

AUTHORIZED PUBLIC SAMPLE



NOVEL I — EXPOSITION

Dancing on the Tightrope of Reality

50 pages of novel text

German principal text / authorized English literary parallel

**First-reading sample. No later-volume spoilers are introduced
by the sample apparatus.**

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THE SCHATTENDORF ECHOES

NOVEL I



Dancing on the Tightrope of Reality

A SUPERNATURAL HISTORICAL COMPOSITION



L I A N A M A R I E S I V E

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WORK

Novel I: Dancing on the Tightrope of Reality

EXTENT

50 pages of novel text

SOURCE PAGES

6-55

READING ORDER

This is the primary trade sample. It begins at the novel's actual opening and stops after fifty pages of novel text.

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CHORUS I

THE EAST DOOR LEARNS ERMORDET

Adornfeld brought the paper in before the coffee had settled. He did not wave it. He placed it beneath two estate letters and a bill for lamp oil, as if bad news could be disciplined by being filed under domestic expense. Frau Klemper had already set the paste jar on the long table.

The jar was a medicine glass with the label soaked off. Beside it lay a bread knife, a bone folder, three pins, two bent nails, and a square of gray cloth used for polishing silver. She put the knife handle toward Hermann and said, "Cut straight. Dead people do not need crooked edges." Hermann touched the folded *Arbeiter-Zeitung* with the back of her fingers.

The paper was cool, and the crease split the headline. When she opened the sheet across the table, the type read: Von Frontkämpfern ermordet—murdered by Frontkämpfer. Rausch leaned over the sheet and read only fragments, because fragments were his habit and also his defense.

"Schattendorf. Moser's inn. Tscharmann's tavern. Shots before the meeting. Gendarmerie promise. Further fire near evening. Child. Invalid. Wounded."

He stopped after each noun as if the paper had placed a toll gate between words. Julia stood at the window.

"If the paper says murder, then the room must not soften it into misfortune. If the paper names the dead, then we must not let the headline swallow them."

Adornfeld took out his notebook and wrote the names in a column: Matthias Csmarits; Josef Grössing; Josef Haring; Alois Schmiedel; Josef Wagner; Jakob Stromer; Martin Grössing. He left one blank line after each name and put down the pencil. Alex came in with glue on his sleeve from some earlier crime against paper. He reached for the clipping.

Frau Klemper caught his wrist.

"Ask before touching." Alex asked.

Hermann nodded. He took the headline, carried it to the east door, and pinned it upside down. Nobody laughed. Alex's mistake left the accusation intact but forced every reader to bend toward it.

Hermann removed the pin and set it right. The pin bent; the wood resisted; the old hinge gave a short metallic complaint. She pressed the headline to the panel until paste rose along the edge. A corner curled back.

She did not smooth it at once. The paper had arrived as testimony, not as wallpaper. Frau Klemper wiped the paste from the table with the gray cloth.

"Now read the names," she said.

Rausch began again, not in his fragments this time but one body at a time. Hermann listened for texture: grit in Csmarits, the hard little consonants in Grössing, the scrape in Stromer. Julia repeated each name after him. Alex repeated the ones he could say and did not pretend with the ones he could not.

The east door now carried the headline beside a bent pin while the names remained on the table. January had entered the house as paper, paste, and a list no one could put away.

CHORUS II

CONDOLENCE ON THE HINGE

The next Landtag report arrived with cleaner margins. Adornfeld carried it in a portfolio rather than beneath the bills and sharpened a pencil before copying the official wording. The table had been scrubbed. Frau Klemper disapproved of grief that used stickiness as proof.

“Paste jar to the left. Dry cloth to the right. No elbows in the official sorrow.” Rausch read the unanimous resolution as if reading a proclamation under a low ceiling.

“Burgenländer killed by Burgenländer. Political reasons. Condolence of the Landtag. Political struggles with geistigen Waffen. No violence that breeds violence. Stern action against high-treasonous elements.”

Julia folded her arms.

“If the state can name the sorrow, then the state must also name the pressure that made the sorrow possible. If it calls for intellectual weapons, then it must not leave children beneath actual ones.”

Hermann cut the phrase geistigen Waffen from the column and laid it beside the headline on the east door. Its ink was visibly lighter than the accusation above it. Adornfeld objected.

“The phrase belongs to the sentence.”

“Everything belongs somewhere,” Hermann said. “That is not the same as being safe there.”

Frau Klemper brought a strip of blue laundry ribbon from the kitchen basket. It had once tied sheets. She handed it to Alex.

“Hold one end. Not in your mouth.”

Together they ran the ribbon from the lower hinge to the pasted Landtag phrase. Alex pulled too hard, bending the nail and splitting the wood in a thin line below it. Hermann covered the crack with her thumb while Alex waited for instruction. Rausch continued: peace with Hungary, friendship with the Hungarian people, refusal of Hungarian foreign rule, gendarmerie filled to prescribed strength, republican formations completed in the province.

The list offered a rail along the abyss but no floor. Adornfeld wrote that down before he could prevent himself. Julia looked at the ribbon.

“If that is a rail, then someone must still hold the child.”

Frau Klemper pointed toward the broom.

“Then hold the broom too. Floors do not build themselves under speeches.”

The east door changed its second state: headline at eye height, Landtag phrase tied to the hinge, blue ribbon under strain, crack visible. No sentence was removed and no sentence was trusted alone.

CHORUS III



BALLOTS AFTER BULLETS

After the April vote, the newspaper arrived with arithmetic. Adornfeld liked figures because they made grief wait in line, but even he hesitated before laying them on the table. Rausch read the headline from the Arbeiter-Zeitung in his quoted manner.

“The example of Burgenland. Social Democrats: 47,702. Christian Socials: 39,063. Landbund: 16,713. Smaller parties: 14,252. Strongest party.”

He tapped each number with the pencil and left a black dot beside the thousands. Frau Klemper brought a bowl of white beans from the pantry.

“The boy counts better with something that can spill.”

Alex counted votes in beans. Forty-seven for one pile, thirty-nine for another, sixteen for another, fourteen for what he called the little parties. He looked pleased until Julia said Schattendorf had added votes and Loipersbach had become a majority. Then he pushed one bean toward the list of names.

“Can a fifth more votes bring Josef back?” he asked.

No one answered at once, which was the first mercy anyone offered. Julia sat beside him.

“If votes could raise the dead, the living would be less careless with them. They cannot. They can only tell the people who made the danger that the village has not become obedient.”

Hermann cut the election figures from the page. The scissors caught on the comma after the first number and tore a small triangle out of the margin. She held the scrap in her palm. Margin, missing; number, intact.

That was acceptable. She would not repair every accident merely because it looked like damage. Adornfeld marked the article’s argument in his ledger: answer to Horthy; answer to the Frontkämpfer; answer for republican gains; answer for the school; answer from a border province that knew the appetite of old masters. Rausch read, “Hands off Burgenland,” though those exact hands were his compression and not the paper’s grammar.

He caught himself and corrected: “The paper says it differently. It means that.” Frau Klemper took the beans away before Alex could make armies of them.

“Numbers first. War games never.”

They pasted the figures below the Landtag ribbon, not over the names. Alex held the lower edge. His thumb left a pale oval in the paste. The paper wrinkled around it, and Hermann did not smooth it out.



Alex's thumb-mark dried in the paste. Afterward the door carried the headline, the Landtag phrase, the blue ribbon, the election tally, and the pale oval of his touch. The hinge no longer squeaked when opened. That was worse.

A hinge can become accustomed to burden.

CHORUS IV



MAY DAY'S FOLD

On May Day the newspaper did not arrive as a single wound. It arrived as a procession compressed into print: red Vienna, red flags, China, fascism, peace, democracy, work for the unemployed, tenant protection, small-tenant protection, old-age and invalid insurance, youth rights, the eight-hour day, the future. Rausch became intoxicated by slogans and therefore less reliable.

"Against imperialism. For the self-determination of the Chinese people. Against fascism. For peace and democracy. Hands off Mieterschutz and Pächterschutz."

He spoke as though each phrase already had boots. Julia took the paper from him.

"If a slogan is true, then it must survive a kitchen. If it cannot be said while bread is being cut, it is not ready for the street."

Frau Klemper put a loaf on the table and cut four slices without changing expression.

"Say it now."

Rausch tried. Work for the unemployed sounded different beside bread. Insurance for the old sounded different beside the chipped cup of a maid whose mother had no pension. Youth rights sounded different when Alex wiped bean dust from his cuffs and asked whether rights could be put in a pocket.

Hermann folded the May Day issue once lengthwise. The fold ran through a list of demands, not through a name. She had learned that distinction. Paper could be disciplined if the hand remembered what must not be severed.

Adornfeld brought out a small bronze-colored May badge someone in Vienna had sent with a note about the march. Its pin had no clasp.

"Unsafe," he said. "Then it suits the month," Julia answered.

Alex wanted the badge on the east door. Frau Klemper said no metal until the paste dried. He sulked with civic intensity. Hermann placed the May issue across the lower panel, below the election figures, where a foot might kick it if the door opened too hard.

The position offended Adornfeld. It pleased Frau Klemper.

"Floors learn there," she said.

The paper bubbled in two places. Rausch reached to smooth it. Hermann stopped him.

"Let the wrinkle show where the demand met the grain."

Julia looked from headline to Landtag ribbon to numbers to May fold.

"If the future enters this door, it enters over the names. It must lower its voice there."



Frau Klemper swept the paste flakes into her hand.

“Then the future should learn to sweep.”

By then, the door bore: January accusation, February condolence, March count, May demand. The hinge held. The room did not become safe. It became answerable.

PRESS INTERLEAF

THE OFFICIAL PAPER FILES THE WOUND

The official paper arrived without hurry. Its lack of urgency was the first offense. Rausch had carried the Wiener Zeitung under his coat because rain had begun before the church bell. He placed it on the table beside the Arbeiter- Zeitung, but not touching it.

Even paper seemed to know when another paper had brought a different law.

"It does not say murder," he said.

Julia did not look up.

"Then read what it says."

Rausch bent close to the column.

"Zusammenstoß."

Frau Klemper stopped trimming the lamp wick.

"That is a word with gloves on."

Adornfeld, who had come to distrust both bare hands and gloves, copied the heading into his notebook: Der Zusammenstoß in Schattendorf. Beneath it he drew three lines. On the first he wrote: report. On the second: clarification.

On the third: what the word avoids. The official account did not deny the dead. It did something more orderly. It placed them after the station, after the two meetings, after the waiting Schutzbund men, after the alleged blockade, after the gendarmes had mediated, after the groups were supposed to withdraw, after the return through the village, after the songs and shouted insults, after the guests at Tscharmann's had grown afraid and moved into the private rooms.

"It makes a corridor," Julia said. "You have to walk through every door before the bodies appear."

"Reports work that way," Adornfeld said. "Corridors work that way," Frau Klemper said. "Reports choose where to hang the coats." Rausch continued.

Three hunting guns in the dwelling. A converted military carbine in the attic, loaded. Sixty-six hunting cartridges. Nine military rifle cartridges.

He read the numbers twice because numbers quieted him and frightened the others differently each time.

Alex, who had been ordered not to touch the wet paste and was therefore touching the dry brush, asked whether a gun in an attic was asleep.

"No," Julia said. "Then what is it?" Hermann answered before she could make the answer gentle.

"Waiting."

There was also the small item that hurt the room by being small. Josef Tscharmann had not yet been formally examined at the court, the paper said, but he had admitted to the gendarmerie that he had fired from the window of his father's inn onto the street. Everyone stayed where they were. The admission did not thunder.

It lay on the table like a tool whose use everyone knew and no one wanted to name.

"Put that on the door," Rausch said. "Not over the names," Julia said. "On the reverse," Adornfeld said. "The state prefers the reverse."

They opened the east door and pasted the official column to the back panel, where the wood was less scarred. To read it one had to turn the door inward and stand between hall and passage. Hermann liked that and distrusted liking it. Frau Klemper cut a narrow slip from the funeral notice: Csmarits in Klingebach, Grössing in Schattendorf, members of the Burgenland government to attend.

She placed it below the weapons list.

"A funeral under cartridges," she said. "That is not an arrangement I would have chosen."

Alex held the corner while the paste took. His finger slipped and left a moonshaped blur under the word Leichenbegängnis.

"Leave it," Julia said.

Outside, at eleven, the village stopped in pieces: a hammer paused, a cart stood in the lane, a woman waited with both hands in flour, and a door remained half closed. The paper had announced fifteen minutes of work stoppage. Inside the hall, each interruption became audible without ceremony. The next layer on the door was: official report on the reverse, weapons under funeral, confession near the hinge, silence entering by the clock.

The wound had not been denied. It had been filed.

PRESS INTERLEAF



FIVE GRAMMARS AT THE TABLE

By the end of the week, the table had too many papers and not enough table. Adornfeld proposed categories. Frau Klemper proposed another table. Julia proposed that categories were what people used when they wanted grief to stand in obedient rows.

Hermann brought boards from the shed. The boards warped. That settled the argument: the archive would not be level. The *Arbeiter-Zeitung* remained at the center because it had arrived first with its accusation unsoftened: murdered by Frontkämpfer.

The *Welser Zeitung* entered from Upper Austria with a quieter Catholic grammar: tragedy, order, family, official report, and restraint. Its columns did not deny the dead. They placed the event within appeals for protection and containment, words whose decency could harden when fear supplied the pressure. Julia laid its report beside the others. "It asks order to carry grief," she said. "We must still ask whose order, and what it permits."

"It begins by saying it cannot judge," she said, "and then spends the month deciding who is permitted to grieve."

Last came the paper Rausch did not want to bring and Adornfeld insisted must not be hidden: the *völkisch* National Socialist sheet, with its poisonous inversion of the event. Frau Klemper placed a saucer over the worst words before Alex could sound them out.

"If it is poison, why keep it?" Alex asked. "Because poison also has a bottle," Frau Klemper said. "And bottles have labels. If you tear off the label, someone drinks." Hermann wrote no moral over the page.

She placed a black thread across it and pinned the thread at both ends, so the paper could be read only by lifting the thread deliberately.

"It will think we fear it," Rausch said.

Julia answered, "We do."

It was the morning's first honest sentence. They made a table of grammars, neither for visitors nor instruction, but to compare what each paper had done to the same dead. Paper

Grammar brought into the room

Arbeiter-Zeitung

Murder, class wound, armed reaction, Schutzbund necessity.

Wiener Zeitung

Clash, report, clarification, confession, weapons, funeral, procedure.



Salzburger Wacht

Provincial solidarity, stoppage, burial, national labor body.

Welser Zeitung

Tragedy, order, official report, Catholic restraint, Seipel containment.

Deutsche Arbeiter-Presse

Inversion, provocation myth, antisemitic and anti-Marxist permission.

“This is not a balance,” Adornfeld said. “No,” Julia said. “Balance would mean each grammar has the same right to the dead.”

Hermann took the Wiener Zeitung slip and slid it behind the Arbeiter- Zeitung headline, not to hide one with the other, but to show how the official paper could remain invisible while bearing weight. When the door moved, the official slip rasped against the wood. The sound was small, bureaucratic, and impossible to ignore once heard. The door’s table-state: accusation on the front, official filing on the reverse, provincial solidarity at the lower rail, Tyrolean order near the latch, poison under thread.

No paper was permitted to become the room.

PRESS INTERLEAF



SPRING WEATHER IN BURGENLAND

Spring did not soften the papers. It multiplied them. Burgenland brought candidate lists, party calls, election figures, parish gossip, Pächterschutz, Easter hope, May Day expectation, the cost of bread, the cost of rent, and the cost of being told to wait by men whose shelves were full.

“Schattendorf is not on every page,” Adornfeld said. “No,” Julia said. “But every page has learned the road to it.”

The Burgenländische Freiheit spoke from Sauerbrunn with the urgency of a young province that had no luxury of being merely local. It asked how to win the election, how to hold the border, how to answer Horthy without becoming what Horthy desired, how to govern villages, how to make farmers and laborers believe the Republic belonged to them before someone with a uniform or a sermon told them otherwise. Rausch brought the April and May pages in a string-tied bundle. He wanted to quote the grand sentences.

Frau Klemper made him sort first: election, rent, bread, insurance, small tenants, youth, church, border, Frontkämpfer, May Day.

“You are making politics into laundry,” he said. “Laundry tells you what touched the body,” Frau Klemper answered.

Alex took the May Day sheet and asked why China was in Vienna. Julia sat beside him and folded the map in the air with her hands: here Vienna, here Italy, here Hungary, here China, here the word fascism traveling faster than boats, here workers whose names the paper did not know but whose danger it claimed as kin.

“Can a paper know someone far away?” Alex asked. “It can know enough to be responsible,” Julia said. “Not enough to own them.”

Hermann cut no names from the spring pages. She cut edges, numbers, demands, and dates. The strips made a weather band across the lower part of the east door: bread, rent, insurance, tenant, border, school, May, vote. None of them explained the murder.

All of them showed the world in which the murder had been possible. Adornfeld wrote in the ledger: social weather is not background. AFW, much later, struck out the word background and left the rest.

THE MANUSCRIPT BODY



VORSPIEL

Womit anfangen? Kaltes Gestein umarmt Hermann sanft. Seine letzten Seufzer verhallen durch endlose Hallen. In Österreichs Katakomben hört man ein leises Raunen: Wo beginnt das Ganze?

Above her, the clouds kept their silence. Below her, the stone remembered. Between them lay Austria, reduced and restless, a country that had survived its empire only to find itself without a name large enough to inhabit. Schattendorf.

Shots were fired in Schattendorf in January; the July verdict would carry their consequences far beyond the village. Hermann entered that history late, through recollection and damage rather than eyewitness certainty. The plain fact is simpler: Hermann was already dead when this account began.

PART I



Shadows of Schattendorf: Adornfeld's Echo



CHAPTER 1

The Golden Shimmer

Schattendorf woke without Vienna's machinery. Before sunrise there were no trams or café doors, only a bucket striking stone, a shutter forced open, and a woman calling first in Hungarian and then in German. Mist lay in the meadow beyond the eastern wall of the Mansion. A bird called from the orchard.

Light reached the church tower, the low walls, and the two dark tracks worn into the road by carts. Smoke lifted from the first chimneys, thin and reluctant. The fields, damp from the night's rain, held the first light in small broken pieces. Hermann stood at the upper window and watched.

The glass was cold beneath her fingers. She had been standing there longer than she knew. Behind her, the room remained untouched: bed made, washbasin unused, dressing screen folded, the morning robe placed over a chair by a servant who understood household order better than household sorrow. On the writing table lay a sketchbook, a silver pencil, a sealed account from Vienna, Julia's letter, and a brittle newspaper clipping folded to the same width.

The letter had been opened before dawn. Then again at dawn. Then again after the bird called. It contained no accusation.

That made it worse. Only five lines, in Julia's hand: Papa, You keep rooms for every dead thing. You keep silence for every old wound. But there must be room for the living.

Is there room in it for me? J. Hermann had read the last line until the pressure of the nib seemed more visible than the words. She returned to the paper as to an inventory: the downward hook of Julia's J, the softened fold at the center, the small bruise where the nib had paused before the question. With each reading Hermann became more conscious of the room's scale.

Generations had filled the Mansion with portraits, uniforms, property agreements, prayer books, hunting trophies, visiting musicians, unpaid debts, family scandals, and the dead. The dead had always been given the best rooms. It remembered badly, as old houses do. A step creaked for a person who had never used it.

A door swelled in damp weather around an argument no one had entered there. In certain mornings, when mist pressed against the glass, the house seemed to offer Hermann not memories but rehearsals: the same grief moved from room to room until one mistook recurrence for fate. Hermann turned from the window. The mirror above the washstand held her face imperfectly.

A crack ran from the upper left corner through the glass, not across her features but beside them, producing a second cheek, a second eye, a mouth almost hers and not hers. She had often thought the crack vulgar. That morning it looked honest. The public record, where it bothered to mention such matters, preferred its old grammar.

It had been trained by church registers, school certificates, passports, inheritance law, and the invisible customs by which a society protects itself from the living. Zeitblom, when young, followed that grammar too closely. Later he corrected himself. Later still he corrected the corrections.

The records keep one grammar. Memory keeps another. Rita, when she is permitted to enter, keeps a third. The painting will eventually keep none of them cleanly.

I have not corrected these grammars into agreement; their disagreement is part of the wound. AFW's marginal note beside this passage reads: Do not ask a corpse to keep your paperwork tidy. Beneath Julia's letter lay the January clipping Hermann had not meant to keep and had therefore kept. VON FRONTKÄMPFERN ERMORDET.

The left edge had been trimmed too close, so the V of Von survived only as a black tooth at the margin. No acquittal had yet been printed and no verdict had yet crossed the calendar. The paper belonged to the first morning after the shots, when the dead were still newsprint, names, witness-claims, and the odor of paste warming beside a stove. When Hermann lifted Julia's letter, the clipping rose with it; old sealing wax had joined private paper to public paper during the night.

She separated them with the paper knife. A fiber from Julia's page remained caught in the headline, and the headline took a pale thread of the letter with it. The inkstand rocked on one foot. Hermann slid the clipping under it without thinking.

ERMORDET' steadied the table for three breaths, then slipped free and left a crescent of dust where the murdered had briefly served as furniture. She folded Julia's letter again along its existing crease, but the crease did not agree with the newspaper fold. The two papers had learned different pressures. They lay together badly, and that was more accurate than sympathy.

There must be room for the living. She could no longer confine the sentence to the page. Not that Julia had written it. Julia had written harder things.

But this one had passed through the walls. It had entered the staircase. It had gone below to the locked east hall, where dust covered the parquet in a gray film and the windows looked toward the village as if ashamed of their own height. The east hall.

The committee from the village wanted it. That, at least, was the respectable version. They wanted a place for lectures, for music, for children during the winter, for meetings that would not have to be held in taverns under the eyes of men who drank faster when politics was mentioned. They wanted, in plain language, a room.

Hermann had not yet answered. She looked again toward the meadow. When Julia was small—if small was the right word for a person who had seemed from the beginning to belong partly to the future—she had run there barefoot after rain. A servant had called after her, then given up, because Julia's disobedience had always possessed a purity that made correction seem bureaucratic.

She had slipped on the grass, risen with mud on both knees, and laughed as though the earth had admitted her into a joke not available to adults. Hermann had watched from the terrace. Lord Alistair had still been alive then. No. That was one of memory's tricks.

Alistair had already been dead in the way fathers become dead long before burial: present as rule, absent as mercy. He had stood behind the glass doors in a dark suit, one hand on the handle, not entering the garden, not forbidding the laughter either. The Kunstdorfs were capable of restraint when restraint cost them nothing.

"Children," he had said.

Hermann had thought it an insult. Julia had heard only the tone and bowed theatrically in his direction, muddy knees and all. The memory left as quickly as it came. In its place stood the morning.

The house waited. Hermann dressed without calling for assistance. White shirt. Dark waistcoat.

Black jacket too severe for the season. Her hands hesitated at the collar. The mirror offered two faces again. One belonged to the family portraits.

The other had been present for years, looking back from the margins of polished silver, window glass, rain barrels, and the dark surfaces of unplayed pianos. She touched the cracked glass once.

"Not yet," she said.

Whether she spoke to the face, to the house, or to Julia's letter, Zeitblom does not say. Perhaps he did not know. The corridor outside her room smelled of wax, old linen, and the faint medicinal bitterness of polish. The servants had begun their work below.

A broom moved somewhere behind a closed door. From the kitchen rose the smell of bread, coffee, and damp wood being coaxed toward flame. The Mansion had

many names in the village. Some called it Schloss Kunstdorf, though it was not properly a castle.

Some called it Villa Dolorosa, after a priest with too much Latin and not enough tact had used the phrase at a funeral and found it repeated by people who liked a grand name for another family's misery. Hermann himself called it simply the house when speaking to Julia, the estate when speaking to lawyers, and the Mansion when she wished to accuse it. That morning it was all three. She descended the Grand Staircase slowly.

Her slow descent had nothing to do with age. The staircase had been designed to make haste improper: its width, polished rail, and intermediate landing turned ordinary movement into an appearance before the ancestral portrait. Halfway down, she stopped before Lord Alistair. The portrait was too large.

It had been painted in the last confident years of the previous century, when men of his kind still believed Europe existed to arrange itself behind them. He wore a black coat, a white collar, and the expression of someone who had never been contradicted by weather. One hand rested on a document. The other held gloves.

Hermann had once asked what document. Her mother had answered, "Something important." Later Hermann discovered that the painter had invented it. That seemed to her the truest thing about the portrait.

Below Alistair, in the actual hall, Adornfeld waited. He stood beside the small table where the morning post had been arranged in three piles: estate correspondence, village matters, and Vienna. A fourth pile, too small to be called a pile, contained Julia's letters. Adornfeld had placed nothing on top of it.

He was a narrow man, not physically weak but constructed as if by a draftsman who disliked waste. His beard was precise. His cuffs were precise. His disapproval, when offered, was precise enough to wound without extravagance.

He had the gift, rare in a household of inherited melodrama, of making even silence seem indexed.

"You have read it," he said.

Hermann reached the final step.

"Good morning to you as well."

"It is not a morning that benefits from ceremony."

"That has never prevented this house from supplying it."

Adornfeld inclined his head, conceding the point.

"The committee comes at noon."

"I know."

"They will ask for the east hall."

"I know that too."

“And your answer?”

Hermann looked toward the tall doors at the far end of the entrance hall. Beyond them lay the east wing, which had not been opened for any public purpose since before the war. A ballroom once. Then a storage hall.

Then, after Alistair’s death, a room where furniture went to wait for a need that never returned.

“The hall is not suitable.”

“For what?”

“For children.”

“That is true,” Adornfeld said. “At present it is suitable chiefly for mildew.”

Hermann almost smiled. Adornfeld noticed and did not soften.

“The roof above the south corner must be repaired. The stove has not been lit in years. Three windows are cracked. The floor is sound, though ugly.”

“You have inspected it?”

“Someone had to.”

“You presume much.”

“I itemize. Presumption is less orderly.”

She passed him and entered the breakfast room. The curtains had been opened. Light fell across the table in long rectangles. The silver coffee service reflected the room in miniature: chairs, plate, hand, cup, ceiling, face—each object curved and reduced until the whole world seemed designed to fit inside a spoon.

Hermann sat. Adornfeld remained standing.

“That is irritating,” she said. “What is?”

“You standing there as though I have committed an error before breakfast.”

“You have delayed a decision until it has become a moral position.”

“That sounds like you.”

“It should sound like Julia.”

At the name, Hermann’s hand paused over the cup. Adornfeld saw that he had struck the intended square. He did not apologize.

“She wrote to you plainly,” he said. “She writes to everyone plainly. It is one of her cruelties.”

“It may be one of her mercies.”

“Do not become sentimental before coffee.”

“I am never sentimental.”

“No. That is your cruelty.”

Adornfeld sat. For a time, only the coffee was poured. Outside, a cart moved past the gate, its wheels heavy in the wet road. The sound entered the breakfast room and left at once.

“What do they truly want?” Hermann asked. “The villagers?”

“No. The century.”

Adornfeld stirred his coffee without drinking it.

“That is too large a question for this table.”

“You will answer anyway.”

“Yes.”

He set the spoon down.

“It wants legitimacy. It wants rooms in which to speak. It wants bread to cost less. It wants fathers to stop saluting portraits. It wants sons not to die for borders that vanish before the uniforms fade. It wants women to be citizens before anyone turns them into figures of speech. It wants children indoors when the winter comes. It wants old houses to explain why they are still locked.”

“That is a speech.”

“It is an inventory.”

“And what do I want?”

Adornfeld looked at her.

“That is the question you have avoided by asking about the century.”

Hermann turned the cup in its saucer.

“I want the house not to vanish.”

“Then let it be used.”

“You think use preserves?”

“No. I think unused things rot while calling themselves sacred.”

Neither of them spoke for a moment. Hermann looked toward the window. The mist in the meadow had lifted enough to reveal the orchard. One of the younger trees leaned badly to the left.

It had done so since a winter storm three years before. The gardener had tied it to a stake, then retied it twice, but the tree had kept its angle. It bloomed every spring.

“Julia believes the Mansion has no room for her,” Hermann said. “Does it?”

“That is not fair.”

“No.”

Adornfeld drank his coffee.

“Fairness,” he added, “is rarely available before noon.”

Their conversation continued much longer. It included remarks on the Austrian soul, the decline of landed authority, the housing reforms of Red Vienna, the theological implications of hospitality, and a comparison—regrettable even by his standards—between the east hall and the nave of an unconsecrated church. AFW cut six pages; Zeitblom restored two sentences.

The present version is the compromise. After breakfast Hermann took the eastwing key from the drawer in the library.

It was larger than necessary and colder than expected. Keys to unused rooms often are. They gather in themselves the vanity of locked things. Adornfeld followed at a distance.

"You need not supervise," Hermann said. "I know."

"Then why are you here?"

"In case the door has swollen."

"Is that concern or metaphor?"

"Wood expands in damp weather. The latch proves it before the sentence can."

They crossed the entrance hall. The servants had withdrawn with the tact of those who knew a household decision was approaching and wished to hear it later in improved form. At the east-wing doors, Hermann inserted the key. It resisted.

Adornfeld said nothing. She turned harder. The lock gave with a sound less like opening than complaint. The air inside was stale.

Dust had settled over the floor, the covered chairs, the piano, the stacked frames leaning against the far wall. Three chandeliers hung above, each wrapped in linen. The room's tall windows faced the village. One pane was cracked in the lower corner, exactly as Adornfeld had reported.

Through it came a thread of morning air. Hermann stepped in. The east hall did not resemble a room awaiting rebirth. It resembled a room that had won an argument against time by refusing to participate.

Near the center stood a child's chair. Hermann stopped. She did not remember ordering it stored here. It was painted green, though the paint had flaked at the arms.

One leg was shorter than the others; a folded piece of cardboard had been wedged beneath it. Julia had used that chair in the garden when she was five. Or six. Or perhaps never.

Memory, when wounded, steals furniture from other rooms. Hermann touched the back of the chair. Dust came away on her glove. Adornfeld remained at the threshold.

"Leave me," she said.

He obeyed. That was one of his virtues. He could obey without yielding. When the door had closed behind him, Hermann stood alone in the hall with Julia's absent chair and the covered piano.

Under the piano bench lay a packet of old scores: Bach with the corners worn soft, Liszt marked by a hand too impatient for margins, Wagner in a binding heavy enough to bully the shelf, and several blank leaves on which some later name had

once been penciled and erased. The bench smelled of dust, felt, and iron. Hermann did not open the packet. It was enough to know that the instrument contained neighbors: notes close enough to touch, far enough to refuse union. There must be room for the living. She crossed to the first window and tried the latch. It stuck.

She pressed harder. The metal snapped open and the window swung inward with such force that the room seemed to inhale. Cold air entered. Then sound.

The village came in first as fragments: a horse snorting, a woman laughing, a cart wheel striking stone, children somewhere beyond the wall, the church bell being tested or repaired in one uncertain note. Only sound, neither history nor yet symbol, not music. Hermann opened the second window.

Then the third. By the time she reached the cracked pane, her hands were shaking. Not from effort.

Dust remained dust. The chairs were still covered. The piano still needed tuning. The damp had not withdrawn from the wall.

Yet the hall was no longer sealed, and with that the danger had begun. At noon, five committee members arrived. The schoolmaster, Herr Zeller, came first, carrying his hat in both hands and glancing too often at the ceiling.

Frau Klemper, who had organized winter coal collections with a severity that made charity tremble, stood beside him. A young Social Democrat named Rausch wore his best jacket and his worst expression. The priest sent a curate instead of coming himself, which everyone understood as both participation and refusal. The fifth was a boy of perhaps eight or nine, though no one had invited a boy.

He had attached himself to Frau Klemper's skirt and was introduced only after he stepped forward and said, "I am Alex." Hermann looked down at him. He looked back without fear. He looked back without lowering his eyes.

"Are you on the committee?" Hermann asked. "No."

"Then what is your office?"

"I can count chairs."

Frau Klemper flushed.

"He insisted on coming, Frau—" She stopped.

The title failed her. Herr? Frau? Gnädige?

The old forms trembled. Hermann heard the failure, felt it enter the room, and for once did not rescue anyone from it.

"Alex may count chairs," she said.

The boy nodded, as if this confirmed a qualification long suspected. Adornfeld, standing behind Hermann, made a note.

AFW

AFW later wrote in the margin: Good. The child enters with a task. Not as innocence. As a boy who counts chairs, not as Austria. Keep him there as long as possible. Zeitblom underlined the note. Then, against his nature, obeyed it. They entered the east hall. Herr Zeller removed his spectacles and put them back on. Rausch walked to the windows and looked toward the village as though checking whether the view had changed now that he occupied it from above. Frau Klemper examined the stove.

The curate crossed himself discreetly, perhaps from habit, perhaps from concern over dust. Alex began counting.

“One, two, three, four—this one is broken.”

“That one is Louis-Philippe,” said Adornfeld.

Alex considered the chair.

“It is still broken.”

Hermann laughed. It startled everyone, including Hermann. The sound struck the covered chandeliers, rose, and vanished into the linen. Rausch looked at her more directly then.

“You would allow meetings here?” he asked. “I have not said so.”

“But you might.”

“I might.”

“For workers as well as lectures?”

Herr Zeller coughed. Frau Klemper inspected the stove with intensified devotion. The curate looked at the floor. Hermann turned to Rausch.

“What would workers do in this room that aristocrats have not already done?”

“Speak of justice.”

“That is not reassuring. Aristocrats spoke of justice constantly.”

Rausch colored. Adornfeld’s eyes flickered with interest. Hermann continued, “The question is not whether justice is spoken of. It is whether anyone is permitted to answer.” Everyone stayed where they were.

Rausch, who had expected opposition and prepared for condescension, found himself briefly deprived of both. Alex called from the far corner,

“Twenty-seven!”

“What?” asked Frau Klemper.

“Chairs,” said Alex.

“If we include the broken king.”

“The what?”

He pointed to a large carved chair beneath a dust sheet. Its back rose higher than the others. One arm had cracked.

"The broken king," Alex repeated.

Dollberg would later claim the phrase. Adornfeld would deny that Dollberg had been present. Hermann walked to the chair and pulled away the sheet. Dust rose. The chair had belonged to Lord Alistair. No one said so. They did not need to. His initials were carved beneath the crest.

Alex touched the cracked arm.

"Can it be fixed?"

"Yes," Hermann said.

Adornfeld said, "Perhaps." Frau Klemper said, "With money." Rausch said nothing. The curate said, "All things may be restored in grace." AFW's note: The curate should be fined for this sentence. The committee laughed, though not all for the same reason.

Hermann did not. She looked from Alistair's cracked arm to the green chair Julia had outgrown. Dust lay on both. Alex's finger rested on the older wood. Hermann made the decision before she could improve it into a principle.

"You may have the hall," Hermann said.

Silence followed. She repeated it.

"You may have the hall."

Herr Zeller inhaled sharply. Frau Klemper looked immediately suspicious of good fortune. Rausch opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again in a more disciplined manner. The curate bowed his head.

Alex continued touching the chair.

"For lectures," Adornfeld said, already writing.

"Music. Winter children's hours. Public meetings by application. No smoking. No torches. No rifles. No banners fixed to the walls without permission." Rausch objected. "No banners?"

"Banners leaned against walls by prior agreement," Adornfeld amended.

Frau Klemper nodded. This seemed sensible to her. Hermann watched Adornfeld write the terms that would domesticate her decision.

"You are pleased," she said to him.

"I am relieved."

"That is less flattering."

"It is more accurate."

Alex looked up.

"Will Julia come?"

The question entered the hall more cleanly than the morning air had done. Hermann did not answer quickly enough. Frau Klemper drew the boy back by the shoulder.

“Alex.”

But Hermann raised a hand.

“No. It is a fair question.”

She looked toward the windows, open now to Schattendorf, then toward the small green chair.

“I do not know,” she said.

Alex accepted the answer.

“If she comes,” he said, “she can sit there.”

He pointed to the green chair.

“No,” Hermann said.

Several people stiffened. Then she added, “That chair is too small.” Alex frowned, thinking.

“Then we need another.”

“Yes,” Hermann said. “We should count again.”

“Yes.”

So Alex counted again. He did not open the Mansion; he counted, carried, miswrote, asked, and walked.

AFW objected.

No. The house admitting the village is not the true opening. The child asking where Julia will sit is. For once, the correction stands.

That evening Hermann wrote to Julia. She began three times. The first letter was dignified and therefore false. The second apologized too much and therefore asked to be forgiven before it had confessed anything.

The third was short. Julia, The east hall was opened today. They will use it for lectures, music, meetings, and children when the weather turns. A boy named Alex counted the chairs.

He asked where you would sit. I did not know. Come and tell me. H. She sealed it before she could improve it.

Then she sat in the library until the lamps were lit. The house made its usual evening sounds: settling beams, a servant’s step, wind in a chimney not yet repaired. But the sounds had altered. Or rather, Hermann had.

A closed room had been opened. A question had been answered imperfectly. Somewhere in the east wing, dust moved in the night air and resettled on objects no longer fully abandoned. At ten, Adornfeld entered.

“The letter has gone.”

“Thank you.”

“The committee will return Friday.”

“So soon?”

“History rarely waits for rooms to be properly aired.”

She looked at him.

“That is almost witty.”

“I apologize.”

He placed a small object on the desk. The east-wing key. Hermann looked at it.

“You kept it?” she asked. “You gave it to me.”

“I do not remember doing so.”

“No.”

He turned to leave.

“Adornfeld.”

He paused.

“Did I do right?”

“That is not yet knowable.”

“I asked whether I did right.”

“No,” he said. “You asked whether consequences will absolve you.”

She leaned back.

“And will they?”

“Consequences absolve no one. They merely arrive.”

After he had gone, Hermann took the key and set it beside Julia’s letter. For a long while she did not move. Then, from somewhere below—perhaps from the east hall, perhaps from the kitchen court, perhaps from the portion of the mind that imitates houses when lonely—came a sound like a soft drum. Once.

Then again. The two knocks were not yet a trill. They were only a room practicing alternation before anyone had earned the right to call it music. Hermann stood.

The mirror above the mantel gave her back a face half-lit by lamp, half-held in dark.

“Not yet,” she said again.

But this time the words did not sound like refusal. They sounded like a promise made by someone afraid of being overheard.

AFW

Serenus.

UE

Yes? Leave the child with the chairs for one night.

UE

Very well. For one night.

CANVAS INTERLEAF I



The Rose Ground

Hermann went to the studio after Adornfeld returned the key and before the house had decided whether the hour belonged to evening or night.

The room did not receive her as the east hall had done. The east hall had opened reluctantly and then become vulgar with requirements: windows, coal, chairs, rules, other people. The studio received her too easily. Every object in it had already learned her hand.

The large canvas stood against the north wall on two blocks of oak. It was taller than Hermann and nearly as wide as the window. A linen sheet covered it, though the sheet had been lifted so often that the upper edge carried five separate folds, none of them corresponding to the others. The lowest corner was stained with rose madder. Gold leaf had adhered to a place where no gilding had been intended. One blue fingerprint remained near the hem.

Hermann closed the door.

The action had once meant privacy. That evening it meant that no one else could answer.

She drew the cloth away.

The painting had acquired several names in its making. Adornfeld called it the large account. Julia, in the one letter where she mentioned it, called it the weather you have made obedient. Zeitblom would later insist that the title had always been Symphony on Canvas. This was untrue in chronology and accurate in appetite. Hermann had written the words on the stretcher only three weeks before Schattendorf, then covered them with paper tape when the title embarrassed her. The pencil remained beneath the tape.

The surface began in rose.

Not pink. Hermann disliked that word because it made the color innocent. The ground was rose mixed with umber, a warmth held under the later layers so that black never became wholly black and gold never floated free of flesh. Klimt had taught Vienna that a surface might remember the body even when ornament tried to replace it. Hermann had taken the lesson and made it more hopeful than it deserved.

Across the upper field ran Marc's blue, not copied from any one horse or mountain, but remembered from the authority with which he had once placed blue where the visible world had not requested it. The blue did not describe the sky. It claimed another manner of seeing.

Gold entered from the right.

The blue and gold nearly met above a central figure whose face Hermann had scraped out twice. At first the figure had been a young man in a military coat. Then a woman holding a palette. Then no body at all, only a set of hands suspended over a chessboard, a residence slip, a child's chair, and a narrow map of Austria after Saint-Germain. Each revision removed a lie and left the authority of the arranger untouched.

Hermann lit the second lamp.

The surface warmed. The rose rose through everything.

At the bottom of the canvas, a procession crossed from left to right. Workers, veterans, mothers, children, priests, teachers, men carrying rolled flags, women carrying baskets, one figure with a drum, one with a violin case, one with a sheaf of documents. They were not portraits. That had seemed a defense when Hermann painted them. No one could accuse her of using a particular person if every face was composite.

Now she saw the greater danger. A composite face cannot object.

The procession approached a door made from two adjacent colors. Blue on one side. Gold on the other. Between them Hermann had left a strip of unpainted linen so narrow that from a distance the colors seemed to vibrate. She had called the effect the Trill before she understood what she was asking it to do.

Two notes, close enough to touch, alternating rapidly enough to produce an event neither could make alone.

A perfect Trill.

She had believed perfection meant that the alternation would become seamless without becoming unison; that the eye would hold blue and gold, Germany and Austria, rupture and surface, male grammar and female life, parent and daughter, house and village, law and injury, past and republic, each distinct and yet relieved of conflict by exact relation. If she found the proper interval, no term would have to consume the other. The painter would not reconcile them by blending. She would reconcile them by timing.

It was a more intelligent form of command.

Hermann did not yet know that.

She stepped closer to the canvas and touched the unpainted strip with the back of one finger. The linen was rough. On either side, the paint had been worked to a finish that made the roughness look deliberate. The eye read wound as design.

Behind her, the floorboard near the door sounded.

She did not turn.

"You have opened the hall," Marc said.

His voice came from the wrong side of the room. The reproduction of the blue horse hung above the washstand, but the voice came from beside the canvas. When Hermann looked, he stood with one shoulder inside the north light and the other where no body could have been without blocking the easel. His fieldgray coat showed no mud. The absence of mud made him more dead than the wound would have done.

"I opened a door," Hermann said.

"Rooms are offended by modest descriptions."

"You sound like Adornfeld."

"No. Adornfeld believes the description should survive a clerk."

Marc looked at the canvas. His gaze moved first to the procession, then the map, then the blue. He did not praise the blue.

"You improved me," he said.

"I did not paint you."

"That is one way to improve a dead painter."

Hermann moved between him and the canvas. The gesture was absurd. A ghost did not require a better view.

"What is wrong with it?"

Marc smiled without pleasure.

"You ask as though the painting had sent for a critic."

"It sent for you?"

"No. You did."

"I did not."

"You opened the hall."

"That is not the same as summoning the dead."

"In this house it has rarely been different."

A small sound came from the far wall: metal against glass, then silence. The saucer of gold leaf had shifted on the worktable. When Hermann looked again, Klimt sat on the low stool, examining one cuff as if the room had inconvenienced the fabric.

"You keep the gold too obedient," he said.

Marc laughed.

"You see? She cannot satisfy either corpse."

Klimt ignored him. He stood and approached the painting, stopping close enough that his breath should have clouded the varnish. It did not.

"The gold is made to confess," he said. "Every time it becomes beautiful, you punish it with dirt."

"Beauty has escaped punishment often enough."

"Then punish the hand that uses it. Not the surface for shining."

Marc moved to the other side.

"And the blue?" Hermann asked.

"It has been given the moral advantage," Klimt said.

Marc's face changed.

"No," he said.

"Yes. Blue breaks. Gold encloses. Blue is future. Gold is empire. Blue arrives barefoot. Gold sends a servant to announce it."

"You announce yourself quite well."

"I am dead. One must make allowances."

Hermann looked from one to the other. She had painted their opposition before either ghost had entered the room. That should have pleased her. Instead it made the canvas look prepared, as Julia's room might have looked if Hermann had obeyed the first impulse and arranged every object to receive the daughter she remembered.

"The colors remain distinct," Hermann said.

"Colors have no difficulty remaining distinct," Marc replied. "People do."

"The surface lets them meet," Klimt said.

"The surface decides how."

"Of course. A surface without decision is weather."

"And a surface with every decision made by one hand is sovereignty."

Klimt turned toward Marc.

"You object to sovereignty only when the sovereign gilds."

Marc's blue deepened in the canvas, or the lamp guttered. Hermann could not tell. She went to the window and adjusted the wick instead of choosing.

On the worktable lay Julia's letter. Hermann had brought it without realizing it and set it beside the gold leaf. The paper's worn fold crossed the edge of the saucer. A fleck of gold clung to the line: Is there room in it for me?

Hermann removed the fleck with the point of the knife.

It left a bruise in the paper.

Klimt watched.

"You saved the sentence from beauty," he said.

"No."

"No?"

"I damaged the letter to preserve my interpretation of it."

Marc came closer. "Better."

"Do not praise that."

"I praised the correction."

"The correction also belongs to me."

“Then leave the bruise visible.”

Hermann laid the letter face down. The canvas stood behind it, too large to turn. The central unpainted strip began near the blue-gold interval and descended through the map, the chessboard, the hands, and the procession. Hermann had intended it as the place where opposites remained unmerged. Looking now, she saw that every figure moved toward it as though the strip were an altar, a border crossing, or a wound whose meaning had already been assigned.

“What do they do after the door?” Marc asked.

“The canvas ends there.”

“You have not answered.”

“It is the edge.”

Klimt touched the air above the unpainted strip. “No. The frame is the edge. This is a command disguised as opening.”

Hermann felt the first movement of anger, then the more dangerous movement beneath it: recognition seeking a graceful sentence.

She refused the sentence.

Instead she took the palette knife and scraped a small place in the rose ground below the procession. The knife exposed linen. A woman’s painted shoe lost its toe. A child’s hand became three fingers. The strip widened by less than an inch.

Marc did not speak.

Klimt did not stop her.

Hermann scraped again. The rose came away in curled skins. Under the upper layer lay an earlier blue, under that a brown drawing line, under that the rough pale ground. The painting carried all its abandoned decisions inside it. Destruction did not produce innocence. It produced provenance.

She stopped before the cut became a gesture large enough to admire.

“What is it called?” Marc asked.

Hermann looked at the paper tape on the stretcher. Beneath it, in her own hand, the title waited.

“Nothing yet.”

“That is not true,” Klimt said.

“No.”

She peeled the tape back.

SYMPHONY ON CANVAS appeared in pencil, the S darker where she had begun with confidence, the final S faint where the name had already embarrassed her.

Marc read it.

“A symphony has time,” he said. “This has obedience.”

Klimt read it too.

“A canvas has surface,” he said. “You have made it apologize for having one.” Hermann pressed the tape down again, but it no longer adhered along the edge she had lifted.

From below came two soft knocks.

Once.

Then again.

The notes did not come from the piano. They might have been a pipe, a bucket, a child testing the hall door, Frau Klemper setting down a cup. The room did not identify them.

Hermann listened until the interval between them became more important than either sound.

“The Trill,” she said.

“Not yet,” Marc answered.

Klimt looked toward the closed door.

“Good,” he said. “Perfection is unbearable before supper.”

When Hermann looked back, both men were absent. The stool held one thread of gold. The north light had gone gray. Julia’s letter remained face down beside the saucer, bruised where the gold had been removed.

Hermann covered the canvas.

The sheet caught on the newly scraped place and tore a little at the hem.

She did not mend it.

CHAPTER 2

The Second Key

Adornfeld came the next morning with an inventory. He did not call it that at first. He called it “a preliminary statement of practical conditions,” which was Adornfeld’s way of warning that mercy had acquired expenses. Hermann found him in the east hall shortly after nine, standing beneath the covered chandeliers with a notebook in one hand and a pencil in the other.

The windows were open despite the cold. A servant had swept the central floor, leaving gray ridges of dust along the skirting boards, as if time itself had been pushed to the edges but not removed. The green chair remained where Alex had left it. Lord Alistair’s cracked chair stood uncovered in the corner.

Between them, twenty-six other chairs waited in various conditions of dignity, injury, and pretense.

“You began without me,” Hermann said. “I began because mildew does not observe household hierarchy.”

Adornfeld did not look up. He was measuring the distance between the stove and the nearest window with a length of string.

“That is a sentence you have been waiting years to say.”

“No. Years would have improved it.”

He made a note. Hermann crossed the room slowly. Yesterday the opening of the windows had felt like decision. Today it looked like maintenance.

The curtains would have to be taken down. The cracked pane repaired. The floor washed twice, perhaps three times. A room, once admitted into life, became vulgar with requirements.

“What have you found?”

“That generosity is draughty.”

“Adornfeld.”

He turned the notebook toward her.

“South corner: damp. Roof above: tolerable but not trustworthy. Stove: usable after inspection. Windows: three cracked, one dangerous. Floor: sound. Piano: sentimental ruin. Chairs: twenty-eight if we include Lord Alistair’s, twentyseven if we include taste.”

“And Julia’s?”

He glanced at the green chair.

“That is not a public chair.”

“No.”

“Nor is it useful.”

“No.”

He waited. Hermann looked at it longer than she wished to.

“Leave it.”

“I had no intention of removing it.”

“That sounds almost kind.”

“It is practical. Alex has counted it. Removing it would alter the number.”

She smiled despite herself. Adornfeld resumed writing. The committee had sent three communications before breakfast. Herr Zeller’s was written in a careful schoolmaster’s hand, thanking Hermann for “the noble and civic-minded permission provisionally extended to the educational interests of the village.”

Frau Klemper’s was shorter and more useful: she listed coal, brushes, soap, lamp oil, two buckets, and twelve blankets. Rausch sent no thanks at all. He asked whether political meetings would require prior review of topic or only of date. The curate sent word through the housekeeper that Father Benedikt wished to know whether devotional use of the hall would be permitted.

“What does devotional use mean?” Hermann asked.

Adornfeld, who had been sorting the letters into piles, answered without lifting his eyes.

“It means the Church has noticed the Social Democrats entering by the east door.”

“Your cynicism is too quick.”

“My experience is quicker.”

He placed the curate’s note on top of the others.

“Will you permit it?”

“I have not yet decided.”

“That means yes if no one forces you to say it aloud.”

Hermann sat at the table in the smaller breakfast room, where the morning light fell unevenly through a lace curtain and made a prison of flowers on the cloth. She had slept badly. The dream, if it had been a dream, left no image, only a rhythm: once, twice, then silence. She reached for Zeller’s letter.

“Educational interests,” she read. “A phrase designed to survive both monarchy and republic.”

“And Rausch?”

“Rausch will test every boundary until he finds the one we meant.”

“And the priest?”

“The priest will bless whatever cannot be prevented.”

Hermann lowered the letter.

“You dislike them all.”

"No. I understand their nouns."

"That is worse."

"It is safer."

He placed a blank sheet before her.

"What is that?"

"The terms of use."

"I thought you had already written them."

"I wrote conditions. Terms require your signature."

The word lay between them. Signature. Hermann looked at the blank line near the bottom. The printed heading Adornfeld had prepared read: Permission granted by Hermann von Kunstsdorf, proprietor of Villa Dolorosa, for limited communal use of the East Hall.

The name was correct. The body beneath it was less cooperative.

"Must it say proprietor?"

"It is legally accurate."

"It sounds like livestock."

"Ownership often does."

She touched the paper but did not take up the pen.

"Could it say custodian?"

"No."

"Steward?"

"No."

"Host?"

"Not if you want the document to survive a lawyer."

"I do not."

"The document may wish to survive you."

Adornfeld's face did not change after he said it. That was his cruelty and his mercy: he could speak of death without lowering his voice. Adornfeld uncapped the inkwell and turned it a quarter inch so the chip in the glass faced him, not her. The pen lay across the blotter with its nib already darkened; he had tested it, of course, on the corner of a waste envelope and left three obedient strokes there.

Hermann took the pen by the wooden shaft. A ridge of old varnish caught her thumb, and a fleck remained on her skin when she lifted it. The first letter entered the page easily: H, a vertical line, a crossbar, the old practiced permission of a name trained by ledgers. Halfway through Kunstsdorf the nib snagged on a raised fiber.

The ink gathered there, not enough to blot, enough to make the o heavier than the other letters. She held her wrist above the paper while the drop considered becoming accident. Adornfeld did not speak until the drop flattened.

"If the line remains blank, the hall remains closed in law while open in sentiment. That arrangement will please everyone who intends to take advantage of you."

She finished the name because the paper required an ending before anyone could dispute it. The final f dragged a little tail of ink into the margin, where the printed border stopped it. The sheet smelled of gum, iron, and the dust that rises when a drawer has been opened after years of obedience. Adornfeld took the sand shaker and tapped it twice.

Fine grains fell over the signature, catching in the wet places, dulling the black shine. One grain stuck to the o in von. Another lodged at the foot of the f. He waited, then lifted the paper and let the unused sand slide into the tray.

The line did not look true or false. It looked entered: ink, sand, pressure, date, witness, and a hand that had become answerable because it had touched the page.

"I require one more thing," he said. "Of course you do."

"A second key."

"No."

He closed the sand shaker.

"Then nothing has changed."

"The hall can be opened when needed."

"By whom?"

"By the household."

"Then it remains yours."

"It is mine."

"Yes. That is precisely the difficulty."

The air between them felt tighter. Hermann rose and walked to the window. Beyond the glass, the village road was still wet from yesterday's rain. Two children passed carrying a basket between them.

One slipped; the other did not laugh until the first did. Then both laughed, and the basket tilted dangerously. A second key. It sounded small.

Old orders defended themselves that way: by making the decisive thing look practical.

"Who would hold it?" she asked. "Frau Klemper."

"Not Rausch?"

"If Rausch holds it, half the village will call the hall a party office. If the curate holds it, the other half will call it a chapel. If Zeller holds it, he will misplace it in a book. Frau Klemper will know where it is, and no one will dare accuse her of romance."

Hermann turned.

"You have thought this through."

"I think many things through while others experience destiny."

She almost laughed.

"Have the key made."

"No."

"No?"

"You will have it made."

"That is theatrical."

"That is consequence."

The second key was not, though Hermann wished to pretend otherwise, the first attempt to make the house answer to more than blood. Years before the war had taught every room to count absences, Franz Marc had stood in the east hall with rain drying on his sleeves and said, "This place should not store ancestors. It should store beginnings."

He had meant an artists' colony: painters in the bedrooms, composers in the winter salon, lectures beneath the chandeliers, students sleeping badly under good ceilings, arguments over color in the morning and over bread by night. Klimt, from Vienna, had later sent a note with a gold border too beautiful for the sentence it carried: A house that fears paint fears touch. Hermann had kept that note. Lord Alistair had found it.

"A colony," he had said, making the word sound like mildew.

"You would turn inheritance into lodging."

"Into use," Hermann had answered.

Alistair had looked toward Marc, not because Marc had spoken but because aristocratic men often locate disobedience in the nearest guest.

"Artists do not preserve houses. They consume them."

Marc had smiled then, not kindly.

"No. They reveal what the house has already eaten."

Hermann remembered the silence that followed more clearly than the argument. He had not defended Marc enough. She had not defended the house enough either. Between those failures the colony had remained a sketch: a blue horse in Marc's margin, a small butterfly beneath it, and a line of Hermann's pencil that stopped before becoming a door.

Now, years later, the colony returned smaller and more dangerous: not painters from Munich and Vienna, not manifestos under chandeliers, not Klimt's gold and Marc's animals, but Frau Klemper with a key, Alex with arithmetic, Rausch with a question, and a stove that would not light itself. Alistair would have hated this version more. That was almost a recommendation.

The locksmith was also the blacksmith, and the blacksmith was also, according to Frau Klemper, “a man who hears only half of what is said and all of what is not meant for him.” His shop stood beyond the church lane, where the road narrowed and the houses leaned closer, as though exchanging local facts over Hermann’s head. The forge was already lit when Hermann arrived with Adornfeld. A horse stood tethered outside, one hind hoof lifted, steaming faintly in the morning chill. The blacksmith, Herr Pál, looked first at Adornfeld, then at Hermann, then at the large iron key in Hermann’s gloved hand. He wiped his palms on his apron.

“Morning, Herr—” He stopped.

The forge filled the pause. Hammer. Breath. Fire.

Hermann had become familiar with such pauses. Some were malicious. Some were frightened. Some were merely grammatical, and therefore harder to forgive.

“Frau von Kunstdorf,” Adornfeld said.

Pál blinked once. Then nodded.

“Gnädige Frau.”

The form was imperfect but usable. Hermann placed the key on the counter.

“I need a copy.”

“For the Mansion?”

“For the east hall.”

The blacksmith lifted the key and turned it in his hand.

“Big key for one hall.”

“It is a big house for one family,” Hermann said.

Pál glanced at her, then down at the key again. Adornfeld’s expression warned against comment. The blacksmith selected a blank from a drawer. It was smaller than the original and without ornament, a piece of iron that had not yet learned any family.

He laid the old key beside it and rubbed chalk along the teeth until the pattern appeared as a pale uneven map.

“Do you want the crest?”

“No.”

Adornfeld looked at Hermann. She continued, “No crest. No initials.”

“What shall I mark it with?”

The question had not occurred to her. The forge snapped. A scale of blackened iron loosened from the blank and fell near the vise. Adornfeld said,

“Ostsaal.”

Hermann shook her head.

“Gemeindesaal.”

Adornfeld’s eyebrows rose slightly.

“That is inaccurate.”

“Not yet.”

Pál smiled before he could stop himself, then removed the smile by setting the blank in the vise and tightening the screw until the iron gave a small complaint. He aligned the steel punch over the warm face. The hammer struck once, driving the letter G into the metal and raising a minute burr of silvergray scale. He did not blow it away.

He shifted the tool two millimeters to the right and set the e under his thumb. The oil on the bench trapped coal smoke and gave it back in a bitter smell when the hammer fell again. The second letter entered crookedly; Pál corrected it with a file whose teeth rasped against the new cut and left filings on the bench like dark sugar. For m he changed punches.

For e again he wiped the face with his apron and left a black smear across the lower edge. Gemeindesaal appeared not as inscription but as work: strike, burr, file, breath, another strike. He tested the new teeth against the old key, marked one notch with chalk, filed, tested, filed again. The trial lock on the bench refused the first turn, admitted the second halfway, and opened on the third with a dry click that made the horse outside lift its head.

Hermann heard only the shop: hammer, vise, file, lock, breath. Nothing in the sound asked to become music. The key was being made, and that was enough burden for iron.

“You understand,” Adornfeld said quietly, “that words on keys are sometimes taken seriously.”

“I am counting on it.”

“That is what concerns me.”

“You wanted consequence.”

“I wanted a key in another hand. The rest begins when people discover the word stamped on it.”

Pál tested the new key against the old.

“Will she turn?” Hermann asked. “She will turn if the lock is honest.”

“And if it is not?”

“Then you will learn something about locks.”

He handed her the duplicate. It was still warm. For one foolish second Hermann wanted to close her hand around it and keep the heat. Instead she placed it on the counter between herself and Adornfeld.

“This goes to Frau Klemper.”

Adornfeld nodded.

“Today.”

“Yes.”

“Not after the repairs.”

“Today.”

He made no note. Some decisions did not require paper. They required witnesses. Outside, the church bell sounded eleven.

Pál looked toward it with professional suspicion, as if bells were merely hammers that had found religion. AFW wrote later: The key is better than the manifesto. Keep the key. Frau Klemper accepted the key as though accepting custody of a minor kingdom whose behavior she did not entirely trust.

Weeks later, when the March Arbeiter-Zeitung carried the Burgenland election figures into her kitchen, Frau Klemper used the lower margin first to catch grease from the pan. The number 47,702 darkened at the edge but remained legible. She wiped the table with the clean half, turned the sheet, and only then allowed Hermann to cut the figures for the hall. Politics, she said, could survive onions if it meant to survive meetings.

She lived in a narrow house near the school, with three geraniums in the window and a boot scraper polished by generations of resentment. When Hermann and Adornfeld arrived, she did not invite them in. Instead she stepped onto the threshold, wiping her hands on a towel.

“Is there a problem?”

“Yes,” said Adornfeld.

Hermann looked at him. He continued, “The hall now requires governance.” Frau Klemper examined the key lying in Hermann’s palm.

“Governance usually means trouble with better handwriting.”

Adornfeld looked almost pleased. Hermann said, “We would like you to hold this.”

“Why?”

“Because the hall is to be used.”

“By whom?”

“The village.”

“That is not an answer. That is a weather report.”

Hermann felt, not for the first time, that Frau Klemper and Adornfeld belonged to the same species and had concealed it for political reasons.

“Lectures,” Hermann said. “Music. Children’s hours in winter. Meetings by arrangement.”

“Political?”

“Yes.”

“Religious?”

“Yes.”

“Both?”

“If they can refrain from killing each other before the stove is repaired.”

Frau Klemper gave her a look.

“Jokes are for rooms with exits.”

Hermann accepted the rebuke.

“Will you hold it?”

Frau Klemper took the key but did not close her hand.

“What does it say?”

“Gemeindesaal.”

“That is premature.”

“So I am told.”

“It is also correct.”

She closed her fist around the key. Then, after a pause: “Does Julia know?” Hermann’s composure altered by a degree too small for most people to see. Frau Klemper saw it.

“I wrote to her.”

“That is not what I asked.”

“No.”

“Will she come?”

“I don’t know.”

Frau Klemper nodded once. Not sympathetically. She was not a woman who gave sympathy to people who had enough rooms to mismanage grief. But neither was she cruel.

“If she comes,” she said, “do not put her beside the portrait.”

“Which portrait?”

“The one of the man with gloves.”

Hermann looked at Adornfeld. Adornfeld looked at the geraniums. Frau Klemper continued, “No one should be introduced to the living beneath that face.” Then she stepped back and closed the door.

The key had left Hermann’s hand. Only then did she understand how much of the house had gone with it. They walked back without speaking. The village had entered the hour before noon, when labor begins to think about food and children begin to lose concentration.

Smoke thickened over the roofs. Two men unloaded boards near the church. A woman beat a rug from an upper window with such violence that Adornfeld paused to admire the method. At the Mansion gate, they found a note tucked between the iron bars.

No envelope and no signature. The paper was ordinary, torn from an account book. The hand was educated enough to disguise itself badly. Adornfeld removed it before Hermann could.

“What does it say?” He read silently.

“Adornfeld.”

He handed it to her. Houses that forget their blood invite mud through the door. Hermann read it twice. The first time as insult.

The second as weather.

“Do you know the hand?”

“No.”

“You are lying.”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“That would turn the sentence into gossip before we have understood it as symptom.”

“Sometimes gossip is the honest name of politics.”

He considered this.

“Von Reisinger, perhaps. Or his son. The father would have used better paper. The son would think poor paper made the threat democratic.”

Hermann folded the note.

“Should we answer?”

“No.”

“Should we inform the police?”

“No.”

“Should we keep it?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because a house that opens its doors should preserve the first thing that crawls in.”

This time Hermann did laugh. It was not a happy sound, but it was alive. They passed through the gate. For a moment she looked back toward the village.

Somewhere beyond the houses Frau Klemper now possessed a key marked Gemeindesaal. Somewhere nearer, a man who feared mud had already begun mourning blood. Somewhere on the road to Vienna, perhaps, Julia’s answer had not yet been written. The Mansion stood behind Hermann with its old correctness.

It had lost nothing visible. One knew the loss by its invisibility. The letter from Julia arrived in the late afternoon. Hermann saw the envelope before the maid announced it.

Julia's hand had always leaned slightly forward, impatient with the line's appointed pace. Even the address looked as though it might leave the paper before being read. Hermann took it to the library. Adornfeld, who had been entering the easthall expenses into the household ledger, closed the book.

"You may stay," she said. "I was not leaving."

"Then pretend you were."

He rose and went to the window. Hermann broke the seal. Papa, Your letter reached me. I am glad the east hall is open.

I am glad a boy counted the chairs. I am glad you did not know where I would sit. A wrong answer would have been worse than none. I will come Saturday.

Do not prepare a room as though my arrival completes an argument. Do not ask the house to welcome me. Houses perform obedience too easily. I will not sit in the green chair.

J. Hermann read it once. Then again. The second reading hurt more because it removed hope's decorations. Adornfeld did not turn from the window.

"She is coming," Hermann said. "Yes."

"You have not read the letter."

"No."

"How do you know?"

"You are holding it as though it has struck you and spared you."

Hermann sat. Outside, late light had entered the garden. It touched the gravel path, the bare rose canes, the wet backs of leaves. Beyond the wall the village continued: buckets, carts, doors, voices, the ordinary indecency of life going on before one had finished interpreting it.

"Do not prepare a room," Hermann said. "That is wise."

"It is cruel."

"Wisdom often is, at first contact."

"She says the house performs obedience too easily."

"That is also wise."

"You admire her."

"I have always admired her."

"You never told me."

"You never asked a question to which that was the answer."

She almost responded. Then did not. There were rooms even language should not open before Saturday. Instead she folded Julia's letter and placed it beside the unsigned threat, the east-hall terms, and the original key.

The desk looked suddenly crowded. A family, a village, a house, a warning, a room. All paper. All dangerous.

At dusk, Adornfeld left her there. He did not ask whether she wished for dinner. He had already ordered it sent to the library. This, too, was one of his forms of tenderness: anticipating the body while refusing to discuss the soul.

When the lamp was lit, Hermann took up her sketchbook. For the first time in several days, she drew. Not the Mansion. It was not Julia.

It was not Schattendorf. A key. But she drew it twice: once as it lay on the desk, with its old crest and heavy teeth; once as it had looked in Herr Pál's hand, plain, warm, newly cut, marked for a room that did not yet know what it had become. Between the two keys she left a blank space.

Later she would say she had intended to draw the east hall there. She did not. The blank remained. Near ten, when the house had quieted and the library fire had settled into red, there came from somewhere below—perhaps from a loose pipe, perhaps from the cooling iron of the stove, perhaps from the village road where Herr Pál's hammer had taught metal to repeat itself—a soft sound.

Once. Then again. Hermann did not rise. She listened.

The sound did not explain itself. For now, that was its virtue.

CHAPTER 3

The Unprepared Room

Julia arrived on Saturday with one suitcase and no hat. This was the first thing the village noticed. The second was that she came by the public motorbus from Mattersburg instead of by hired car from the station, which caused Herr Pál to observe, while shoeing a mare, that aristocratic families were best understood by watching how they misused transportation. The third was that she carried her own suitcase up the road.

By noon, Schattendorf had arranged these facts into six different interpretations. Frau Klemper, who saw her first from the schoolhouse window, gave no interpretation at all. She put on her coat and walked toward the Mansion gate. Julia was halfway up the road when Hermann saw her.

The morning had been dry and pale. The winter sun, if it deserved the name, lay thinly over the roofs and fields, touching nothing with conviction. From the upper landing window, Hermann watched the figure approach: dark coat, uncovered hair, suitcase in one hand, gloves in the other. Julia walked quickly, but not as one eager to arrive.

Rather as one determined not to be delayed. Hermann stepped back before Julia could look up and see her watching. That retreat cost her more than she wished to admit. Adornfeld, passing through the lower hall with a ledger under his arm, stopped.

"She has come."

"Yes."

"Will you meet her at the door?"

"That seems theatrical."

"Most necessary gestures do."

Hermann looked toward the portrait of Lord Alistair. The painted mouth above the staircase had been given the smallest curve of aristocratic confidence.

"I do not know what to say."

"That is an improvement."

She turned.

"Over what?"

"Your usual condition."

"Which is?"

"Knowing too much before speaking."

The bell rang. It was not the front bell. Julia had used the smaller side bell near the east entrance, the one tradesmen, servants, and people with actual business used. That, too, was a statement.

Not a loud one. Julia had learned from the Mansion that quiet statements lasted longer. Hermann did not move. Adornfeld closed the ledger.

"If you remain here, I will answer it."

"No."

"Then go."

She descended the first three stairs, stopped, and looked again at Alistair.

"Not you," she said.

Adornfeld's expression did not change. But he remembered. Julia stood beneath the east portico with her suitcase at her feet. Frau Klemper stood beside her, not because she had been invited, but because she had decided the road between public bus and aristocratic threshold required a witness.

"Good morning," Hermann said. "It is nearly afternoon," Julia answered.

"Yes."

The two women looked at one another. The years between them did not appear all at once. That would have been easier. They arrived in small delegations: a missed birthday, a letter unanswered, a painting sold without consultation, a doctor's name never spoken, a winter illness Hermann had learned of too late, Julia's first public lecture in Vienna, Alistair's funeral, the day Julia stopped asking permission to leave.

Frau Klemper bent and lifted the suitcase. Julia turned.

"I can carry it."

"I know."

"Then why—" "Because you have already carried it from the bus."

This ended the matter. Hermann said, "Your room—" Julia's face changed. Only enough, not dramatically.

Hermann stopped.

"I did not prepare one," she said.

Julia studied her.

"No flowers?"

"No."

"No fresh curtains?"

"No."

"No childhood relics arranged to testify against me?"

"No."

Frau Klemper looked from one to the other with an interest she did not bother to conceal. Adornfeld appeared in the doorway.

"Tea has not been prepared either," he said.

Hermann looked at him.

"That is not true."

"No," he said. "But it may be useful."

Julia laughed. The sound entered the portico before anyone could prevent it. For one instant Hermann saw the girl in the meadow again, knees muddied, mouth open with a joy that belonged to no house. Then the woman before her closed around the laugh and became herself.

"Adornfeld," Julia said. "Fräulein Julia."

"Still Fräulein?"

"Until instructed otherwise."

"I will consider your file."

"I await reform."

She smiled, and the smile made Hermann briefly jealous. Not of Adornfeld. Of ease. They entered through the east door.

Julia noticed the change at once. The corridor had been cleaned. Not polished, not restored, not dressed for sentimental inspection. Cleaned.

The runner had been beaten. The damp umbrella stand had been removed. Two cracked panes had been replaced with new glass that shone too plainly beside the old. At the door to the east hall, Julia stopped.

The key was not in the lock.

"Where is it?"

"With Frau Klemper," Hermann said.

Julia turned slowly.

"You gave it away?"

"Copied."

"But not kept?"

"I kept the old one."

"Those are different things."

"No."

Julia looked at Frau Klemper. Frau Klemper took the plain key from her coat pocket and held it up. Gemeindesaal. Julia read the word.

Then she looked at Hermann. For the first time since arriving, her guardedness faltered.

"You had that engraved?"

"Yes."

"It is premature."

"I have been informed."

"By whom?"

"Everyone."

Julia took the key from Frau Klemper, weighed it, then returned it.

"Good."

Hermann had expected accusation, gratitude, mockery, perhaps even tears. Julia gave only the one word and moved toward the hall. Hermann followed, while Adornfeld remained in the corridor with Frau Klemper.

"Will they kill each other?" Frau Klemper asked. "Not before tea."

"That is not reassuring."

"It was not meant to be."

The east hall had been altered by labor. The covered chandeliers were still wrapped. The cracked corner wall still showed damp. Lord Alistair's chair remained beneath the far window, its broken arm visible.

Julia's green chair stood near the center, where Alex had left it after the second counting. Beside it, as if embarrassed by the difference in scale, someone had placed a plain wooden chair from the kitchen. Hermann had not ordered this. Julia saw both chairs.

"Who put that there?"

"I don't know."

"That means Adornfeld."

"Probably."

Julia approached the green chair. She did not touch it.

"It is smaller than I remember."

"You are larger than you were."

"That is a dangerous sentence from a parent."

Hermann accepted the blow. Julia moved to the plain chair and sat. The act was simple. It did not forgive anything.

It did not restore anything. It did not announce a future. It placed a living body in a room that had been waiting too long for one. Hermann remained standing.

Julia looked up.

"Will you sit?"

"I thought perhaps—" "Papa."

The word struck the room. Not loudly. It had always been the most difficult word Julia owned. In childhood she had used it without care.

Later she used it as one might handle a cup already cracked. Sometimes tenderly. Sometimes to prove it still leaked. Hermann sat on the green chair.

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