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Unkindness

There are ravens in the grounds. The back yard is large and expansive, and once you get away from the house a little there are big oak trees before you reach the pond. Back under the trees, it feels like you're miles way from anyone and anything, though you're only just out of sight of the house. The ravens nest there, and you can hear them croaking as you pass under the boughs. But they also come onto the lawn, or sit in the hedgerows and watch you. They're big, impressive-looking birds, and I love them very much. They seem somehow wise and whimsical at the same time, like hobgoblins in one of Mrs. Perrault's stories. This morning I had set my easel up near the pond, and two of them sat in a gorsebush near me the whole time, just watching. When I was packing to go in, I jokingly turned the canvas toward them so they could see what I had been painting. They both cocked their heads, and looked so quizzical I couldn't help but laugh. I told Mrs. Perrault about it when I got back to the house.

Mrs. Perrault wasn't as amused as I was. She said that I shouldn't trust ravens, and to be more careful. I told her ravens were simply animals, and "trust" wasn't the right word.

"No such thing as simple animals," she said. "There's a reason that a group of ravens is called an Unkindness."

I didn't say anything else because she gave a little nod as if the conversation was over. She was making a pie and she just kept on rolling out the crust. But surely it isn't the ravens' fault if people call them unkind. Words are people things, after all, and it isn't fair for us to decide for someone else something as powerful as a name. I wonder if anyone ever asked the ravens?

[Theme music; opening credits]

[Sounds of writing]

Lenore: I have settled into a fairly regular routine here at Maison d'Aubépine. I write in my journal in the mornings, as I'm doing now, and then breakfast with Radcliffe, when he's here. He's gone more than I'd expected—more on *that* later. After breakfast I am at my leisure. There is a lovely library in the house, smallish, but still more books than we had at mother's. I sometimes read in the parlor, sometimes under the great oak tree in front of the house. I usually take a walk mid-morning. There is a path beyond the drive that passes through a wood and then emerges on the cliffs above the sea. It's a ten or fifteen minute walk beneath the trees, and then the vista opens out and the sparkling water reaches to the horizon. It isn't technically our land, but I'm still fuzzy on how that all works. I gather it's sort of public, but it can only be accessed through our wood. If the day is clear, I imagine I can see England, where mother is.

I paint in the afternoons. I've made myself a studio in the attic, a beautiful large room with wonderful light. Sometimes I have Talbot carry my smaller easel into the grounds where I try to capture the landscape with my brush. Radcliffe is usually home before dinner, which is always in the formal dining room across from the parlor. We read or talk or play games in the parlor, and then we go to the scarlet room at the top of the stairs and tumble onto the big four poster bed together. We sleep sometime before dawn. It is all so magical.

Maison d'Aubépine itself sits above the town on a little rise. It isn't a mansion, nor is it terribly modern, but it has an air of faded grandeur that suits the setting somehow. The house feels like it was always in this place. Or no, that's not quite it. The place feels like it was shaped to fit the house, from the trees leaning in around the edge of the lawns to the stone path from the road to the way the big oak nestles against the roof like an embrace.

The house is large and old, and full of hidden nooks and unexpected treasures. A sweeping staircase leans over the foyer, where a grand Turkish rug is edged by an ornate console

table and an antique grandfather clock. The foyer is flanked by the dining room and the parlor, through which is the library. Beyond the dining room is my morning room with its glass doors opening out onto the back lawn. Upstairs are the bedrooms: our suite, Mrs. Perrault's little monastic cell, and two guest rooms that I've only glimpsed. Then there's the cellar, where Mrs. Perrault keeps her jars of herbs and canned goods, and the attic, where I paint. There is a small outbuilding, like a summerhouse, where I gather Talbot sleeps, but I've never been inside.

Our bedroom is draped in scarlet silks. The walls are covered with them, and they shine against the black silk of our bedsheets. From the tall leaded windows I can see the woods circling the back lawn, and sometimes through the trees a glimpse of light on the ocean beyond. There's a small balcony where I can stand and listen to the birds. And sometimes I hear other things.

In the afternoons, after I'm done painting, I visit Mrs. Perrault in the kitchen. She tells me stories while she prepares dinner. I suppose this is a silly, little girl thing to do, but by four I long for a human connection, and Mrs. Perrault knows so many charming and fascinating tales of the area. She tells me about goblins and witches and all sorts of wicked goings on. She told me a tale of a master carpenter who went mad and killed all the other builders, and another of a girl who loved a faerie and murdered a priest so they could be together. There was a terrifying tale of a woman who asked the devil to stop a great war, but was burned alive instead. Once upon a time, she'll say, there were two sisters trapped in a room, guarded by a dog that no one could see. And for the next hour, I'll listen, enraptured by the story, by her voice, by the sheer beauty and horror of it all. It is astonishing how the sound of a single voice can transport you, building worlds full of people and making you believe in them, if only for an hour or so.

Mrs. Perrault says she has a book of these old stories, and that she will lend it to me. It must be something she keeps in her room, because I haven't seen anything like that in the library.

There are books of poetry there, Baudelaire and Rimbaud and Byron and Mr. Wilde, and hunting tales, and maps of Brittany. Novels by Dickens, and Flaubert, and Balzac. Some in English, and some in French, as befits a sophisticated expatriate. There are also books of art, some of which are quite...racy. One in particular I have taken down several times, a small ornate volume of engravings with what I assume is descriptive text. It appears to be from India, at least the illustrations have the look and style of Hindu art I've seen in museums, but I can't read the alphabet used in the text. It makes me blush to talk of it, even in the private pages of this journal. The pictures are...well, all of them feature men and women in groups of two or three, all unclothed, engaged in various sexual exploits. Some of these are so acrobatic as to require special training, for surely no one could contort that way except circus performers. I'd be mortified if Mrs. Perrault (or god forbid, Talbot!) found me reading it, but I return to it every time I'm alone in the library. And Radcliffe owns such a thing! I suspected his wickedness, but this is proof beyond expectations. There are obviously things about my husband I have yet to discover.

I said that Radcliffe is gone more than I expected, and it's true, but I don't mean that he's abandoned me or that I'm lonely. He leaves after breakfast and is home by dusk, which is no different than any husband in any London or Paris, I suppose. I don't know exactly where he goes—his business is mysterious to me—but I know sometimes he takes the train to Paris, because he brings me the most beautiful gifts from the city. Chocolates and absinthe and beaded dresses. A little carved alabaster figurine of a wolf and a lamb. I haven't left the house since I arrived, but Radcliffe promises we will soon hold a grand party to open the season. It seems rather the end of the season, since the autumn approaches hard, but I discover that things are different in France.

I've only received visitors two or three times. One of these was a woman from town who came to, I suppose, welcome me to what little society they have in Gevaudán. Madame Millais. She has no English, and I have very little French, so it was a terribly quiet tea we shared in the back garden. The other two visits were from an English rector, an expatriate like Radcliffe and me, who came first to welcome me, and then again in a spirit of national comraderie. His name is Rev. Baring-Gould. I gather he is retired, as there is no Protestant church here in Brittany, and spends his days reading and writing and whatever else a scholar does when left to his own devices. He's interested in the local fauna, he says, and asked if he could wander in our woods. I told him he could, and I felt free to do it without asking Radcliffe. I feel more and more like the mistress of the house.

It was pleasant enough to host the Rev. and Madame Millais, but I am beginning to long for company more fashionable. I had thought that once I was established here we would hold gatherings and parties, and that Radcliffe and I would be frequently in Paris. *I want to go to the Moulin Rouge!* But when I told Radcliffe this he laughed, and said there was no need to go to the city, that he would "bring Paris to me." And then he kissed me and I forgot to be cross. It is hard to be angry with Radcliffe when I am in his arms.

Speaking of which, I must put away my pen and go in to breakfast. More later.

[Sounds of writing]

I'm sitting up writing this by the light of a candle in the kitchen. It is sometime after three in the morning. If Radcliffe wakes I shall tell him I came down to warm a cup of chocolate. Something very upsetting has occurred, and I want to set it down on paper before the details fade into uncertainty.

Radcliffe has been in Paris. He brought me a lavender flapper-style dress that I adore—

it's scandalously short, and I can only hope I'll soon have a chance to wear it for anyone besides Talbot to see. We dined on the back veranda this evening, an onion soup followed by *boeuf bourguignon* paired with a bordeaux from the wine cellar. The sunset lit the back garden in gold and red, and I felt again how lucky I was, to have this vista, this house, this man. I was ashamed to think of my earlier complaints about lack of society, because surely I had everything I needed here at Maison d'Aubépine?

We decided to forego games in the parlor, and instead took another bottle of bordeaux up to our scarlet room, where we spent a long evening entwined.

I awoke sometime after midnight. I felt I had just missed hearing something, that a sound had just ended. I waited a moment, my cheek rising and falling against Radcliffe's broad chest as he slept. Then I heard it—a howling, the sound of what could only be a huge dog or wolf. Quietly I slipped from the bed, and, covering myself with a silk robe, I went to the windows. The casement was open to the night, and I could see the moon, not quite full, reflected on the lawn below.

Another howl, and I could tell it was close. The animal must be just inside the line of trees, I thought, a hundred yards away. And as I thought that, I heard it moving, a rustle in the treeline and what might have been a low growl. I watched intently, expecting the moment some beast emerged onto the moonlit lawn.

It didn't come. Instead, I became aware that I was not the only one watching for the beast. A small movement, like a moth against a glass, drew my attention to the lawn below my window. Just on the edge of the grass immediately below and a little in front of me, stood a woman in a white dress. Her dark hair spilled down her back, and I could not see her face, but I knew her. She was the woman I had dreamed of several nights ago. She was a real person

standing on the grass thirty feet away. Startled, I cried out, and then covered my mouth, afraid.

The woman on the lawn turned to look up at me, and I could see her piercing blue eyes, even in the midnight shadows that covered her. I don't know why, but I lifted my hand and waved at her. She smiled, a small secret smile that felt both intimate and off-putting. Then she turned and vanished below the window, assumedly through the door to my morning room, which is below our bedroom.

As she disappeared, Radcliffe slid his arms around me from behind. I nearly cried out a second time, but caught myself and turned into his embrace. I told him I had seen someone outside, and he looked immediately concerned and pushed me behind him so he could stand at the window.

He was silent a long moment, and then he said, smiling, "You were dreaming, little one."

"I was not dreaming," I said, though now I doubted myself a little. "I heard an animal in the woods, and when I looked out, there was someone standing just below the window."

He did not look out the window again. He chuckled, a low thrumming sound, and said, "I think you may have had too much wine tonight, Lenore." He tried to embrace me again, but I pulled back.

"I am not drunk," I said. "And I am wide awake. I'm telling you I saw someone on the lawn."

His face tightened, and his mouth drew into a tight small line. There was a strangeness in his eyes I had never seen before. "And I'm telling you," he said, "that you imagined it. There is no woman on the lawn."

I said nothing, and his face softened. He kissed my head, cupping his hand under my chin. "I expect you were sleepwalking," he said. "Come back to bed." And he pulled me with

him.

But I did not sleep. After his breathing lengthened into the low rumble of snores, I slipped from the bed again and came downstairs, where I'm writing this now. I have gone through the main rooms and found no one. The french doors from my morning room are closed and locked as I left them. But none of this convinces me I have imagined anything.

I don't know what the answer to this mystery is. I don't know what I saw in his eyes at that moment. But he said no woman was on the lawn. And I never told him it was a woman I saw.

[Theme music; credits]

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