BURN HER SLOWLY

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Inspired by the true origins of the Malleus Maleficarum - The Witch Hunter's Bible.

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From across the square, KRAMER, dressed in black, pristine and unblinking, watches.

KRAMER
Mistress Scheuberin!

She turns, off-balance but masks it.

HELENA
Father Kramer.

He walks toward her. Each step deliberate, measured.

A crow flaps out of his path.

KRAMER
You’re flushed. Ill, perhaps?

HELENA
I must have overexerted myself on my walk earlier.

KRAMER
(a faint smile)
Ah, yes. Your walks.

A beat.

He takes one step closer, closer than politeness requires.

KRAMER (CONT'D)
You do walk… often. Farther than most. At most peculiar hours.

Her gaze locks on his. Cold, unflinching.

HELENA
Is that a reproval?

KRAMER
Only an observation. One wonders what what compels such distances.

A beat.

KRAMER (CONT'D)
Or whom.

HELENA
And you observe. Often. Like a crow on the gallows, waiting for the rope to tighten.

She nods, a polite farewell and moves as if to pass him but her balance falters.

He sees it. Moves to catch her, overshoots.

KRAMER
Helena...

He leans forward, reaches out and takes hold of her elbow.

Firm. Too familiar.

He whispers in her ear. The gesture masquerades as support but claims territory.

KRAMER (CONT'D) (CONT'D)
There are those who whisper your name...

HELENA
Let them. It's only breath. It vanishes.

KRAMER
And yet, wind spreads flame.

HELENA
(turning toward him)
Be careful, Father. Flames are hungry. They eat their masters first.

KRAMER
Or they purify.

HELENA
Is that what you're hoping for, father?

They stand in the grey cold, the square strangely silent. The wind howls.

KRAMER
Your eyes... like embers searching for something to set ablaze.

HELENA
(with razor-edged calm)
Then look away.

KRAMER
I *can't*.

Helena shifts and almost stumbles.

Kramer reaches out.

Their bodies collide, almost an embrace; his arm catches her around the waist. Her face stops inches from his.

His arm steadies her waist.

Her face is inches from his.

KRAMER (CONT'D)
You are burning.

HELENA
You mistake fever for fire.

A long moment passes, their breath mingling.

Then Helena slowly pulls back.

His hand slips away, his fingers dragging over the fabric at her side, as if reluctant to let go.

He straightens, nods once then turns on his heel and walks away.

Helena exhales as she steadies herself against the well.

Her hand trembles.

CUT TO BLACK.

10. EXT. COMMUNAL WASHING AREA BY THE RIVER - DAY

The river runs cold and clear. Steam rises from where hot water meets winter air. A dozen women kneel along the banks, their skirts tucked up, sleeves rolled past raw elbows.

They scrub linen against smooth stones, wring out heavy wool. Their hands are red and chapped but confident.

Laughter drifts over the water like birdsong.

AGNES (late 50s), weathered and sharp-tongued, holds court near the center:

AGNES
So I told him, "If you want it clean, wash it yourself. I've spent enough years scouring your filthy--
"

The women CACKLE. A nursing mother shifts her baby to muffle her laughter.

ANNA (30s), a worn-out mother of many, mousy, with shadows under her eyes and a stubborn jaw, beats a shirt against the rocks.

Her eldest daughter helps sort the clean from the dirty.

Suddenly HOOF BEATS. Distant but growing closer.

The laughter stops.

Agnes lifts her head, alert as a hound.

The women freeze mid-motion, hands still gripping wet cloth.

The sound grows louder.

Through the trees, glimpses of metal and leather - guards.

A YOUNG WOMAN, maybe seventeen, drops her washing. It falls into the river with a soft splash.

Without a word, she begins to run.

Barefoot through the snow, skirts flying, her red hair streaming behind her like a banner in slow-motion.

The other women watch her disappear into the forest.

Then quietly, efficiently, they begin to pack. No panic. No voices raised. Just hands moving with the precision of long practice.

ANNA
(to her daughter, quiet)
Home. Now.

The daughter gathers the wet clothes without question.

One by one, the women disperse. Some toward town, others deeper into the woods.

Each taking a different path.

Within moments, the washing area is empty.

Only the soap dissolving in the current and footprints in the snow remain.

The hoof beats grow louder.

CUT TO: