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ANNA CROISSANT-RUST

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DEATH

PREVIEW

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INDUSTRIA

Thick, black smoke marks the site of the factory town from hours away. Threatening, like a cloud expectant with storms, the smoke from countless chimneys hangs over its roofs. Not a house or a tree or a field to be seen. From miles around you see the puffing breath of the behemoth industry which has enslaved the town in its talons. Its poisonous breath sings the buds, no tree bears fruit, no flower fully unfolds, they hang from the stalk stunted and half wilted. Beneath the summer sun the haze collects and covers the blue sky in grey. And into this grey the smokestacks unfurl their long, soft, black flags.

The sand on the plain glows; a foul, sluggish haze of corruption rises from the hot, narrow streets, from the filthy workers' quarters, from the enormous factories, and into the air.

The inhabitants of these workers' quarters are dull and listless, their complexion pale, their eyes dim.

Hammering and thumping, creaking and

rattling, whistling and stamping and droning, puffing and blowing and hissing fills the air, a relentless force rumbling imperiously from the depths of the factories, a force that bends every head to its rule.

Calm flows the mighty river in the heat of the sun. The light lattice of the bridge seems to tremble in the hot air. No trees, no bushes line the bank. Black railway tracks run alongside it, past the mighty blocks on the quays, past the ungainly warehouses that lie there foul, broad and prone. Heavy cargo ships and big dark barges are firmly anchored before them; the tangled skeletons of masts large and small extend into the sky all the way down both sides of the river. A little boat with a white sail tacks in the distance, the rowboats of the big ships sleep in the port, rocking gently. Mighty steamboats approach, majestic as great water fowl; the waves swell with white spray at their proud white breast. In wide arcs they move across the water and set down once more, silently, like water birds alighting in the reeds.

Evening adorns the banks with bluish electric suns. Hundreds of trembling, shimmering strips of light shine in the current, which flows darkly, as sluggish and heavy as molten lead. Thousands of bright rectangles, thrown together at irregular, arbitrary intervals, the windows of the tall apartment buildings flecking the darkness.

The beast is sleeping, only breathing in little puffs for now, its rattling and moaning muffled.

The smoke drifts over the plain like a light autumn mist, the dead chimneys stand there, just one great, wild, rust-coloured flame flaring from the high

roof of a factory to menace the night.

The workers in the low, hall-like rooms are bathed in sweat. All day the sun has been beating down on the roof and making them limp, now in the muggy night they drearily drag themselves through the smothering air beneath the weight of sleepless hours. Row upon row of machines. All around there is a dull stomping, a quick thrusting and wheezing, a perpetual up and down of the heavy pistons; the wheels turn with a light whistle, and little lights skip and sparkle from the blinking metal cylinders and rods in the glare of the electric lights. In the ceiling the many small wheels produce a chaotic humming; the whole room is filled with the buzzing of transmissions, the whirring of belts.

The workers stand at their posts, weary and heavy.

Giant, grey shadows hop along the walls, scurry over the ceiling, coil through the tangle of ropes and belts.

When one of the big lamps flares of a sudden they look like scurrying ghosts. They creep away, leap across the floor, dancing on the whirring flywheel of the steam engine turning its mighty spokes in muffled bluster; they race up high and twirl down the walls again.

Is the stomping of the engine growing faster all of a sudden? Are the belts not turning in even greater haste? Can no one see it? The workers stand at their posts, weary and heavy.

A shadow disappears above, between the belts of the great steam engine. Presently it appears again. There, above the big wheel. It lurks there, motionless. Is that

not a hand dashing into the gears?

Faster, ever faster turn the wheels, louder, ever louder grinds the tortured metal, wilder, ever wilder speed the belts in a demented, lunatic whirl. The whizzing and hissing and rumbling in the hall rises to a bluster, the furious metal casts off sparks. A shriek of fear awakens and dies away in the stark terror that paralyses all. Motionless they stare at the intensifying horror of the witches' dance. These are no longer machines, no lifeless masses, they are alive – crazed, blood-thirsty creatures, roaring and groaning and wheezing as they struggle to free themselves, to visit annihilation on those who have enslaved them.

They're rending their fetters, they're breaking free, they're coming!

From up in the belts comes a snickering and grinning. A shout of derision rings out in the groaning of the raging beasts. One of the numb humans falls forward, falls onto the large, whizzing flywheel ... tries to save himself ... a bony hand shoots down like lightning, grabs him, a jolt ... he flies in an arc against the ceiling rafters, back, then he is caught by the bony arm once more and hurled up high again, caught again, dashed against the iron ribs of the ceiling again. Then the shapeless mass falls to the ground with a dull smack. The one up above bends forward, looks over this witches' Sabbath with a grin once more, nods, and gives the mighty wheel a kick – crash! And all is still. It vanishes like a spectre and with a deep sigh the steam engine takes its last, hasty breath. Deathly silence; the little beasts bow down to their lord and master.

SHADOWS

The clatter of the carriage that brought the young woman home dies away in the distance. Crouched in a soft chair, she listens as the last of the rolling fades away on the frozen ground. Slowly she takes the gloves from her fingers and the silken scarf from her hair.

There is a fixed gleam in her eyes, a vague, proud smile on her lips, she hears murmured words and hasty questions, sees shy and burning looks.

Her boudoir is filled with the heavy scent of wilting flowers. Mighty ball bouquets, dainty, coquettish bunches, poor little florets, arrogant, proud blooms spreading their stiff petals, and soft, delicate flowers full of lush scent, flowers with timid, demure colours, hard, burning flowers, flagging little violets, they all lay on the table, tossed without a thought.

The young victrix reclines in her white rustling silk dress, adorned with jewels.

Suddenly she leaps up. Her slender body outstretched, she stands with blazing eyes in the middle

of the room, her gaze directed at the large mirror reflecting her image.

She sees her reddish hair, positively phosphorescent in the tingling light of the many candles, her narrow, delicate forehead, her sombre brow above her shining eyes, her proud nose, her lips twitching with the sense of her own triumphant beauty. She steps closer to the mirror, closer to the image, it overcomes her like a rapture, intoxication. She must light every candle so that a halo of light forms around her; it glows from her eyes, it shines from the white of her skin, it sparks like little imperious suns from the diamonds on her breast.

Lifted, borne aloft, transfigured, she stands in the white, dazzling flood of light.

She follows the fine line of her neck, her shoulders, her arms, intoxicated by the soft forms of her body, she caresses the gently rustling silk that wraps around her – lifts the branched candelabra above her head so that it blazes like a flame over the head of the queen.

It is a holy mass, a cult of beauty, a triumph of youth, a surrender with every fibre of her being – to die, to melt in this frenzy of pleasure!

Is that her? Is that really her?

She grows dizzy with her own beauty, shaken by a frisson as her own blazing eyes behold her.

Are those her eyes?

No, those are strange, burning, sinister eyes fixed on her, growing ever larger, wilder, brighter, mighty suns that outshine the light of the candles, flashing forces that subjugate all that would dazzle them.

With a cry she casts the light to the floor, and tries to flee.

It drifts toward her like a cold breeze, her reflection extinguishes, a dead, black surface stares back at her, the candles flash and a giant shadow rises up from the depth of the room.

Shaken by a fit of shivering she collapses. Small, cowering, pleading, she lies on the floor and struggles with the shadow that casts its great cape around her, burying light, burying youth, burying beauty.

END OF PREVIEW

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