

The Mortician's Daughter

A fairytale in a pack of cards

Cast of Characters

MARIA KOVULOR, the mortician's daughter, 18.

MR CATANACH, the mortician, 56.

MRS SOPHIE CATANACH, the mortician's wife, 16.

LARS GRIMMBAUER, the mortician's assistant, 22.

EKATERINA GRMMBAUER, the mortician's assistant's sister, 18.

MRS HERTA KOVULOR, the mortician's daughter's mother, 45.

MR KOVULOR, the mortician's daughter's father, 50.

A MARRIONETTE.

Note that MARIA and EKATERINA are virtually identical in appearance.

Also note that the manner of scene numbering follows that of a pack of cards for a reason. The intention is that the running order of the piece might be determined by shuffling a deck of fifty-two and dealing it out one card at a time. Whether each act is kept separate from one another, or that every scene is randomly placed, or even that the entire ensemble is orchestrated into place, is a decision to be left for the manipulators of the mortician's daughter.

◆/The Mortician's Workshop

A◆

[MARIA, dead, on the workbench with a sheet over her. CATANACH enters, left, with LARS, and goes into the workshop]

CATANACH. And here's our latest.

LARS. What are they like?

CATANACH. Haven't looked yet. Only got dropped off a few minutes ago.

[He pulls the sheet down to MARIA's stomach. Her face is completely crushed, bloody chunks of skull sprayed over her]

LARS *[pulls a face]*. What a mess.

CATANACH. Get the notebook.

[LARS takes a notebook and pen from the table and turns to a blank page]

LARS. Okay, go ahead.

CATANACH. Female, young, but impossible to determine a more precise age due to the facial damage. Cause of death appears to be the same: massive facial trauma. Brought in wearing a white, cotton nightdress, no scars, birthmarks, etcetera. And no-one's reported a young woman missing.

[Pause]

CATANACH. That'll do.

[LARS nods, and returns the notebook and pen to the table]

LARS. So, what are your bets for this one?

CATANACH *[examining the face]*. Hmm...fell from a high place I reckon. And landed right on her face, smashed the whole skull from the force of the impact.

LARS. Is there any skull left at all?

CATANACH. A little, round the back. Just enough to keep the rest in place. But everything else is completely crushed.

[He grunts and straightens up]

CATANACH. Aren't you finished for the day?

LARS. I wasn't sure if you wanted a hand with this one or not.

CATANACH. I'll do fine.

LARS. You haven't got much to work with. How're you going to put her face back together?

CATANACH *[smiling]*. Years of practice, boy. By tonight she'll look like she died in her sleep. Go on, get off.

LARS. Thanks, Mr Catanach.

[LARS heads for the door]

CATANACH. Give my regards to your sister.

LARS. I will.

[LARS leaves the workshop and exits, left. CATANACH turns back to MARIA]

CATANACH. Now then, my dear. Let's make you beautiful, shall we?

2♦

*[MARIA, dead, lying on the work bench, covered by a sheet from the neck down.
CATANACH is wiping traces of blood from her face]*

CATANACH. There...all back in one piece. And what a piece...without your face smashed into your brain, you really are quite beautiful.

[He wipes her face once more, tenderly. Pause as he looks at her. He slowly leans down and over her, runs his finger over her lips, then kisses her. Straightening up, he looks at her again while stroking her hair]

CATANACH. Quite beautiful...

[SOPHIE enters, left, with a cup of tea, and knocks at the workshop door. CATANACH wipes his mouth and opens it. SOPHIE gives him the cup]

CATANACH. Thank you.

[He drinks. SOPHIE goes into the workshop and looks at MARIA]

SOPHIE. This is her?

CATANACH. Yes.

[Pause]

SOPHIE. She's pretty.

CATANACH. She wasn't when she was brought in.

[Pause]

CATANACH. Besides. She's not as pretty as you.

[CATANACH puts his arm around SOPHIE, and kisses her on the head. SOPHIE leans against his chest, smiling]

3♦

[MARIA lies on the workbench, covered by a sheet. Voices are heard approaching]

LARS. ...right in the middle of the night, it-

CATANACH. You hush yourself, boy, what we're going to see-

LARS. And what *are* we going to see? All you said-

CATANACH. I said what I had to and that should be enough, I don't need-

LARS. But I'd just like to know-

[LARS and CATANACH enter, left. They stop outside the door]

CATANACH [*irritated*]. You'll know soon enough, and until then you'll mind your manners, hear?

[They stare at each other, and eventually LARS breaks contact and opens the door. CATANACH watches him angrily, then follows]

LARS. So...what?

CATANACH. The body.

LARS. What about the body?

CATANACH. Have a look.

[LARS pulls the cover off MARIA, down to her stomach]

LARS [*shrugs*]. Nice work. But couldn't it have waited till the morning?

CATANACH. Idiot! Put your ear down to her mouth.

[LARS sighs and bends down. A pause, then he straightens up sharply]

LARS. She's breathing!

CATANACH [*smiling nastily*]. I know.

LARS. She's fucking breathing!

CATANACH [*irritated*]. Watch your tongue!

LARS. But I saw her when she was brought in yesterday! Her face was completely crushed! There were chunks of skull all over the place! We even found some in her throat!

CATANACH [*irritated*]. I know.

LARS. And now she's completely fixed, and breathing! Alive! Jesus Christ...

CATANACH. Don't you blaspheme in this house.

LARS. Sorry, sorry. It's...it's just so fantastic, it's hard to believe.

[*Silence as they watch MARIA's chest rise and fall*]

CATANACH. She's beautiful, isn't she?

LARS [*uncomfortable*]. Mr Catanach...she was a corpse just an hour ago...

CATANACH [*sighs in exasperation*]. Lars, not all praise of a woman implies lust. Appreciate her as you would a work of art, as a broken sculpture that was restored so well it came to life. Beautiful.

4♦

[MARIA, on the workbench, sheet clutched to her as she tries to move away from LARS and CATANACH]

CATANACH. Careful, she'll fall off the bench if she keeps doing that. I don't think her legs are working yet.

LARS [*gently*]. It's okay, we're not going to hurt you. Just try to calm down.

[He moves towards her, and MARIA pushes herself further back on the bench]

CATANACH. She's going to fall! Go round and catch her, quick!

[LARS runs round behind MARIA as she falls off the bench, and catches her safely. In his arms she begins to shake violently, and pushes at him weakly]

CATANACH. You got her?

LARS. Yes, but she's still trying to get away. Shaking all over as well.

CATANACH. She must still be in shock.

[MARIA slaps LARS weakly, and pushes at his face]

LARS. I'd better let her go, I don't think she likes me touching her.

[He lets her go and she crawls away]

CATANACH. What have you gone and done that for? She'll hurt herself!

LARS. She's on the floor now, she can't fall off anything.

[MARIA gets up awkwardly, steadying herself on the workbench with one hand and holding the sheet with the other]

CATANACH. No, but she can still fall over! Look! She's hardly steady is she?

LARS. Well do you want me to grab her again? She virtually had a fit when I did it the first time.

[MARIA takes a few steps forwards and falls, catching herself with her hands. She crawls the rest of the way and curls up in a corner, watching LARS and CATANACH in terror]

CATANACH. She needs some clothes. Go and wake Mrs Catanach up.

[LARS nods and exits, left. CATANACH watches MARIA]

CATANACH. Can you talk?

[Pause]

CATANACH. You can understand, can't you? I'm not going to hurt you. Just nod if you can understand me.

[MARIA nods hesitantly]

CATANACH. I'm Mr Catanach. I'm a mortician. You understand?

[MARIA nods]

CATANACH. You came in her dead, but you're alive now. I fixed you up. You're alright now, understand?

[MARIA hesitates, looking confused, then nods]

CATANACH. Can you remember anything?

[MARIA shakes her head. She tries to speak, but can't make a sound and starts coughing]

CATANACH. We'll look after you. You're safe here, understand?

[MARIA nods. LARS enters, left, with SOPHIE, and goes into the workshop. Pause]

SOPHIE. This one.

CATANACH. The girl brought in earlier. No name, no family.

SOPHIE. I saw her...she was brought in dead.

CATANACH. Yes.

[Silence as LARS, CATANACH and SOPHIE look at MARIA]

SOPHIE. I'll find some clothes.

[She exits, left]

5♦

[*SOPHIE, with clothes, and MARIA*]

SOPHIE. Come on, they're gone now. Drop that sheet and put these on.

[*MARIA doesn't move*]

SOPHIE [*waves*]. Can you hear me?

[*MARIA nods*]

SOPHIE. Still can't speak then?

[*MARIA shakes her head*]

SOPHIE. So...I could strangle you down here, and no-one would be the wiser... what do you think of that?

[*She moves towards MARIA, who moves away fearfully. SOPHIE stops*]

SOPHIE [*laughs*]. Oh come on, I'm only joking. Jumpy thing, aren't you?

[*MARIA tries to speak, but can't and begins coughing*]

SOPHIE. Shame your voice is taking so long to come back. If it's going to come back at all of course.

[*She puts the clothes on the workbench*]

SOPHIE. Alright, let's get you dressed.

[*Pause*]

SOPHIE. Well come on, drop the sheet and get dressed. I know you can understand me, so hurry it up.

[*Pause*]

SOPHIE. What's the matter? The men are gone, there's nothing to be embarrassed about.

[*Pause*]

SOPHIE. Don't you like the clothes? I know they're nothing special, but it's all I've got in your size. Used to belong to my sister, God rest her soul.

[*Pause*]

SOPHIE [*annoyed*]. Look, I know I'm not as old as you, but this is my house and you're not in your right mind. Give me the sheet and get dressed.

[*Pause. SOPHIE steps forwards and snatches at the sheet, but MARIA moves back too quickly for her. SOPHIE glares at her*]

SOPHIE [*angrily*]. What the hell is the matter with you? Do as you're told!

[*MARIA tries to speak again, and coughs. She has started shaking*]

SOPHIE [*sighs, calming*]. Look, what if I left the room as well? Will you get dressed then?

[*MARIA nods*]

SOPHIE. Fine. Be careful you don't fall over, shaking like that.

[*CATANACH enters, left, as SOPHIE leaves the workshop and closes the door*]

CATANACH. Is she dressed?

[*MARIA looks around the workshop to make sure it is clear, then drops the sheet and dresses; a white dress.*]

SOPHIE. She wouldn't start till I left.

CATANACH. You left her in there alone?

SOPHIE. It was either that or dress her myself.

[*CATANACH grunts. Pause*]

SOPHIE. She's very nervous, isn't she?

CATANACH. She start shaking again?

SOPHIE. Just after I tried to get the sheet off her.

CATANACH. Can't say I blame her. Dying, Sophie...it's bound to leave a mark.

6♦

[LARS, CATANACH and SOPHIE are at the door of the workshop. MARIA, dressed, is inside, looking about the room nervously]

LARS. Together? She's scared enough as it is.

CATANACH. We're not going to hurt her.

LARS. She doesn't know that. It could come over as threatening.

CATANACH. It won't so long as we don't *make* it threatening. Come on.

[He opens the door and leads them inside the workshop. MARIA turns to face them quickly, and backs away as far as she can]

CATANACH. Easy, girl. You're safe here.

MARIA [*hoarse, terrified*]. Who are you?

[*She begins coughing*]

CATANACH [*awe*]. So you *can* talk. Amazing...

MARIA. Where am I?

LARS. We're in the house of Mr Catanach, and this is his workshop.

CATANACH. I'm a mortician. Do you remember me telling you earlier?

MARIA. You said I was dead.

[*She begins coughing*]

CATANACH. That I did.

LARS. But now-

CATANACH [*to SOPHIE*]. Go and get her a glass of water.

[*SOPHIE looks at CATANACH in annoyance*]

MARIA. I'm not dead!

LARS. You're not dead now, but you were...when you arrived. You were dead.

[*SOPHIE exits, left*]

MARIA. Then how am I alive now?

CATANACH. We don't know. It's a miracle.

LARS. Do you remember anything?

MARIA. I can only remember waking up here. Without my clothes.

CATANACH. You had on a white nightdress, but it was removed and burned when you were brought in. The stains wouldn't have come out.

MARIA. What stains?

CATANACH. Bloodstains.

[*MARIA gags, covering her mouth and stepping away from them*]

LARS [*quickly*]. But you're fine now, Mr Catanach mended you perfectly. You won't notice anything different.

MARIA [*frantic*]. I have to wash my hands, I have to wash my hands.

CATANACH [*moving towards the sink*]. Here, come over to the sink.

[*MARIA hurries over to the sink, beginning to cry. CATANACH turns on the water. MARIA puts her hands in the basin, then leans into it and vomits*]

7♦

[CATANACH, by the workbench, turned away from the door. A glass of water rests on top of the sheet. Slowly, he puts his hand to his mouth and runs it down, over his lips]

CATANACH. What a beautiful creature you are, little girl...

[SOPHIE enters, left, and goes into the workshop]

SOPHIE. She's in bed.

CATANACH [*turns to her*]. Asleep?

SOPHIE. I don't know. Certainly not when I closed the door. But I wouldn't expect different from anybody.

CATANACH. No, I expect not.

[*Pause*]

SOPHIE. I wonder what it's like.

CATANACH. To return from the dead?

SOPHIE. To die. Like a dark dream, winding up and around the mind, blackening the soul before crushing it entirely. We are your toys, oh father. Watch us dance, watch us fall. When the demon's machinations touch our strings, will you tell us? Watch us dance, watch us fall.

CATANACH [*fondly, touches her face*]. You've been writing again.

SOPHIE [*blushing*]. Just a little.

CATANACH. My clever girl...

[*He kisses her*]

SOPHIE [*breathlessly*]. Touch me, Mr Catanach, touch me.

CATANACH [*as if to a child*]. Shh, shh...

[*He puts one hand on her back. The other slides down her face, over her throat, between her breasts, past her stomach, and finally comes to rest between her legs*]

SOPHIE. Treat me as you would a wide-eyed doll; abuse me, destroy me, but love me with every inch that you give.

[*He pushes his fingers against her, and she gasps*]

CATANACH. Sophie...my beautiful Sophie...

SOPHIE. Beautiful, beautiful...

[*She places one hand on the back of his neck and the other on the lower of his hands. She kisses him passionately, and grinds his fingers against her. She is breathing heavily now, although he hasn't changed at all*]

SOPHIE. Let me drink you, I will have all of you.

CATANACH. All, she says?

SOPHIE [*desperately*]. All, all!

CATANACH. Then you'll have it...with no fabric to shield my fingers...

[*He lifts her skirt and slides his hand underneath. SOPHIE cries out, clutching his neck*]

SOPHIE. Oh God!

CATANACH. There is no god here besides me.

SOPHIE. My Lord and Saviour...

CATANACH. For ever and ever.

SOPHIE [*ecstasy*]. Amen.

[*The kiss*]

CATANACH. Undress yourself for me.

[*SOPHIE unbuttons the front of her dress. CATANACH kisses the tops of her breasts, and SOPHIE arches her back with another cry. He breaks away, and puts both hands on her hips*]

CATANACH. Onto the workbench.

[*She steps back and sits in the workbench, legs dangling*]

CATANACH. You'll be a corpse for me, pale and unable to resist.

[*SOPHIE jumps off the bench, and moves away from him*]

SOPHIE [*angry*]. I'll be nobody's corpse!

CATANACH. Sophie.

SOPHIE. Pig!

CATANACH [*command*]. Sophie!

[*She stops and becomes still. CATANACH extends his hand to her*]

CATANACH. Come here, child.

[*Pause. SOPHIE smiles seductively*]

SOPHIE. Child? Was it this child's hips that first hooked your eye? Or her breasts, that drew you closer, or her sex, thinly veiled in a sopping wet, white dress, that persuaded you, finally? This child, that cast aside the shroud of puberty so early. This child, who wrapped her legs about you, and whimpered, and bled, under your ministrations. This child, who has forgotten even the meaning of the word 'maiden'. This child, that you married. This child?

[*Silence as CATANACH walks over to her slowly*]

CATANACH. A young woman. An innocent woman. But a woman none the less. I never wanted to wear the skin of an infant.

[He takes her in his arms. They kiss. He puts his hand on her breast]

8♦

[LARS, alone in the workshop. He moves about the space, tidying. Finally he comes to the white sheet, on the workbench. He smooths the material out on the bench slowly, gentle and tender. His eyes are thoughtful. EKATERINA enters, left, and knocks on the door. LARS goes to the door and opens it]

LARS [*signs*]. Ekaterina? What are you doing here?

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. He finished early again? That man isn't worth the money.

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*shrugs, signs*]. I suppose, so long as you're learning.

[She goes into the workshop, and he closes the door]

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. No, not yet. Why? Are you hungry?

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. Okay, we'll go when I've finished clearing up.

[He begins folding the sheet]

LARS. We had someone come in last night who reminded me of you.

EKATERINA [*frowns, signs*].

LARS. Sorry. [*Signs*].

EKATERINA [*pulls a face of disgust, signs*].

LARS [*laughs, signs*]. I didn't mean it like that.

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. I don't know...her eyes maybe? I can't remember. Forget it, I don't know what I'm talking about.

[He continues folding the sheet, then pauses and glances at her]

LARS [*motioning, signs*]. Come here.

EKATERINA [*moving over, signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. Nothing bad. Just stand there.

[He picks up the sheet and moves towards her, but she backs away]

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS. It's fine, it's clean.

EKATERINA [*annoyed, signs*].

LARS [*sighs, puts down the sheet, signs*]. It's clean. It hasn't even been near a corpse.

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. It's just a bit of fun, come on.

[EKATERINA rolls her eyes, but goes back to him. LARS takes the sheet and slowly wraps it around her. Silence, as they realise that they are very close]

LARS [*signs*]. Ekaterina...I know that we're family, but...

[Pause]

LARS [*signs*]. You're beautiful.

EKATERINA [*signs, looks down and blushes*].

LARS [*signs*]. You're even more beautiful when you blush.

[He lifts her chin. Pause. He kisses her, tenderly. They break apart, and EKATERINA steps away]

EKATERINA [*ashamed, signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. Please don't be like that. There's nothing to be ashamed about.

EKATERINA [*signs, crying*].

LARS [*signs*]. I *know* you're my sister! It doesn't have to mean anything if we don't let it!

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. Fuck the priest, when has he ever treated us well?

EKATERINA [*angry, signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. I'm sorry, I'm sorry...I just...just forget it.

[He sighs. Pause]

LARS [*signs*]. Perhaps you'd better go and wait upstairs. I'll be done in a few minutes.

[EKATERINA puts the sheet back on the workbench and leaves the workshop, closing the door behind her. LARS picks up the sheet and folds it. EKATERINA leans against the door and gently touches herself through her dress, crying. LARS puts the sheet to his nose and inhales slowly]

9♦

[LARS, in the workshop, the folded white sheet to his nose, and EKATERINA, leaning against the door, touching herself through her dress. Hearing footsteps, she quickly removes her hand and exits, left, passing CATANACH on the way. LARS puts down the sheet. CATANACH glances at EKATERINA, then watches her go, before opening the door and going into the workshop]

CATANACH. I think I passed your sister on the way in.

LARS. We're going to lunch together.

CATANACH. She seemed upset. Didn't greet me.

LARS. Really?

CATANACH. She didn't say anything?

LARS. No.

[CATANACH shrugs. Going to the workbench, he takes the sheet and puts it away in a cupboard]

CATANACH. She looks...very similar to our resurrection, don't you think?

LARS. Resurrection?

CATANACH. The girl.

LARS. Oh. I hadn't noticed.

CATANACH. It's striking. Almost identical. If I hadn't worked on the girl, I wouldn't be able to tell the difference between them.

LARS. Is she up?

CATANACH. Still sleeping, soundly. She's very peaceful when she sleeps, not a flicker of movement. Almost as if she was dead again.

LARS. Sleeping the sleep of death.

CATANACH. Quite.

LARS. So you've been watching her sleep?

CATANACH. Checked in on her a few times. See how she's doing.

LARS. Are you going to study her?

CATANACH [*thoughtfully*]. No...no, she doesn't need something like that now. She needs compassion and support.

LARS [*nastily*]. I'm sure she'll get plenty here.

CATANACH [*suspicious*]. And what do you mean by that?

LARS. Nothing. Just a little humour.

CATANACH [*annoyed*]. Keep it to yourself, boy.

[*LARS shrugs, smiling unpleasantly*]

LARS. So what do you make of her? Our Sleeping Beauty?

CATANACH. What's to make? We know nothing about her or why she came back to life. And she can't remember a thing.

LARS. Have you thought of a name for her yet?

CATANACH. She's got a name.

LARS. Before she died, perhaps. But not now that she's been born again.

CATANACH. Names don't die. If she had one before, she has one now.

LARS. Not one that she remembers.

CATANACH. So? I've no right to give her another.

LARS. What are you going to do instead? Keep referring to her as 'that girl'? Besides, you're as good her father now, you said it yourself.

CATANACH. I didn't conceive her.

LARS. Not in the normal way. But you made her. And without any memories, she's a child once more.

CATANACH. I put her back together. It's not the same.

LARS. Regardless, as it stands she has no name.

CATANACH [*annoyed*]. And I'm not going to give her one.

LARS. Why not?

CATANACH. Because to name something is to create it and to control it. I don't want that.

LARS [*mocking*]. Poetry? Master, I'm impressed.

CATANACH [*angry*]. Enough of your lip, boy! I'm not giving her a name and that's it! If you've finished down here then get off to lunch and stop bothering me.

LARS. As you will. But her not having a name is just as bad.

CATANACH. She'll have a name. But of her own choosing, whatever she ends up with. Her own choosing.

10♦

[MARIA, sitting on a chair reading an old, tattered book. Her hands are red raw from washing them so often. LARS enters, left, and goes into the workshop. MARIA starts at his presence, getting up and starting to move away]

LARS. It's alright, only me. Lars. You remember?

MARIA. Yes.

[She relaxes somewhat, but doesn't sit back down]

LARS. So you've been reading?

MARIA. Yes.

LARS. Can I see?

[He steps forward, hand outstretched. MARIA puts the book down on the floor and backs off quickly. LARS pauses, then goes and picks it up]

LARS *[looking the book over]*. The Spun Garden...I don't know this one.

[He opens the book]

MARIA. It's fairytales.

LARS. So it is... 'The Night-Time Sea to the Void'... 'The Marionette Ballet'... 'The Lady of Smoke'... 'The Cat Wedding'... 'Maria in the Puppet Factory'-

MARIA. That one.

LARS. Sorry?

MARIA. Maria.

LARS. Maria in the Puppet Factory? What about it?

MARIA. My name...Mr Catanach said I should think of one for myself...or find one.

LARS. And you want to be called Maria?

MARIA. Yes.

LARS. Well then, it's very nice to meet you, Maria.

[He extends his hand in greeting. MARIA looks at the hand uneasily, then curtsies awkwardly. LARS looks troubled, and bows in response to her]

LARS. I was always an avid reader of Grimm's fairytales...maybe just because of my surname, Grimmbauer. But I thought they were good. What about these?

MARIA. I like them...some of them are very sad, and sometimes what happens to the characters is horrible...but I like them. They let me escape.

LARS [*carefully*]. Escape from what?

[Pause. MARIA watches him, cautious]

MARIA. Nothing. They're just nice to read.

[LARS studies her. MARIA drops her gaze to the floor. Pause]

LARS. Would you favour me a reading?

MARIA [*looking up*]. A reading?

LARS. Reading one of the stories out loud. Any story you want.

[He places the book on the chair, then steps back]

LARS [*indicating the book*]. Please.

[MARIA approaches the book cautiously, watching LARS. She picks up the book]

MARIA. I can't read very well.

LARS. That's okay. Take your time.

[MARIA sits down on the chair and opens the book. She slips through it for a while before settling on a story. Although nervous, she reads well]

MARIA. The Princess and the Thorns. Once upon a time, in a faraway land that has not been visited by outsiders in a thousand years, there lived a princess. She dwelt in a tower of white marble, taller than all the mountains of the world and almost as beautiful as the princess herself. Intricate carvings, designs and statutes adorned the tower, all the way up from its base to its rooftop. And should mud, or paint, or dust touch the tower, it remained as white as the day it was built. Even blood, which stains all things with its crimson caress, could not overcome the tower's purity.

[Slowly, LARS moves around behind her. Lost in the story, MARIA doesn't notice him]

MARIA. Around the tower, and covering all the land, grew monstrous hedges of thorns, thirty feet high and as sharp as daggers. For the mortals of that place, it was sheer madness to travel through them, and the princess was no different. She remained in her tower for twenty years, looking out each day over her overgrown domain. She had little to occupy her time; her mother had died bringing her into the world and her father followed shortly thereafter, happier to hurl himself from the tower's battlements than be apart from his queen. Unloved since her beginning, surrounded by servants who became mute at her approach, the princess soon became desperate for companionship. Despite their refusal to-

[LARS places his hands on MARIA's shoulders. She jerks away from him instantly, knocking over the chair in her haste to escape and moving to the left wall]

MARIA [*terrified*]. Don't touch me!

LARS. I'm sorry, I was just trying to look over your shoulder-

MARIA [*shaking*]. I don't like being touched!

LARS [*sincerely*]. Okay, I'm sorry. I won't do it again.

[MARIA opens the door and hastily exits, left. LARS sighs and runs his eyes tiredly]

I♦

[The workbench is spattered with blood, a similarly stained white sheet scrunched on the floor. CATANACH is wiping the workbench clean with a damp cloth. MARIA enters, left, book clutched tightly to her, and cautiously opens the workshop door]

CATANACH *[looks up]*. Come in, Maria.

[MARIA goes into the workshop, but stops just inside]

CATANACH. Been reading again?

MARIA. Yes.

CATANACH. Same book?

MARIA. Yes.

[He nods and goes back to his work. After a few moments he looks up again]

CATANACH. Well come and sit down then.

[MARIA looks at the chair nervously, but doesn't move]

CATANACH. Come on, don't be shy. I'm not going to bite.

[MARIA doesn't move]

CATANACH *[shrugs]*. As you like.

[He goes back to his work. After a few moments, MARIA cautiously approaches the chair. CATANACH watches her out of the corner of his eye. MARIA picks up the chair and moves it away from him, to the far right wall. She sits down and opens the book]

CATANACH. Is it good then? The book.

MARIA. It's...it's nice.

CATANACH. Just nice?

MARIA. I don't know what else to say about it.

CATANACH. What about it makes it nice? The writing? The stories themselves?

MARIA. I don't know. I...I just like it.

[*Silence*]

MARIA. Have you read it?

CATANACH. That one? No. I can't remember ever seeing it, before you found it the other day.

[*Pause*]

CATANACH. But I was never one for fairytales. Real life's complicated enough.

[*SOPHIE enters, left, and approaches the workshop door*]

MARIA. I like to-

[*SOPHIE opens the door and goes into the workshop. The other two look at her. Pause*]

SOPHIE. Good afternoon, Maria.

MARIA [*frightened*]. Good afternoon.

CATANACH [*coldly*]. I told you to bring down clean sheets, Mrs Catanach. Where are they?

SOPHIE [*wounded*]. I must have forgotten them. I'll...I'll get them now.

CATANACH. See that you do.

[*SOPHIE exits, left, quickly, head bowed*]

CATANACH. You were saying?

MARIA [*still afraid*]. No. It was nothing. Nothing.

[*She pulls her legs up to her chest and begins to read. CATANACH watches her for a moment, then goes back to his work*]

Q♦

[*CATANACH and LARS in the workshop, a body covered by a white sheet lying on the workbench with blood staining the cloth from the chest. CATANACH is looking under the cloth*]

LARS. Well?

CATANACH [*absently*]. What?

LARS. Your verdict.

CATANACH. I'm looking.

LARS. Stab wound to the chest, looks like.

CATANACH [*lets go of the sheet*]. Probably. We'll do a full check though.

LARS. Why bother?

CATANACH. Better safe than sorry.

[*SOPHIE enters, left, and goes into the workshop*]

SOPHIE [*angrily*]. Again! She's done it again!

CATANACH. Is there a problem, Mrs Catanach?

SOPHIE. There is. One that lives with us. You may have seen it about the place, book in hand, nerves in pieces.

CATANACH [*coldly*]. I presume we are discussing, Maria?

SOPHIE. A fat lot of good the girl is! I try getting her to work in the shop and she goes to pieces! Locked inside her own head, a lunatic child of the asylum!

CATANACH. Mind your manners, woman. That's our daughter you're talking about.

SOPHIE [*acidly*]. My apologies. I wasn't aware a woman was capable of giving birth to a child two years older than herself.

CATANACH [*sharply*]. She is under our guardianship. Consider her a valuable art object that it is in your best interests to treat delicately.

[*He grips her wrist*]

CATANACH. I hope I've made myself understood.

[*SOPHIE holds his stare for a few moments, then drops her gaze*]

CATANACH [*not turning his head*]. Lars. Go and see to Maria.

[*LARS exits, left. SOPHIE begins to cry. Gently, CATANACH lifts her chin*]

CATANACH [*softly*]. Look at me.

[*She does*]

CATANACH. I just want you to be kind to her. Nothing gets better from shouting and anger.

SOPHIE [*despairingly*]. She's taking you away from me.

CATANACH. No, Sophie. That's not true. She's our daughter. I would never touch her skin.

SOPHIE. Do you promise?

CATANACH. You need a promise from me?

SOPHIE. Promise that you'll always miss me, whenever I'm not by your side. Always.

CATANACH. That's already true. It's been true since you first bled onto my lap, and it will always be true. Always.

K♦

[MARIA, washing her hands at the sink. She scrubs the skin hard, taking a long time. LARS enters, left, and goes into the workshop. MARIA turns off the tap and watches LARS carefully, but doesn't move]

LARS. It's only me.

[Pause]

LARS. I don't frighten you so much anymore, do I?

MARIA. I see you every day.

LARS. But you still stop to watch me? What is it you think I'll do?

MARIA. I don't know.

[Pause. She lowers her gaze, and takes a towel to dry her hands]

MARIA. This world is very frightening.

LARS. Have you visited others?

MARIA. I could have...before. I don't know.

LARS. Do you feel that you have?

MARIA. No. But even this one scares me.

LARS. You're right to be wary...there are a lot of things in the world that are frightening. But I'm not one of them. Neither are Mr and Mrs Catanach.

MARIA. They've been...very kind to me.

LARS. You must feel some degree of safety here. Mr Catanach says you sleep very soundly.

MARIA. I don't feel it. I'm tired...all the time, Lars. Always tired. But I don't like to sleep. I worry...I worry that I won't wake up.

LARS. That won't happen.

[Pause. MARIA quickly heads for the door]

LARS. Are you going?

MARIA. I just...I want to...

[LARS moves to block the door]

LARS. Can you stay, just for a minute? I want to talk to you about something.

MARIA *[increasingly nervous]*. Please let me go, Lars.

LARS. Just for a minute. I promise.

[MARIA steps back, holding her hands to herself]

LARS. I wanted to ask...have you thought about going outside? It's been nearly a month since you...

[Pause]

LARS. Well, you haven't gone outside in all that time.

MARIA. It's nice here.

LARS. It's nice out there too. Sunshine. Fresh air. It's not good to stay indoors all the time.

MARIA *[starting to shake]*. I'm safe here. I don't want to go outside.

LARS. Can you just consider it? Please? I can go with you, for a walk in the park. Nothing will happen to you.

MARIA. I'll think about it.

LARS. Okay. Thank you.

[He moves away from the door. MARIA hurries out of it, and exits, left]

♣/The Park

A♣

[LARS, centre, a coat on in addition to his usual clothes. He inhales deeply and looks around him]

LARS. Maria? Come on, we're here now.

[MARIA enters, left, slowly. She is wearing a red coat over her white dress, and has her hands in her pockets]

LARS. The park. What do you think?

MARIA. It's cold.

LARS. And?

MARIA. And?

LARS. Anything else, apart from cold?

MARIA. Bright. Big.

LARS. But do you like it?

MARIA. It's different.

LARS. That doesn't have to mean it's worse.

MARIA. But it is.

[She looks about her uneasily]

LARS. What don't you like about it?

MARIA [*worried*]. I have to get home, Lars.

LARS. We'll go back in a minute. What don't you like about it?

MARIA. Please, I have to wash my hands, we have to go back.

LARS. Just try to focus on the moment, Maria. Nothing's going to hurt you, just relax and think. Can you do that for me?

MARIA [*desperate*]. We can't stay here!

LARS. Take a deep breath, keep calm. You're safe with me, wherever we go. Go on, take a deep breath.

[*Their eyes meet. Pause. MARIA takes a deep breath*]

LARS. Now tell me what you don't like about being outside. I'm not going to be angry, I just want to understand.

MARIA. It's...it's dirty. It's open. It's not safe here.

LARS. What do you think will hurt you?

MARIA. The world is full of cruel inventions.

LARS. And you're afraid of them?

MARIA [*beginning to cry*]. Other people are the cruellest of them all.

[*She turns away from him, takes her hands out of her pockets, looks at them*]

MARIA. The dirt...it's all over my hands.

LARS [*looking*]. They're clean, Maria. If anything you wash them too often.

MARIA [*bitterly*]. They're covered in filth.

LARS [*sighs*]. Come on...let's get back to the workshop.

[*They exit, left*]

2♣

[LARS and EKATERINA are strolling across the stage. The latter is wearing a white dress and red coat over the top]

LARS [*signs*]. So how was the funeral?

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*nods, signs*]. Good. I'm sorry I couldn't come, Mr Catanach wouldn't give me the time off. We're busy at the moment. Lots of people are dying...flu going round, killing off the elderly...

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. I'm not going funny. Death is my business, as it always will be. I've known that since I worked on my first corpse...it didn't bother me. Somebody's got to take care of the dead, Ekaterina. Better it be someone who won't have nightmares about it.

[Silence. LARS stops by a tree and looks around him]

LARS [*to himself*]. The spun garden...

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. Nothing...just thinking out loud.

[Pause]

LARS [*signs*]. I've been doing a lot of thinking lately, Ekaterina. About our kiss in the workshop.

EKATERINA [*upset, signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. No. I'm not accepting that answer this time. There's something between us, something that transcends blood and taboos.

[He moves closer to her. She looks down, ashamed, but doesn't move away]

LARS. Please look at me, Ekaterina. I can't sign to you like this.

[He brushes her cheek. She looks up]

LARS [*signs*]. I love you. I love you more than any brother could love his sister. I love you more than any man could love his wife.

[He kisses her. EKATERINA pushes him away angrily, crying]

EKATERINA [*angry, signs*].

LARS [*angry, signs*]. You feel it too, you can't deny it!

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. Yes you do. You're just afraid.

EKATERINA [*signs*].

[EKATERINA goes to move away, but LARS grabs her wrist. He pulls her too him, then holds her against the tree. He kisses her again; this time EKATERINA fights against it. LARS pulls away. Pause]

LARS [*unhappily, signs*]. That's it then...I'll see you at home.

[LARS exits, right. EKATERINA leans against the tree and slides down to crouch at its base. She puts her head in her hands and weeps]

3♣

[*EKATERINA, against the tree. She is crying. Eventually she calms herself, wipes away her tears, and stands. SOPHIE enters, left*]

SOPHIE. Maria.

[*EKATERINA pays her no attention, and moves right*]

SOPHIE. Maria! Don't ignore me, I know you heard!

[*SOPHIE throws a stone at EKATERINA who glances at her, confused*]

SOPHIE. That's right, I'm talking to you. Come here.

EKATERINA [*signs*].

SOPHIE. Don't waggle your fingers at me, witch!

[*She goes towards EKATERINA*]

SOPHIE. That's right: witch. I can't deny that you're capable of magic; rising from the dead isn't something most people can do. And I've never met another woman before me who could bewitch my husband's eye.

EKATERINA [*signs*].

[*SOPHIE draws a knife from her sleeve, and has it against EKATERINA's throat too quickly for her to flee*]

SOPHIE. Keep your hands still, snake! You'll not enchant me. Born again, just as Christ was. But you're no saviour. A sorceress heretic, ready for the fire.

[*EKATERINA begins to cry*]

SOPHIE. Save me your funeral waters, whore. When I first wooed the mortician I was only fourteen. Can you imagine? Fourteen years old. But I was no babe; the good Lord saw fit to furnish me with a constitution six years my senior.

[She presses the knife further into EKATERINA's neck]

SOPHIE. I made him mine! And mine he shall stay until fate puts out my candle!

[She withdraws slightly]

SOPHIE. No words? And no shaking either? You *have* come a long way...long enough to spread your legs for him, perhaps? It's certainly not for his health that he spends all night in your room. Pale Maria the mortician's daughter, beauty and beast and corpse and all!

[She reaches into her handbag]

SOPHIE. But I shan't harm you today, my little prostitute of the depraved.

[Takes a rose from her handbag]

SOPHIE. Today, I only give you this.

[Gives her the rose]

SOPHIE. It's a warning. Don't even consider it any less. Free my husband from your spell, that's all I ask.

[She returns the knife to her sleeve]

SOPHIE. I'll return when the rose is in full bloom.

[SOPHIE exits, left]

4♣

[*MARIA and LARS, slowly crossing the stage*]

LARS. Okay, how about now? Is it better this time?

MARIA. A little.

LARS. It'll get easier each time. Just like with me, and the other people you've met. Do you remember how scared you were of us at first?

MARIA. Yes.

LARS. And now you don't even watch us when we're with you in the same room. You trust us enough to ignore us.

MARIA [*quickly*]. I don't ignore you, it's not like that-

[*She stops and blushes*]

LARS. What is it like?

MARIA. Nothing.

[*Pause*]

LARS. You know you can talk to me about anything, Maria.

MARIA. Yes.

LARS. Anything at all. However difficult you think it'll be, you can tell me. I wouldn't laugh at you.

MARIA. I know.

LARS. Okay.

[*Pause*]

MARIA. Thank you.

LARS. I haven't done anything for you yet, Maria.

MARIA. You have. And I'm thankful for it.

[*Pause*]

LARS. We'd better get back.

[*He offers her his hand. She looks at it warily, and doesn't take it*]

LARS. You still don't trust me completely then.

MARIA. I don't like to be touched.

LARS. Or to touch others yourself.

MARIA. No.

LARS. You're going to be very lonely when you're old, Maria.

MARIA. It won't matter.

[*They exit, left*]

5♣

[MARIA, left, with her book. She looks about the empty park cautiously, then heads for the tree and sits down, begins to read. Silence. She looks around again, then begins to read aloud]

MARIA. Once upon a time, there was a little town on the banks on a great lake. The town was ordinary, and nothing of note happened there for many years. Its people lived and died without comment, never famous, never insightful, never interesting. The town produced not a single famous painter, musician, or author. It would have passed on into obscurity, forgotten by everyone else in the world...if it hadn't been for the Puppet Factory.

[Strings are pulled from above, and a featureless MARIONETTE sits up in the bushes]

The builders of the Puppet Factory arrived in the night, and began their work immediately. And when the townspeople came out of their houses to see what all the noise was about, they found not men labouring in the dark, but marionettes. Hundreds upon hundreds of wooden, faceless marionettes, their strings stretching high up into the clouds.

[The MARIONETTE moves towards the centre of the stage]

MARIA. The villagers were frightened by the ghostly puppets and returned to their houses to wait till morning. The marionette builders ignored them, working with the speed of the devil all through the night and on into the morning. For a whole month, the marionettes were there when the villagers got up and when they went to bed.

[The MARIONETTE moves over to the tree]

MARIA. And what had marionettes built, at the end of that month? That most curious of things: a Puppet Factory. Built by puppets to build puppets, the Factory went on to operate as mysteriously as it had been created. Its army of parents passing through its front gates and out of sight; as they disappeared their strings fell away, yet the marionettes stood upright, able to move on their own whims.

[The MARIONETTE's strings are severed and pulled away into the sky. It stretches and moves without them]

MARIA. But the marionettes were not the only residents of the Puppet Factory. A family lived there: the master puppet maker, his wife, and their daughter, Maria. All three live alone. The master puppet maker is eternally busy with his creations, and Maria's mother despises her child so much that she banishes the girl to a tiny attic.

[The MARIONETTE crouches down beside MARIA]

MARIA. Here, Maria slides into her imagination to escape the cold, uncaring world. The puppets, all different shapes and sizes, are her constant companions. In other lives Maria forgets, temporarily, her own life; the puppets are her brothers and sisters, allies and enemies, husbands and lovers.

[The MARIONETTE puts its hands on MARIA's shoulders]

MARIA. While she has the mind to pretend, Maria can forget her loneliness. But the further she is carried from childhood...the more imaginary her imaginations become...the less she believes her own creations...

[The MARIONETTE moves one hand gently onto her throat, stroking the skin, and kisses the back of her head. MARIA stops, tensing. The MARIONETTE abandons her and returns to the bushes. MARIA turns around sharply, but the MARIONETTE is already gone]

6♣

[*MARIA, sat by the tree, open book in hand, turned to look behind her. HERTA enters, right, unnoticed by MARIA*]

HERTA. I know that story.

[*MARIA turns to her, startled and afraid*]

HERTA. But I haven't heard it...in a long time. What's your name, girl?

[*MARIA gets hurriedly to her feet and begins to back away*]

HERTA [*icily*]. I asked you your name.

MARIA [*terrified*]. Stay away from me!

HERTA. I beg your pardon?

MARIA. Don't touch me!

HERTA [*annoyed*]. I'm nowhere near you. Now tell me your name.

[*MARIA backs away*]

HERTA. Where are you going? Stay still, girl!

MARIA. Let me be!

HERTA. Tell me who you are first. That book under your arm: where did you get it? Did you steal it from me?

MARIA. I haven't stolen anything!

HERTA. Then how did you come by the book? Answer me, girl!

[*MARIA exits, left, running*]

7♣

[*CATANACH, with SOPHIE*]

SOPHIE. It's nice today. Some sun, creeping through the clouds.

[*CATANACH looks around. Silence*]

SOPHIE. And it's warmer. It's been so cold lately.

[*Pause*]

SOPHIE [*sadly*]. You're thinking about her, aren't you?

CATANACH. Hmm?

SOPHIE. Never mind.

[*Pause*]

SOPHIE. I love you.

CATANACH [*not paying attention*]. What's that?

SOPHIE. I said I love you.

CATANACH. Is that a fact?

[*Pause. He looks at her*]

CATANACH. You'd better.

SOPHIE [*fiercely*]. I do, Mr Catanach, I'd give any-

CATANACH. Why do you call me that?

[*SOPHIE reacts as if struck in the belly. Silence*]

SOPHIE [*deeply hurt and unhappy*]. What?

CATANACH. After two years of marriage.

[*He moves away from her*]

CATANACH. You still won't use my first name, when we're alone.

SOPHIE. I thought...I thought that...

CATANACH. Thought what?

SOPHIE. Please...don't do this to me, darling.

CATANACH. What would you rather I do to you? Embed my fingers? Is that all we are to each other, Sophie? Meat?

SOPHIE [*savagely*]. Only since you butchered us.

CATANACH [*savagely*]. But you were happy enough to swallow your cut, weren't you?

SOPHIE [*furiously*]. Aye, till I saw the maggots inside!

[*Silence*]

CATANACH [*coldly*]. I've no hand in snapping our ring, though you seem to be dragging me there. Either tear out your green eyes, or tear out your heart.

[*CATANACH exits, left*]

8♣

[*LARS, with MARIA. The latter is nervous, looking around her*]

LARS. Are you alright?

[*She doesn't reply*]

LARS. Maria?

MARIA. Yes?

LARS. Is everything all right?

MARIA. I'm fine.

LARS. You're tense.

MARIA. Am I?

LARS. What are you looking for?

MARIA. Nothing.

[*She looks down at the floor*]

LARS. Did something happen yesterday?

MARIA. Nothing happened.

[*LARS opens his mouth to speak, but stops, sighing. Pause*]

LARS [*quietly, quickly*]. Maria, I want to help you. But I can't do that if you won't let me in.

MARIA. I don't-

LARS. Please let me finish. You *are* sick. Normal people don't wash their hands as much as you, or sleep as still as you do, or mistrust *everything*, as you do.

[He takes her hand, MARIA tenses, starting to panic]

MARIA. Let me go, Lars.

LARS. No, I won't, not this time. I love you dearly, Maria, and I want you to get better. You've lost something, in death, but you *can* get it back, and you will! I'll make sure you do. But you have to let me in, you have to tell me things, you have to-

MARIA. Let me go!

[She pulls away from him. Out of his grasp she is less scared, but turns away and begins to cry. Silence]

LARS. You have to trust me.

[Pause]

LARS. Do you trust me, Maria?

[Pause]

MARIA *[still not looking at him]*. No.

[MARIA exits, left]

9♣

[*LARS, alone in the park, lost in thought*]

LARS. Why...why can't I touch her...*he* wouldn't approve...that's why, Lars...that's why...

[*EKATERINA enters, right, stops abruptly when she sees LARS*]

LARS [*signs*]. Ekaterina.

[*Pause*]

LARS [*signs*]. You know...I love to sign your name. It's beautiful.

EKATERINA [*angry, signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. It *is* beautiful. And so are you.

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. It doesn't make you any less beautiful.

EKATERINA [*furious, signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. I know. And I'm sorry. But I meant every word...I only wished you felt the same way.

[*Pause. LARS suddenly grabs EKATERINA and kisses her. She slaps him and pushes him away*]

EKATERINA [*furious, signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. If you don't want me, why didn't you fight it before? Why now?

[*Pause*]

LARS [*signs*]. I should like...to make love to you, Ekaterina.

EKATERINA [*disgusted, signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. Yes, making love! What would you call it? I love you; isn't that enough to qualify?

EKATERINA [*furious, signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. I *do* love you. I'm also attracted to you. Love can be shown physically just as much as it can verbally.

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. Then you don't even understand *yourself*. Can't you feel it?

[He puts his hand on her cheek. She pulls away, but he grabs her arm with his free hand and keeps his first hand on her]

LARS [*firmly*]. Here.

[Silence. EKATERINA begins to cry; lowers her head]

EKATERINA [*signs*].

[LARS kisses her on the forehead, then hugs her]

LARS. I know. It'll be hard for both of us.

10♣

[*LARS, hugging EKATERINA. CATANACH enters, left. LARS sees him and lets EKATERINA go*]

LARS. Mr Catanach.

CATANACH. Good evening, Lars. And good evening to you too, Miss Grimmbauer. It's been quite some time since I saw you last.

[*EKATERINA looks at LARS for translation*]

LARS [*signs*]. He says good evening. He hasn't seen you in a long time.

[*EKATERINA smiles thinly*]

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. She says it's nice to see you too. She hope's you're well.

CATANACH. Nothing to complain of.

LARS [*signs*]. He's fine.

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*nods, signs*]. I'll see you later.

[*EKATERINA exits, right*]

LARS. She has to start cooking.

CATANACH. You're not going with her?

LARS. I assumed you wanted to talk.

CATANACH. Did you now?

LARS. It's getting dark. You're not out here for your health.

CATANACH. No.

[*Pause*]

LARS. So?

CATANACH. My daughter.

LARS. That's how you think of her now?

CATANACH. That's how she is.

LARS. Well, what about her?

CATANACH. Your eyes are on her.

LARS. Excuse me?

CATANACH. You know precisely what I'm talking about.

LARS [*smiling unpleasantly*]. I don't know that I do. Perhaps you could be a little clearer.

CATANACH [*threatening*]. I know what you're hoping for, boy, with all these walks out here. I know what you're planning, and I know what you want.

LARS. Oh you do, do you?

CATANACH. I do. But you shan't get it.

LARS. Maria is a friend, who I'm trying to help get better.

CATANACH [*angry*]. Trying to help into your bed more like!

LARS. That's what you suspect me of?

CATANACH. You keep your distance! Understand?

LARS [*angry*]. You're no father to me!

CATANACH [*furious*]. You refuse me? Forgotten who you're assistant to, have you?

LARS [*furious*]. Perhaps I have! The man I *used* to work with was never this jealous!

CATANACH. What do you mean by that? I'm a married man!

LARS. A married man who lusts after his ward!

[*Pause*]

CATANACH. You enjoy your job, lad?

LARS. I do.

CATANACH. Good. Then watch your fucking tongue when you speak to me!

LARS. I'll speak as I please!

CATANACH. No, you won't, you'll do as you're told! Because if you don't I'll go back to working alone, and a few more people round here will find out about the rag man's daughter!

[*Pause*]

LARS [*strangled*]. How do you know?

CATANACH [*scornful*]. You don't think the inspector talks to the best face-fixer in the region? He kept it quiet after I cleaned up his son for free. But nephew or no, I *will* let the gossip spread if you don't keep your dick to yourself, all the way to the capital if need be. Maria is out of bounds. Keep taking her for walks if you want; that's very sweet and innocent. Just make sure that white dress of hers, *stays* on her.

[*CATANACH exits, left*]

♣

[*MARIA, with LARS. The former is standing next to the tree, one hand on its trunk. The latter is standing some way off. Pause*]

MARIA. She curled around him. And she was ivy, kissing the rough skin of a tree.

LARS. Is that from your book?

MARIA. I don't know...I don't think so.

LARS. Have you finished reading all the stories?

MARIA. Yes. But it's not one of the flowers in the garden...I don't know where I've heard it.

LARS. You had an entire life before you came to us.

MARIA. I don't remember it.

LARS. But it remembers you. And it's slowly filtering back.

[*Pause*]

MARIA. Maybe.

[*Pause*]

LARS. I'd like to apologise for my behaviour yesterday. I didn't-

MARIA. We don't need to talk about it.

LARS. But I-

MARIA. Please.

[*Pause*]

LARS. Sorry.

[*Pause*]

MARIA. You said...

LARS. Yes?

MARIA. You said that...that you loved me.

[*Pause*]

LARS. And I do. I love you dearly. But I love my sister dearly as well.

[*Pause*]

MARIA. I didn't know you had a sister.

LARS. Really? I should have mentioned her sooner.

MARIA. Is she older or younger than you?

LARS. Younger, by four years. Ekaterina. You should come over for dinner, meet her.

[*Pause*]

MARIA. What's she like?

LARS. Kind...quiet...beautiful. She looks a lot like you.

MARIA. Like me?

LARS. Almost identical.

[*Pause*]

MARIA. I'm not beautiful.

LARS. What makes you say that?

MARIA [*bitterly*]. I'm a corpse.

LARS. I never saw a corpse walk. You're alive, Maria.

MARIA. Living things aren't this pale.

LARS. Ekaterina is. Pale skin is something many men find attractive. You should be proud of it.

[*MARIA covers her mouth, looking as if she'll be sick*]

LARS [*quickly*]. Oh God, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to...that is...

[*Pause*]

LARS. I'm sorry.

[*Pause. MARIA slowly removes her hand*]

LARS. Maria, what is it that you find unpleasant about it?

[*Pause*]

LARS. It's a natural act, sometimes it's something very beautiful-

MARIA. I don't want to talk about it. I just...I just don't want to.

LARS. It's not that my intentions...that is I don't...

[*LARS sighs. Pause*]

LARS. You're very special to me. I only want to see you happy.

MARIA. I'm happy now.

[*Pause*]

LARS. Flowers are happiest in bloom.

[*Pause*]

LARS. But it's too cold here...too cold for that.

[*She looks at him, then he meets her eyes. Silence. HERTA, enters, right. Seeing her, MARIA moves back fearfully*]

HERTA. Hello again, Maria.

LARS [*sharply*]. Can I help you?

HERTA. I wish to speak to the girl.

LARS. She doesn't seem to share your wishes.

HERTA. She should. I know her.

MARIA. Lars, please, let's go.

HERTA. I've known you since were very young, Maria. When you were just a little girl.

MARIA. Lars, please!

LARS [*to MARIA*]. Hold on. [*To HERTA*] What do you know? Are you a relative?

HERTA. I'm an old friend of the family. My name is Mrs Kovulor.

[*MARIA backs away to exit*]

LARS. Maria, just wait for a moment.

HERTA. I'll leave, she's upset. But I'll come again tomorrow, if she wants an explanation.

[*HERTA exits, right*]

LARS. Who is she?

MARIA. I don't know.

LARS. Then why are you so scared of her? She says she knows you.

MARIA. I don't know her! And I don't want to, she scares me!

LARS [*gently*]. Okay, okay, calm down.

[*He sighs*]

LARS. I'll have to tell Mr Catanach. He'll want to meet her.

MARIA. I can't...I can't stand to be about her.

LARS [*sharply*]. Well you'll have to, Maria. You don't have a choice.

[*He folds his arms, and looks away from her*]

Q♣

[*LARS, by the tree*]

LARS. Christ it's cold...

[*CATANACH enters, left*]

CATANACH [*over his shoulder*]. Come on, Maria. Try to keep up.

[*MARIA enters, left*]

CATANACH. Well?

LARS. Nothing yet.

MARIA. I don't want to talk to her.

CATANACH. You don't need to. I'll handle that.

MARIA. I don't want to see her, either.

CATNACH. That can't be helped.

LARS. Does Maria really need to be here?

CATANACH. Mrs Kovulor is coming here to talk *about* her.

LARS. And terrifying her is worth that?

CATANACH [*sharply*]. Long-term pleasure is often worth its short-term agony. If it upsets *you*, feel free to leave.

[*Silence*]

LARS. I see.

CATANACH. Good.

[*LARS moves to exit*]

MARIA. Lars?

LARS. I'll see you tomorrow, Maria.

[*LARS exits, right*]

MARIA. Where's he going?

CATANACH. Home. He doesn't need to be here.

MARIA. I like having him near.

CATANACH. You've been walking with him every day, haven't you?

MARIA. Yes.

CATANACH. You like him?

MARIA. Yes.

CATANACH. Oh?

MARIA [*quickly*]. I like you as well. And Mrs Catanach. You've all been very kind to me. I know I'm not the easiest person to be around-

CATANACH. How much do you like me?

[*Pause*]

MARIA [*nervous*]. I don't understand.

CATANACH. Do you love me, Maria?

[*Pause*]

MARIA [*afraid*]. I...I don't-

CATANACH. I can't stop thinking about you. You're such a beautiful girl...ever since I first saw that skin, pale as the first snow, and those luscious, midnight locks...you're a goddess, raised again to bless me, to absolve me.

MARIA [*backing away*]. No, no I'm nothing-

CATANACH [*going after her*]. You're everything! Everything I ever wanted, everything I ever needed.

MARIA. You're married-

CATANACH. To a child, meaningless and inferior. She bewitched me with her youth, but I will leave her for you, I will leave *anything* for you.

MARIA [*panicking*]. No, please, I...I can't-

CATANACH. It's alright; I know it'll be hard, people will talk, but it'll be worth it, we'll be together, nothing can hurt us then.

MARIA [*shaking*]. I can't-

CATANACH. Come to me, don't be afraid.

[*He takes hold of her*]

CATANACH. Let me touch you...I've wanted to touch you again for so long...

[*CATANACH brushes his thumb over her lips. MARIA begins to cry*]

CATANACH. Let me kiss you...your lips are so beautiful...you're so beautiful...

[*He leans forward to kiss her. MARIA shuts her eyes in terror. HERTA enters, right*]

HERTA. Mr Catanach?

[*CATANACH stops. Slowly, he releases MARIA and steps away from her, turns around*]

CATANACH. Yes. That's me.

K♣

[*MARIA, CATANACH, and HERTA*]

CATANACH. It's Mrs Kovulor, isn't it?

HERTA. That's right. And you are Mr Catanach, the famous mortician.

CATANACH. Well I don't know about famous-

HERTA. I've heard that you can fix corpses so well they come back to life.

[*CATANACH glances at MARIA*]

CATANACH. Who told you that?

HERTA. A little bird.

[*Pause*]

CATANACH. What exactly can we do for you, Mrs Kovulor?

HERTA. The girl.

CATANACH. Maria?

HERTA. That's the one.

CATANACH. She's my daughter.

HERTA. Her parents are dead.

CATANACH. And? She's well looked after with me.

HERTA. No doubt.

[*SOPHIE enters, left*]

CATANACH [*surprised*]. Mrs Catanach.

SOPHIE. Oh. I was just taking a walk-

HERTA. Your wife, Mr Catanach? She has such youthful skin.

SOPHIE. I don't believe we've met. Mrs Sophie Catanach.

HERTA. Mrs Herta Kovulor.

[*They shake hands*]

HERTA. Charmed.

SOPHIE. Likewise. And how are you employed, Mrs Kovulor?

HERTA. My husband and I are trades-people. The factory is my domain, and my business.

SOPHIE. On the edge of town?

HERTA. There are others?

SOPHIE [*blushing*]. No...I suppose not.

HERTA. Yes, Mr Kovulor makes puppets.

CATANACH. Puppets?

HERTA. Puppets.

CATANACH. Of what variety?

HERTA. Of all varieties.

SOPHIE. You run a secretive organisation, Mrs Kovulor. I can't say that I've heard of your craftwork before.

HERTA. We cater to a selective group.

SOPHIE. Indeed?

HERTA. The wealthy. I believe even our string marionettes lie outside your price range, and the clockwork angels...well. I'm sure I don't need to tell you how expensive a thousand glass cogs are.

SOPHIE [*disgruntled*]. Oh...I see.

CATANACH. What is it you want with Maria?

HERTA. Of course. Maria. As a friend to her parents, may God rest their souls, I was left quite specific instructions as to her care. That she is your ward is not a problem, Maria's parents wished only that she be looked after in a home that she felt happy in. What is more pressing, however, is the issue of her marriage.

CATANACH. Marriage?

SOPHIE. She's engaged?

[*CATANACH glares at SOPHIE*]

HERTA. She is. The groom is, sadly, no longer with us, but Maria's parents were committed to the union none the less.

CATANACH. She's to wed a corpse?

HERTA. A ghost marriage. A rarity these days I'll grant, but still an occurrence. Despite the obstacle of death, the young couple shall be together.

SOPHIE. Well if that's what her parents wanted-

CATANACH. Don't be so stupid! This is a ludicrous idea!

HERTA. It is the holiest of ceremonies, Mr Catanach. I shall provide a clockwork marionette as the groom's physical representation.

[*The MARIONETTE enters, right, and approaches MARIA; it is invisible to the others*]

CATANACH. I've agreed to nothing!

HERTA. This is not a matter for discussion.

[*The MARIONETTE reaches MARIA. Though she trembles, she doesn't move as he takes her in his arms and caresses her cheek*]

SOPHIE. We should respect the parents' wishes.

CATANACH. Hold your tongue, woman! I will *not* abandon my ward to this insanity!

HERTA. If you refuse to give her up, I will have the police remove her forcibly. I'm sure none of us want that.

CATANACH. You'll have to pry her from *this* corpse's grasp!

HERTA [*asinine*]. And they do grip one so tightly, do they not? I'll await your decision.

[*HERTA exits, right*]

CATANACH. Come on, Maria!

[*CATANACH exits, left, followed by SOPHIE. MARIA remains in place with the MARIONETTE*]

MARIA. You're so beautiful...but who are you?

[*The MARIONETTE slowly moves his hand up to the back of her neck*]

MARIA. I recall you from somewhere, just like Mrs Kovulor...please, won't you tell me your name? I want to remember.

[*The MARIONETTE slips his hand round her neck and takes her by the throat. MARIA cries in terror*]

MARIA [*tearfully*]. Even *you* have grown cruel! Let me go, you're not who I fell in love with!

[The MARIONETTE releases her. MARIA backs off. Pause. The MARIONETTE mock-lunges forward, fist raised, and MARIA starts back with another cry. The MARIONETTE steps back, lowering his fist. MARIA breaks down, sobbing]

MARIA. Oh God! What has she done to you?

♥/The Grimmbauer House

A♥

[The stage is empty. LARS enters, left, agitated]

LARS *[to himself]*. There's got to be a reason...she can't be scared of her for nothing...

[He goes to the bookcase and begins searching through it. EKATERINA enters, left]

LARS *[signs]*. Have you seen the newspaper almanac?

EKATERINA *[jokingly, signs]*.

LARS *[signs]*. Please, Ekaterina, I don't have a lot of time.

EKATERINA *[hurt, signs]*.

LARS *[signs]*. Will you just bring it to me? It's important.

EKATERINA *[signs]*.

LARS *[signs]*. Thank you.

[EKATERINA goes into the kitchen and exits, right. There is a knock at the door. LARS opens the door, revealing MARIA]

LARS *[surprised]*. Maria.

MARIA. Lars...I'm sorry, I shouldn't have come, you don't need to be bothered like this-

LARS. It's okay, I'm always here to help. Why don't you come in?

[MARIA hesitates, then steps inside. LARS shuts the door behind her]

LARS. So what can I do for you?

MARIA. I came from the park...we met with Mrs Kovulor.

LARS. The woman?

MARIA. Yes...she makes puppets.

LARS. Puppets?

MARIA. In the factory, on the edge of town. They're expensive, made of clockwork and glass, they don't have any strings...I should go.

LARS. Hold on, hold on. What did this Mrs Kovulor say? How does she know you?

MARIA. She knew my parents.

LARS. Do you remember her?

MARIA. Yes. But not her name, or who she was. Just her...

[*Pause*]

MARIA. Lars...I need you to marry me.

LARS. I...I'm sorry?

MARIA. You have to marry me! If I'm not married I'll have to wed the marionette, and I'll be taken into her house!

LARS. Hold on, marry a marionette? What do you mean?

MARIA. My parents left instructions, I'm engaged to a dead groom but they'll have a ghost marriage, with a puppet as the prop!

LARS. She said this?

MARIA. Please, if I'm married to you I can't marry the puppet! I can't live with her, I can't live with her!

LARS. Maria-

MARIA. I could be a good wife...I could make you happy, Lars.

[They are very close]

MARIA. I know I don't like to be touched...but I could force myself to allow it, to like it...please...you have to help me.

[She looks at him. Silence, as they watch each other. LARS looks down]

LARS. I can't. I'm sorry.

[Silence. MARIA exits, left]

2♥

[LARS, in the living room. EKATERINA enters, right, newspaper almanac in hand. She gives it to LARS]

LARS [*signs*]. Thank you.

[EKATERINA goes to the bookcase and takes out a book. As she does so, she glances, then stares, out of the window. Seeing her attention, LARS goes over and touches her on the shoulder]

LARS [*signs*]. What is it?

EKATERINA [*afraid, signs*].

LARS. She's still on the porch?

[He looks out of the window. EKATERINA drops her book and backs away. LARS turns back to her at the noise. Pause]

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. She's the girl I told you about...the one that reminded me of you.

[Pause]

LARS [*signs*]. Her name is Maria.

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. Ekaterina, please...

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. It's a coincidence.

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. How could it be a sign?

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. I don't believe in God.

EKATERINA [*terrified, signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. Hell does not exist.

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. Really? And what about you, sleeping with your own brother every night? You think heaven has a place for you?

*[EKATERINA turns away, overcome. LARS puts his head in his hands. Silence.
EKATERINA turns back]*

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. I chose you because I love you. And for no other reason.

[He brushes her cheek with his hand. EKATERINA closes her eyes, still crying. She abruptly steps away from him]

EKATERINA [*signs*].

[EKATERINA exits, right. LARS sighs, then looks at the door, left. Pause. He goes over and picks up the almanac]

LARS. Oh, Maria...

3♥

[*LARS, studying a number of local history books on the coffee table. There is a knock at the door*]

LARS. Come in, it's open.

[*Pause. LARS looks at the door*]

LARS. Hello?

[*He gets up and opens the door, revealing MARIA. She is holding her book*]

LARS. Good afternoon, Maria. How have you been?

MARIA [*timidly*]. I didn't see you this morning.

LARS. I was called out.

MARIA. Oh.

[*Beat*]

LARS. Come in.

MARIA. Thank you.

[*MARIA steps inside and LARS shuts the door*]

MARIA. I was wondering if I might...if I might visit you, more often.

LARS. Of course. You're welcome here anytime.

MARIA. I should like...not to go back to Mr Catanach's house. I don't feel safe there anymore.

LARS. Oh...Maria, I'm not sure that will possible. What will Mr Catanach think?

MARIA. He watches me, all the time! Every hour of the day, his eyes are on me!

LARS. Even so-

MARIA. Please, Lars. Don't send me back.

[She clutches at him, then abruptly withdraws, holding her hand fearfully. Pause]

LARS. Okay...you can stay, but if he says anything...you're *his* ward, not mine.

MARIA. Thank you.

[Pause]

LARS. Maria, when you came over here last night...well I-

MARIA. You don't need to say anything. I understand that you don't love me.

[LARS looks away, and coughs. Beat]

LARS [*bitter*]. I wasn't aware that was a necessary component to the arrangement.

MARIA. Some people must love their spouse to take their hand. You are that kind of person.

LARS. Yes...I suppose I am...

MARIA. And your sister...will she not mind my staying here?

[Pause]

LARS. No. I'm sure it'll be fine.

4♥

[LARS sits at the coffee table, smoking. He takes a red blindfold from his pocket, looks at it, and puts it away again. Enter MARIA, right. She stops abruptly when she sees LARS]

LARS. Good morning. How did you sleep?

MARIA Very well. Thank you.

[Pause. MARIA goes into the kitchen and begins washing her hands, scrubbing hard enough to turn the skin red. LARS takes the blindfold from his pocket, looks at it, and puts it on the table]

LARS *[not looking at her]*. Maria?

MARIA *[finishes washing her hands]*. Yes?

LARS *[turns to her]*. Have you ever thought about solving your problems?

MARIA *[afraid]*. What problems?

LARS *[stubs out his cigarette]*. Washing your hands all the time. Your fear of the dark.

MARIA *[taking a few steps backwards, away from him]*. But they're not...there's, there's nothing *wrong* with...

LARS *[gently]*. You're scrubbing all the skin off your hands. You only ever sleep when you pass out from exhaustion. They *are* problems, Maria.

MARIA. I...I really don't need...any help.

[LARS gets up. MARIA flinches and backs away again. LARS stops, and MARIA does as well. A brief pause]

LARS. Maria-

MARIA. Please, Lars, I, I don't-

[He takes another step forwards and she takes step back]

LARS. What are you afraid of? I'm not going to hurt you.

MARIA [*terrified*]. I don't want you to touch me!

[*He steps forwards and she steps back*]

MARIA. Stop it!

LARS. Okay, okay. I won't come any closer. Okay?

MARIA. Okay.

LARS. Why don't you come to me?

MARIA. What?

LARS [*extends his hand to her*]. Walk over to me.

MARIA. Why?

LARS. Come and take my hand.

MARIA [*shakes head, terrified*]. No.

LARS. It's alright, I won't hurt you. Come and take my hand.

MARIA. No!

5♥

[LARS, with MARIA]

LARS. You're perfectly safe, Maria. You control the pace, okay? Just come over and take my hand, as slowly as you want to.

MARIA. Your hands are dirty.

LARS. My last client was half an hour ago. I washed my hands then.

MARIA. Then wash them again!

LARS. I don't need to wash them again, they're clean already. Come on, come and take my hand.

MARIA. But your hands-

LARS. They're fine. Why would I lie to you? Come on, trust me.

[MARIA takes a hesitant step forwards. She has started shaking]

LARS. That's it, that's it. Take your time.

[MARIA takes another step forwards, then another. Gradually this progresses into a slow walk, ending as she reaches LARS]

LARS. Good girl. Now just take my hand.

[MARIA stretches out her hand to his, but pulls back suddenly, a few inches away]

LARS. It's alright. I'm not going to move my hand, just take your time.

[MARIA slowly stretches out again, shaking badly. This time, she gingerly takes LARS' hand. He gently places his thumb over her fingers, holding her properly]

LARS [smiles warmly]. There you go, well done.

[MARIA smiles nervously]

6♥

[*LARS, with MARIA*]

LARS. You're shaking. Are you afraid?

MARIA. I don't want to get hurt.

LARS. Do you think that I *will* hurt you?

MARIA. I...I don't know. But your hands...

LARS. They're clean. Look at them yourself.

[*MARIA glances at his hand, hesitant*]

LARS. Go on, it's alright.

[*He brings up his other hand to the same height as the first, and turns both hands over so the palms face MARIA*]

LARS. There. No dirt, see?

MARIA. It's there, I *know* it's there. It's just too small to see.

LARS. It's too small to hurt you.

MARIA. I'll get sick.

LARS. You won't. And you know that, don't you? That's why you took my hand.

[*They share a look. MARIA smiles nervously and nods*]

LARS. Okay, we'll try it again.

MARIA. Again?

LARS. Walk to the other side of the room, then come back to me.

[He lets go of her hand. She pulls her hands back to her chest instinctively]

LARS. Okay?

MARIA [*unsure*]. Okay...

7♥

[LARS, with MARIA. MARIA walks to the other side of the room slowly, looking over her shoulder at LARS every now and then. When she reaches the far wall, she turns round]

LARS [extends his hand to her]. Good, now walk back.

[A little faster than before, but still hesitant and with stops here and there, MARIA crosses the space and takes his hand]

LARS. Excellent, Maria, well done. Did you find it any easier the second time?

MARIA. A little.

LARS. It'll get better the more you do it. Eventually you'll be so comfortable that you won't even think about it.

MARIA. Please...can I wash my hands now?

LARS. What for? You washed them just a few minutes ago.

MARIA. But your hands-

LARS. They're clean, we've already gone over this. You've got to stop washing your hands so much.

MARIA. There's dirt, there's dirt everywhere!

LARS. Not so much, okay? No more than five times a day.

MARIA [appalled]. Five?

LARS. Yes, five. The way it's going at the moment you won't have any hands left in a year or so. And try not to scrub them so hard.

MARIA. I have to scrub them, to get the dirt off!

LARS. But not *that* hard. Your hands are meant to be the same colour as the rest of your skin.

[*He gently takes her other hand and holds both of them up to her face. MARIA tenses, frightened*]

LARS. They're red raw. They should be white, like your face. You've got to promise me that you won't wash them so much.

MARIA. I, I can't-

LARS. Yes you can. You didn't think you'd be able to take my hand either, and you have. And you can do this as well. Try it for a week, just a week. You won't get sick, just see. But promise me you won't wash them more than five times a day.

MARIA [*beginning to cry*]. You don't understand, I can't just...the dirt...

LARS. Maria, I'm only trying to help. Please, promise.

[*MARIA opens her mouth to speak, but can only manage a sob. She looks down and nods, defeated*]

[LARS, with MARIA]

LARS [*comfortingly*]. Okay, okay. It's alright, you don't need to cry. Here...

[*He lets go of her hands, takes a handkerchief from his waistcoat pocket, and offers it to her. She looks at it and hesitates*]

LARS. You're fine, it's clean.

[*MARIA takes the handkerchief and dries her eyes*]

MARIA. Thank you.

LARS. I'm sorry that this is so hard for you. Change is always difficult. But this is a change for the better. You'll look back some time from now, and say to yourself that this is when your new life began.

[*MARIA nods, unsmiling. LARS takes the handkerchief from her and puts it back in his pocket*]

MARIA. You're not going to throw it away?

LARS. Why would I do that?

MARIA. It's been used.

LARS. So have my shoes. I don't throw them away after one day of wearing them.

MARIA. Won't you wash it then, at least?

LARS [*gentle warning*]. Maria.

MARIA [*drops her eyes*]. Sorry.

LARS [*extending his hand to her*]. Okay, take my hand again.

[*A little faster than before, MARIA takes his hand*]

LARS. Easier?

MARIA. Yes.

LARS [*smiles*]. Good.

[*He moves his free hand towards her face. MARIA visibly flinches and moves away, letting go of his hand and raising her own defensively*]

LARS [*gently*]. Hey, hey. Come on, it's alright. Come on.

[*He extends his hand to her, and she cautiously walks back and takes his hand*]

LARS. I'm just going to put my hand on your cheek, okay?

MARIA [*afraid*]. Why?

LARS. What do you worry will happen?

[*MARIA doesn't reply, eyes wide. LARS moves his free hand towards her face, slowly. MARIA shakes her head slightly, her fear increasing towards panic, and begins to cry. LARS puts his hand on her cheek, and she exhales brokenly, looking down*]

LARS. Look at me, Maria.

[*She shakes her head*]

LARS. Come on, it's alright. Come on. Look at me.

[*She looks up slowly. They share a brief look, the MARIA drops her eyes again. LARS gently moves his hand so that it is under her chin*]

LARS. Look at me, Maria.

[*He lifts her chin and they share a look*]

LARS. I'm going to take my hand away, but I want you to keep looking at me, okay?

[He slowly removes his hand. MARIA's eyes glance down several times, but she manages to hold his gaze more or less]

LARS [*nods, smiles warmly*]. Good girl.

9♥

[LARS, with MARIA. MARIA drops her eyes, takes a napkin from her pocket, and dries her eyes, trembling. LARS goes to the table and, after a moment's hesitation, picks up the blindfold. MARIA puts her napkin in the bin]

LARS [*not looking at her*]. Maria?

MARIA [*looking at him*]. Yes?

LARS. What is it that scares you about the dark?

MARIA [*cautious*]. Why?

[LARS looks at her. A pause]

MARIA. I don't...I don't like the loss of control. I'm helpless in the dark. I can't hide, I...

[A pause]

LARS [*extends his hand to her*]. Come here.

[MARIA walks over and takes his hand. While she still moves slowly, she is not noticeably uncomfortable while doing so]

LARS. Maria, I want you to trust me again. More than you have before.

MARIA. What do you mean?

LARS [*shows her the blindfold*]. Do you know what this is?

MARIA [*confused*]. It's a length of cloth. Why?

LARS. It's a blindfold.

[Silence, as MARIA's eyes flick between the blindfold and LARS. Then she jerks away from him sharply, shaking worse than ever. LARS grips her wrist, preventing escape]

MARIA [*panic*]. Please, Lars, don't put it on me! I'm sorry, I'll do as you say, I won't wash my hands, I won't scrub them, please! Let me go, don't make me wear it! Please, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Don't make me wear it, I'm sorry! I'm sorry!

LARS. Calm down, I'm not going to hurt you.

MARIA [*crying uncontrollably*]. Let me go, please let me go! I'm sorry, I'll be good, I'm sorry!

LARS [*soothingly, puts his arms around her*]. Hey, hey, come on.

[*MARIA twitches and shakes violently in his embrace, but is so scared of the blindfold that this physical contact proves to be soothing. She buries herself into his chest, sobbing, eyes wide*]

LARS. Just take deep breathes. There's nothing here that can hurt you.

MARIA [*sobbing*]. I don't...I don't...

LARS. It's alright.

[*He sighs, puts the blindfold back in his pocket, and gently strokes her head*]

10♥

[*SOPHIE, standing by the coffee table and reading the books. LARS enters, right, stops when he sees her*]

LARS. Mrs Catanach? What are you doing here? And how did you get in?

SOPHIE. Your door is unlocked. Where is Maria?

LARS. She doesn't want to go back to the workshop.

SOPHIE. What's it to me? I don't want her back.

LARS. Then why are you here?

SOPHIE. To speak to her.

LARS. About?

SOPHIE. Perhaps about why she is now living here. My husband is far from pleased.

LARS. He's already told me himself. I explained the situation-

SOPHIE. I'm not here on his behalf.

LARS [*irritated*]. Then why *are* you here? You have no reason to speak to Maria.

SOPHIE. The prince's cage is rattled...

LARS. Excuse me?

SOPHIE. And what lengths will he go to, to protect his sleeping beauty?

LARS. I have no interest in Maria.

SOPHIE. Then why let her live here? She's wetting your sheets.

LARS [*tightly*]. You are mistaken.

SOPHIE. Really? Like the rag man's daughter? She *certainly* mistook your intentions, now didn't she?

[*Silence*]

SOPHIE. Honestly, I couldn't care less what you did to that Jewish creature that calls herself somebody's child, but the courts may take a different view.

LARS. You're out of your mind. I've never touched her.

SOPHIE. Don't insult me! I was listening at the door; I know what was said between the inspector and my husband!

[*Pause. LARS sits down*]

LARS. What do you want?

SOPHIE. I want to talk to Maria.

LARS. She's not here!

SOPHIE. But she came here, after we met with Mrs Kovulor, didn't she? What did she want? Why did she come back to the workshop and why does she reside here now?

LARS. She came here to tell me about the meeting, and her engagement.

SOPHIE. And?

LARS. And she asked me to marry her.

SOPHIE. Is that why she left the workshop?

LARS. I turned her down.

SOPHIE [*angry*]. Then why is she here?

LARS. She said she was scared. Mr Catanach is watching her.

SOPHIE [*bitter*]. No doubt. And now I know what she plans.

LARS. Plans? She's just a scared young woman.

SOPHIE. Fool! It's an act, this coming and going and teasing and lying! I did it myself when I courted Mr Catanach, and she is doing the same! I warned her, and she spits in my face! The coy whore!

LARS. You're jumping to conclusions-

SOPHIE. Be quiet! Breathe a word of this conversation to anyone, and I swear you'll be hanging from a noose by the end of the year!

[*SOPHIE storms out, left*]

I♥

[*MARIA, in the living room reading from 'The Spun Garden'*]

MARIA. The now nervous visitors walked on down corridor after corridor, searching in vain for the theatre that served as the heart to the Prince of the North's vast palace. After many hours they had found nothing, and were unable even to find their way back to the front doors. With no other option before them, the desperate party were forced to continue their search, a search that was to span days, weeks, and finally months. Not one of them felt any hunger in their stomachs, but each was gradually consumed by a hunger in their minds. One by one, the wanderers turned to madness; they screamed and wept, gripped with terror and fury. See the girl dash her baby brother's head against the wall, only to be torn apart by her mother and father. The entire party fell to the most horrifying violence, and the corridors ran red with blood.

[*Beat*]

MARIA. Only one survived. A maid of eighteen years, with snow-white skin and hair as black sable, emerged from the madness with clear mind and healthy body. And it was she alone who, a year after first entering the palace-

[*There is a knock at the door. MARIA puts the book on the sofa and answers it, revealing CATANACH*]

MARIA [*fear*]. Mr Catanach...

CATANACH. Hello, my dear.

[*MARIA backs into the room; CATANACH follows her*]

MARIA. I...I'm sorry...I didn't mean to offend you.

CATANACH. Offend me? Nothing that you could ever do could offend me.

MARIA. But I left your house...I spurned your hospitality.

CATANACH [*laughs*]. No...never fear, I know you better than you think. I can read the intentions of a woman who suddenly leaves. So coy! But now I shall have you...

[MARIA backs against a wall, and CATANACH takes hold of her]

CATANACH. At long last...you and I shall be together, Maria. Not just in spirit, but locked to one another, skin to skin.

[MARIA shakes in terror as CATANACH leans forward and kisses her neck. He puts his hand on her hip, then begins to move it towards the bottom of her dress. MARIA shoves him away]

MARIA [*terrified*]. No! Don't touch me, don't touch me!

CATANACH [*irritated*]. Honestly, Maria, this teasing is starting to irritate me. Come here, kiss me.

MARIA. I shan't, I despise you!

CATANACH. Despise me? Whatever do you mean?

MARIA. I don't love you...you frighten me...you fill me with disgust.

CATANACH [*angry*]. Is that so? Frighten you more than Mrs Kovulor and her puppets? You'd prefer to live there?

MARIA. Please don't send me to her.

CATANACH. You'd rather be here, with me, the old mortician that horrifies you so? No, my daughter, you'll do as you're meant to and marry your corpse!

[CATANACH seizes MARIA and drags her towards the door]

MARIA. No, no!

CATANACH. A dead groom and his dead wife? A match made in heaven!

[CATANACH drags MARIA off, left]

Q♥

[EKATERINA, in the kitchen. She is preparing a meal, chopping meat with a kitchen knife. Her sleeves are rolled up. She pauses, looking at the knife, then slowly puts the blade to her wrist. She puts her arm down on the chopping board, wrist upturned, and raises the knife. Pause, then she puts down the knife and covers her mouth, beginning to cry. Silence, broken very slightly by her sobs. EKATERINA gathers herself, dries her eyes, and, with trembling hands, goes back to chopping the meat. LARS enters, left. Seeing EKATERINA, he takes off his coat and goes over to her, touching her shoulder. She turns and looks at him, then kisses him desperately, clinging to his face. LARS bears the kiss for a moment, then disengages from her]

LARS [*signs*]. Easy, easy. We're very forward this evening, aren't we?

[EKATERINA glances down, blushes]

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. You can't welcome your brother without kissing him?

EKATERINA [*hurt, signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. Alright, calm down. Have you seen Maria?

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*to himself*]. It's late...I hope she's alright.

[LARS goes into the living room and sits down at the coffee table; begins looking through the books atop it. He notices 'The Spun Garden' on the sofa next to him, and, picking it up, looks through it for a few moments. EKATERINA pauses, watching him, then goes over]

EKATERINA [*signs*].

[LARS looks up]

LARS [*signs*]. What?

EKATERINA [*signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. You're joking, aren't you?

EKATERINA [*hurt, signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. Oh don't be stupid.

[*EKATERINA steps back as if physically struck. LARS sighs*]

LARS [*signs*]. I'm sorry. But we can't *elope*. It's unfeasible. I know there are places where the ceremony would be legal, but to come back here afterwards? To live here? How would we face people? We can't afford the scandal. My *work* can't afford the scandal.

EKATERINA [*tearful, signs*].

LARS [*signs*]. My work is here. To throw away a well paid job, when I'm the only one bringing in a wage? We *can't* do it.

[*He looks down at his books. Pause. He looks up*]

LARS [*signs*]. That's the end of it, Ekaterina! Alright?

[*EKATERINA bows her head and goes into the kitchen, where she continues chopping meat. She begins to weep. Silence. EKATERINA places her arm on the chopping board, wrist up, and slashes into it several times with the kitchen knife. Bleeding heavily, EKATERINA drops the knife and falls. At the noise, LARS glances at her, then jumps up and runs through to the kitchen*]

LARS. Ekaterina!

[*He takes a cloth from the side and bandages her wrist*]

LARS. Keep your eyes open! Ekaterina? Keep your eyes open!

[*He finishes the bandage and lets go of her wrist*]

LARS [*signs*]. Keep your eyes open!

[He picks up her arm and elevates it, then pulls a stool over and puts her arm on it]

LARS [*signs*]. Keep your arm still. I have to go and get my things from the workshop.

[LARS exits, left, running. EKATERINA pulls her arm off the stool and into her lap]

K♥

[EKATERINA, in the kitchen, next to a stool, bandaging, bleeding arm in her lap. The door opens silently, and SOPHIE enters, left. She goes into the kitchen, and EKATERINA looks up at her]

SOPHIE. All alone?

[Pause. SOPHIE crouches down next to her, and notices the wounds on her wrist]

SOPHIE. And trying to escape the garden by your own hand too.

[She goes through EKATERINA's pockets, eventually taking out the rose. It is in full bloom]

SOPHIE. Well, I have kept my word, and returned. But you have not kept yours, have you? I haven't even seen my husband today...the famous mortician has left the dead to their own means. Have you seen him, little flower?

[EKATERINA doesn't reply. SOPHIE wrenches her head up so that they are seeing eye to eye]

SOPHIE. Speak when you're spoken to!

[Silence. SOPHIE lets EKATERINA go, who resumes looking at the floor. She has begun to cry]

SOPHIE [*bitter*]. Of course you've seen him. A single kiss, and the sleeping beauty jerks to life on invisible strings...

[SOPHIE begins to weep, and picks up the kitchen knife next to EKATERINA]

SOPHIE. I didn't want it to come to this, Maria. Please believe me, because I mean every word. You looked so sweet, when I saw you on the workbench...so innocent and beautiful. But I love Mr Catanach. And you have taken him from me. I was proud to marry him. And for two years, I had the most perfect marriage...truly perfect. He was so kind to me, took me away from the horrors of my childhood and cared for me...cared for me better than any man cared for his wife before. And I know I was fourteen...I know he is forty years my senior...but I don't care. I love him, I love him and I will not let anyone,

or anything, take him from me, least of all some nervous wreck of a whore who doesn't even have the sense to stay dead.

[SOPHIE angrily presses the knife into EKATERINA's neck, just enough to draw blood]

SOPHIE. See, I had this brother, Maria, little boy, a baby, went by the name of Hans. My mother was a prostitute, another woman with no sense, though in this case she didn't have the sense to have an abortion when Hans was conceived: she'd never wanted me in the first place, why would another child make anything any better? But Hans was born. And my mother leaves her daughter to take care of him while she spreads her legs to earn a wage, a wage that goes on drink and gambling as soon as it's brought in might I add!

[Beat]

SOPHIE. Well, one way or another, we still manage to get through the first year of little Hans' life...that's what she called him, Little Hans. She always said she loved him. When she came home in the evenings she'd slap me out of the way and take him, fuss over him. But after that first year...after that first year.

[Pause]

SOPHIE. Little Hans had always been sickly...colic, eczema, whatever he could pick up he seemed to manage...and then he caught something...we never even knew what it was...but he had diarrhoea, and kept screaming, and screaming...my mother spent more and more time away from the room we lived in...and I was left with Little Hans...watching him get weaker and weaker every day...watching him die, little by little...

[SOPHIE grips EKATERINA by the hair, sobbing]

SOPHIE. I didn't have any money for a doctor! I didn't know what to do, I couldn't make it stop! I'd take him with me to bed each night, and one morning...one morning he just didn't wake up. He shat himself to death, in my arms.

[Beat]

SOPHIE. I didn't live through that, and I wasn't saved by Mr Catanach, to have him stolen away by you! I'm no child, to be laughed at and deceived!

[SOPHIE stabs EKATERINA through the neck repeatedly, who resists weakly but is unable to save herself. SOPHIE drops the body and the knife and sits back against the wall, sobbing. LARS enters, left, with a leather satchel on his shoulder. He hurries towards the kitchen, but stops when he sees SOPHIE and EKATERINA's body]

LARS. Mrs Catanach? What are you doing here?

[SOPHIE stands up. LARS pushes past her and kneels down by EKATERINA. He cradles her ruined throat]

SOPHIE. I killed her.

LARS. Why?

SOPHIE. I had to free my husband from her spell.

LARS. My sister...hated Mr Catanach.

SOPHIE. Well Maria's dead now. You needn't have any contact with him any longer.

LARS. Maria?

[He gets up]

LARS. You killed my sister, Ekaterina! Maria isn't here!

SOPHIE [*confused*]. No...no that's Maria, I can see it's Maria!

LARS [*grief, fury*]. And you've never met my sister? Witch!

SOPHIE. I didn't know!

LARS. Didn't know! Didn't care!

[LARS grabs SOPHIE by the hair]

SOPHIE. I didn't know, I didn't know!

LARS. My sister!

[He slams her head against the kitchen side over and over again, screaming. Eventually SOPHIE goes limp, and LARS drops her. Still screaming, he punches the wall and falls to his knees, weeping]

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