the problem to firearms. Or that the ledger was heavy and I lost my balance in the direction of heroism.

But Red looked at me as though a joke now would be betrayal.

So I told the truth.

Quietly.

Reluctantly.

As though someone were pulling it from beneath my ribs together with the pain.

"Because I couldn't watch someone break you a second time."

Red froze.

Moira stopped wrapping the bandage for a moment.

Around us chaos continued: people ran, wounded were moved, Callum shouted orders, someone argued about horses, someone else said the transport would not wait. But inside that small circle of mud, blood and broken breath, everything fell silent.

Red looked at me as though my words had hurt her more than comforted.

"Nell..."

"I know," I said quickly. "I know it was stupid. I know I was meant to guard the papers. I know that if the ledger had fallen into mud or that man's hands, Moira would have killed me with a look before you had time to do it with a knife. I know everything. But I saw the barrel and suddenly there was no world, no ledger, no history, no Manchester, no Galway. There was only you. And I... I couldn't stay."

My eyes filled again.

Wonderful.

Apparently the bullet was not enough; humiliation of the face had to be added.

Red bent over me so close that her hair brushed my cheek. She smelled of smoke, blood, rain and herself, which was something I could not name without making an even greater idiot of myself.

"You damned, wonderful, stupid girl," she said.

Her voice broke.

Truly.

Red Gallagher, who could laugh at a knife, mock death, threaten an entire village and insult God for poor organisation, had a voice so close to tears that I felt my heart do something unbearably soft.

"Don't do that to me again," she said. "Don't throw yourself under a bullet like the heroine of a cheap ballad, because I don't know the tune I could mourn you to, and I have no intention of learning."

"It was beside the bullet, not under it."

"Don't correct me while you're bleeding."

"Stronger than me."

"Everything in you is stronger than sense."

"That sounds like a compliment."

"It's a sentence."

Moira tightened the bandage and I hissed.

"Sorry," she said.

"Apologies are becoming alarmingly popular in this group."

Moira looked at me seriously.

"You saved her life."

"She's saved mine several times."

Red snorted, though tears still stood in her eyes.

"Several? I would like a more accurate account. I risked myself far more often."

"I'll enter it in the ledger. Beside sacrilege."

Moira suddenly laid a hand on my bag.

"Nell, listen. It was stupid."

"Thank you. I was just in need of a second opinion."

"And necessary."

I looked at her.

"What?"

"If you hadn't moved, Red would be dead."

Red looked away.

Moira continued, her voice very quiet but certain:

"The plan matters. The ledger matters. Evidence matters. But a plan that requires you to watch a person standing in front of you be killed and not move is not a plan. It's another kind of prison."

I did not know what to say.

I do not think Red did either.

That was rare, so the moment deserved appreciation, although pain was doing its best to spoil my reflection.

Callum came to us after a moment, dirty, exhausted and increasingly like a man forced to choose between fire and water while knowing that both burn.

"Can you ride?" he asked me.

Red turned on him so sharply she nearly threw me out of her own arms.

"She's going nowhere."

"I'm not asking you."

"Then start."

"Red."

"She's wounded."

"I know."

"Then why ask?"

Callum looked at me, then at the bag with the ledger.

"Because the hideout is burned. Cavanagh's men know someone is here. The one who escaped, if he reaches the road, will bring more. The transport may already be moving. We don't have time for clean decisions."

Red half rose, still holding me with one arm.

"If you say she's to go with Nuala through the northern exit while I ride after the transport, I'll save you trouble and pronounce that plan dead immediately."

Callum clenched his jaw.

"She has the ledger."

"I know what she has."

"Someone has to get it out."

"We'll get it out."

"Red..."

"No. Not 'Red'. Not in that voice. Not now. Not after this."

The room grew quieter. Even the people moving the wounded slowed, as though they sensed that an argument more important than the earlier ones was beginning, because this was no longer about a route, but about whether after this night any of us still had the right to pretend we were separate matters.

Callum looked at Moira as though searching there for reason.

That was a mistake.

Moira rose slowly from beside my bandage, with blood on her own sleeve and mine on her fingers, her face pale but calm in a way that had nothing to do any longer with her old prison composure. This was a new Moira. Not cold. Not safe. Simply someone who had gone through something and returned with a decision instead of an excuse.

"I'm going with Nell too," she said.

Callum closed his eyes.

"Of course."

"We are not splitting up," Moira added.

"This isn't about sentiment."

Red laughed shortly and nastily.

"Oh, Callum, if it were sentiment, life would be easier. Sentiment can be mocked, drunk away or buried behind a barn. This is about Nell nearly taking a bullet meant for me, carrying a ledger every bastard from Carrigmore to Galway will want back, and having a wound that means she shouldn't sit alone on a horse, while you suggest I hand her to Nuala and ride the other way as though she were a parcel of papers."

"Nuala is better protection than most people here," Callum said.

Nuala, standing by the entrance, nodded with the dignity of someone who needs no praise because she has long known exactly what she is worth.

"I know," Red said. "And if this were only about the ledger, I'd kneel before that terrifying woman and hand her the paper, the horse and my own curses for the road. But it isn't only the ledger."

She looked at me.

Not as a symbol.

Not as the heroine from Manchester.

Not as the girl England wanted to hang, deport, silence or turn into a warning for others.

As me.

And that was worse than pain.

"It's Nell," she said quietly. "And I'm not leaving her."

Moira laid a hand on my shoulder.

"Neither am I."

Callum looked at both of them, then at me, then back at the map, as though trying to find a route on it that would let him go around the stubbornness of three women, but no cartography in the world had ever been that ambitious.

"If all three of you go together, you'll slow each other down," he said.

"If they leave me, they'll slow themselves down too," I said, trying to sit straighter, although the pain immediately informed me that it had a very poor opinion of my dignity. "Red will come back every five minutes to see whether I'm alive, Moira will

pretend she isn't doing that but count my pulse in her head, and I, true to character, will do something stupid merely to prove that solitude does not suit me."

Nuala snorted.

"That part is true."

"Thank you. I adore the support of the elders."

Callum rubbed a hand over his face.

He was tired. We all were. But his exhaustion carried the extra weight of people he had to lead, wounded he could not abandon, a transport he could not let go and three women who could not be arranged on a map like pieces.

"Fine," he said at last.

Red narrowed her eyes.

"Fine?"

"Fine. I don't split you up."

"You don't sound happy enough."

"Because I have sense."

"Your tragedy."

"But we do it my way."

Red opened her mouth.

Moirira cut her off:

"Speak."

Callum pointed at the map.

"The transport may have taken the old quarry road or the southern route. We won't catch it with the whole group if we're dragging wounded and supplies. The hideout has to be emptied. Sorcha, Nuala and some of the others will take the wounded and supplies north. I'll go with a small group after the transport. You three ride with me, but if Nell starts losing consciousness or the wound opens, you turn back to the northern group. No argument."

Red smiled coldly.

"We'll see."

"No. No argument."

Moirira looked at me.

"If the wound opens, we turn back."

"I'm not a sack of flour."

"No. Sacks of flour talk back less and are easier to transport."

"I'm beginning to regret saving anything for anyone."

Red bent over me and adjusted the bag strap so it pulled less against the wound.

"You're lying."

"Of course. Pain gives me the right to poorer-quality lies."

Her fingers paused for a moment at my shoulder. Warm, dirty, trembling slightly.

"Can you ride? Truly?"

This time she was not asking as Callum had.

She was not asking about strategy.

She was asking whether I could manage to be with them, not as a ledger, not as evidence, not as a legend, but as a body that bled and was still trying to pretend it could sit upright.

"I can," I said.

"Nell."

"I can. If I faint, you have permission to insult me later."

"I'll insult you during."

"Touching."

Moira handed me a cup of something strong.

"Drink."

I sniffed it.

"Is that the memory medicine again?"

"For pain."

"So the same thing, only more ambitious."

I took a swallow and immediately concluded that alcohol in Ireland was made from hatred of the oesophagus and an exceptionally difficult national history. It burned so fiercely that for a second the wound seemed almost polite.

"Vile," I gasped.

"Working?" Moira asked.

"If the purpose was to convince me the bullet isn't the worst thing that entered my body today, then yes."

Red snorted, though her eyes were still wet.

I did not look away. This time I would not let her pretend no one could see. She did not look away either. And for one brief moment, amid smoke, shouting, maps, wounded, blood and orders, we looked at each other without any of our usual shields.

Moira fastened my coat more tightly.

"The horse?" she asked quietly.

I touched my breast.

"Here."

"The ledger?"

"Here."

Red slid a knife into my hand.

"And this too."

I looked at the blade.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea. Recently my good decisions have been in the minority."

"It isn't for good decisions. It's for last ones."

Moira corrected my grip.

"Don't wave it. Keep it close to the body. If someone comes too near, strike under the ribs or into the thigh."

"Wonderful. Survival lessons from a former gaoler and a red-haired catastrophe. Mother would be proud or faint. Hard to say."

Red looked at me sharply, but without anger now.

"Your mother would want you alive."

The words entered quietly.
Deeper than pain.
I did not answer at once.
"You don't know that," I said.
"I do."
"How?"

Red lifted the bag with the ledger and helped reposition it so that more of its weight rested on my uninjured side.

"Because mothers may not understand their daughters, may fear them, curse them, pray for them to be different, quieter, easier to hide from the world. But when the world raises a weapon against them, a mother wants one thing. For them to breathe."

I did not know what to do with my face.
Neither did Moira.

Callum, very sensibly, pretended to study the map with the sudden interest of a man who may just have understood that sometimes the best command is not to interfere with women in matters he cannot name.

Outside, the horses were ready. People were taking the wounded out through the northern passage. Sorcha, despite protesting, stayed with Nuala because the wound in her side would not let her ride fast. Padraic would go with Callum. Donal too. Young Maeve of the powder took two charges and looked very much as though she hoped someone would give her a reason to use both.

The hideout was emptying.

Not peacefully. Not with dignity. More as one abandons a house that in an hour may cease to be a house: quickly, painfully, with swearing, leaving behind things that in the morning had seemed necessary and now were merely weight. Someone put out the last flame by the hearth. Someone covered a crate with the remaining supplies. Someone spat into the fire as if to thank it or curse it. The air hung with the smell of smoke, powder, blood and horse sweat.

Red held out a hand when I tried to stand.

Moira took the other side.

They did not say: carefully.

They did not say: you can do it.

They said nothing that could sound like comfort offered to a sick child.

They simply lifted me.

Together.

And then I understood that Callum could divide people, routes, weapons and horses, could draw paths, count shots, choose who went after the transport and who disappeared into the forest with the wounded, but no map would divide the three of us now.

Not after prison.

Not after the Heron Sign.

Not after Moira's little horse.

Not after the blood on my bandage.

Not after Red said she would not leave me.

Perhaps it was unreasonable.

Of course it was.

Everything that had ever saved my heart was unreasonable.

We went out into the night together.

Red on my left.

Moirá on my right.

The ledger at my side.

The horse against my breast.

And somewhere ahead, on a dark road, the transport was moving away, perhaps carrying Bríd, an answer or another loss none of us was ready to accept.

But this time, at least for now, I was not walking alone.

CHAPTER XIX

Daughters of Fire

The night took us in without a scrap of mercy, as though it had been standing outside the burrow all along with a wet coat over its shoulders, waiting patiently for us finally to come out and meet it.

The forest was black, heavy, soaked with rain and the smoke left by the fighting, and the path beneath the horses' hooves seemed not to lead towards any road at all, but deeper into something that had long since ceased to be mere escape. Behind us, someone was carrying the wounded through the northern passage, someone else was cursing under his breath over the last crates, another man was sweeping branches across our tracks, as though Cavanagh's people could be deceived by a few wet sticks and a little good will, something the world had never once given us without presenting a bill. The burrow fell away behind us, growing quieter and darker, gutted of supplies, weapons, people, and that fragile illusion that there might still be some place one could enter, close the door, and say: they will not find us here.

There were no such places any more.

Perhaps there never had been, and for want of better comfort people merely called the interval between one pursuit and the next a hiding place.

I sat on the horse with difficulty, held in the saddle more by stubbornness than strength, and every movement of the animal tugged at the wound in my side as though the bullet, although it had only grazed me, had left beneath my skin a small malicious clerk recording the pain in triplicate. The bandage was quickly growing warm, but Moira had said this was not the sort of bleeding that killed a person, merely the sort that badly wanted to make an impression, so I chose to believe her, not because she sounded convincing but because the alternative was fainting with all the dignity of a sack of potatoes.

Red rode on my left, far too close for the comfort of either horse, but she had plainly decided that equine comfort ranked lower that night than the question of whether I might slide out of the saddle and make a romantic exit into the mud. Every few moments she glanced at me from the corner of her eye, and when I caught her too obviously at it one time, she growled:

"I'm checking whether you're bleeding like an idiot."

"Is it possible to bleed intelligently?"

"You can bleed more quietly."

"I'll try to give the wound a better upbringing."

Moira rode on my right, silent, her face turned ahead, but she kept one hand so close to my elbow that if I swayed even slightly she would have caught me before I managed to deliver a final sentence. There was something new in her after her return from the House of the Heron Sign. Not hardness, because she had been hard before, but some darker clarity, if that makes any sense at all. Like someone who had discovered that she was capable of doing the thing she hated and could no longer pretend the boundary

between herself and violence lay where she had once drawn it. The guard's blood was still on her sleeve beneath the coat, hidden but present, like an unwanted signature.

Callum led us along the narrow path, with Padraic behind him, then Donal and Powder Maeve, who had two small charges wrapped in cloth at her belt and the expression of someone profoundly disappointed that she had not yet blown anything up. We travelled without a light, guided only by the pale treacherous gleam of sky between the branches, and the horses picked their way carefully, as though they too understood that on this night one loud step could be as deadly as a scream.

"How far to the quarry?" Moira asked.

Callum answered without turning his head.

"If they kept to the road through the ravine, less than an hour. If they took the southern way round, longer. But carts dislike mud, and tonight has taken a very personal interest in wheels."

"Cavanagh isn't stupid," Moira said.

"Unfortunately," I muttered. "I'm beginning to miss stupid enemies. They were more predictable and generally made a more satisfying fall."

"If he knows someone was at the Heron Sign, he may split the transport," Moira continued, ignoring my quiet intellectual suffering. "The girls one way, the papers another, the escort somewhere else again."

Red tightened her grip on the reins.

"Don't say 'the girls' in that voice."

Moira looked at her.

"What voice?"

"As though you're already counting them among the losses."

"I'm counting possibilities."

"They are not possibilities."

"I know."

"Then speak as though you know."

Something flashed between them again, but differently than before. This was not the ordinary quarrel between Red and Moira, fire against iron, heart against lock and key. There was too much fresh blood beneath it now, too many unspoken apologies, too much fear for one another for either of them truly to strike. Moira merely nodded.

"You're right."

Red blinked.

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Suddenly agree with me. It's suspicious and very bad for the balance of the world."

Moira almost smiled.

"The girls are alive until we know otherwise."

"Better."

"But we have to think as though Cavanagh means to use them as shields."

Red said nothing more.

Because that was true as well.

And truth, as I had noticed many times, had the filthy habit of arriving at the least elegant moment and sitting squarely on one's chest.

The path at last dropped towards lower ground, where the trees parted enough for us to see the dark shape of a road running between stone walls. Callum raised a hand and we all stopped almost at once. Even I did, although my horse managed it entirely on its own initiative and with the expression of a creature deeply disappointed by my usefulness. Ahead of us, in the wet earth, were wheel tracks.

Fresh.

Deep.

Heavy.

Callum dismounted first and crouched beside the road, running his fingers through the mud. Padraic squatted beside him. Donal moved towards the wall and listened. Powder Maeve studied the tracks with the concentration of a woman considering which spot would look best after an explosion.

Moira dismounted slowly, though Red hissed at once:

"You too?"

"I need to see."

"All of you need to see everything. It's a disease."

Moira knelt beside the rut and touched its edge.

"Two carts," she said.

Callum nodded.

"One heavier. One lighter."

"Different wheels. The first broad and old. The second narrower, faster. The horses' tracks mix here, then..."

She moved several steps farther, holding up her coat so it would not drag through the mud.

"They split here."

Red jumped down from her horse.

"Where?"

Moira pointed towards a fork barely visible in the dark: one road continued towards the quarry, the other dropped lower between wet fields towards the southern route.

"The heavy cart went straight on. The lighter one turned."

"Which one had the girls?" I asked.

No one answered at once.

The wind passed through the walls, carrying the smell of wet earth, horse sweat and something else, so faint it was almost impossible to catch. Smoke? No. Straw? Perhaps.

Moira bent over the lighter cart's track.

"Someone jumped down here or was dragged off. See? A boot. Small."

Red was beside her in a second.

I should not have dismounted, so of course I tried, but the pain immediately reminded me that heroism in the saddle and heroism on the ground were two branches of the same stupidity. Red turned towards me before I managed to make a spectacle of myself.

"Stay."

"I don't like it when you speak to me as though I were a sick mare."

"A sick mare at least has a survival instinct."

"Unproven."

Moira lifted something small from the mud.

I could not see it at first.

Only when she came closer, holding it between her fingers, did I see a narrow strip of cloth. Blue.

A ribbon.

Not the one we had. Another. Wet, torn, its edge smeared with mud and something darker that might have been blood or only earth, though naturally the night had not been courteous enough to leave us easier answers.

Red did not touch it at once.

She stared.

Only stared.

"Bríd," she said.

Not as a question.

As a wound.

Moira closed her hand around the ribbon.

"Maybe she left a sign. Maybe she tried to escape. Maybe..."

"Don't say 'maybe'."

"Red."

"Not now."

Callum stood up from the mud.

"The lighter cart turned south. If Bríd and the other girls were in it, they chose the faster route away from the quarry. The heavy cart may have been bait or cover."

"Then we follow the lighter one," Red said at once.

Padraic shook his head.

"Or Cavanagh wants us to think exactly that."

Red turned on him.

"If you're about to say we should consider the emotional condition of the wheel ruts, I swear..."

"Think," Padraic cut in, surprisingly calm. "The heavy cart goes straight towards the quarry, makes noise, leaves tracks, draws people after it. The lighter one turns with one horse or two, perhaps with a girl, perhaps with empty sacks. If we all follow it and Cavanagh is with the heavy cart, we lose him. If we follow the heavy one and Bríd is in the light one, we lose her."

"Congratulations," I said. "You have just described a choice so filthy it deserves a priest of its own to bless it."

Red clenched her fists.

Moira stared at the ribbon.

Callum stared at the roads.

And I, sitting on the horse with blood drying beneath my bandage and the ledger at my side, felt that the night was doing to us exactly what the machinery did to the girls in its books: separating, labelling, transferring, forcing us to choose between one loss and

another until we began to think not in terms of rescue but of smaller losses and greater ones. Perhaps that was why I hated it so much. Because it did not merely take people. It taught those trying to save them to speak its language.

"We can't split up," I said.

Everyone looked at me.

Red with relief, Moira with caution, Callum with that damned commander's exhaustion of his.

"Nell," he began.

"No. I know what you're going to say. That we have to. One group after the heavy cart, another after the light one, a third with the ledger, a fourth to the nearest convent in search of common sense, though after today's rectory I don't recommend it. But if we split, Cavanagh wins even if we catch one of the carts. That is precisely what he's counting on. Our fear that we'll choose wrong."

"And if we don't choose?" Callum asked.

"That is a choice too," Moira said quietly.

I looked at her.

"I know."

Red came to my horse and rested a hand very lightly on my knee, the uninjured side, but the touch anchored me more firmly than the saddle.

"What do you suggest?"

The question surprised me.

Red was asking me.

Not because she lacked opinions of her own. She generally had enough to supply Parliament and still have some left over for a riot. But now she was asking because she knew that if she went after that ribbon alone, she might not come back. And I knew it too.

I looked at the roads.

"Which cart left the boot print?"

Moira pointed towards the southern road.

"The lighter one."

"And the ribbon?"

"There too."

"Then Bríd, or someone who wanted us to think of Bríd, was with the light cart."

Callum nodded.

"Yes."

"The heavy cart may be cover. It may be carrying men. Weapons. Or other girls."

"Exactly," Padraic said.

"But if Cavanagh is clever, he won't travel with the bait. He'll go with whatever is truly valuable."

Moira looked at me sharply.

"Bríd is valuable because she bites."

"Because she can talk," I added. "Because she knows names. Because if she tried to get word to Tierney, if she was trouble, if Kearney remembered her, if Cavanagh said she still bites, then she isn't merely another girl in a transport. She's a risk."

Red said quietly:

"Then Cavanagh will be with her."

"Or he'll send her where he thinks no sensible person would go."

"The southern route," Callum said.

Donal, who had been silent until then, spat into the mud.

"Road through the bogs. A cart gets through if the driver knows the ground. A stranger may sink. But if they cross it, they'll come out well ahead of us, nearer the old bridge west."

"And us?" Moira asked.

Donal looked into the darkness.

"On horseback we can catch them, if we don't collapse on the way."

Red was already putting a foot into the stirrup.

"That will do."

Callum caught her arm.

"Wait."

Red looked at his hand.

"Let go if you want to keep it."

Callum let go, but did not step back.

"We take the southern road. Everyone who can ride fast. Donal leads. Padraic at the rear. Maeve, put the charges away. We blow nothing until we know where the girls are. Nell..."

"I'm coming," I said.

"I hadn't finished."

"I had."

Callum looked at Red as though hoping she would stop me.

Red smiled in a thoroughly unpleasant way.

"Don't look at me. I have officially resigned from trying to control this woman today. It's like putting smoke in a box and then taking offence when it coughs."

Moira mounted again.

"The wound?"

"Hurts," I said. "Which means I'm still alive. Let's go before the pain starts offering opinions about direction."

Moira rode closer and adjusted the strap of my bag, quickly and very carefully.

"If your vision goes dark, you tell us."

"And if my vision goes dark because it's night?"

"Nell."

"Fine. I'll tell you."

Red leaned towards me from the saddle.

"If you faint, I'll tie you to the horse."

"Sounds like concern."

"It's a threat founded on concern."

"Your affection is becoming increasingly military."

"We adapt to circumstances," Moira said.

And then we moved.

By the southern route.

After the lighter cart.

After the blue ribbon.

After Bríd, who might be alive, might be bleeding, might still be biting, might even now be leaving signs for us in the mud the way a person throws pieces of her own hope behind her without knowing whether anyone is following.

The horse surged forward, pain tore through my side in a bright flame, and I bit my teeth together so hard I tasted blood. Red rode beside me, Moira on the other side, Callum ahead, Donal leading through the wet road, Powder Maeve low in the saddle, Padraic closing the rear and muttering something that might have been a prayer, a curse, or a list of reasons why he should never have trusted three women who had turned the night into a pursuit.

The sky above us was beginning to pale.

Not dawn yet.

But the threat of it.

And ahead, somewhere beyond the black fields and the wet southern track, rolled a cart that might be carrying one girl, all of hell, and an answer to the question of whether a person can truly catch what the world has long since learned to hide.

The southern road was not a road but a long wet lie pretending that a person could ride through bog, stones, roots and his own fear if only he pressed his knees hard enough into a horse's sides and pretended the wound beneath his bandage did not understand every jolt better than he did.

We rode fast, though 'fast' in that place was an insult to any respectable gallop. The horses slipped on wet ground, their hooves sank into soft peat, and now and then a stone sprang from beneath the mud like an old corpse's tooth, making the animals snort, toss their heads and demand soothing by whisper or curse according to the rider's character. Donal led, bent low over his horse's neck as though he were part of the road itself, a man who knew every treacherous turn, every place a cart might sink, every field whose owner pretended blindness because in that part of Ireland people sometimes saw only what allowed them to live until morning.

Behind him came Callum, then Red, me, Moira, Powder Maeve, and Padraic closing the rear, though I had the feeling he was guarding our recklessness more than the road. No one spoke for the first few minutes because breath was too valuable, and silence, that wet racing silence before dawn, had something in it of a funeral that did not yet know whose name to put on the board.

The pain in my side properly woke.

Not with a scream at first, but diligently and bureaucratically, every movement of the horse adding another note to my body: pulling here, burning there, splitting soon, remember here, Nell Whitmore, that a bullet may only graze you and still turn a human being into a very badly packed sack of complaints. I clenched my teeth and tried to breathe shallowly, which was of course idiotic, because shallow breaths made me faint and deep ones made me want to curse every saint in turn, including those whose names I did not know but who deserved equal treatment.

Red noticed.

Of course she noticed.

"Slow down," she said to me, not the horse, as though the horse were merely an instrument of my stubbornness.

"I can't. I have a very ambitious wound. I need to show it who is in charge."

"The wound has already won if you've started negotiating with it."

"I'm not negotiating. I'm insulting it."

"Worse. Insulting things is in your blood."

"At present, what's in my blood is mostly blood. And some of that vile alcohol of Sorcha's that could probably remove rust from a bridge."

Moirra rode up on the other side, not looking directly at me but at the way I sat in the saddle, which was even more humiliating because I felt like a building being assessed after a fire.

"If you start sliding, you tell us."

"Yes, Moira, I intend to inform you very politely of my loss of consciousness in a complete sentence and the proper sequence."

"Nell."

"I'll tell you."

Red muttered:

"She'll tell us after she falls."

"Then you'll ride closer," Moira replied.

"I'm already riding closer."

"Closer."

"If I get any closer, I'll be sitting on her horse with her."

"Don't tempt fate," I said. "Our horse already looks as though it's drafting a complaint to the owner."

Red glanced at me, and even in the dark I saw her fighting a smile.

That was good.

Not because it mattered to the pursuit. Not because it brought us nearer to Bríd. But because in a world that for days had tried to turn us into animals hunted along roads, the simple fact that Red almost wanted to smile was a small rebellion. Not a grand one, not sung by the fire, not worth a newspaper. But real.

The lighter cart's tracks led us through a wet strip of ground between two fields, then past an old roofless chapel whose walls were so thick with moss that the cross on the stone looked like something hauled from underwater. At the chapel the road split into three narrow tracks and for a moment we feared we had lost the trail, but Donal dismounted, ran a hand through the mud, smelled his fingers, which I regarded as a degree of field dedication I had no intention of ever reaching, and pointed to the lowest track.

"That way," he said. "The cart went down. They were in a hurry."

"How do you know?" Padraic asked.

Donal did not even look at him.

"Because no sane driver takes that road at night unless he has men or the devil on his heels."

"In our case one doesn't exclude the other," I muttered.

The road down was worse.

The ground turned to slick filth, and the high grasses on either side whipped the horses' legs, wet, cold and sticky with mist. In the distance, where the sky was slowly beginning to lighten, I saw the outline of a low bridge, or rather several stone arches that must once have been proud of their usefulness and now looked like an old man's teeth clinging to his gums from habit alone. Beyond the bridge the ground rose towards a black line of trees and, farther on if Donal was right, towards the old track by which one could travel west, avoid the larger villages and disappear towards places where people asked only as many questions as they could survive.

Suddenly Powder Maeve raised a hand.

Everyone stopped the horses.

At first I heard only the wind.

Then something else.

A creak.

Soft, distant, but unmistakable.

A wheel.

A cart.

Red drew breath as violently as though someone had put a knife between her ribs.

"Ahead."

Callum dismounted immediately and signalled us to get lower among the grass. Donal led the horses into a hollow behind a wall and we went the last stretch on foot, although in my case 'went' meant Red and Moira exchanged a look I hated and then appeared one on either side of me.

"I am not an old wardrobe," I hissed.

"Old wardrobes bleed less," Red replied.

"And comment less often," Moira added.

"I feel betrayed by your shared talent for practical insults."

"Walk," they said together.

I walked.

Not because they had convinced me.

Because every word cost breath and every breath cost pain, and for the first time in a long while I decided perhaps not every argument had to be won immediately. It was a disturbing discovery. If I survived much longer it might lead to serious character development, and I was not ready for that.

We moved along the wall, low in the wet grass. Ahead, the road dropped towards the bridge and on it, perhaps a hundred yards away, stood a cart.

The lighter one.

I could see it only in part because mist drifted through the hollow like a dirty curtain, but I saw black wheels, one horse in the shafts, another perhaps beside it, a man at the tailboard and two more by the road. The cart had not stopped by choice. One wheel was sunk deep in the mud just before the bridge, and the horse tossed its head uneasily as though it sensed the men around it possessed less sense than it did, which in many cases was an accurate assessment.

A sound came from the cart.

Not a scream.

Not crying.

Something muffled.

As though someone were trying to kick a board or speak through cloth stuffed into her mouth.

Red took a step forward.

Callum caught her by the arm.

This time she did not wrench herself free at once, but her face had gone so pale that for a moment she looked as though all the fire in her had moved into her eyes.

"The girls," she said.

Moira watched the cart tensely.

"How many men?"

"Three visible," Donal said. "Perhaps more beyond the bridge."

"Cavanagh?" Red asked.

No one answered.

The cart lurched suddenly. One of the men swore aloud and struck the horse across the neck. The animal snorted and backed, the cart shuddered, the wheel sucked at the mud and stayed exactly where it was. A second man turned towards the road beyond the bridge and shouted something I could not catch. After a moment another shadow emerged from the mist on the far side.

Tall.

A hat.

His face indistinct, but his movements calmer than the others'.

I did not need to see the pockmarks.

Red recognised him first.

"Cavanagh."

She said it so softly I barely heard, but in that single word was all the blood on her hands, the whole story of the woman in Ballynareen, all Moira's fear, the blue ribbon, and the girls in the cellar whom someone had silenced by pounding on the floor above them.

Cavanagh walked to the cart and looked around slowly, without nerves. That was the worst of it. He did not look like a man fleeing. He looked like a man calculating.

"I don't like this," Moira said.

"What?" I asked, though I felt the same.

"They are stuck too conveniently."

Callum looked at her.

"A trap?"

"Or a problem that wants to look like a trap. I don't know."

Red tore her arm free of Callum's grip.

"They're inside."

"Yes," Moira said. "Which is precisely why we need to know where the rest of the men are."

Cavanagh suddenly turned towards us.

He could not see us.

He should not have been able to.

We were low behind the wall, in grass and mist.

Yet he turned his head exactly as though he had felt our eyes on him.

Then he smiled.

Not broadly.

Not theatrically.

A small, filthy movement of the mouth from a man who had just heard a mouse enter a trap and did not need to hurry because the wood had already fallen.

"He knows," Moira said.

Before anyone could answer, a scream came from the cart.

Clear this time.

A girl's.

Muffled, but desperate.

Red moved.

Callum and I grabbed her at the same moment, though in my case the action was mostly symbolic because my side objected so violently I nearly collapsed into the grass myself. Red fought us like an animal.

"Let go of me!"

"No!" Callum snarled.

"She's in there!"

"I know!"

"No, you don't! You always know the map, the road, the number of men, but you don't know what a girl sounds like in a cart!"

The words struck him squarely.

Callum released her for one second, but Moira seized Red from the other side.

"Red, look."

"I won't look!"

"Look!"

Moira said it so sharply that Red froze.

Moira pointed to the bridge.

Only then did I see.

On the far side, among the stone arches and the low wall, more figures moved. Two. Three. Perhaps four. Rifles. Not beside the cart. Not on the road. In position. Waiting.

The cart with the girls was not merely transport.

It was bait.

And Cavanagh stood beside it as calmly as a man certain that if we tried to rescue them, we would expose ourselves exactly where he wanted.

Red breathed as though she had been running.

"I'll kill him."

"Perhaps," Moira said. "But you won't do it by giving him all of us."

Powder Maeve moved closer to Callum.

"I can put a charge under the wall. It won't kill them all, but it'll give us smoke."

"Too close to the cart," Moira said at once. "The girls are inside."

"I didn't say at the cart."

"The mud will carry fragments."

Maeve pressed her lips together but did not argue. In her world powder answered many questions, but even she understood that some questions bled too innocently.

Cavanagh was speaking to one of the men now. Then, to our horror, he went to the tailboard and struck the wood with his fist.

"Quiet in there!" he shouted.

A sob came from inside.

Red closed her eyes.

Not because she could not watch.

Because if she watched any longer, she would go.

I knew that movement. Knew it far too well. I had something similar in me, that obscene readiness to throw oneself at the world with bare hands simply because one cannot endure the sight of suffering for one second longer. The difference was that Red had more practice killing and I had more practice complicating indictments.

Moira bent towards me.

"Nell."

"What?"

"The cart cannot cross the bridge while the wheel is stuck in the mud."

"I noticed. I have tremendous respect for the mud's civic spirit."

"If we force them to move the men from the far side towards the cart, they'll lose their positions."

Callum looked at her.

"How?"

Moira was looking at me.

I did not like that look.

It was too exact.

Too quick to understand things I did not yet want to understand.

"They don't know how many of us there are," she said. "But they know someone is following. Cavanagh is counting on Red charging the cart."

"Quite rightly," Red muttered.

"Then he needs to see something else."

"What?"

Moira kept looking at me.

Red understood too and spun round.

"No."

"I haven't said anything yet," Moira replied.

"You said it with your face."

"Nell is wounded. She looks weak. She has the ledger. If Cavanagh sees her..."

"No," Red repeated, quieter and more dangerous.

Moira continued, though I could see what it cost her:

"If he sees Nell with the ledger on this side of the road, he may think we're trying to carry the evidence away rather than attack the cart. He'll want her alive, or at least want the bag. He'll move men."

"You will not use her as bait."

"I don't want to use her."

"But that's what you're proposing."

"I'm proposing it because I see no other way to draw the gunmen away from the girls."

Red stepped between Moira and me.

"No."

I felt my heart beating harder, stupidly and painfully, beneath the bandage, beneath the little wooden horse, beneath the ledger. Cavanagh stood by the cart. The girls inside were crying or trying not to. Bríd might be there behind the boards, hands tied, lip split, eyes still biting at the world. The gunmen waited by the bridge. We waited behind the wall. Time ran through the mud, and with every second someone might find a way to free the wheel, move, kill a hostage, do anything that turned our hesitation into another ledger of names.

"I'll do it," I said.

Red turned on me so fast the world swam.

"No."

"Red..."

"No."

"It might work."

"It might kill you!"

"Everything might kill me. Lately even riding a horse has ambitions."

"Don't joke!"

Her voice broke.

And that break silenced me more effectively than a shout.

Red seized my shoulders, careful around the wound but hard, as though the sheer strength of her hands could keep me alive.

"You just shoved me out from under a bullet. You were lying in the mud bleeding, telling me you couldn't stand and watch someone break me. And now I'm supposed to watch you walk out in front of Cavanagh with the ledger on your shoulder because the plan needs pretty bait?"

"Not pretty. Wounded, filthy and extremely irritating. Important distinction."

"Nell!"

"I don't want to watch them stay in that cart either."

Red fell silent.

Moira closed her eyes.

Callum looked away.

I said it quietly, and that made it worse.

"I don't. Not after all of this. Not after Moira came back with blood on her sleeve. Not after the little horse. Not after the ledger. Not after Bríd left us a ribbon in the mud. If I can make Cavanagh look at me instead of the cart, even for a few breaths, perhaps those breaths will be enough for you to do something cleverer than I am."

Red looked at me as though she hated every word separately.

"I hate you," she said quietly.

"I know."

"You don't."

"A little."

"No. You have no idea what it's like to find someone in this world who finally makes you want to survive until tomorrow, then watch that person, with the stubbornness of a drunken saint, march towards the place where other people are aiming."

I stopped breathing.

Not because of the wound.

Because of her.

Moira turned her face away, as though the words were too naked even for her.

Red tightened her hands on my shoulders.

"You tell me you couldn't watch someone break me. What am I supposed to do, Nell? Stand here and watch the world try to break you?"

I could not answer.

So I did something I probably would not have done once.

I touched her hand.

"Don't let him."

Red closed her eyes.

I saw her fighting herself. Anger. Fear. The need to grab me, throw me over a saddle and carry me as far from Cavanagh, Bríd, the ledger and this whole damned history as the horses could manage. But Red was no coward. Not before the world, and not before truth. And truth stood ahead of us in the form of a cart, mud and the muffled voices of girls.

Moira came closer.

"She won't go out alone," she said.

Red opened her eyes.

"What?"

"I'll go with her."

"No."

"Not as a second lure. As cover. I'll stay lower, by the ditch. If Cavanagh sends men, I'll signal. Callum and Donal strike from the wall. You..."

"I what?"

Moira looked straight into her eyes.

"You do what you do best. Go in when they're no longer looking in the right direction."

Red breathed hard.

Callum said:

"It might work."

"Say that once more," Red hissed, "and I swear I'll choose the plan where you're the bait."

"Cavanagh won't move for me the way he will for the ledger and Nell."

"Exactly why I hate him a little less than I hate this plan."

Another thud came from the cart.

Three this time.

Like a foot against wood.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Not by accident.

A signal.

Moirra went pale.

"She knows someone is near."

Red looked at the cart.

Everything in her trembled, but differently now. Not helplessness. Decision.

"All right," she said at last.

One word.

Forced through her teeth.

"But if anything goes wrong, I take you and run, even if I have to carry you on my back and insult you all the way."

"That sounds like a very long walk," I said.

"Shut up."

"You're moved again."

"Nell."

"Already silent."

Moirra removed the outer covering from my bag so the ledger showed, but not too much, only enough for a man like Cavanagh to recognise the shape and want it immediately. Callum gave me a small pistol, lighter than Red's knife and heavier than my confidence. Moirra checked that it was loaded, then slipped it under my coat.

"Don't shoot unless you have to."

"One of those pieces of advice that sounds obvious until a person has a gun in hand?"

"Yes."

Red leaned close.

"Look at me."

I did.

Her face was inches away, pale, filthy, wet with mist, her eyes so bright in the half-dark that for a moment I could forget everything else.

"Thirty steps," she said. "No more. If I say come back, you come back. If Moirra signals, you drop into the mud. If anyone gets too close, you cut or shoot. You do not argue. You do not make a speech. You do not try to shame him socially. You do not turn yourself into a symbol."

"What if he starts the conversation?"

"Nell."

"Fine. No speech."

"Promise."

I did not like promises.

But this time I nodded.

"I promise to try."

"That is the worst possible version of a promise."

"The most honest one I have."

Red closed her eyes for a second, then pressed her forehead to mine, briefly and hard, as before, only now there was more fear in it than oath.

"You will come back to me," she said.

She did not ask.

She did not plead.

She said it as an order thrown at the world, which naturally had never made a habit of listening to women, but Red had never cared much for other people's habits.

"I will," I answered.

And I went down.

Alone.

Though not truly alone.

I felt Red in every step, like a taut cord tied around my heart. I felt Moira in the way I counted breaths and watched shadows. I felt the wooden horse against my breast, the ledger at my side, the wound blazing beneath the bandage, the mud beneath my boots and fear walking so close beside me I could almost have taken it by the arm.

After ten steps one of the men at the cart saw me.

After fifteen he raised his weapon.

After twenty Cavanagh turned his head.

The smile returned to his face.

Slowly.

As though he had received exactly what he had been waiting for.

And I, Nell Whitmore, a girl from Manchester with a bullet wound, a ledger of sins under my coat and a heart beating hard enough to wake the dead, stopped on the wet road and thought that if I was to be bait, the damned bait might at least have a tongue.

Cavanagh took a step towards me.

"Lost, girl?"

I smiled.

It hurt.

Everything hurt.

"No," I said. "You are the ones who've been standing in other people's road for years."

Cavanagh stopped in the middle of the road perhaps twenty paces away, mud up his boots, mist hanging at his knees and that calm filthy smile of a man who had seen enough other people's panic to learn to enjoy it.

He did not look like a monster.

That was the worst part.

Monsters ought to have scales, fangs, eyes like coal pits and breath that stank of graves, so a person could point and say: there is evil, someone fetch the pitchforks, fire and a suitable quantity of moral certainty. Cavanagh had only a face pitted by smallpox, a wet coat, a hat pulled low over his brow and the movements of a man who knew the price of everything from a horse to a girl and never confused one column with another. Had I passed him in a port or market, I might have taken him for a carter, a trader, a

warehouse man, someone who coughed badly, paid debts late and kicked a dog when no one watched. Not one knot in a network that took girls without family, name, money or luck and moved them across the map like sacks of goods.

And yet there he stood.

Beside the cart.

Beside the muffled crying.

Beside the blue ribbon in the mud.

Beside Bríd, who might be breathing only a few boards behind him.

One man by the cart kept a rifle trained on me, another stood nearer the horse, a third had vanished from sight by the rear wheel, and the figures by the bridge still held their positions, motionless and patient, ready to fire at anyone who moved too quickly. I could feel that somewhere behind me in the grass and mist Moira lay low by the ditch, counting breaths and angles, Callum waited with Donal beside the wall, and Red was invisible, which was both comfort and the worst possible sign because an invisible Red usually meant someone was about to have a very bad morning.

I, meanwhile, stood in the road.

Wounded.

Filthy.

With the ledger beneath my coat.

And under a promise that I would not make a speech.

Which, given the circumstances, was probably the least realistic part of the entire plan.

Cavanagh tilted his head.

"You've courage or a fever," he said. "Up close they're difficult to tell apart."

"In my case they usually arrive together."

"Nell Whitmore."

He said my name the way men of his kind say the name of a thing someone has promised to deliver: without curiosity, but with the pleasure of ownership.

"Good to know the papers have reached this far," I replied. "I was beginning to worry my reputation was lying fallow on the far side of the sea."

His smile widened a little.

"The papers? Girl, you're worth more than papers. You're trouble with a face. And trouble with a face is easier to show people before it's hanged or sold."

"Sell me? Ambitious. Fair warning, I have a bad character, a bullet wound and a habit of ruining men's plans."

"Anything can be broken."

He did not say it angrily.

That was why I felt cold.

He was not threatening. He was informing me. The way Moira informed people of the number of doors in a building. The way Callum informed us of roads through a bog. Cavanagh possessed his own knowledge of the world, and in that knowledge people were not people but material that under sufficient pressure took a more convenient shape.

Something struck the cart again.

Once.

Then silence.

I did not look.

I could not.

If I looked too long, my face would say too much. And if my face said too much, Red would come out of the grass like fire through spilled paraffin and our beautiful, revolting plan would end in one scream, three shots and another name to carry beside the heart.

Cavanagh took another step.

"Where is the ledger?"

"What ledger?"

"Don't make yourself stupider than you are. You don't have the face for it."

"And yet men try it every day with very little difficulty."

The man by the cart gave a short laugh, then immediately sobered when Cavanagh looked his way.

Good.

Let him look.

Let him look at his own men, not the grass.

Not the ditches.

Not Red.

Cavanagh turned back to me.

"Kearney was very upset."

"He ought to be grateful. For a while he was silent, which must have improved the moral atmosphere of the parish."

"You took something that doesn't belong to you."

"Funny. I heard you made a profession of that."

This time his smile disappeared.

Not entirely.

But enough.

"You think you understand what you found?"

"A ledger. Names. Dates. Routes. Signatures. Dirt beneath the fingernails of people who like wearing gloves."

"You found paper. Paper burns quickly."

"So do people. Yet sometimes the stench lasts so long entire nations have to pretend it's incense."

Cavanagh studied me more closely. Too closely.

I felt sweat running down my back, cold as well water. My side burned harder and my legs were becoming strangely light, which was alarming because a person in my position preferred her legs to remember their duties and not open negotiations about leaving the service.

"You're wounded," he said.

"In Ireland that seems to be a form of introduction at present."

"A bullet?"

"No, a very aggressive compliment."

His eyes moved to my side, then to the bag beneath my coat.

He saw it.

I wanted him to.

And when he did, his face changed by a fraction. Not greed. Cavanagh was too disciplined for greed in its simple form. Rather, calculation accelerated behind his eyes like a machine receiving another shovel of coal. The ledger mattered more to him than my wound, more than my name, perhaps for a moment even more than the cart behind him.

"Give it to me," he said.

"In return for what?"

"Your life."

"Mine?"

"Yours. Perhaps one of the girls'."

Behind me in the dark, somewhere very low to the ground, something shifted in the grass. I did not turn. Could not. But I knew Moira had heard. Red too. One of the girls. That was how he said it. As though choosing an apple from a basket. As though the others were already bruised, unprofitable, not worth the discussion.

I smiled.

I felt sick.

But I smiled.

"Only one? Very economical of you in the salvation trade."

"You are not negotiating from a position of strength."

"I noticed. Positions of strength usually bleed less."

"Give me the ledger and perhaps I'll let you walk away."

"You know no sensible person would believe you."

"Are you sensible?"

"Unfortunately, more often than I'd prefer."

Cavanagh turned towards the man by the bridge.

"Doyle! Closer."

One of the gunmen by the stone arch moved.

Moira had been right.

He was shifting men.

Not all of them, not dramatically, but enough. One left his position and came towards the road, weapon low, eyes on me. The second stayed by the bridge. A third by the cart turned for a moment to see what the first was doing.

A few breaths.

That was all.

A few breaths that had to be stretched across eternity.

"Don't come too close," I said. "I'm wounded, but still unpleasant."

Cavanagh signalled the man to stop and took another step himself.

"Where are the others?"

"The others what?"

"Your people."

"We've changed membership so often lately it's difficult to keep the records straight."

"Is Red Gallagher near?"

My heart struck harder.

I could not show it.

"Red Gallagher? I don't know. She generally appears wherever a man has too high an opinion of his own durability."

Cavanagh looked at the grass behind me.

Too long.

I had to draw him back.

Fast.

"Were you afraid of her?" I asked.

His eyes returned to me.

"Who?"

"Red."

"A little girl with a knife?"

"Men who call women little girls tend to end with very grown-up trouble in the belly."

"I know her sort. There have been plenty. Angry ones, red-haired ones, black-haired ones, crying, biting, singing songs while they still think songs are weapons. Then comes hunger, money, pain, or someone they love. Any of them can be broken."

"Maeve too?" I said.

I had not meant to.

The word left me like a knife thrown without a full swing.

Cavanagh stopped.

I do not know whether he knew Maeve. I do not know whether the name meant anything, or whether he merely understood I had struck somewhere I should not touch. But for a fraction of a second I saw uncertainty in his eyes.

And in that same fraction, to the right of the cart, a shadow detached itself from shadow.

Red.

She moved low and fast, almost soundlessly between mud and mist, exactly where the gunman by the cart had turned his head at my voice. I did not see the whole movement, only its result: a hand over the man's mouth, a flash of steel, a violent jerk backwards and a body sinking without a cry between the wheels and the high grass.

Moirá was on the other side.

Not with a knife.

With a pistol.

By the ditch.

Aimed at the man coming down from the bridge.

She had not fired yet.

She waited.

Cavanagh saw something in my face.

Perhaps relief.

Perhaps fear.

Perhaps simply that for one second I stopped looking only at him.

His hand went beneath his coat.

"Doyle!" he shouted.

Then everything happened at once.

Moira fired.

The man from the bridge staggered and fell sideways, though I did not know whether dead or merely hit. Callum and Donal burst from behind the wall on the left, while Padraic at the rear shouted something in Irish that sounded like an order or a promise of violence. The horse at the cart reared, the cart lurched, the mud released the wheel for a moment and seized it again. A scream came from inside, no longer entirely muffled, because someone within must have torn part of the cloth or broken a board.

Red jumped onto the back of the cart.

Cavanagh did not go for her.

He came for me.

I understood too late.

Perhaps he had known from the start that Red would go to the cart. Perhaps he had calculated that too. Perhaps the ledger mattered more to him than one dead guard, more even than part of the transport, because without the ledger he could rebuild the route, bribe another priest, change the names, move the girls by another road. With the ledger in other hands, the whole machinery had a face, tracks and signatures.

He covered several paces faster than a man in mud should.

I stepped back.

Too late.

The wound flared with pain so sharp my legs folded. I reached for the pistol but my hand was not fast enough. Cavanagh struck my wrist, the weapon fell into the mud, and his other hand closed on the strap of the bag.

"No," I snarled.

I wrenched the ledger towards me, but pain split me in two.

Cavanagh dragged me brutally closer until his face was inches from mine. He smelled of wet wool, tobacco and something sour, perhaps fear, though I badly wanted to believe that was it.

"Mouthy to the end," he hissed.

"My only consistency."

I tried to knee him, but aimed badly because the edges of the world were beginning to swim. He struck me across the face with an open hand. Not as hard as he could. Hard enough to snap my head aside and fill my mouth with blood.

Behind him Red turned from the cart.

She saw us.

And froze.

This was the moment Cavanagh wanted.

Of course.

With one hand he held the bag, with the other he drew a knife and pressed it to my throat.

"Not a step!" he shouted.

Everything stopped.

Red on the rear step of the cart, her knife bloody and her face so white through the mist she looked like a ghost. Moira by the ditch, pistol raised but without a clean shot. Callum several paces away, caught between movement and decision. The girls in the cart crying and gasping, one hand pushed through a broken board, thin dirty fingers clutching the edge like roots gripping stone.

Cavanagh held me hard.

The knife cooled the skin beneath my chin.

"Drop your weapons," he said.

No one moved.

He pressed the blade harder.

I felt a thin sting, then warmth.

Red made a sound I had never heard from her. Not a word. Not a scream. Something between.

"Red," I said.

I do not know how I managed to speak.

Perhaps because the knife was at my throat and yet my tongue, that unfortunate stubborn ill-mannered tongue, decided that being nearby it could not waste the final opportunity.

"No."

She looked at me.

"Nell..."

"Don't drop it."

Cavanagh laughed softly by my ear.

"Will you listen to her? She nearly died for you once already. Very moving. Stupid, but moving."

Red breathed hard.

Her hand trembled on the knife.

Moira took half a step sideways, tiny, almost invisible. Cavanagh noticed.

"You too, gaoler. Weapon on the ground."

Moira stopped.

Her face was calm.

Too calm.

"If you kill her, the ledger won't help you," she said.

"If I kill her, I'll take it from her body."

"No. Because then Red will tear you apart before you take three steps."

Cavanagh smiled.

"Which is why she'll drop the knife."

Red looked at me.

I looked at Red.

Everything in me, absolutely everything, screamed to live. It was almost offensive how badly the body wanted to remain a body, how desperately it clung to air, pain, mud, the sight of Red and Moira, even that vile road, even the knife at my throat. But if Red dropped her weapon, if Moira put down the pistol, if Callum stepped back, Cavanagh

would take the ledger, the girls, perhaps me, perhaps all of us. The machinery would close its jaws.

And I was meant to be a witness.

Not a dead symbol.

A witness.

Beneath my fingers, where one hand still clutched the bag strap, I felt the small shape of the wooden horse under my coat. I do not know why it gave me the thought. Perhaps because it was the only thing in that whole scene not made for violence. Perhaps because it reminded me of the child in Ballynareen, of Moira, of Eamon, of all those whose bodies and names men like Cavanagh treated as material for transfer.

My other hand, the slower one on the side of the wound, was partly hidden by the bag.

Red's knife was in the bag.

Small.

The one she had slipped into my hand earlier and told me to keep close to my body.

Do not wave it.

Do not show it.

Under the ribs or into the thigh, Moira had said.

I had no rib.

I had a thigh.

Cavanagh held me too close.

"Red," I said quietly.

Her eyes were flame.

"Remember what you said?"

"What?"

"That I wasn't to make a speech."

Cavanagh frowned.

Red understood a fraction of a second before I did.

I do not know how.

Perhaps my eyes betrayed the plan before my body carried it out.

"Nell, don't..."

I drove the knife into Cavanagh's thigh.

Perhaps not very deep. Not beautifully. Not the way Red would have done it. But deep enough.

He screamed.

The blade at my throat jerked and cut the skin shallowly as I threw myself down, more falling than escaping. Moira's shot cracked. Cavanagh convulsed, the ball striking arm or shoulder because his body spun with the force, and the ledger bag tore from his fingers with me. I fell face-down into the mud with pain so immense that for a moment there was no road, no cart, no Red, no world.

Only a scream.

Not mine.

Red's.

She came off the cart at Cavanagh like something released from hell after waiting too long at the door. She struck him with her whole body and knocked him into the mud, the knife flashed, but Callum and Donal were already on her because a living Cavanagh meant information and a dead one only satisfaction. Red fought them for a second like an animal, shouting something I did not understand, perhaps Irish, perhaps no language at all. Moira dropped to her knees beside me.

"Nell!"

"The ledger," I rasped.

"Here."

"The horse?"

Her face twisted as though she might strike me or embrace me, and for one moment I genuinely could not tell which would suit her character better.

"Here."

"Good."

"You damned idiot."

"Everyone is saying such tender things to me today."

Moira pressed my hand to my neck, where Cavanagh's blade had left a thin cut. It was not deep. I knew by her breathing. She was frightened, but not as she had been over the bullet wound.

"You're alive," she said.

"Trying."

Red tore herself free of Callum and reached me.

I do not remember whether she knelt or fell. One moment she was above me, wet, bloodied, shaking with such fury and fear that her whole body seemed too small to contain it.

"I told you," she whispered. "I told you, no speeches, no idiocy, no turning yourself into a symbol."

"That wasn't a speech."

"You stabbed him in the thigh."

"Practical end to the conversation."

Red laughed.

And then she cried.

Not for long. Not loudly. Not in any way that might let someone mistake her for a broken woman. It was brief and violent, torn from her with a breath, after which she bent and pressed her forehead to mine so hard the ache in my head could almost have lodged a complaint.

"Don't leave me alone with this world," she said so quietly I think only I heard. "Not after you made me want to be in it again."

I did not answer at once.

Because I could not.

Because the sentence entered deeper than the bullet, the knife and all the guilt together.

At last I lifted a filthy trembling hand and touched her cheek.

"Then keep a better eye on me," I whispered.

Red closed her eyes.
 Moira turned her face away, but I saw that she was crying.
 Not much.
 Only as much as a woman allows herself when she will have to hold a weapon again in a moment.
 Behind us someone tore away the rear board of the cart.
 The girls began to come out.
 One by one.
 Filthy, bound, pale, their eyes huge with fear and night. Powder Maeve cut their bonds, Padraic helped one down as though afraid to touch her too hard, Donal watched the road beyond the bridge, Callum kept Cavanagh in the mud with a pistol at his neck.
 Red raised her head.
 "Bríd?"
 No one answered.
 The first girl shook her head, crying.
 The second could not speak.
 The third, the youngest, looked at Red with such fear that she seemed afraid the answer might kill her more surely than silence.
 "Bríd?" Red repeated, more gently this time, though there was a break in her voice.
 Another girl came out of the cart.
 Not Bríd.
 Her lip was split and a blue ribbon was tied around her wrist.
 Not the one from the mud.
 Another.
 She looked at us, at the ledger beside me, at Cavanagh in the mud, at Red rising slowly as though every inch of movement were a struggle against the worst fear.
 "Bríd is alive," the girl said hoarsely. "But she isn't here."
 Red froze.
 Moira beside me did too.
 Callum lifted his head.
 "Where?"
 The girl swallowed. Her eyes darted towards Cavanagh, then back to Red.
 "They took her earlier. Before us. On a separate horse. They said she couldn't travel with the rest because she knows too much. They said..."
 Her voice broke.
 Red took a step.
 "What did they say?"
 The girl closed her eyes.
 "That she's to be taken to Galway."
 The world went silent.
 Not all of it.
 I could still hear horses, girls crying, Cavanagh groaning, my own breath, but all of it seemed to withdraw behind thick glass.
 Red said nothing.

That was the worst.

Because Red could swear at judges, threaten men over a knife, laugh amid blood, insult priests, horses and the whole Empire with the ease of a woman who never asked the world for permission. But when she heard 'Galway', she fell silent so suddenly it was as though someone had taken her tongue with her breath.

The girl added more quietly:

"They said another name. A house by the bay. Green doors. I don't know more."

Red stepped back half a pace.

Moira looked at her.

"Do you know it?"

Red stared for a long time into the mist beyond the bridge, towards the west where the sky was turning pale and sick, almost morning.

"Yes," she said at last.

Nothing more.

But her face said the rest.

It was not merely a place.

It was a wound that had waited for her in Galway for years, patient as a grave and apparently displeased that Red had delayed her return.

I lay in the mud with the ledger at my side, the little horse against my breast, blood beneath my bandage and my throat lightly cut by the knife of a man who still breathed a few paces away. I looked at Red and for the first time understood that the Galway she spoke of with longing, anger and fear was not a home waiting for a daughter's return.

It was another door.

And behind it someone already held Bríd.

Red turned slowly towards us.

Her eyes were dry.

That frightened me more than tears.

"If she was taken there," she said, "we are not going to my home."

She looked at me, then Moira, then the cart full of rescued girls, the ledger and Cavanagh in the mud.

"We are going to the place that taught people to sell souls before they even learned to count money."

No one said anything.

Dawn rose beyond the wet fields, dirty, pale and merciless.

For a while no one moved.

Dawn spread over the wet fields slowly, as though it too lacked the courage to look at what the night had left behind. Mist lay low over the ground, dirty and torn, touching cartwheels, horses' fetlocks, our boots and the faces of the girls who came down from the rear board one by one and stood on the road uncertainly, as though earth were something new, something suspicious, something that might be taken from them at any moment. Some wept without sound. One held her stomach. Another hugged her own arms as though afraid that if she let go she would fall apart. A third stared into emptiness, not at us, not at Cavanagh, not at the road, but somewhere farther away, to

the place a person goes when the body remains standing but the soul must leave for a while in order not to see everything at once.

I watched them from the ground, from the mud, from the pain pulsing in my side and throat, and for the first time in a very long while nothing sharp came to mind.

Not one sentence with which I might wound the world before it wounded me again.

Not one sneer.

Not one thought dressed in black humour so it would not have to walk naked through that terrible morning light.

There was no room in me for irony. Not after I saw their faces. Not after I heard that Bríd lived but had been taken farther. Not after Red froze at the words 'house by the bay' and 'green doors' as though those two images drained blood from her faster than any wound. Not after I felt the ledger beneath my fingers, saved only because several people that night had chosen not to be sensible in precisely the right way. Not after Moira's wooden horse remained against my breast, small, fragile, stubborn and strangely warm from my body, as though I were not protecting it but it were protecting something in me from hardening altogether.

I was sad.

Simply that.

Not angry yet. Not ready for another run. Not clever. Not vicious. Sad so deeply that it took the form not of tears but of silence stretching inside me from throat to the very bottom of my belly. Sad for those girls coming out of the cart like from a grave opened too soon. For Bríd, who was ahead of us again, yet farther away than ever. For Moira, who stood over them with her pistol lowered and the face of a woman who had just discovered that the blood on her hands was not an ending but the beginning of another responsibility. For Callum, who held Cavanagh in the mud but looked at the rescued girls as though each were a question he had failed to answer in time. For Red, whose Galway had ceased to be a place of return and become the throat of an old wound.

And I was proud.

It came quietly, almost shyly, like a feeling I had no right to accept because there was blood everywhere, pain, mud, delay, fear and that one absent girl still pulling us west. Yet I was proud. Of Moira, who came back with blood on her sleeve and did not run from herself. Of Red, who wanted to throw herself into death but stopped for the plan even though every breath must have hurt her for it. Of the people from the forest, strangers a short while ago, rough, suspicious, morally unclean as the whole world, now standing beside a cart cutting girls free as though there were more holiness in that dirty work than in all of Kearney's rectory. Perhaps even a little of myself, though that thought came last and immediately tried to hide because I did not know how to carry pride without guilt.

Red stood several paces away, motionless.

She no longer looked at Cavanagh. Nor at the girls. She looked at the road beyond the bridge, where one horse's tracks must have vanished towards the west. Her hair, wet and filthy, clung to her face. A streak of blood marked her cheek. She held a knife in her hand, but the blade hung lowered as though for a moment she did not know what it was for. At that instant she did not look like fire, or rebellion, or hell in a dress, as I liked to

think of her when I needed laughter instead of fear. She looked like a person standing at the edge of the place she had feared returning to all her life and suddenly knowing she could no longer turn back.

I wanted to stand.

I could not.

Moira noticed and knelt beside me at once.

"Don't move yet."

Her voice was gentle. Tired. Very close to breaking, but present.

"I need to go to her," I said.

Moira looked at Red, then at me.

She did not answer at once. For a moment I saw her struggle with her own common sense, with that instinct to arrange the world according to what was safe, possible, less dangerous. Then she set the pistol down, slipped an arm behind my back and helped me sit up.

"Slowly."

Pain passed through me in a wave so bright that for a moment I had no breath. I clenched my teeth but did not swear. I had no strength. Moira held me firmly, and when I swayed another hand appeared at my left side.

Red.

I did not know when she had come.

Suddenly she was there, one hand on my shoulder, the other at my face, her eyes still dry but so full of something unspoken that I felt my own heart bend under the look.

"Don't try to stand alone," she said.

There was no anger in it.

That moved me more than anything.

Red without anger sounded like someone who had laid aside a weapon not because she had stopped fighting, but because for a moment she had to hold something more fragile.

"I wanted to come to you," I said.

"So I came to you."

"See? We're understanding one another better all the time."

It did not become a joke.

Not really.

Only the shadow of an old reflex, weak and toothless.

Red knelt before me in the mud.

She did not care who watched. Not Callum, Padraic, Donal, Maeve, the rescued girls, Cavanagh gasping on the ground with blood on his thigh and shoulder. She did not care about the road, dawn, war, Galway. For that one moment she looked only at me.

"I thought I'd lose you," she said.

The words were simple.

Naked.

She covered them with nothing.

I drew breath, but it caught in my throat.

"So did I," I answered. "For a moment."

Red shook her head.

"No. You don't understand."

Her voice trembled. Not weakness. Not shame. Something kept shut too long finally finding a crack.

"When he had the knife at your throat, I..."

She stopped. Looked aside as though near the cartwheel she might find a less cruel word.

She did not.

"I stopped thinking about Bríd," she said at last, very quietly. "For a second. Maybe less. But I did. Not Galway. Not Maeve. Not the girls in the cart. Only you. That if he moved his hand, the world would become empty."

I closed my eyes.

Not because I did not want to hear.

Because I heard too much.

Moirá beside me drew back a little, not far, only enough to give us room, but her hand remained behind my back. I felt her presence like a quiet wall. She did not intrude. She did not disappear.

Red lowered her head.

"I wanted to kill him. I still do. But more than that... more than revenge... I wanted you breathing. And that terrified me."

I looked at her.

"Why?"

Her lips trembled.

"Because when a person has something like that, the world immediately tries to tear it away."

I could no longer hold back the tears.

They were not violent. They did not come with a cry. They simply ran out, warm and quiet, mixing with the dirt on my cheeks. I was not ashamed of them. Not then. Perhaps because everything was already exposed. Perhaps because after such a night, pretending hardness would have been only another kind of lie, and I was too tired to lie even to my own face.

"Red," I said.

It sounded different than I intended.

Less certain.

More like a plea.

She looked at me and I suddenly understood that if I did not say it now, I would carry the words like another splinter left inside. Perhaps I would never get another chance. Perhaps I would, but the world had not earned trust. Too many times it had taken a moment from people before they could name it.

So I said it.

Without a joke.

Without ornament.

Without defence.

"I love you."

Red went still.

She did not move away.

She did not answer.

For one second I thought I had done something terrible, added another weight to that road, that perhaps the word 'love' was as dangerous in our world as a pistol because it could not be taken back once fired. Then I saw her eyes. And I knew the silence was not refusal. Silence was the place in which Red was trying to survive something that could not be deflected with mockery.

She breathed quickly.

She looked at me as though those two words were rescue and wound together.

"Nell..."

Only that.

My name.

But spoken in a way I could have rested inside, had the world allowed it.

"You don't have to say anything," I whispered.

That was true.

And untrue.

I wanted her to say it. Of course I did. I was wounded, terrified, too tired for pride and too alive to pretend I was not waiting. But I did not want to drag those words from her throat merely because I had let mine go first. Red had spent her life learning to swallow tenderness like blood so no one could see where she might be hurt. I did not want to become another person demanding something from her.

She shook her head.

"No."

I thought that was the answer.

My heart dropped so violently that for a moment the pain in my wound nearly vanished beneath something worse.

But Red immediately caught my hand.

"Not like that," she said quickly, as though frightened by her own word. "Not 'no' to you. No."

She swallowed.

I had never seen her like that. Red, who could walk among armed men smiling, now fought one sentence like a lock no one had taught her to open.

"I don't know how to say things like this," she said. "Not properly. Not cleanly. Everything I say comes out with teeth."

"I know."

"And if I say it, then..."

She looked at the road. At the cart. At the girls. At the mist beyond the bridge, behind which waited Bríd, Galway and the house with green doors.

"If I say it, it'll be real. And if it's real, the world will have another thing it can use to strike me."

I could not answer at once.

Because that too was true.

Love did not make us safer. Not in our world. Not with the ledger under my coat, Cavanagh in the mud, Bríd on the road to Galway and our names wanted on both sides of the sea. Love was no shelter. It was another lamp lit in a house someone could see from far away.

But perhaps that was precisely why it mattered.

Because if everything burns anyway, better to know for whom one keeps the fire in one's hands.

"I know," I said softly. "But it's already real, Red. Even if you never say it."

Her face twisted.

Not with physical pain.

With something larger.

After a moment she leaned in and rested her forehead against mine. So carefully, as though my skin were thin paper that might tear under too hard a touch.

"I love you too," she whispered.

There was nothing beautiful about those words in any songlike sense.

They were rough.

Barely forced out.

Painful.

And that was why they were true.

I felt something inside me give way. Not the wound, not fear, not guilt, because all of those remained faithful as dogs at a grave. Something else loosened. That small hard part of me that had long believed that if no one named a person loved, at least no one could take it away. Red said it in the mud, beside blood, at dawn, between abducted girls and the next road to hell, and never in my life had any words seemed less appropriate and more necessary.

Moira turned her face away, but not fast enough.

I saw tears on her cheeks.

One. Perhaps two.

No more. Even emotion was disciplined in Moira.

"Don't look at me like that," she said when she noticed my stare.

Her voice trembled.

"I didn't say anything."

"Your face did."

"My face is tired."

Red drew back a fraction, but still held my hand.

"Your face just betrayed the fact you have a heart. Fatal tactical error."

Moira wiped her cheek with her sleeve.

"After tonight we've all made worse."

And it was so gentle, so nearly tender in her mouth, that Red did not answer with a joke.

She merely reached out and touched Moira's hand for a moment. Briefly. Without words. And Moira, after one hesitation, did not pull away.

We sat like that for several breaths, three women on a wet road beside a cart from which girls had just been freed, with the man behind the transports thrown into the mud,

the ledger safe beneath my coat and Galway waiting ahead like a wound that had learned to become a city. No one hurried us for that brief moment. Even Callum, who knew better than anyone that time is the flesh the dogs of history tear apart first, stood quietly to one side and watched the road, giving us as much privacy as can be given amid blood and dawn.

And I thought then, without irony, without anger, without any blade at all, that perhaps this is what it means truly to live.

Not to be safe.

Not to be clean.

Not to be innocent.

Only to have someone whose presence makes you want to rise from the mud even when there is nowhere left to return.

Red helped me stand.

Moira supported me from the other side.

Pain returned at once, the world swayed, the road softened beneath my feet, but this time I was not afraid I would fall. Not because I was strong. I was not. Not because fate had grown kinder. It had not, and had never promised it could. Simply because I was not standing alone.

Behind us the girls wrapped themselves in blankets, drank water, wept, kept silent, learned their own hands again.

Ahead was Bríd.

Galway.

The house by the bay.

Green doors.

Red looked west, and I saw love, fear, past and anger braid themselves in her face into one decision.

"We'll go and get her," she said.

Moira nodded.

"Yes."

They looked at me.

I held the ledger with one hand and pressed the other to my breast where, beneath the coat, the wooden horse still lay.

"Yes," I said.

I added nothing.

Nothing was needed.

Dawn rose over the road dirty and pale, but it rose. And we, wounded, soaked, exhausted, too late for innocence and too early for peace, stood before it together.

And for the first time in a long while, despite everything I had lost, I did not feel cursed.

The first volume of our escape was ending.

And the war had only just found the right door.